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# Juvenile Probation Tricks of the Trade\*

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## Using Interpersonal Communication Skills to Promote Probation Officer Safety

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In January, 1989, a Jackson County (Kansas City, Missouri) juvenile probation officer was shot and killed by a 15-year-old client. The shooting occurred during a routine home visit at the juvenile's home. The youth then stuffed the body into the trunk of the officer's car and drove around the area for several hours before abandoning the vehicle. The youth was arrested and charged with the homicide several days after the killing.

In 1990 the Middle Atlantic States Correctional Association (MASCA) conducted a survey of over 15,000 adult and juvenile probation officers in seven states (CT, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA, and VT) to investigate hazardous incidents perpetrated against probation and parole staff in the line of duty. Of the 6,940 probation and parole workers responding to the survey, 62% had experienced some kind of victimization during their careers and 35% reported at least one such event during the twelve months immediately preceding the survey (Parsonage and Miller, 1990).

The reported murder of the juvenile probation officer and the MASCA survey on probation and parole officer safety reflect the growing body of anecdotal as well as empirical evidence surfacing throughout the U.S. that underscores the increasing concern over safety in the juvenile probation profession. The frequent reports of violent behavior by juvenile probationers and the growing body of research suggesting that many of today's juvenile offenders are more

sophisticated, more prone to aggressive violent behavior, and have greater access to dangerous weapons indicate a need for greater emphasis on juvenile probation officer safety.

Jurisdictions around the country have responded to the perceived increase in the level of job-related danger with revised policies and formal training in probation officer safety issues. Some jurisdictions have, in fact, allowed probation officers to arm themselves. For example, Westchester County, New York (a suburban community outside of New York City) recently adopted policies allowing probation officers to carry weapons. The debate in probation departments nationally over whether or not to arm probation officers is threatening to redefine the probation profession in both the juvenile and adult arenas. It is not the purpose of this article to enter into that debate. The point is that juvenile probation has the potential to be a dangerous line of work and the potential for danger appears to be increasing. The purpose of this article is to heighten the juvenile probation officer's awareness of safety issues and to provide some basic techniques for handling dangerous situations.

### Interpersonal Communication Skills: The First Line of Defense

The juvenile probation officer's first line of defense against becoming a victim is the ability to communicate effectively. Juvenile probation officers must be equipped with

\* In recognition that probation officers have a wealth of untapped knowledge and experience, this series provides a medium for them to share their experience, knowledge and skills with the field. The series seeks to address specific professional development needs of juvenile probation officers by providing practical, useable materials focused on discrete probation skills and techniques. Anyone interested in contributing to this series should contact Doug Thomas, JPOI Coordinator, at the NCJJ, 701 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219 (412) 227-6950. The Center is the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. This series was supported by funds provided to the Technical Assistance to the Juvenile Court Project by OJJDP through grant #89-JN-CX-K001. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP.

the skills to proactively recognize threatening situations and to avoid them altogether or manage them effectively. Accordingly, the most important skills a juvenile probation officer should possess are those required for effective interpersonal communication.

The degree to which the juvenile probation officer is skilled in communicating interpersonally will determine that officer's effectiveness in any situation, including interpersonal conflict with clients. Four key elements provide the foundation for all interpersonal skills. They are **positioning, posture, observing** and **listening**.

**Positioning** refers to the spatial relationship between you and the client. Whereas, in a normal interview, a distance of three to five feet between you and the subject may be appropriate, a potentially dangerous situation requires more distance. At least six feet separation distance should be maintained—more, if you suspect weapons. In normal interview situations, the interviewer will face the subject squarely (shoulders parallel). In a dangerous situation, however, your body must be angled to the subject, your strongest side away, to provide the smallest possible target. To the extent that you can position yourself to the side of, behind, or above the subject you increase your ability to physically control the subject. Eye contact is also important—by looking directly at the subject, you are able to maintain good eye contact but are also able to observe the environment surrounding the subject.

**Posture** refers to the way you present yourself physically to the client. Whether standing or sitting, your posture should be erect. An erect posture conveys an element of self confidence and also prepares you for quick reactions, if necessary. Conversely, a very relaxed posture (e.g., slouching, placing your feet on chairs, desk, or table) may be perceived as disrespectful and may, in turn, incite your client to become aggressive or assaultive. Inclining slightly forward allows you to focus on the subject and be prepared to move immediately. This posture may be accomplished in either a sitting or standing position by placing one foot a bit forward of the other.

**Observing** involves your ability to see and process the numerous visual cues which come from the subject. You should attempt to identify any significant deviations in the subject's normal behavior or changes in the subject's typical environment. Observing requires three steps: *looking, inferring, deciding*.

**Looking** at a subject's behavior, appearance, and environment involves objective observations. For example, an objective observation may include the following: "The subject is male, about 6' 3" tall, weighs about 230 pounds, he is very animated, his eyes are dilated and he is staring at me while yelling at me, he is using many profanities." An *inference* is an educated guess of what a set of data might mean. For example, you may infer from the above observation that "the subject appears to be angry." Finally, the juvenile probation officer must *decide*, "Does this situation mean trouble for me?" For example, the above subject who is exhibiting intense feelings of anger and who appears highly agitated and coiled for action may well represent a threat to the juvenile probation officer.

**Listening** skills involve paying attention to auditory stimuli, suspending judgment, and picking out key words. Frequently, probationers will make inflammatory or threatening statements to juvenile probation officers in an effort to elicit a reaction. To avoid an over-reaction and possible escalation of a tense situation, juvenile probation officers should be skilled at suspending judgment and listening to the client. Unless the situation is immediately perilous, suspending judgment will allow time for gathering more information and reduce the possibility of over or under reaction.

Picking out key words is helpful in identifying the focus of the subject's energy and values. Key words are those words where the subject places the greatest emphasis or vocal strength while speaking. Careful listening and identification of key words will assist the juvenile probation officer in quickly assessing the content and the context of the subject's concerns.

Subjects will use increases or decreases of vocal volume and emotion, depending upon the intensity of their emotion. To the extent you are able to identify the intensity of emotion, you will be better able to determine the probationer's concerns and needs and avoid misunderstanding. Additionally, when these verbal cues are placed in the context of changes in kinesic behavior, you will identify potentially dangerous or threatening situations.

## Non-Verbal Skills

About 75% to 90% of interpersonal communication is non-verbal. Accordingly, it is imperative that the probation officer be skilled in recognizing non-verbal cues, including those cues we receive from clients and those cues that we unconsciously send to others.

Special note must be made, however, that individual non-verbal cues may or may not be significant. The significance of the cues, and their interpretation, increases when they are placed in context with other cues (also called "clustering") or when the cues deviate from what you know to be "normal" for a given individual. Non-verbal cues may be divided into seven categories:

- **Kinesics or "body language":** Kinesic cues refer to movements or positions made by the person's body (e.g., position of the head, posture, hand gestures).
- **Facial:** The face is a very expressive communicator. By carefully observing an individual's facial expression, focusing on the nose, mouth, chin, and most particularly the eyes, you will be able to learn a great deal about any individual.
- **Proxemics:** Proxemics (the Greek word for approach) refers to the relative distance between two or more individuals. As you approach a subject's "personal space," you increase the possibility of physical touching.
- **Haptics:** Haptics refers to physical touching. Physical contact is, perhaps, the most emotionally powerful of the non-verbal elements. The social norms involved in physical touching are subject to tremen-

dous variation across situations (relaxed vs. tense), gender, relationships (friend, family, colleague, client), and cultures.

- **Paralanguage:** Everything you do with your mouth and voice beyond the actual words uttered is called paralanguage. Using voice pitch, volume, specificity, inflection, intensity, and intonation, the speaker can transmit a message that far surpasses its actually stated words.
- **Appearance:** The variables of appearance include dress, grooming, physical hygiene, race, gender, height, weight, posture, etc.
- **Chronemics:** Refers to issues related to time. An often overlooked non-verbal communicator, chronemics can convey a powerful message. For example, a person's punctuality, or lack thereof, communicates a signal. Or from another perspective, it is probably not a good time to confront a client if he/she is in the middle of a group of peers on a neighborhood street corner.

Juvenile probation officers must be knowledgeable of both verbal and non-verbal communication skills to effectively recognize and react to conflict situations with clients.

### Juvenile Probation Officer Safety Awareness

A basic dichotomy is emerging in the juvenile probation profession. There are juvenile probation officers who believe that juvenile probation is primarily a *social work* function. Alternatively, there is an emerging school of thought that places the juvenile probation function firmly in the realm of *law enforcement*. Regardless of one's view of the profession, all juvenile probation officers must remain cognizant of the dangers inherent in the work and cognizant of the evidence that the dangers appear to be increasing. To develop and maintain safety awareness, juvenile probation officers should consider the following awareness factors and keep them in mind whenever they are conducting the business of the court:

- **Know Your Clients:** An individual client's backgrounds, attitudes, values, motivation, willingness to reason, and inclination for aggression may be different from the probation officer's and will certainly vary from client to client.
- **Implications of the Use of Force:** Legal, moral, and emotional implications of using force must be anticipated before a confrontation.
- **Be Prepared:** Preparedness and planning are critical prior to any client contact. By learning and practicing proper techniques, the probation officer avoids mistakes.
- **Flexibility:** No two situations are ever alike; no set of procedures is always effective. Develop and be aware of multiple options when interacting with clients. Multiple options are an asset to the probation officer's repertoire of skills because they provide a range of legitimate responses and, as a result, increase the juvenile probation officer's ability to negotiate.

- **Practice, Practice, Practice:** Under stress, in a crisis, probation officers instinctively revert to the way they were trained (repetitions lead to response generalizations).
- **Know Your Limitations:** Identify the physical and emotional limitations of both yourself and the client.

Juvenile probation officers should be particularly aware of physically aggressive clients, those clients who are most likely to pose a physical threat. It is important to remember that physical attacks are rarely rational acts; most attackers are not intimidated or deterred because you are an officer of the court. However, physically aggressive clients may "telegraph" their readiness to attack by: 1) appearing to ignore you; 2) paying excessive attention to you (e.g., the client may stare at you or talk to you in a loud, abusive voice); or 3) exhibiting excited, exaggerated, frenetic movements.

### Progression into Crisis

Crisis situations generally follow an observable progression of events. Each of these stages includes verbal and non-verbal cues. The stages include: 1) passive/aggressive; 2) refusal; 3) bluff signs; 4) danger signs; and 5) attack.

During the **Passive/Aggressive** stage the verbal cues include periods of silence and retorts such as: "I already told you that." Clients may also slightly increase the volume of their voices. They will appear to be logical, but questioning and somewhat defiant, e.g., "I don't see why you want me to do that!" Non-verbal cues are dependent on the individual and the environment. Factors such as the client's age, the setting, the situation, and the client's gender will affect the non-verbal cues. Eye contact may become intermittent.

The verbal cues characteristic of the **Refusal** stage include overt resistance to directions or orders (e.g., "I won't do that") and direct challenges to authority (e.g., "Who do you think you are!"). The client may also use obscenities. Additionally, they may challenge you to assert yourself (e.g., "Make me!"). The client has lost the ability to be objective and logical and may commonly make emotional statements such as "You're picking on me." Non-verbal cues include overt physical movements, hand gestures, staring in your face, and increased voice volume or inflection.

During the third stage, **Bluff Signs**, verbal cues include open hostility, obscenities, and loud verbal responses. Usually verbal releases last about fifteen to eighteen seconds. Non-verbal cues include red, flushed face and throwing objects, but not necessarily at you. Look also for distance enhancing signs such as waving the arms, backing away, and leaving the room. Many verbal threats against staff come during this stage. Males tend to show more bluff signs while females are quicker to escalate to the next stage.

The **Danger Signs** stage will probably not afford you any verbal cues. Clients will probably not be thinking clearly, their responses may be aggressive, or they may be quiet and immobile. However, one should not mistake these lack of verbal cues for submission. Non-verbal cues include tight, white lips, mouth slightly ajar, body flexed, arms cocked. The

client may also have a white or grayish facial color, a fixed stare (often at the area of your body that is to be assaulted), or a fighting stance. For example, the client may "square off" toward you.

In the event of an **Attack**, you should **BE AWARE OF YOUR LIMITATIONS**. Know your age, physical abilities, and your survival I.Q. Be aware of such things as the type of shoes which allow you to exit quickly and that neckties or jewelry can be used as handles and chokers for assailants. Know positive tactics to enhance your safety and welfare, as well as that of others.

### Preventing a Physical Confrontation—Planning

Build your awareness, not your paranoia. Consider the opportunities the subject might have to injure you. Cultivate tactics which are unexpected. Can you survive by doing nothing? Will confidence carry you through a situation? Will you provoke an attack by looking like a victim? If you resist, will the attacker flee or continue the onslaught? Is there danger if you walk away? Look for escape routes. Are they blocked? Are other alternatives available? Can someone accompany you? Are sources of aid nearby? What if there would be weapons? Is there cover? Can you increase distance? What do you have that can be used as a weapon?

Prevention measures include: 1) **Assess the Situation**. Objectively assess whether it is essential to enter a situation or remain in one; 2) **Stabilize the Situation**; 3) **Remain Calm**. Do not shout or otherwise escalate the tension, remove other sources of noise - radios, televisions, other people; 4) **Remove Dangerous Objects** (e.g., paper weights, letter openers, umbrellas); and 5) **Identify Escape Routes/Get Back-Up**. Identify and keep escape routes open. Get back-up even if you only think you will need it. (Back-up can be a case aide or another probation officer.) The odds of being attacked are reduced substantially by having at least one other person with you during times of conflict with clients.

### Management and Control

Although it is preferable to recognize and avoid or diffuse physical conflicts with clients, we are sometimes unable to avoid this eventuality. When a crisis situation has progressed to the point that it is out of control, the probation officer may do several things to manage the crisis prior to regaining control: 1) **Maintain a Safe Distance**. In a crisis situation, stay at least 72" (six feet) away from the client. This removes you from immediate striking distance. The distance must be greatly increased if you suspect that weapons may be involved; 2) **Maintain the Proper Stance**. The feet should be shoulder width apart, the body angled toward the client, with the weak side of the body facing the client; 3) **Maintain a Position of Advantage**. Always try to be in control from an outside position to the side or to the rear of the client and gain the highest position possible; 4) **Maintain Posture**. Keep centered and balanced and keep both feet on the ground; 5) **Keep Moving**. It is always harder to assault a moving target. Move with a purpose; 6) **Maintain Calm**. Quiet the situation, do not shout, remove other sources of noise, such as televisions, radios, or other people and control the client's movement. Try to have the client sit down. It is more difficult for

a person to attack from that position; and 7) **Show Confidence**. Do not act like a victim.

### Using Verbal Techniques to Regain Control

After a crisis situation has progressed to the point of being out of control, the probation officer may regain control without resorting to physical restraint by using the following verbal techniques:

- 1) Provide needed instructions in a calm, simple manner;
- 2) Ask questions and receive information about the problem;
- 3) Allow some controlled venting; e.g., "Tell me what has you so upset?";
- 4) Avoid "why" questions. Do not suggest criticism or judgment of the client's behavior. Focus on "what" and "how" questions. These questions force greater thought and lengthier answers;
- 5) Do not use trigger words which are prejudicial, defamatory, or threatening; and
- 6) Do not be power assertive (e.g., don't try to push your weight around). Be observant and introspective.

The next techniques are most useful in passive/aggressive and refusal stages; 1) **Use Distractions** (e.g., "How is school going," request a favor, confuse client by asking a bizarre question); 2) **Use Humor**. This may ease tension but can escalate the situation if the client thinks you are making fun of him/her; 3) **Provide a Paradox** (e.g., provide a description of what the client is doing, e.g., "You say you're not upset and yet you're pacing up and down."); and 4) **Give Direct Orders** (verbal commands). Keep in mind, however, that you are more power assertive doing this, therefore, you may be perceived as a potential threat by the subject which may escalate the situation.

### Bailing Out (Evacuation)

When all else fails, evacuate. Have an escape route in mind ahead of time. Engage the person verbally, but do not turn your back on the client. Follow-up with increased manpower/intervention (police). **Self-preservation is your goal when the situation is beyond your control. There should be no sense of failure or guilt. It simply happens sometimes.**

### References

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