



## SHIFTING THE PERSPECTIVE ON YOUTH VIOLENCE

The following talking points can be used flexibly—as a source of themes for longer written pieces, as short responses in media interviews or public appearances, or as set-ups to “pre-frame” a conversation on specific policy or program proposals. Each pulls from rigorously tested messages that have been shown to shift thinking away from common but unproductive ways of thinking about adolescent development, juvenile justice, and the criminal justice system, and to build the public’s support for evidence-based programs and policies designed to improve youth and social outcomes.

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### Talking Points



#### PRAGMATISM

To ensure good youth outcomes that contribute to our communities’ safety and well-being, we need practical juvenile justice policies and programs based on proven, age-appropriate interventions. We now know that adolescence is a time of rapid brain development, which affects youths’ judgment, decision making, and behavior. For that reason, it makes no sense to treat youth as adults. Instead, we can achieve better outcomes by keeping children and teens out of the system through diversion programs, mental health treatment, and other interventions—practices that are both feasible and in line with our modern understanding of adolescent development.



#### BRAIN ARCHITECTURE

Our brains get built in an ongoing construction project that begins before birth and continues into adulthood, with especially rapid development phases in the early years and again in adolescence. And just like a house, what comes first lays the foundation for all that follows. That means children’s early experiences and environments—their building materials—are critical to the durability of their later functioning. As children grow and develop into adolescents, they need to be able to meet changing cognitive, emotional, and social expectations and requirements. Their brains must become functional, or get remodeled, to respond to these new challenges, and the quality of the supports available to them to do so will have a lasting effect on their capacity to develop into healthy adults and responsible citizens.



## AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

As they grow, children develop the mental skills and abilities they will need to function throughout their lives. Key capacities like the ability to focus, pay attention, and ignore distractions begin to develop in early childhood, when they require plenty of practice and support, but aren't completely operational until people reach their mid-20s. Similar to the way that air traffic control at a busy airport safely manages a heavy load of takeoffs and landings at the same time, these abilities act as a mechanism, called "executive function," that our brains use to manage our mental airspace—to process information, prioritize, and make good decisions. To make sure children and adolescents are able to build strong air traffic control centers in their brains, our education, justice, and other social systems need to recognize and support their ongoing development. To do that, policies for youth should focus on responsive practices that give them opportunities to build these skills.



## JUSTICE MAZE

Even the most difficult mazes include exits. But our current juvenile justice system is designed like a maze with too many paths in and too few paths out. Too many young people, no matter where they enter the system, end up on a path leading straight to detention, with no way out. Alternative paths that improve youth outcomes must be created: for example, there must be multiple routes to mental health and addiction services and programs appropriate for adolescents, who are in a period of rapid brain development, so that they can get back on track to live healthy, productive lives. Attention must also be paid to the policies and programs that can divert young people from entering the maze in the first place: community development, well-functioning schools, safe neighborhoods, and so on. By redesigning the justice maze, we can limit the number of entry points and maximize opportunities for young people to access the services they need in order to be functioning members of our communities.



## JUSTICE GEARS

Most people understand that a bicycle stuck in one gear isn't going to get anyone very far. Our criminal justice system right now is just like that—stuck, because it's using detention as the main response to situations that call for another gear. For low-level offenders, for children and

adolescents whose brains are still developing, for people in need of mental health or addiction services, prison is the wrong gear. It doesn't move them or our society forward. For youth, it can derail their progress at a critical time in their brain development, with long-term implications. Instead of using one gear no matter what the terrain, our system must be flexible, with appropriate responses to different situations and circumstances, so that we can achieve better outcomes and see real progress.



## LEVELNESS

At some point or another, everyone has experienced a table that isn't level. Maybe the floor is uneven, or the leg needs adjusting, but whatever the cause, a table doesn't function well when it isn't level. Children's mental health is similar: without the levelness good mental health provides, children can't function well in their daily lives. And while some kids' brains are built on level floors—in well-resourced environments with lots of social supports—others' develop on sloped floors, like environments in which they are exposed to abuse or neglect, lack supportive relationships, or don't have access to the resources they need. Just as tables can't fix themselves, these children need interventions from experts who can work on the floor, the table, or both to help restore their levelness.



## RESILIENCE SCALE

As children and adolescents develop, positive or negative factors in their experiences, relationships, and skill-building opportunities stack up like weights on a scale, tipping their development toward good or bad outcomes. Supportive relationships, safe and healthy environments and communities, and plenty of opportunities to develop strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills tip the scale positively; negative factors like violence, chronic trauma, neglect, or malnutrition do the opposite. Removing youth from school and sending them into the criminal justice system is an especially heavy negative weight; counteracting it with positive factors is difficult, so it's best to not put that weight on their scales to begin with. Instead, diversion programs, in-school counseling and behavioral therapies, and similar programs are ways to help the scale tip positively. We need to recognize adolescents' developmental needs and address their circumstances and behaviors in ways that do not stack the odds against them.

**Source:** Frameworks Institute. Toolkit File, Talking Points (Juvenile Justice). Published September 1, 2015  
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