

Operation Conversation: NYPD Cops Talk with Kid

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This blog post is part of a series highlighting best practices in community policing by police departments throughout the United States as part of IACP's Community Policing: The Next Generation project. The project showcases modern, innovative, and cost-effective solutions to crime problems and public safety issues through collaboration and partnerships between law enforcement and community stakeholders in order to implement community policing efforts. The project is funded through the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. New York City, New York, Police Department is a recipient of the 2016 IACP/Cisco Community Policing Award.

The New York City, New York, Police Department (NYPD) has created an innovative partnership bringing together cops and community, helping to keep the streets safer.

Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids (Cops & Kids) was launched more than 10 years ago following a police shooting, which exposed the need to develop a positive relationship between inner-city youth and the police. Since 2011, when the NYPD officially incorporated Cops & Kids into their work, more than 8,200 officers, new recruits, and students have been trained, bringing together police officers and young people. For young people participating in Cops & Kids, the workshops humanize police officers without questioning their authority. For police officers participating in the program, the workshops also humanize inner-city teenagers.

In 2011, the NYPD entered into a formal partnership with the **All Stars Project (ASP)**, a privately funded nonprofit organization whose mission is to transform the lives of youth and low income communities using the power of performance, in partnership with caring adults. The partnership is guided by four principles:

- The NYPD interest in talking to the community and recognition that police officers talking with inner-city youth has value for alleviating tension and creating a better environment for law enforcement to operate.
- Both the NYPD and the ASP's recognition of performance as a method for increasing the understanding and humanizing of the other, and as a positive form of participatory education.
- Young people and police have different roles and responsibilities in society. The Cops & Kids approach does not look to challenge nor undermine either the authority of the police or the civil liberties of the young people. Rather, it looks to persuade police and young people to give expression to their everyday roles.

- Joint recognition that participatory workshops, based on these principles, can bring about constructive and positive changes in police-community relations.

Cops & Kids workshops take place at Police Athletic League facilities, community centers, and the like. Officers and youth are seated in a circle of chairs and asked to sit in alternating order of cop, kid, cop, kid. After introducing themselves, the participants take part in improvisational, interactive theater games. This allows them to get to know one another and share an experience. After performing together, participants reflect and comment on the experience of playing these games together.

Participants are asked to say in two sentences the one thing that they came there to say, allowing participants to get what they want to say "off their chest," and moving them on to a new conversation. Participants also perform in improvisational skits, leading to productive and respectful dialogue.

One of the things that cops and kids discover is that they have many things in common. Play and performance allow the cops and kids to relate to each other, often for the first time, as fellow human beings. At the end of the workshop, each young person then steps up to each officer, shaking his or her hand and thanking them. Then each officer does the same with each of the young people. Final comments are often quite moving and sometimes end in embraces or "body bumps."

The success of the workshops has everything to do with the fact that hostility, suspicion, and fear is not covered up, but related to as real or meaningful. Everyone is given the opportunity to put attitudes and feelings on the table.

The NYPD and ASP administered a survey to a sample of program participants in 2014. Among the results: 100 percent of kids and 93 percent of officers said that the workshops played a positive role in promoting communication between police and youth.

