

# Investing In Our Youth Smart Policing

Ward Clapham

Investing in our youth makes sense. Nobody will argue that some extra energy and effort invested in our youth early on will serve society well in the future. Spending quality time with our children and teens now helps to strengthen and form their character, so they can make healthy choices in an increasingly complex and challenging world. By nurturing young people as they develop mentally, emotionally, and physically, we can help them acquire the building blocks they will need for long-term happiness.

Police agencies have recognized the importance of investing in our youth for a long time, but only recently restructured their service delivery to match this philosophy. However, much of society still holds a common misconception: that the men and women in police uniforms are only devoted to catching criminals and issuing traffic tickets. What people often don't know is that there has been a fundamental shift in policing over the past 10 years. The shift is from strictly a law enforcement paradigm towards a community problem-solving approach. The buzzword right now is community policing, but I like to call it "smart policing." This philosophy is really about root problem-solving in partnership with the community. It's also about investing time and energy up front, to proactively nip problems in the bud, before they even occur.

Today's peace officer is equipped with a wide variety of skills and tools, and their training takes them beyond just enforcement activities. Certainly, enforcement is still a significant part of the job. However, police services are also expected to lead communities in broader issues, such as personal safety and

wellness. That's why most police services are expanding their activities into areas such as crime prevention, restorative justice, school liaison and victim services.

It's a natural evolution of a police officer's role to now include nurturing the building blocks of the healthy development of youth. However, building developmental assets in a child takes time and there is no quick fix. Sometimes it requires making a painstaking investment which is slow to reap dividends, so it's easy to get frustrated or critical at times. However, I, like thousands of the other men and women practising "smart policing" have learned that the extra time can make a real difference in a boy's or girl's life.

I joined the RCMP because a Mountie in my hometown of Nanaimo took the time to help me, listen to me, and lead by example. He helped give me the courage to say NO when necessary and above all, maintain my integrity. My story is not unique—ask any cop on the beat and they will probably tell you about a police officer or someone in a position of authority who inspired them to make a difference in someone else's life.

One of my first calls as a police officer was to the crime of "road hockey in progress" in a *cul de sac*. Fresh out of training, I was ready to take on the world. I blocked off the *cul de sac* so no other traffic could flow through, turned on the red and blue flashing lights and marched up to the youths. In full uniform, I could see the kids shaking in fear as I approached.

"I have a complaint that you are using the road for hockey," I said, noticing the kids were nervous. "There are two ways to go on this. I shut you down so you don't get run

over or I leave my car where it is and we play. Got an extra stick?"

We played for 45 minutes. During that time we talked about drugs, the law and the cool things that cops get to do. I was feeling pretty good about myself that day, I made a whole bunch of friends and I was pretty positive that I had really made a difference in a few lives. My bubble burst the next day when my boss hauled me into his office. Apparently, the person who complained about this road hockey game also made an official complaint against me for neglect of duty. My pleas went nowhere with my boss or the complaining citizen. They didn't understand that it was more important to make a connection than trot out the provincial traffic act.

I pursued my passion for working with young people throughout my Mountie Stomp around Alberta, engaging the youth in activities like hackey sack, collecting hockey cards, skateboarding, and even hang gliding.

This experience paid off when I got my first command in Faust, Alberta. Youth crime was at an all-time high and we were getting called out of bed every night for a break and enter. Our overtime budget was taking a major beating and we were not getting any rest because of the continuous call outs. We all knew our enforcement strategy wasn't working and we needed to try something different. However, given the limited resources in the community, it was difficult to figure out what we could do to put an end to the problems.

Then it occurred to us—the police station had the only pavement in town. What looked like just a parking lot to us was something that could be worth gold to our youth. We

opened up our detachment grounds to the kids to play basketball and road hockey. Then we took up a collection and bought them basketballs, hockey sticks and hoops. We had a very difficult time raising the money, as we were in a very depressed area, with a small population of only 300 people. Nobody understood our plight. In addition, some of my peers thought I had gone crazy with my policing strategy.

As it turned out, opening the detachment grounds was a blessing in disguise. It was an instant hit and the youth were coming out in droves to play in the parking lot. Every shift, the police officers made a point to visit and play with the youth, which helped bridge the gap between police and the community.

However, this bridge building came with its own set of problems. The teens needed a washroom near our parking lot. Because of where the washroom was located, we had to escort them into the detachment and escort

them out. Nobody was able to get any work done. One day I grew so frustrated with the situation, I lost my temper with a youth who needed to go to the washroom. I felt guilty I had reacted so harshly, so the next day I apologized to the youth and rented a port-potty with policing budget funds and proudly placed it right beside the detachment. Soon after, the headlines across the province read: "Mounties got this John." "Mounties got an outhouse." "Mounties going into the toilet."

I thought that once my boss in Edmonton saw this, I too would be in the outhouse. But, times had changed. The Faust initiative was a hit across Canada. People lined up to buy the kids equipment and provide us support. Youth crime in the community ended - completely stopped. Nobody could believe it. The kids opened up to us and we began a journey into new territory. It wasn't long until we ventured into a host of other partnerships to

provide support and prevent crime. That was the best time of my career because I was really able to make a difference.

I hope that these simple examples help illustrate how we can all make a difference with our youth regardless of what we do, who we are or how much money we have. After all, what matters most to the young and old alike is having someone who takes time to truly listen when they are ready to talk. If we create an environment for children where they know you are a trustworthy, safe person to talk to, who is willing to listen, understand and respect them, doors will open. It is also in those moments when we will have the greatest chance to make a difference, and build someone's developmental assets.

*Inspector Ward Clapham is Operations Officer for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Nanaimo, B.C.*

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