



JSM GUIDANCE GROUP

# JUVENILE JUSTICE

Communication for Collaboration

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# INTRODUCTION

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Communication for Collaboration in the Juvenile Justice System is one of five companion papers in the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group Series, created to inform juvenile justice system practices and decision-making through practitioner insight and systems-level reflection.

This piece explores the structural and relational role of communication throughout the juvenile justice system and its direct impact on youth outcomes, recidivism, staff wellbeing, and cross-sector collaboration.

The content comes from twenty video conversations held over several months among members of the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group. While these discussions were informal and exploratory, they revealed common themes, insights, and observations about system-wide communication disconnects, terminology conflicts, and the stress they create for youth, their support networks, and service providers. Specific examples of miscommunications are provided to demonstrate how they lead to mismatched understanding and expectations.

Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC was asked to review these conversations and notes, then organize and synthesize the group's insights into a series of clear, coherent papers with specific examples and practical guidance provided by the group. The result is a collection of opinion papers that capture practitioner insights while offering organized, actionable paths forward. Each paper is presented in two formats: a brief executive summary for quick reference and a more detailed 6-7 page paper with examples and guidance.

This work aims to support both reflection and action. It encourages cross-sector professionals to examine how communication choices and patterns—whether deliberate or habitual—shape results, influence trust, and either strengthen or weaken system cohesion.

# COMMUNICATION FOR COLLABORATION IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## Executive Briefing

### PURPOSE

This briefing emphasizes how even routine communication—when inconsistent or misaligned—undermines outcomes for youth and their support networks, and affects workforce safety, efficiency, and systems sustainability.

It summarizes key findings and recommendations from a service provider's lens and examines communication norms within the juvenile justice system. Communication for Collaboration offers insights and strategies to improve communication across roles, organizations, and sectors—promoting more coordinated, equitable, and accountable practices throughout the system.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite decades of updates and reforms, communication within the juvenile justice system remains fragmented. Inconsistent terminology, unclear and unenforced expectations, and siloed operations lead to confusion, poor coordination, high recidivism rates, staff burnout, and unequal outcomes. These issues also undermine workplace safety and staff well-being—making it harder to respond effectively under pressure and maintain a positive, mission-driven environment.

### KEY CHALLENGES

- **Lack of Shared Language and Understanding:** Important terms like “case plan,” “behavior management,” and “restorative justice” are interpreted differently in various settings, leading to mixed messages and conflicting interventions.
- **Siloed Operations:** When organizations and providers work in isolation instead of collaborating, youth often face duplicated services, significant gaps in support, and unnecessary system involvement.
- **Implicit Bias and Communication Gaps:** Internalized norms and unrecognized bias shape perceptions of behavior and the exercise of authority—particularly in interactions with historically marginalized youth.

- Institutional inertia: Long-standing habits and assumptions about authority, structure, and stability often hinder efforts to improve communication, even when there is widespread agreement that change is necessary. Leadership often does not reinforce or role-model training in new skills.
- Power Dynamics and Organizational Mindsets: When normalized, coercive or dismissive communication practices weaken trust and diminish the potential for youth development and adult accountability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure leadership models transparency, invites and responds effectively to feedback.
- Create shared language frameworks to align definitions and expectations.
- Establish cross-sector learning spaces and practical collaboration tools.
- Provide role-specific training in communication under stress, conflict de-escalation, and trauma-informed, dignity-centered practice.
- Normalize reflective practice and cultural accountability.
- Align youth-facing communication tools with the developmental needs of young people.
- Integrate feedback loops into communication systems to enable real-time improvements.

## CONCLUSION

Communication is not just a side issue—it is a structural and relational driver of system effectiveness. Transparent, inclusive, and consistent communication builds the foundation for trust, collaboration, and lasting impact. But alignment requires more than just updated terminology or isolated training sessions—it relies on whether shared values are consistently reinforced through daily interactions across roles and settings.

When communication reflects shared values and is consistently reinforced in practice, it results in better outcomes for youth, greater clarity and safety for staff, and increased public confidence in the system's ability to respond in a fair, consistent, and constructive manner.

The full paper, *Communication for Collaboration*, expands on these insights and recommendations with concrete examples and actionable guidance for improving communication across organizations and roles, promoting more collaborative, fair, and accountable practices throughout the system.

# COMMUNICATION FOR COLLABORATION IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## Detailed Paper

### OVERVIEW AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The juvenile justice system is a complex network of agencies, organizations, and independent professionals dedicated to supporting the rehabilitative growth of young individuals as they reintegrate into society. Achieving meaningful outcomes today requires more than updates to policies and procedures; it demands consistent and coordinated communication among stakeholders, including law enforcement, courts, educators, service providers, detention and residential facilities, family members, and community organizations.

Even with shared goals and decades of effort, communication throughout the juvenile justice system remains persistently disjointed and inconsistent. The same words are used to mean different things, creating differences in expectations and interpretations of roles, responsibilities, and youth behavior. Combined with vague or constantly shifting procedures, these communication disconnects perpetuate confusion and limit opportunities for more effective, lasting, and positive outcomes.

While not the only factor, the absence of a unified communication framework greatly adds to ongoing issues such as high recidivism, worker fatigue, and uneven outcomes—problems that likely won't improve without more coordinated and consistent communication practices.

Bridging these divides requires deliberate, coordinated efforts—such as universally accepted standard protocols, joint planning, and regular cross-sector communication—to foster mutual understanding and alignment in practice.

### KEY CHALLENGES

Communication barriers in the juvenile justice system are shaped not only by structural silos and inconsistent practices but also by the mindsets individuals bring to their roles, many of which are implicit and influenced by internalized social norms and institutional habits.

How authority is exercised, how intent and impact are understood, and the skill used to manage everyday tensions all affect whether communication fosters clarity and accountability or results in mistrust, confusion, and fragmentation that can escalate into conflict. Even well-designed protocols and reforms may fall short if they overlook these dynamics. Recognizing these challenges is essential for transforming systems and daily practices into more effective, coordinated efforts.

## LACK OF SHARED LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Stakeholders often use the same terms to mean different things or different terms for similar concepts. Although these differences sometimes seem small, they usually reflect deeper differences in values, goals, and practices. Without verifying shared understanding, communication across sectors can break down, leading to misaligned expectations, conflicting interventions, and confusion for youth and their support networks.

### EXAMPLES

#### **“Case Plan” – One term, multiple meanings.**

Social workers and probation officers often use the term ‘case plan’ to describe a roadmap for a young person’s growth, including goals, supports, and milestones. In other settings, especially those focused on supervision or security, the same term might refer to a record of behavior or disciplinary history.

Without a shared understanding or consistent use of the term, differences in how ‘case plan’ is interpreted will likely continue throughout the system. Expecting any part of the system to give up its long-standing use of the term may be unrealistic. However, practitioners can implement simple practices—such as using handouts or providing clear explanations in forms and verbally—to help youth, their support networks, and other service providers understand that the term can mean different things in different parts of the system. Clarifying what it means in a specific setting and what to expect when working together in that setting can reduce confusion and encourage stronger engagement.

#### **“Behavior Management” – This term may refer to self-regulation skills in one context and punitive control in another.**

In educational and therapeutic settings, ‘behavior management’ typically refers to structured strategies to help young people develop self-regulation skills and encourage positive choices. The phrase might imply authoritative control or punitive consequences in other contexts. These differences affect how staff perceive and respond to youth behavior, and how youth experience and interpret trust, fairness, and consistency. When language is used inconsistently, it can confuse young people and their support systems about expectations, what is being reinforced, and the reasons behind specific responses.

#### **“Diversion Program” – Could be an early intervention (pre-charge) or post-adjudication sanction.**

Community-based organizations often use the term “diversion” to describe early interventions that give youth options beyond formal system involvement, sometimes before charges are filed or court appearances are needed. However, courts may use similar language to refer to post-adjudication alternatives to incarceration, such as community service or probation conditions following a guilty finding.

For example, a youth might participate in a community-led mentoring program as a preventive diversion before formal charges are filed. Conversely, another youth might be assigned to a court-run program under the same “diversion” label after adjudication. These differences affect not only the timing of the intervention but also its tone, goals, and how youth and families perceive their involvement with the system. When the term is used inconsistently, it can cause confusion and undermine trust in the fairness or purpose of the process.

## **“Trauma-Informed Care” – Ongoing Practice or Emergency Response?**

Mental health professionals usually view ‘trauma-informed care’ as a long-term strategy that affects daily interactions, environments, and policy decisions. It involves understanding how trauma influences behavior, anticipating potential triggers, and creating settings that foster emotional safety and trust. On the other hand, some frontline staff might see trauma-informed practice mainly as de-escalation techniques used during stressful situations.

For example, a clinician might adjust communication methods during a routine check-in based on a youth’s trauma history. Meanwhile, a facility staff member might define trauma-informed care as avoiding physical restraints when a youth becomes agitated. Without a shared understanding, implementation can vary, and the broader goal of trauma-informed practice can be overlooked, making it appear as a reactive tool rather than a proactive, relationship-focused approach.

## **"Restorative Justice" – Relationship repair and accountability or just a compliance tool?**

For youth advocates and community practitioners, restorative justice emphasizes self-awareness, healthy relationships, open dialogue, and personal responsibility. In institutional and other settings, however, it is sometimes viewed as a structured alternative to formal discipline, valued more for efficiency than its true potential. When restorative practices are mainly seen as a time-saving substitute for formal discipline—rather than as a process centered on growth-focused engagement and accountability—they risk losing their purpose and effectiveness. These different perspectives weaken the credibility of restorative approaches and limit their ability to foster positive, meaningful change.

## **SILOED OPERATIONS AND LIMITED CROSS-AGENCY COORDINATION**

Professionals throughout the juvenile justice system often work independently rather than collaboratively—each driven by different priorities, timelines, and protocols. When organizations and providers operate in isolation instead of working together, youth frequently encounter duplicated services, significant gaps in support, and unnecessary involvement in the system. When schools, courts, detention and residential centers, mental health providers, and community programs don’t share information or synchronize their language and efforts, children and their support networks experience confusion, staff become frustrated, and opportunities for assistance are missed.

For example, a youth might be referred to multiple services with overlapping goals but little coordination, or be held accountable for court mandates without the school or other relevant staff or providers being aware. These disconnects cause confusion, increase staff frustration, and lead to systemic inefficiencies. Over time, the lack of shared planning and communication erodes trust, undermines outcomes, and raises the risk of recidivism, especially when youth feel unsupported, misunderstood, or set up to fail. Although often unintentional, these patterns are preventable through better coordination and shared accountability.



## IMPLICIT BIAS AND COMMUNICATION GAPS

Many patterns in communication—such as how behavior is interpreted, whose voices are acknowledged, and which responses are considered appropriate—are shaped by unconscious, socially ingrained beliefs and institutional norms. Internalized narratives and generalized assumptions influence how people interpret language, behavior, and intent, often without conscious awareness. These common dynamics affect how messages are sent and received, what is prioritized in decision-making, and how consequences are justified. Most readers will recognize these realities; we aim to articulate them and provide a framework for understanding how they operate across various roles.

When communication fails to consider and respond to cultural context, lived experiences, and structural inequalities, it reinforces stereotypes and worsens disparities that lead to higher recidivism and poorer outcomes. Youth from historically marginalized communities are especially affected when behaviors are interpreted differently depending on who displays them.

For example, the same behavior might be called “assertive” in one setting and “defiant” in another. Additionally, assertiveness is often seen as acceptable and expected in males but not in females. Likewise, socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally marginalized groups are more likely to be perceived as ‘defiant.’ These inconsistencies can cause miscommunication, unfair discipline, lowered morale, long-term disengagement, resentment, and retribution—especially when young people feel invisible, misunderstood, unfairly judged, and treated unequally.

## INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Even when cross-sector leadership and staff agree that communication practices need improvement, deep-seated habits and social norms around authority, credibility, and control often hinder progress. New initiatives are frequently met with skepticism or seen as merely symbolic rather than meaningful unless there is visible leadership, feedback systems, and support for implementation.

Long-standing routines, embedded hierarchies, and socialized norms regarding authority, control, accountability, and credibility shape both formal and informal communication within organizations. These patterns are rarely questioned and are often maintained with the belief that keeping the status quo is more effective than pursuing modernization.

Although many leaders and individuals acknowledge the need for better communication and collaboration, efforts to enhance clarity and consistency often encounter resistance, hindered by procedural rigidity, unspoken power dynamics, and a reluctance to change “how things have always been done.”

These tendencies are not merely the result of individual hesitation; they are strengthened by systemic habits that prioritize compliance over connection and authority over effectiveness. In settings where directives come from the top and new ideas are met with skepticism or defensiveness, even well-meaning efforts to improve communication can be blocked or weakened. Staff may feel forced to follow outdated norms—even when those norms go against their professional judgment or ethical principles.

Most readers will recognize these tensions. Our goal is to make them visible, not to assign blame, but to identify the structural and cultural patterns that often limit innovation, transparency, and

accountability, thus impeding the ability to improve outcomes. Without intentional focus on the relational dynamics, professional norms, and power structures that shape daily practice, communication reforms risk being symbolic rather than substantive, fragmented rather than integrated, and temporary rather than lasting. Changing these patterns requires leadership that exemplifies clear, transparent communication, encourages dialogue, and helps individuals reevaluate long-held beliefs about power, voice, and accountability within organizations and across roles.

## POWER DYNAMICS AND INSTITUTIONAL MINDSETS

In many settings, authority is exercised through a “power-over” dynamic—where power and control are maintained through coercive or demeaning practices rather than through principled, developmentally appropriate guidance. This can include manipulation, mockery, name-calling, sarcasm, or dismissiveness toward youth behaviors that may be considered normal as part of routine discipline, adult authority humor, or social interaction, but ultimately undermine trust, clarity, and emotional safety. As a result, this approach decreases the likelihood of cooperation, positive development, and better outcomes, including lower recidivism.

To be clear, adults in youth-serving roles hold significant power and are responsible for creating a structured, safe, and appropriate care environment. The issue isn't with having authority but with how that authority is exercised. When power is used to enforce compliance harshly or to demean a child, instead of fostering positive growth, communication becomes strained, relationships break down, and the chances for long-term positive outcomes decrease.

Moving toward a more constructive model of authority requires not only a new tone but also a shift in mindset. It involves reevaluating the beliefs and habits that influence how adults interpret youth behavior, set expectations, and respond under stress. Transitioning from control-focused habits to a principled, accountable, and growth-oriented approach helps create environments where communication is clear, expectations are consistent, and relationships support—rather than hinder—youth development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are not a checklist but serve as a framework to align communication practices with the goals, values, and responsibilities of those working throughout the complex juvenile justice system. Real conversations and frontline realities inform these recommendations, aiming to promote more consistent, equitable, and developmentally appropriate communication across roles and settings.

Each recommendation is intended to foster more consistent, developmentally appropriate, and effective communication across roles, settings, and over time, leading to clearer expectations throughout the system at all levels and across sectors, and ultimately resulting in better system-wide experiences.

### **Ensure Leadership Models Transparency and Responsiveness**

Leaders should set the tone by demonstrating open, respectful, and clear communication. This includes inviting feedback, explaining the reasons behind decisions, and acknowledging complexity and uncertainty when they occur.

### **Establish a Shared Language Framework**

Develop clear communication protocols and glossaries across sectors to align terminology and meaning. Support this with cross-training, practical tools, and regular opportunities to clarify assumptions in real time.

### **Promote Cross-Sector Collaboration**

Encourage joint initiatives, multidisciplinary case reviews, and shared learning spaces that bring together stakeholders from courts, education, service providers, and community organizations. Build trust, familiarity, and alignment by creating opportunities for shared problem-solving.

### **Invest in Role-Aligned Communication Skills Training**

Provide training focused on each role's specific communication challenges. Emphasize active listening, conflict de-escalation, maintaining clarity under stress, and approaches that address power dynamics, trauma, and structural inequities.

### **Support Reflective Practice and Cultural Accountability**

Encourage staff at all levels to explore how personal experiences, professional norms, and organizational cultures influence communication habits. Create protected spaces for reflection and dialogue—especially around bias, perceived authority, and default responses under pressure.

### **Align Communication Tools with Youth and Family Needs**

Make sure communication with youth and their support systems is suitable for their developmental level, easy to access, and consistent across organizations. Use simple language, avoid jargon, clearly explain the purpose—checking in to ensure messages are understood as intended—and keep messages consistent in all settings.

### **Create Feedback Loops and Evaluation Tools**

Develop systems for youth, support networks, and frontline professionals to give feedback on communication practices. Gather and analyze data to identify gaps, guide continuous improvements, ensure accountability, and promote learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Improving communication throughout the juvenile justice system isn't just a technical fix — it's a cultural and relational effort that affects every level of practice, from how power is expressed and received to how understanding is built.

Transparent, inclusive, and consistent communication builds trust, encourages collaboration, and creates a foundation for stronger outcomes. However, alignment requires more than just updating terminology or offering isolated training—it depends on whether shared values are consistently reinforced in daily interactions across roles and settings.

When communication reflects shared values and is consistently practiced, it promotes better outcomes for youth and offers greater clarity and safety for staff. It also boosts public confidence in the system's ability to respond in a constructive, consistent, and fair way.

The recommendations in this paper offer a way forward, based on shared responsibility, clear purpose, and the belief that communication is not a sideline task but a vital tool for meaningful progress. With continued focus, structural support, and leadership that prioritizes successful outcomes over mere compliance, communication can shift from causing fragmentation to fostering connection, consistency, and accountability throughout the system.

# ABOUT THIS SERIES

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This paper is one of five created through an iterative partnership between the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group (JSM-GG) and Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC. The series explores common issues across the juvenile justice system and offers practical strategies to improve outcomes for youth, increase workplace safety, and support the well-being of staff and service providers.

Over more than 20 weeks of discussion-based meetings, JSM-GG professionals participated in extensive conversations about youth-serving systems, sharing their insights, frustrations, and real-world observations. The discussions—covering systems such as law enforcement, courts, corrections, reentry, education, mental health, and public service—highlighted significant concerns about fragmentation, miscommunication, and the need for stronger cross-role accountability and leadership. However, these meetings did not follow a formal agenda, nor did they produce written recommendations.

Instead, Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC was asked to review the entire set of video recordings and notes, then identify emerging patterns and turn them into a portfolio of clear, action-oriented briefs. These documents embody the real-world expertise, professional judgment, and lived experiences of those serving system-wide stakeholders, organized and presented to support practical, sustainable improvements across the system.

Each topic is presented in two formats: a condensed executive briefing and a detailed 6–7 page paper, crafted to support both high-level strategy and practical application by decision-makers, front-line staff, and cross-sector collaborators. Although the ideas presented do not reflect formal research or consensus, they demonstrate a shared intent to identify system-wide pain points and provide specific, actionable, and forward-looking solutions.

The series is a collaborative effort between the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group and Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC. Authorship is shared, with Roundtable Group organizing and writing based on extensive source material provided by the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group.

For assistance with implementing any recommendations in this series, contact Jumpstart Mastery at <https://www.jumpstartmastery.org>

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ORGANIZATIONS

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Communication for Collaboration is one of five companion papers in a practitioner-led series offering insights and guidance from professionals whose expertise spans crisis response, behavioral health, public safety, leadership development, and systems innovation—as well as direct service within the juvenile justice system. Contributors include a Confinement Prevention Administrator leading statewide juvenile reform efforts; a reentry specialist supporting transitions from incarceration to community life; a clinical supervisor integrating crisis response with addiction treatment for vulnerable populations; and others whose work in psychiatric care, military preparedness, mobile crisis teams, and emergency response brings a rare depth of practical and strategic knowledge to this series. Together, their field-tested guidance offers actionable pathways to improve outcomes for youth while addressing the broader social, systemic, organizational, and public safety impacts of the juvenile justice system.

Developed through a collaborative effort between the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group (JSM-GG) and Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, each paper in the series is shaped by the lived experience, professional insight, and strategic reflection of JSM GG's seven members whose diverse professional paths reflect both direct service and systems-level leadership within and beyond youth justice, contributing to how society as a whole ensures safety, fairness, accountability, and trust in its systems of care and response.

As the writing and facilitation lead for this series, Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, guided by conflict resolution specialist and researcher Beth Myers, brought expertise in systems thinking, deep listening, and analysis to the task of synthesizing dialogue, transcripts, and key insights. Complex ideas were transformed into actionable guidance, rooted in the group's lived experience and supported by foundational research in youth justice.

The following introductions provide a brief overview of the professionals whose experience and perspectives inform this series.

## Jumpstart Mastery – Guidance Group Member Bios

**Andy Prisco**, founder of Jumpstart Mastery, LLC (JSM), is a leading figure in crisis de-escalation education, emphasizing non-violent crisis management. His background in founding psychiatric emergency response programs and experience as a firefighter and EMT ground his work in practical, life-saving skills for public safety professionals. Prisco's innovative approach to training reflects his belief in continuous learning and community empowerment to address the urgent need for safer crisis interventions.

**Mike Delay**, a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Clinical Supervisor, excels in integrating crisis intervention and addiction treatment for vulnerable populations. His work focuses on building community partnerships and leading mobile response teams, mainly supporting homeless individuals and those in the justice system. Delay's compassionate approach to crisis management and recovery is essential in addressing the complexities of addiction and mental health in today's social service landscape.

**Dan Gapsch** has over 40 years of psychiatric nursing experience and over a decade of leadership experience in safety and crisis intervention education within psychiatric care and services workforces. As the Training and Development Manager at one of the nation's largest psychiatric hospitals, he was pivotal in creating and implementing programs that promote safety and reduce violence. His expertise extends into security management, equal opportunity, and dispute resolution, demonstrating a broad commitment to fostering safer, more respectful environments in high-stress institutions.

**Candis Hannah**, a re-entry Program Director and Crisis and De-escalation Specialist dedicated to reentry services, brings academic knowledge and practical insight to her work supporting individuals transitioning from incarceration to community life. Having managed the largest homeless shelter in Thurston County, Candis implemented effective crisis management and de-escalation strategies tailored to the unique needs of vulnerable populations. Candis' passion is serving youth and marginalized communities and empowering individuals during their reentry journey.

**Grace Icenogle** is a key advocate for justice system reform, specializing in youth development and confinement prevention. As a Confinement Prevention Administrator in a Juvenile Justice State System, Icenogle leads efforts to reduce youth confinement through evidence-based programs. Her research-driven approach and leadership in developing alternative support systems exemplify a forward-thinking, rehabilitative focus on justice reform.

**James Sporleder** brings a multifaceted approach to crisis response and leadership, blending military training with a philosophical focus on systems thinking. His extensive experience in survival training, repatriation, and workplace security positions him as a leader in developing specialized crisis prevention and intervention programs. Sporleder's dedication to human dignity and safety is reflected in his leadership roles across both military and corporate sectors.

**Mark Wiser**, a retired Lieutenant Colonel, offers a distinguished military career focused on joint combat operations, organizational behavior, leadership, and deliberate planning. As a highly decorated instructor pilot, Wiser has trained elite aircrews and shaped operational strategies across U.S. and NATO military theatres. His expertise in airpower, combined with a strong foundation in combat operations, continues to inspire teams as he now serves as a motivational speaker and consultant, sharing insights on leadership and personal development.

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