

Juvenile justice programs help youth avoid traps

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It's not always the right choice to follow the popular crowd.

Twelve-year-old Jennifer Coleman recently learned the importance of picking your friends as a teenager as part of a 10-week program at the Alfred Saliba Family Services Center called Parent Project and Positive Action.



Dothan Eagle photo illustration.

Unlike the rest of her classmates, Coleman volunteered with her parents to enroll in the course.

“Don’t do things to be popular because some of the things you do can have bad consequences,” Coleman said.

Coleman’s parents, Barbie Clark and Ander Coleman Jr, entered into the program as more of a preventive measure to keep their daughter and two younger sons out trouble as they grow up, and to learn helpful tips after their parenting was recently questioned by a relative.

“Kids don’t come with an instruction manuel, especially when they get to be a teenager,” Clark said. “She’s 12 years old now and I have six years to instill some values in her and help become a productive member of society.”

Teresa Lloyd, one of the program instructors, said most parents and children in the program are court ordered to participate from a juvenile judge, usually as part of the child’s juvenile probation. Lloyd said the program’s primary goal is to empower parents to take control of the home, and to give the children the confidence to make decisions on their own without following their peers.

Circuit Court Judge Butch Binford said its programs like the Parent Project and Positive Action that are helping juveniles stay out of trouble with the law at an earlier age. Binford, the chief Houston County juvenile court judge, has worked with District Court Judge Lori Collier Ingram to establish and continue several juvenile justice programs to help curtail the number of juvenile in the court system.

“We are trying to develop as many local program resources as we can for juveniles. These programs allow us to spend more time in hands-on supervision and mentoring of juveniles,” Binford said. “These programs allow an added layer of attention that a lot of kids need. We’re trying to keep kids from offending and sending them up to Montgomery to the Department of Youth Services.”

Parent Project and Positive Action

Coleman said going to her Positive Action classes after school gave her an opportunity to talk about how to handle situations similar to one she went through earlier this year when a friend blamed her for a fight on a church bus. She said she learned not to be scared to tell the truth.

Both Clark and Ander Coleman Jr. completed the 10-week Parent Project portion of the class earlier this year, at the same time as their daughter went through the program. But Clark said they sent their daughter through the course for a second time because they thought there was more for her to learn.

“I wanted her to have the experience to be there with children who are in the system,” Clark said. “We wanted her to see the reality that she’s in the same age group as children who are getting in trouble with the law.”

Clark said the program helped teach them to look out for certain habits as their daughter becomes a teenager.

“Like if she’s carrying a Ziploc baggie in her back pocket it’s a sign of drugs,” Clark said. “It gave us more knowledge of what’s going on today.”

Clark said the class also helped them learn about the importance of discipline when raising children.

“Out of our class, we were the only ones that volunteered for the program,” Clark said. “If they’re not held accountable for things today while they’re young then how can they be held accountable in front of a judge.”

Clark said the program also helped her daughter distinguish the difference between discipline and abuse. She said they entered the program after someone questioned their parenting methods when she spanked her daughter. She said Jennifer told her grandparents she’d been abused. She said they also learned about encouragement, and how important it is to remind children what they’re doing right in life.

“It’s to make sure we’re doing what’s in her best interest,” Clark said. “We’re raising them for the next generation. I’ve got more confidence to be a better parent after going through the course.”

Lloyd said the parent and child generally meet at the same time once a week, but in separate rooms, and the classes generally include youth from the age of 12 to 18. Several guest speakers are brought in as part of teaching responsibility, from convicted felons to representatives from the House of Ruth, along with course instructor Slocumb Police Chief Don White.

Lloyd said the parents are also taught about terms used on [Netlingo.com](https://www.netlingo.com) and cyber bullying, which include specific text codes to watch out for, like GNOC (Get Naked on Camera) to KFY (Kiss For You) and PAL (Parents Are Listening).

“We talk about a variety of issues the parent may have to deal with,” Lloyd said. “We also focus on the parent and child building a relationship. Communication is a key point between the parent and the child.”

Other programs

Wallace Smith, a retired school principal in Ashford, serves as a volunteer in a program that helps young people change their perception of life. Smith serves as a monitor on a juvenile conference committee with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). He said usually the court has referred the youth to them, and they’ve usually already admitted to their offense.

“We talk to them about their social habits. We give them obligations and tasks to perform, and they have a month to complete these tasks,” Smith said. “I was a principal down in Ashford, and when I retired I wanted to get involved with young people in some way. It’s a way of helping the court system out without overloading it with criminals that are not hardened yet.”

Sam Crawford, one of the coordinators for the program, said he recruits people who are 55 or older to serve as monitors. They meet with the youth every third Thursday of the month at a church in Dothan.

“They’re obligated to determine what the youth’s consequences are for their charges,” Crawford said. “We deal with truancy, shoplifting and minor drug offenses. So far we seem to be having a desirable effect on the kids.”

While both the Parent Project and Positive Action and RSVP programs have helped county youth for more than a year, Randy Mayfield said the Alabama-Florida Boy Scout Office is in the middle of its first Houston County Juvenile Redirection program.

“We’re taking the same principals that have been so successful for boy scouts over the years and fine tuning them, and teaching them to those kids that are beginning to get in trouble,” said Mayfield, the chief executive director of the boy scout office.

Mayfield called the Challenging Outdoor Personal Experience (COPE) a major part of the co-ed three-month program. He called it a leadership course held on a Saturday with several goals that include problem solving and decision making skills.

The program targets non-violent offenders from age 11 to 17, and comes with a requirement of 20 hours of community service to complete the program.

While the Parent Project and Positive Action and RSVP programs come at no cost to the youth, the Juvenile Redirection program comes with a fee. But Binford said there are scholarships available to help offset any affordability issues.

Consequences

Binford said state law requires the most serious crimes, like class A felonies from murder to drug trafficking to armed robbery, filed against teenagers 16 and older to be tried in adult court and not juvenile court.

Juvenile court involves a variety of criminal cases from minor criminal offenses to serious cases like sex crimes, and is generally closed to the public. Binford said the juvenile court judges also have jurisdiction over child in need of supervision (CHINS) cases. He said CHINS cases do not involve actual crimes, but instead involve allegations that the child is unable to be controlled by their parents and is in need of supervision by the court. He said classic examples include truancy and runaways.

Binford reiterated how the juvenile justice programs are for non-violent offenders, which specifically include CHINS cases and youth who have had little or no prior involvement with the juvenile court system.

He said the juvenile courts also have what he referred to as Youth Villages, an in-home hands on program where counselors meet with youth and their families at their homes.

Should a juvenile fail to complete any or all the programs, Binford said officials will look to place them at boys and girls homes or at the Southeast Alabama Youth Leadership Academy (SAYLA).

“We also have available to us the Pathway program in New Brockton, which is an excellent long-term therapeutic placement,” Binford said. “Should these more intense placements and sanctions fail we always have the option of a commitment to the (state) Department of Youth Services. This actually sometimes involves the incarceration of juveniles in DYS facilities.”

Binford said the Southeast Alabama Juvenile Diversion Center offers a secure place to hold juveniles who can not safely be released before their trial.

Allen Peaton, the deputy director of administration at DYS, said the state department of youth services has several ways of housing youth, from smaller group homes to secure institutions like Mount Meigs, a 780 acre facility just north of Montgomery.

“We have a school and a cafeteria and all, but they’re not locked in a cell. It’s a secure facility so they don’t go anywhere,” Peaton said. “It’s so much better for the youth to be served in their local community rather than be placed in a large state institution.”

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