

# Saving our Kids

[00:00:00] **Jason Hibbs:** Content warning. This episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for children. Discretion is advised.

[00:00:15] **Tramain Rayford:** We got a lot of youth crime going on right now. A ton of youth crime. Don't wait until your kid is that kid shooting and killing and Carrying drugs and hanging around the wrong crowd. No, don't wait until they're like that. You can do something right now.

[00:00:31] **Jason Hibbs:** The MacArthur Grant in Lucas County is winding down, but youth crime is on the uptick.

And so many of the conversations I've had with people for the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast point to common concerns about kids. One reason we've dedicated this episode to saving our kids.

[00:00:50] **Robert Jones:** Juveniles now are involved in more serious crimes than they were even five years ago or 10 years ago.

We're seeing them, the charges that they're facing are more significant and higher level than they were before.

[00:01:04] **Jason Hibbs:** So how do we save our kids before it's too late? And what can you do as a neighbor, coach, teacher, or family friend if you're worried about a child that's not yours going down the wrong path?

Welcome to a critical episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast produced by WGTE Public Media. And made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host, Jason Hibbs, and this is Fonda Royster.

[00:01:41] **Fonda Royster:** Just can't talk about youth homelessness. You gotta talk about child abuse. You gotta talk about poverty. You gotta talk about all of that.

[00:01:46] **Jason Hibbs:** She says she knows this because she's experienced it all.

[00:01:49] **Fonda Royster:** The reality is, this is my truth. This is my story.

[00:01:54] **Jason Hibbs:** And in some ways, it's a unique story.

But in other ways, it's not.

[00:01:59] **Fonda Royster:** I had two pairs of drawers, which means I had two outfits. Why am I going to school? I'm the dirty kid. I'm going to just get kicked out anyway because I'm a fighter. If you won't say I'm poor or whatever I have to defend myself. So why is school a priority? I don't even know where I'm laying my head when I leave school.

It was a lot of, Struggle between me and my mother. She was a single mother. She had her own treated trauma.

[00:02:24] **Jason Hibbs:** Royster says, while she thinks some family members knew just how bad things were at home, they didn't wanna get quote too involved.

[00:02:32] **Fonda Royster:** Everybody was a ostrich. I see it, but I don't wanna be involved. I don't know what to do.

'cause they had their own stuff.

[00:02:39] **Jason Hibbs:** She says she and her mother's fights turned so violent as a teen, Royster called Child Protective Services. She says she met with a kind social worker who confronted her mother.

[00:02:49] **Fonda Royster:** So she goes, she takes me to my mom's house. My mom did not deny it. My mom expressed, I'm tired.

I have issues. I need help. But the help they received,

[00:03:01] **Jason Hibbs:** Royster says, was nothing more than an admonishment to not get violent again. and a case closed.

[00:03:09] **Fonda Royster:** We never got intervention services, none of it.

[00:03:13] **Jason Hibbs:** But Royster says the ripple effects from her calling CPS were huge.

[00:03:18] **Fonda Royster:** A few months later, I'm kicked out. I was graced enough where I didn't have to sleep in park benches, but I still had to compromise in situations where I slept in the bed with people.

I didn't want to because I didn't have no place to go. It wasn't safe spaces there either. And you gotta, and I'm thinking like I was 14 and after the fact, people like if you would have told me that, but I was a child, I responded like a child. I was just, I did not live day by day. It was moment by moment.

I'm 14. And I got this permanent crease. Cause when I was out in the street, I always had to look mean. I was like, look, cause I didn't want you to bother me. I didn't. And I was just telling somebody earlier, I was, it was God's grace that covered me, but I never fell for a pimp like some of my peers did.

Cause my thing was, if I'm doing all the work, Why am I paying you? I know that some people may be like, but nature of the streets. Nobody sat down with me and said, what's going on with you? I did get sit down. Why you ain't going to school? You need to stop hanging around them boys. You need this, but nobody, even especially the ones that knew me and my mom's turbulent relationship said, how can I help?

It took, it was one person, the 14th year of my life.

[00:04:46] **Jason Hibbs:** Royster says after couch surfing for less than a year, she ended up living with her maternal aunt who helped her put things into perspective and get her life back on track.

[00:04:56] **Fonda Royster:** She was like, you gon cry today, and tomorrow, we comin up with a strategic plan.

So I'm like, I know this Negro just heard everything I done been through, you know what I'm saying? Hello? And she said, this is not gonna be your forever. And that has stuck with me, and I passed that along. So when I hear a young lady say I was hungry, so I give him it. It's not just you doin the act, right?

You gotta sit with that. I am 43. And I still have periods where I cannot sleep in the dark or you get those flashback moments. You know what I'm saying? People don't realize that. And again, like I said earlier, you gotta cope somehow.

So am I surprised that these kids are, Bed hopping, or they're on drugs, or they're fighting, and they're just angry.

No, because what child asks to be on this earth and not protected?

[00:05:55] **Jason Hibbs:** So as an adult, she's trying to be that protector.

[00:05:59] **Fonda Royster:** I hear the stories worse than mine. And I'm just happy they hear, and I tell kids, I'm happy you hear. Because you could have jumped off the bridge. Every successful founder is 15, 20 that didn't make it.

And I live with that every day because the odds were stacked against me. I'm also a youth suicide attempt survivor. And I'm so glad they weren't successful. But again, when you're in that moment of you're tired of being beat, you're tired of being Just neglected or whatever the case may be.

And you feel like this is my way out, but had it been success, I wouldn't be here. So I like to be the poster board to tell kids. Okay, we had trifling parents. We had cuckoo parents. Okay, you was out in the street. Okay, you was a hoe. Okay, you was fighting, but look at me now. I'm not ashamed of my story.

[00:07:02] **Jason Hibbs:** And never forgetting what her aunt did for her, Royster wants to help rescue other kids.

[00:07:07] **Fonda Royster:** It's, you know what, it's not, because it didn't happen overnight, so it's not going to be cured overnight. My thing is to, Take steps, though, to decrease it.

[00:07:17] **Jason Hibbs:** The single mother of four is a domestic violence specialist at the juvenile court, and she started the appropriately named Open Arms Transformation Living.

It's a non profit dedicated to empowering marginalized youth facing homelessness, exploitation, and running away. They address youth homelessness, teen dating violence, and human trafficking by providing essential resources like food, clothing, hygiene products, and housing assistance. And by educating clients on healthy relationships for long term change.

They have big goals and very humble beginnings.

[00:07:50] **Fonda Royster:** Cause I started off in the park feeding the homeless out of my pocket. I still have four kids. So we're homeless, helping homeless kids, . I tell people that all the time.

[00:08:05] **Jason Hibbs:** I met Royster at the public library where she often meets with kids and parents to connect them with resources, which at times means referring kids to the Area Youth Shelter.

She says, the 20,000 MacArthur grant dollars given to open arms. Are all going toward meeting very basic needs.

[00:08:23] **Fonda Royster:** It is getting spent on basic necessities. Again, it's not just the homeless kids. It's marginalized youth. Let me break down that down a little further. We've had kids in the school where they come in with literally lingerie.

And it's did your mama see you with that on and they're like, that's fine, my mama picked it out. Baby, you ain't about to wear that today. So that's a scenario that we deal with. Also we have kids that are experiencing intermittent homelessness where they're borrowing different people's clothes or, and again, it's that food piece, right?

Because if you hungry, I don't ask parent permission or a caregiver's permission or a teacher's permission to feed a child. You call me a relative, call, listen, I get a lot of calls from family members. Hey, my little sister, she's in this situation. She's hungry. That's how we're there at

[00:09:09] **Jason Hibbs:** another local survivor with a passion for helping kids is Tremaine Rayford, the CEO and founder of the program Inc.

[00:09:17] **Tramain Rayford:** I sit on a board inside the Lucas County Correctional Facility Advisory Board, and they've reported that close of 90 percent of the ones that are So the way in my mind works is like, at some point of time, we have to stop, this is an analogy that I heard, we have to stop saving people out of the water and go back to figure out where they fell in.

[00:09:45] **Jason Hibbs:** And Rayford is not the only one sharing sentiments like these. My name's Carl Mitchell. He's the senior pastor of Restore Church the Bible Way in Toledo and ministers to the community by helping feed the hungry. with the help of juveniles who've been court ordered to do community service.

[00:10:01] **Carl Mitchell:** So it was mostly get in the community, show the love that we profess in our faith not to just encourage membership because that really doesn't work, but to show that people care.

[00:10:12] **Jason Hibbs:** I didn't hear Mitchell disagree with the MacArthur Foundation's goal to reduce the racial disparities in jail. But he does believe that leaders may be going about this the wrong way.

[00:10:22] **Carl Mitchell:** It's not a situation of we're at war and we're at war with a specific enemy. The enemy is bad decisions, bad choices.

There's no effort to address those bad choices. It seems as though most of the effort is the disparity is because, I hate to say it, I don't hate to say it, because Black, it's not. It's because Black people. bad decisions. So I, it's frustrating because when there's funerals, guess where they're going?

And they don't have insurance, guess where they're going? They need food boxes. There's very little effort seemingly, or fun seemingly, placed on what's the cause of the issue in the first place. Why are people actually living the lifestyles and making decisions that's causing them to be arrested and incarcerated?

It seems as though they should invest way more money and effort in addressing the problems instead of putting financial band aids on a bullet hole of a problem that persists. There's no effort. Nobody talks about the decision. Everybody talks about inanimate objects as though they have brains. No, it's the kids.

It's the person selling the kids, the drugs or the guns or what have you. And then the choice is made. Where are the parents? Seems like none of that's being, personal responsibility. None of that's being addressed. And that's the cause. In my opinion, we've forgotten the benefits of what's called a traditional family.

It's just the way a family should be. It should be a mother and a father and Children rearing them up in respect of community and respect of themselves. That's what's missing. But

[00:12:06] **Jason Hibbs:** the makeup of the American family has changed. According to the Pew Research Center, there is no longer one dominant family form. Two parent households in the U. S. are decreasing due to higher rates of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation. Families are becoming smaller because of an increase in single parent households and declining fertility rates.

While most children were born within marriage in the early 1960s, today about Forty percent are born to single women or those living with non marital partners. This, as the role of mothers has evolved, with more moms going to work, many as primary breadwinners for their families. And research through the years shows that children raised in fatherless homes are more likely to commit crime and go to prison.

We've

[00:12:56] **Carl Mitchell:** forgotten the benefits of having what people deem to be normal, a normal life, and doing things right, and respecting one another no matter who they are. We've gotten our little boxes, it seems and with our digital devices, not to get on a soapbox or get on a diatribe, where people, Aren't even used to communicating with each other.

I'm 53 years old and I say hello to everybody. I don't care what you look like, what you smell like, where you come from, what color your skin, I could care less. You're a human being. I'm going to be congenial. And I've noticed, especially with the youth. They almost don't know how to say hello anymore.

[00:13:34] **Jason Hibbs:** So what is Mitchell's prescription to reverse this breakdown of community?

[00:13:38] **Carl Mitchell:** Grab devices from people that age. Seriously. My son, my eldest, youngest rather, I have six. That's my youngest over there, he's ten. If he doesn't need to have it in his hand, Yeah, I'm going to take it out of his hand. Parents need to be parents again. Fathers need to be fathers again. Mothers need to be mothers and not best friends to their children again.

And yeah, we do need to take that, those devices away from them and spin. Personal time with them television and digital devices have become babysitters.

[00:14:11] **Jason Hibbs:** He also believes parents leading by example, teaching kids to communicate and engage with their community will go a long way in reducing tension with police and yield a new generation of people who work with law enforcement.

[00:14:25] **Carl Mitchell:** When's the last time you've seen a beat cop on the street? In Toledo ever walking. Yeah, it doesn't happen very seldom. Do you see that you see patrol officers? But the engagement has to go both ways. We have to remember that our law enforcement, our fire department, our first responders

they represent us, but they also work for us and As purveyors of the authority of the law, no matter what they're doing, we have to respect them.

In order to have respect, you have to have a relationship. That's why we try to effectively be involved with either advertising or showing up or promoting. Coffee with cops. When we have relationships with each other, I could get stopped today. And based on a stereotype where my car looks like somebody else's car, I could be in the news tomorrow easily and possibly, and people will get upset with me and they can justifiably, if I.

Fit a stereotype. And I don't know that officer and that officer doesn't know me. Remember I did that for a living for a little bit. At the end of the day, he just wants to get home to his family. And he wants to hopefully not get the poop suit out of them for offending somebody based on something that somebody actually did.

That's not me. So we need to have relationships with each other. And how do we do that? And. Stop acting like they're the enemy, and they stop acting like we're all suspects.

[00:15:50] **Jason Hibbs:** Now back to Tremaine Rayford, who says he, too, is dedicated to building community for the sake of the kids.

[00:15:57] **Tramain Rayford:** Why not go upstream and say, okay, where's everybody falling in at? Let's be proactive with this. I think that's what the program Inc. is.

[00:16:05] **Jason Hibbs:** The program Inc., which received 20, 000 MacArthur Grant dollars, offers a variety of programs for boys to help develop their social and life skills.

including a community development initiative with fun hands on educational activities and includes topics such as character development, financial literacy, emergency car repair, and violence prevention. They have a mentoring program for boys growing up in fatherless homes, monthly meals, and have even expanded into programming for women.

[00:16:33] **Tramain Rayford:** We have our first date event where young men learn how to treasure and respect and court women on their first date and they go on the first date with their mom. It's difficult to grab a 20 year old, 17 year old, 18 year old kid who's been selling drugs, making great money off of selling

drugs or doing drugs or promiscuity or, All that is difficult to have to stop that and say, Hey, stop.

Now you got to do the right thing. It's a lot difficult to do that. It's quite easier when they're age eight to just merge them into the right trajectory, say, Hey, we're just going to be proactive. And here's what you do. Here's the great thing is surround them by positive male mentors, positive male role models, expose them to.

All that life has to offer, kids get bored so easy, they play video games and they don't do anything but the same things. They get bored pretty fast. Then they tend to, within their community, find those negative mentors or negative. One of our volunteers said that the first, when he was age eight, his impressionable moment Was when a drug dealer gave him drugs and said you're going down to that house and they're gonna give you 20 He started off as a drug dealer by age 15 He was selling drugs like and it's difficult when you're making great money selling drugs.

It's hard to say Hey, you can either die or go to jail. You're like, that's not my story. I'm invincible. I'm a teen, But that's the reality of it is kids are victims at that young age You Victims of predators who are drug dealers, predators who are just making money off of them. And kids don't realize that when we equip them with the confidence of knowing their self value, knowing that you are bigger than selling drugs or crimes against women you are the runner up.

You are the hero of the story. That's you. We're retiring. We need someone to take over. And that is you. That's one of our affirmations that we do. Like you are the hero of the story. Like this whole story is about you. Each individual person here is all interdependently working to be the heroes of society.

We need every single one of you guys to step up and do the right thing. We need you guys.

[00:18:59] **Jason Hibbs:** Rayford says he needs parents to, to lead by example.

[00:19:04] **Tramain Rayford:** Nothing in comfort grows the way it should. And that's what we do with our young men. We put them and we expose them to places that are outside of their comfort zone.

And that's where we see the true life skills develop. The skill of overcoming fear, the skill of being patient, the skill of teamwork. Like those are the true life skills. You can get through life without not knowing how to tie a tie, right? You

can get through life without changing a tire. You might be able to get through life without budgeting and managing money.

You can't get through life without learning how to teamwork. You can't get through life without overcoming fear, resolving conflict, being patient at times. Those are the true life skills that. Aren't widely discussed, and those are the skills that we, the underlying skills that we talk about through our events.

[00:19:54] **Jason Hibbs:** But not every kid in need will find their way to someone like Tremaine Rayford, Carl Mitchell or Fonda Royster. And that's where Toledo Public Schools can help TPS representatives say they get county tax dollars to help housing insecure students. They often rely on students and parents to self-report their needs.

[00:20:12] **Brian Murphy:** We have. Been number one in terms of the number of students that are and families that are reporting to us that they're in a homeless situation.

[00:20:22] **Jason Hibbs:** That's Brian Murphy, chief of Strategy and Organizational Development for Toledo Public Schools.

[00:20:27] **Brian Murphy:** I've been doing this 27 years, and I would just tell you in the last two to three decades.

Education has changed and there's more responsibility being put on school districts to help the family structure and not just the student coming to school every day to get an education. It's much more than that.

[00:20:45] **Jason Hibbs:** Murphy says when they find out a student is in need, they have to act fast.

[00:20:50] **Brian Murphy:** One of the things that we find is that housing insecurity typically leads to some other issues within the family structure or with the student that needs to be addressed as well.

For example, a lot of times housing security means that there's what we see is there's a pattern of attendance issues with the child being in school, meaning that a lot of the students that are experiencing housing security because they've moved around or they're not necessarily in a stable place.

They miss a lot of school. So a lot of times that means that we have to academically we're first, we have to get them in school. You got to work with

the County to get them secure housing. And then we need to expedite the enrollment process and whatever school they would go to. Sometimes that means doing some unique things around transportation.

We need to we work towards getting them academic support. We work towards we have tons of community partners in the community. A lot of times there are things that we necessarily can't accomplish or don't have the resources within the school district, but that's why we have community partners come in and help us.

In those various situations,

[00:21:52] **Jason Hibbs:** Murphy's TPS colleague is Dr. Amerah Archer, acting executive director of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

[00:21:59] **Amerah Archer:** Yeah. And if I could add to that so research shows that the public education system is where students have the most exposure out of any other institution. If we are going to try to address childhood trauma or provide any type of opportunities, the public school system is going to be the best place.

Cause we have the most exposure to students. So also, just like Brian said In terms of attendance, we have attendance champions in a lot of our buildings, and those are people who are going out to find the students who are not coming to school connecting with those parents, figuring out why they're not coming to school to put resources in place for them.

If there are people who have housing insecurities, we have Heather Baker's program, but then also some people, live in a house that just don't have adequate means. So we'll have resources to get them appliances. I was recently at a school and they got a family refrigerator because they didn't have a way to keep their food cold.

So they were eating mostly, canned foods, things like that. And then we have a food pantry that we partner with, Brian mentioned all of our community partners and our school sometimes go and get. the food pantry bags and have them at the schools and the students take them home with them.

We have health clinics in many of our schools for our students can utilize for free. So if they don't have access to health care or a way to get to the doctor, if they're feeling ill, things like that, they don't only service our students, but they

also service our community within the buildings. And then a lot of our schools are community hub schools.

So they have a specific person in that building, a community hub director, and they provide wraparound services again, not only for the student, but for everyone in the community of that school.

[00:23:28] **Brian Murphy:** I think that's evolved over the years as well. I think if you went back 25 years, even, most school districts, They did for a lack of a better word, really balk or throw up, a shield to all the other responsibilities that were being pushed towards education and school districts.

[00:23:45] **Jason Hibbs:** And that's pushback Fonda Royster says she's heard before.

[00:23:50] **Fonda Royster:** I tell teachers in a perfect world, you went to school to be a science teacher. I would love for you just to do that. What's that Anton chart and all that. But in the society we are, you might be a mama, a daddy, an uncle, a social worker, or a nurse.

That's just the nature in which we're in right now. And you're frustrated, but you, because the young man, he presents himself as mad, as aggressive, but you don't know the tub is his bad bed. So can you imagine people coming in and out the bathroom? Use, as they using the bath, and you got, you don't know where your next meal is.

[00:24:23] **Brian Murphy:** They've evolved. I think the majority through education, through professional development training, I think, our teachers recognize that it's very difficult to educate a child that's coming to school hungry every day. It's very difficult to educate a child and be successful with a student that is, to your point, experiencing housing insecurity all the time.

A child that's moving around from house to house and has no stability at home education is typically the last thing on their mind. I think our teachers recognize the fact that this is real and for us to be able to improve the likelihood of the child to be successful, we have to embrace it.

[00:25:00] **Amerah Archer:** And also we don't put the onus only on the teachers, as a district, we're providing all of these different services. And it's part of our effort to streamline all the different services that we have. So a teacher knows if I have a student that's experiencing homelessness, I'm going,

either to the counselor and the counselor knows to go to Heather Baker's department.

If I have a student that's experiencing or that needs food, I'm going over here, so that the teacher does not have to find resources for all these different things. They already exist. They can send them to the health center so that it's not all the onus is not on the teacher. I think part of this is about how we build relationships with students.

We really want to build a foundation between our schools, our teachers and students, our administration and students, our counselors and students. And part of that relationship is being able to identify what the root causes of some of the problems.

[00:25:51] **Lisa Sobecki:** When I started seeing that spike of 30 percent going up with our youth crime, the question is, why is that happening?

[00:25:58] **Jason Hibbs:** That's Lucas County Commissioner Lisa Sobecki.

[00:26:01] **Lisa Sobecki:** I just don't have the answers, but it's finding out why that's happening. Is there a correlation between juvenile court, what I call kids court, and adult court.

[00:26:12] **Jason Hibbs:** She wonders if more local data sharing could help reduce youth crime. She wants to find out if there's an easier, quicker, yet legal way for TPS to share mental health records with juvenile court judges, and if juvenile courts share data with adult courts as defendants do.

age into adulthood. She wants to be sure the courts and school system are working together and communicating about youth needs. She says she's optimistic TPS superintendent Romulus Durant is open to more collaboration.

[00:26:42] **Lisa Sobecki:** I can't speak for him, but I believe that Dr. Durant, this is one of the things on his radar.

And I think it makes him sad when students within the school system get into these messy situations. And I know that there's staff and there's teachers that are sad when they see their students that are excelling or maybe having some issues that they probably can't do more. But the reality is that we as a community that, the old adage of it takes a village.

It literally takes a village.

[00:27:16] **Jason Hibbs:** While I didn't get a chance to interview Dr. Durant, I asked Murphy and Archer, who were speaking on behalf of TPS, about a hypothetical high schooler who gets in trouble during the summer, the alleged crime is committed off school grounds, and has nothing to do with TPS. But as the juvenile judge presides over this case, there's a big file sitting at TPS with years of mental health and other interventions that could be useful to the judge.

Would the judge see those TPS records? I got a very detailed response about reporting student absences, but beyond that, a judge would need to request that info from schools.

[00:27:51] **Brian Murphy:** One of the challenges in communities is a comprehensive case management system, for lack of a better word, that could be used between all the different organizations in the community, including school districts, including behavioral health, mental health organizations, in the public sector outside of school districts, whether it's juvenile court, etc.

That is very difficult to accomplish because of a lot of the legalities and some of the obstacles that come with that. So really it comes back to communication and collaboration.

[00:28:23] **Jason Hibbs:** Juvenile Court Judge Robert Jones believes the recent uptick in youth crime is a ripple effect from the pandemic and that more kids have more serious mental health needs and are simply acting out.

[00:28:35] **Robert Jones:** I know we're a couple years removed from that, but it's still Dramatically, I think, affects especially children.

[00:28:43] **Jason Hibbs:** His colleague, Judge Linda Knapp, agrees.

[00:28:46] **Linda Knepp:** I don't know a youth that comes before my court that doesn't have anxiety, depression, or a combination thereof, at a minimum.

[00:28:57] **Robert Jones:** A significant piece that our kids have to deal with it.

We didn't have to, and generations before didn't have to, and social media is a huge piece of that. It, there are certainly benefits to social media, but. There are certainly negatives and real chances for harm, especially for kids. We see it every day. We see that, the negative sides to social media.

And it's hard, I think, when kids their whole life is looking at the screen. Actually engaging in the real world is a challenge for them, and it may be intimidating and causing them anxiety.

[00:29:34] **Jason Hibbs:** But what about sharing juvenile defendant data? The judges say that pretrial department in adult courts should gather defendant data from the juvenile courts, and the juvenile judges will reach out to TPS for info, but they can't always get it in time.

[00:29:49] **Linda Knepp:** We will reach out. I don't know a percentage as to how much we get back. I've had teachers Come to the courtroom to speak on behalf of the youth that we have. Again it, there's we do reach out cause we always want to check the grades, check attendance and, see how things are going.

But again, TPS has A lot going on there and sometimes, youth get in trouble in the summer and we can't get records because, the school is closed. So it varies from youth to youth. I don't know if it has to do with the school or, but I know our people do reach out.

They don't always get a response.

[00:30:28] **Jason Hibbs:** The judges and Juvenile Court Administrator Said Orra says we also have to consider privacy.

[00:30:34] **Said Orra:** By nature, because we're working with youth. It's not an entity or a series of entities that are open to public record, right? There's a reason why they protect juveniles and their records and what's going on.

We fully expect that, there are kids that might engage in behaviors that are bad choices, but again, as the judges have shared, this is a place of rehabilitation and hope, but so is school, right? That's all toward, goes towards the privacy, confidentiality, protection of those rights for children.

Now, there's nothing to say if there was a new solution or as we examine solutions, how is it that we can facilitate some of the sharing of this information. If a child, if their parent, their guardian wants to release this information and for us to share it with other people, those are things that we can do but in terms of other entities or other places having open access to everybody's records.

Those structures are in place to protect kids, and that information doesn't flow freely like that.

[00:31:32] **Jason Hibbs:** Executive Director of the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board of Lucas County, Scott Szilak, shared similar sentiments.

[00:31:39] **Scott Sylak:** I'm not quite sure where that's all heading, but I'll just say, we take the protection of behavioral health information very seriously.

It's protected health information, just like your medical records. You just not, you would not want your medical records. records shared without your consent and without a purpose.

[00:32:00] **Jason Hibbs:** So that's what they're doing. But what can we do as neighbors, teachers, coaches, family members, and friends, when we see a kid who isn't ours who might be going down the wrong path. Here's judge Linda Knepp .

[00:32:13] **Linda Knepp:** As a neighbor, show interest in that young person. When you see them say, hello, how was your day? How was school today?

Kids want a sense of purpose. Feeling loved, cared for, and the more people that can show that, the better that youth is going to be, so they don't feel so alone. Parents have to work, and schedules can be crazy, but just knowing that there's somebody there that cares that they walk past them every day.

Oh, I see you at the basketball, do you like to play basketball, who's your favorite basketball team, right? Just things little things like that are very compelling in the life of a youth.

[00:32:56] **Robert Jones:** Yeah, I would agree like I think engagement is always going to be more beneficial than distancing or ignoring or whatever if someone sees youth in their neighborhood that they are Whatever they're noticing any kind of engagement is always going to be better because I think It goes back to what I said at the beginning with regards to the kids coming out of the pandemic, many of them are lost and they don't understand that people in the community do care.

[00:33:23] **Erin Wiley:** If I was going to write a prescription for every one of what we should be doing. Everyone should be involved in the lives of kids around them.

[00:33:29] **Jason Hibbs:** Erin Wiley is a therapist and the owner of the Willow Center, an area counseling provider with services for individuals of all ages, couples, and families.

She says teachers, pastors, and coaches often recognize when something is wrong with children due to their extensive experience. They can identify outliers, kids who can't function like their peers, through behaviors that are either highly escalated or very shut down. Examples include children who get excessively angry or lose control and those who are withdrawn or socially isolated, observing significant changes in sleeping or eating patterns also indicates issues.

She says these behaviors should be viewed as communication, reflecting unmet needs or internal distress rather than disobedience or attention seeking. And understanding this helps address the root causes. and helps support the child.

[00:34:22] **Erin Wiley:** Kids are struggling because of trauma. If they have mental health problems, we all have mental health problems, right?

Feeling emotional and hearing you should take up space and you should say how you feel and then trying to do that and getting your butt beat or being ignored by parents or poverty. Having parents who just can't attend to you. And so you stay all the time. Yeah. With your great aunt or your grandma.

And so you get the sense of they don't care or your dad leaves and, or your mom, and a mom has multiple boyfriends and there's just no bandwidth for anyone to pay attention to you. You are going to look, be right. I just hate diagnosing people depressed. Yeah. You're going to experience deep sadness. And that deep sadness will make you overeat or stop eating, not be able to sleep or want to sleep all the time, make you want to self harm because you don't know what to do with the deep feelings of grief.

So like cutting goes, yes, see my hand hurts. That's what it is, right? So all of it's. To me, it's all coping skills of trying to deal with emotional pain and trauma. How much does mental health play a role for these kids? Yeah, 100 percent of the time they're struggling. Something's not right.

And so they are anxious and panicky because they don't trust situations or people. Sad and depressed because they're not having their needs attended to. And angry because that's, they know that doesn't feel right to them. They know, like we know deep down we're special and we should be cherished and loved by our parents.

And most, many of us are but there are moments for all of us where we aren't, and where would that connection breaks and you experience a wound in your brain. That unless you're dealing, unless you're in therapy or you're actively

working on it, or you have the vocabulary, which children don't, that kind of pain gets stuck.

And then to me, all of that behavior that we call mental health or mental illness are just reactions that are natural to not being cared for, seen, heard, loved, held, attended to.

[00:36:14] **Jason Hibbs:** Wiley says schools should incorporate social and emotional learning into each grade.

[00:36:19] **Erin Wiley:** We should absolutely be teaching kids how to manage emotions, how to develop coping skills, how to handle conflict resolution in relationships,

[00:36:26] **Jason Hibbs:** she says.

Despite being overworked, teachers can do a lot on their own, like spending just two minutes daily helping students reflect on their feelings and needs by placing their hands on their heart and thinking about how they want their day to go. And what they need, students can learn to identify and address their own needs.

She says this practice can be life changing, introducing self awareness and empowerment with minimal time investment. She holds workshops for local teachers and says the feedback she gets is eye opening.

[00:36:56] **Erin Wiley:** Particularly men, which is so interesting to me, but they come and they go like, When I talk about what not to do and how like shaming kids being like what's wrong with you or stop it This isn't that like the anger the vitriol that we spit on kids that they just wear and hate themselves I have guys come up after we go.

That's exactly what I do. That's all I've ever known I do that to my kids. I do it to my students. I say what is wrong with you? And they're like, what do I do? So the ones who want to hear it and hear my, what I'm saying about how damaging that is really want skills to change. I just think if we could be teaching teachers the internal, deep, emotional stuff as opposed to, here's classroom management.

When a kid is bad, you make them clip down and now they've been demoted amongst all their peers and everyone can visually see that they're badly behaved. We just need better for teachers and kids. But I'd like to think that we are entering a new age of consciousness. So even if there aren't resources made

by the government and there's not more money that superintendents do what they've been doing, which is bring people like me into the schools to try to give people a baseline knowledge of this stuff so that they can be healthier and better for themselves, for their families, their kids, their spouses, and for the kids they work with.

[00:38:17] **Jason Hibbs:** Back at the library, Fonda Royster with Open Arms Transformation Living says she's optimistic about her group's future.

[00:38:25] **Fonda Royster:** We're going to keep doing what we're doing, but we also want to be the second youth shelter in Toledo. I don't want no buildings. I want a home. Because a lot of these kids don't know how it feels to be in a safe.

[00:38:38] **Jason Hibbs:** She says the goal is to have the home be a safe space with in home therapy.

[00:38:43] **Fonda Royster:** Be a solution, not a problem. And my thing is I get everybody is not comfortable doing the work I do. Everybody's not comfortable hugging prostitutes or holding a drug addict's hand or even feeding them. I get that. that. But if you that millionaire help fund us so we can continue to do the work because if we can get them stable, you don't have to look around your shoulders or who's trying to attack you, who's trying to ask you for money and all of that.

Help us do the work. And these politicians, they need to spend the night at the Cherry Street Mission. They need to have a conversation with these kids at the youth shelter, hear about their lives. Maybe that'll make them more empathetic, make them more open to having intervention programs for them and their family.

[00:39:35] **Jason Hibbs:** And as for Royster and her mom?

[00:39:38] **Fonda Royster:** And I'm at a space now where I am more empathetic towards my mom. It's not minimizing what she did, but again, she had her own treated trauma. And I was there when she expressed I need help and she didn't get the help. She didn't get the help.

[00:40:00] **Jason Hibbs:** The Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast is produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast. I'm your host. Jason Hibbs.

on the next Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast.

Punishment is too important to leave to the criminologists, the prison system. So we need to get more folks who are in the sciences, who are in the humanities, who are in the professional Professions involved in what it is that we're doing,

[00:40:44] **Jason Hibbs:** how a local professor and her students are opening what she calls the black box of prisons and giving inmates new opportunities while they're incarcerated.

So as we would with any kind of government. Tax funded, publicly funded institution. We should know what's going on there.

[00:41:02] **Jason Hibbs:** And the tale of a trucker who found the road to a better life while behind bars. I'll tell you what, I've never been happier than I am now. That's on the next Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast.