



***GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUCTING YOUTH
PRIOR TO ADMINISTRATION OF A
MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING TOOL***

**Valerie Williams, M.A., M.S.
Thomas Grisso, Ph.D.**

This document was created to assist juvenile justice personnel when introducing youth to a mental health screening tool as part of an intake process. There are a number of things that need to be explained to youth so they understand the nature of the questionnaire that they are being asked to complete. This document outlines some steps for juvenile justice facilities to consider when they are creating policies for disclosing procedures to youth.

These guidelines were developed by the Juvenile Detention Centers Association of Pennsylvania (JDCAP) with the assistance of the National Youth Screening & Assessment Project (NYSAP), for settings using the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-Second Version (MAYSI-2). Although it refers to the MAYSI-2, it would apply as well to other mental health screening tools used in intake settings.

NYSAP is a member of the National Resource Bank of technical assistants, associated with the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative.

Guidelines for Introducing the MAYSI-2 to Youth

Introducing Youth to the MAYSI-2

Instruments like the MAYSI-2 must be introduced to youth appropriately. How youth respond to the questions on such instruments depends a lot on what they think the instrument is for. Therefore, when youth are approached to take the MAYSI-2, we recommend that the person giving the MAYSI-2 take one or two minutes to introduce youth to the MAYSI-2 by providing them information about it.

There is no single way to do this. Certainly, this calls for something more than simply handing the form to the youth and saying, "Please complete this." On the other hand, it does not require a lengthy or detailed description. What is needed is some basic information, offered in a non-threatening manner and in a way that youth can understand.

The wide range of ages of youths involved in the juvenile justice system makes it difficult to write one "script" that would be understandable or appropriate for all youths. Moreover, conditions are different from one juvenile justice agency to another. Some may strictly limit how mental health screening data will be used, while others may have broader policies for who sees a youth's MAYSI-2 results.

Below we provide a list of guidelines describing the types of information that should be included when introducing youths to the MAYSI-2, while leaving it to the facility and its staff to decide what is appropriate to say in addressing each guideline.

List of Things to Include in the Introduction

1. That the questions will help staff understand the youth better

Let youths know that you would like to give them a set of questions to answer that will help staff to understand them better. Describe them as questions about who they are—their thoughts and feelings about things or themselves. Tell them this includes about 50 yes-no questions. The youth should be told that this helps the staff learn whether they might have special needs that staff should know about. References to the MAYSI-2 as a test should be avoided as youth may think this means there are right and wrong answers to the questions.

2. Who will (or will not) see the youth's answers and use them for certain purposes

Youths should be told who will see their answers and/or scores. This may differ across programs. For example, one detention center might allow only detention staff to see the youths' answers and scores, so that they can determine whether the youth has special needs that require an immediate response for the youth's safety. Whatever the potential uses, the youth should be told about them. This does not have to be detailed, but it should be honest. It might include informing the youth that "the results will not go the judge or D.A". But it might require informing the youth that "this goes to your probation officer as well," if that is actually the program's policy.

3. *Voluntary nature of the MAYSI-2*

Taking the MAYSI-2 is always “voluntary,” in that youth may choose not to answer the questions and it is inappropriate to make their participation mandatory or to punish them for not answering. The MAYSI-2 is routine (like other health and identity questions) and intended only for the youth’s protection. The information is intended to help staff in the program attend to youths’ immediate safety and needs.

4. *Check for special needs of youth in completing the procedure*

Once the youth is ready to take the MAYSI-2, staff should assist the youth in getting started. If the program uses MAYSIWARE, this is a matter of entering the youth’s background information in the computer and then, after putting the headphones on the youth, sitting with the youth while the computer program is giving the youth the initial instructions about answering the questions on the keyboard. The staff person then steps aside when the youth begins to respond, so that the youth does not feel that the staff person is looking at the responses.