

# RESPONDING TO CHILD VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

## Innovative Practices for Prosecutors

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

#### SOME FACTS ABOUT CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE

Children are far more likely to be victims of crime than they are to be perpetrators. Statistics show that young people commit about 18 percent of crimes, but they represent about 33 percent of crime victims. Only 28 percent of violent crimes against juveniles are reported to police.

#### THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE CAN BE DEVASTATING

Short-term consequences of child victimization include

- ▶ Fears.
- ▶ Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- ▶ Behavior problems.
- ▶ Sexualized behaviors.
- ▶ Poor self-esteem.
- ▶ Depression.

Childhood sexual abuse, in particular, has been linked to serious problems extending into adulthood. These problems include

- ▶ Guilt, shame, and self-blame.
- ▶ Anxiety and depression.
- ▶ Post-traumatic stress.
- ▶ Isolation and fear of intimacy.
- ▶ Revictimization.
- ▶ Self-injurious behavior.
- ▶ Substance abuse.
- ▶ Physical symptoms.
- ▶ Eating disorders.
- ▶ Certain psychiatric disorders.

Even if they are not victims, children who witness violence in their homes or in their communities exhibit many of the same short- and long-term consequences.



## **THE LINK BETWEEN EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE AND COMMITTING VIOLENCE**

Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent and the likelihood of arrest for a violent crime as an adult by 38 percent. There are similar trends for children who witness domestic violence.

This does *not* mean that every child who is exposed to violence will grow up to become a violent offender; it means that the risk is greater. This means that child victims and witnesses may need targeted, effective intervention to reduce this risk.

## **HOW THE JUSTICE SYSTEM CAN HELP**

Early and effective intervention can ameliorate the negative impact of children's exposure to violence and perhaps prevent future incidents. Both the criminal justice system and the child benefit. With the proper support and guidance, most children can provide accurate, credible, and compelling testimony without feeling re-traumatized. By giving children a voice, the system can better assure that justice is served.

The elements of an effective response to children exposed to violence include

- ▶ Multidisciplinary involvement.
- ▶ Streamlined case management.
- ▶ Specialization.
- ▶ Education and preparation.

### **Multidisciplinary Involvement**

Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, victim/witness coordinators, counselors, social workers—all have a critical role to play in these cases. Ideally, all work together as a team to achieve a common goal: *building a strong case without further traumatizing the child.*

As of 1998, more than 30 states had laws authorizing joint investigations or a multidisciplinary response to certain child abuse cases. Research suggests that effective cooperation among professionals may be even more important in achieving convictions than the child's courtroom testimony!

In more than 400 communities across the country, "child advocacy centers" like Childhelp Children's Center of Arizona bring all these components together under one roof. (For more information, contact the National Children's Alliance at 800-239-9950.)

### **Streamlined Case Management**

Having to endure repeated interviews with different people can be the most painful part of a child's experience in the criminal justice system. By conducting a single forensic interview and sharing the information with each other, investigators, advocates, counselors, and prosecutors can minimize the need to re-interview child victim/witnesses. Formal protocols can minimize duplication of effort and improve coordination of services.

### **Specialization**

Forensic child interview specialists have the training and expertise to gather information from children thoroughly and sensitively. *Even very young children can provide accurate information if they are interviewed with sensitivity and skill.*

Research and experience have taught us much about how best to interview children. Here are some tips:

- ▶ Introduce yourself and explain why you are asking questions. Children may think they are suspects. Even teens may not understand the roles people play in the criminal justice system.
- ▶ Use the child's language for body parts, but make sure you understand what their words mean to them.

► **Education and preparation.** Preparation does not mean "coaching." Rather, it means explaining what to expect in court. This helps alleviate children's fears and makes them stronger witnesses.

Sensitive and effective intervention benefits both the children *and* the criminal justice system. With the proper support and guidance, most children can provide accurate, credible, and compelling testimony without feeling re-traumatized. By giving children a voice, the system can better assure that justice is served.

### **Discussion questions:**

- Which agencies in your community have a role to play in cases involving child victims or witnesses?
- Who has the expertise to interview children effectively? To prepare them for court?
- Are there any barriers to coordinating across agencies? How might these barriers be overcome?

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**Information included in this discussion guide was obtained from the following sources:**

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