

RESPONDING TO CHILD VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

Promising Partnerships To Improve Case Outcomes

DISCUSSION GUIDE

SOME FACTS ABOUT CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE

Every year, millions of children are exposed to serious violence. Nearly 1 million children are victims of abuse or neglect. Most suffer neglect, but

250,000 of the victims are physically abused and
130,000 are sexually abused.

As many as 10 million children witness violence in their homes or in their communities.

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.
- ▶ Multiple personality disorder.



Early exposure to violence significantly increases the risk for children to engage in violent behavior as adolescents and adults, thereby perpetuating the "cycle of violence."

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.

New research indicates that experiencing violence can actually alter brain function in ways that affect the child's ability to learn and to interact with others.

Discussion questions:

- How do child victims come to the attention of the justice system?
- Why is it so important to intervene quickly when child victims are identified?
- What is your community doing to help children who witness violence in their homes? In their communities?

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

- ▶ **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.*
- ▶ **Partner with service providers.** Having a referral process in place to connect children exposed to violence with community-based service providers can ensure that they will receive help and counseling, regardless of whether the cases are prosecuted.
- ▶ **Streamlined case management.** By sharing information with each other, these players can minimize the need to re-interview child victim/witnesses and reduce the children's anxiety. 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. Over time, members of the multidisciplinary team gain experience in their respective roles and learn to trust and rely on one another.

► **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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