

# RESPONDING TO CHILD VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

## Innovative Practices for Law Enforcement

PROPERTY OF  
National Crime Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)  
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### 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. Domestic violence and child abuse often go hand-in-hand. Studies have found that between 30 percent and 60 percent of men who batter their female partners also abuse their children.

#### **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.

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.

### **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.

#### **Discussion questions:**

- Why is it so important to intervene quickly when children are identified at crime scenes?
- Does your department have a protocol for identifying children as witnesses in incidents of domestic violence? Do officers include them on the witness list? Do they interview or take statements from child witnesses?
- Is there a policy for referring children for services when children witness domestic violence?
- What resources are available in your community to provide crisis intervention and counseling to child victims and witnesses?

### **COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Early and effective intervention can ameliorate the negative impact of children's exposure to violence and perhaps prevent future incidents.

Teamwork is an essential component of an effective response to child victims or witnesses. The response team should include

- ▶ Law enforcement officers.
- ▶ Mental health professionals.
- ▶ Social workers.
- ▶ School personnel.
- ▶ Health care providers.
- ▶ Other community service agencies.
- ▶ Victim/witness advocates.

By sharing information and identifying appropriate resources, these agencies can ensure that children's needs are met. Many communities have found ways for agencies to share information that might otherwise be confidential when children are crime victims or witnesses.

#### **Discussion questions:**

- Which agencies in your community have a role to play in cases involving child victims or witnesses?
- Are there any barriers to coordinating across agencies? How might these barriers be overcome?

### **STRENGTHENING YOUR FRONT LINE**

Children are not small adults. But 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 entirely 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.
- ▶ Be supportive but professional.
- ▶ Ask simple questions, one at a time. Allow children to say, "I don't know" or "I don't understand."
- ▶ Begin with general, open-ended questions, and progress to more specific questions. Be aware, however, that very young children are not developmentally able to provide much detail in response to open-ended questions.
- ▶ For in-depth interviews or formal statements, consider using an experienced forensic child interview specialist or a trained investigator.

Several organizations train law enforcement officers and others in the skills for interviewing child victims and witnesses. Some sources of training include the following:

- ▶ American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC): 312-554-0166
- ▶ National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse: 703-739-0321
- ▶ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: 877-446-2652 x6209

Many communities have child advocacy centers where specialists from law enforcement, child protection, and other agencies conduct forensic interviews of children who are victims of sexual or serious physical abuse, or children who witness particularly serious violence. For more information, or to locate a child advocacy center near you, contact the National Children's Alliance at 800-239-9950.

### **Discussion questions:**

- Are patrol officers in your agency expected to interview children at crime scenes? Have they been trained in basic interviewing skills?
- Is there anyone in your agency with particular expertise in interviewing children? Is there anyone in the community with this expertise?
- Is there a child advocacy center or other multidisciplinary team for child victims in your community? If not, would your agency be interested in developing such a program? What other agencies might be involved?

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*For additional information on innovative practices featured in this videotape, please contact:*

- ▶ **Westminster Police Department SHIELD Program**  
8200 Westminster Blvd.  
Westminster, CA 92683  
714-898-3315 (x302)  
[aehal@pacbell.net](mailto:aehal@pacbell.net)
- ▶ **Prince William County Criminal Justice Academy**  
13101 Public Safety Drive  
Nokesville, VA 20181  
703-792-4525
- ▶ **Sandra Sylvester**  
Assistant Commonwealth Attorney  
Prince William County, VA  
703-792-6050  
[ssylvester@pwgov.org](mailto:ssylvester@pwgov.org)
- ▶ **National Center for Children Exposed to Violence  
Child Development-Community Policing Program**  
Yale Child Study Center  
230 South Frontage Road  
P.O. Box 207900  
New Haven, CT 06520-7900  
203-785-7047  
800-49N-CCEV

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

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