Defending Childhood Initiative

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice unveiled the Defending Childhood Initiative focused on addressing children's exposure to violence. The launch of this initiative followed a National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, the most comprehensive nationwide survey of the incidence and prevalence of children's exposure to violence to date. The survey, which was a wake-up call and warning bell, revealed that sixty percent of American children have been exposed to violence, crime or abuse in their homes, schools and communities. Forty percent were direct victims of two or more violent acts. Children exposed to violence (child abuse, neglect, domestic violence, bullying, gangs, assaults, etc.) often experience academic, behavioral and social problems in the class room. They are also at a higher risk of engaging in criminal behavior later in life and becoming part of a cycle of violence.

"This problem affects all of society, and effectively addressing it must become our shared concern and our shared cause. For far too many years each profession has held a piece of a child's life puzzle, but failed to see the complete picture. As a consequence, children have fallen through the cracks. The key to ensuring that children exposed to violence succeed in school and later life hinges on collaboration, communication and simply "handling these children with extra care."

– *U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin*

The West Virginia Children Exposed to Violence Initiative is a Defending Childhood Initiative tailored to reflect the needs and issues affecting children in West Virginia. The Initiative, a result of a collaborative effort of key stakeholders and partners, builds upon the success of proven programs throughout the country. The goal of the Initiative is to prevent children's exposure to violence, mitigate negative affects experienced by children's exposure to violence, and to increase knowledge and awareness of this issue. For more information, visit www.justice.gov/usao/wvs.

PARTNERS

West Virginia Prosecuting Attorney's Institute; West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources, Bureau of Children & Families; West Virginia Department of Education; West Virginia Center for Professional Development; West Virginia Child Advocacy Network; West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Kanawha County Victim Services Center; Kanawha County Prosecuting Attorney's Office; Cabell County Prosecuting Attorney's Office; Kanawha County Sheriff's Office; Cabell County Sheriff's Office; Charleston Police Department; Huntington Police Department; Kanawha County Schools; Cabell County Schools; Family Counseling Connection; YWCA of Charleston, WV; Highland Health Center; Highland Hospital; Process Strategies, Inc.; Prestera

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PROTECT • HEAL • THRIVE

Defending Childhood

West Virginia Children Exposed to Violence Initiative

Parents • Community • School
Treatment • Services • Police

Sponsored by the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of West Virginia and the West Virginia Children's Justice Task Force

Trauma Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence

Children are very resilient — but they are not unbreakable. No matter what their age, children are deeply hurt when they are physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or when they see or hear violence in their homes and communities. When children see and hear too much that is frightening, their world feels unsafe and insecure. Children's reactions to exposure to violence can be immediate or appear much later. Reactions differ in severity and cover a range of behaviors. How a child responds also varies by age. Professionals (teachers, coaches, therapist, law enforcement, shelter staff, etc.) play a critical role in preventing and reducing the impact of exposure to violence on children.

POLICE

Law enforcement comes into contact with children exposed to violence on a daily basis. As a first responder, law enforcement is in a unique position to intervene early in the lives of children exposed to violence. Police officers play a crucial role in identifying children who would benefit from crucial treatment and services. The referral relationship with police is a cornerstone of the Initiative, in addition to training officers in principles of child development. The Initiative also encourages police to interact with children in the school and community so that children regard them as figures of safety and trust.

Tips for Law Enforcement

- Determine whether children are present and observe for physical evidence that may indicate the presence of children (i.e.: toys, clothes, etc.)
- Health and safety checks on children. Assess injuries and signs of physical abuse. Assess if children are in imminent danger
- Make sure you are knowledgeable and trained in interacting with children on the scene of a crime.
- Avoid interviewing witnesses in the presence of children
- Generally avoid subduing or arresting someone in the presence of children

SCHOOLS

Regardless of the source of trauma, the common thread is the school. Research now shows that trauma can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom.

Mechanisms have been implemented to ensure that schools are provided reliable information, practical tools and guidance to help children exposed to violence to thrive and succeed.

Participating schools have implemented trauma-sensitive strategies and individual support for students exposed to violence.

Effective linkages have been established with mental health professionals, advocacy and service programs that can directly meet the needs of their students. Through training, teachers are able to utilize trauma sensitive interventions to ensure that all children will be able to achieve at their highest levels despite whatever traumatic circumstances they may have endured.

Tips for Teachers

- Know and watch for warning signs such as bruises, unexplained changes in behavior, depression, mood swings and fearful or anxious behavior.
- Respond appropriate to disclosures. A teacher's willingness to listen to a child's story can provide the foundation on which to increase resilience and personal strength.
- Provide a comfortable and safe environment where children can talk.
- Follow school policy and refer children to the social worker, psychologist, or other professionals within or outside the school system.

Treatment & Services

Mental health professionals with expertise in trauma can offer many kinds of assistance to schools that are helping traumatized children learn. Once a caregiver or guardian has signed a release of information, educators will play a helpful role in steering families toward appropriate mental health resources and support. With permission from the parent or guardian, clinicians will encourage teachers to respond to a traumatized child's underlying emotions rather than solely to the child's behavior, and provide feedback to the school about the child's needs. Mental health professionals will work with the school community to ensure that mental health, academic and nonacademic individualized supports are sensitive to the needs of the traumatized student.

Tips for Agencies and Staff Working with Youth

- Establish protocols to screen for exposure to violence symptoms and mental health needs on an ongoing basis
- Refer youth for comprehensive mental health assessments
- Plan individualized interventions that take traumatic experiences into consideration
- Avoid staff burnout
- Help youth feel safe and in control
- Know when to refer the youth for professional help