

Law Enforcement Overview of the Special Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care

When the Law Needs to Intervene

As a law enforcement officer, you may enter situations with other law enforcement officers, another type of first responder and/or a child welfare worker that can cause trauma. Even seeing your badge, gun and uniform may provoke a traumatic response. As you perform your investigation or other duties, one of your main goals is to minimize trauma and prevent re-traumatization. Children and families at risk may need law enforcement involvement for situations such as:

- A child abuse or neglect investigation
- Intervening with domestic violence or intimate partner violence
- A child or youth has run away from home
- Someone has attempted suicide or is suicidal
- A natural or man-made disaster

Children and Youth in Foster Care and Behavioral Differences

It's important to remember that children and youth in foster care often behave differently than children or youths who aren't in care because they've typically come from a background of severe abuse or neglect. GoodTherapy.org lists the following behaviors you may see in children and youth in foster care:

- Anger
- Difficulty connecting with others
- Emotional sensitivity
- Lack of understanding regarding consequences
- Low impulse control
- Physical aggression towards others or animals
- Property destruction
- Self-harm
- Sexually acting out
- Withdrawn, anxious or depressed mood

Trauma and Its Role with Children and Families at Risk

When individual's experience trauma or toxic stress in the moment, they can be stuck in a "fight-flight-or-freeze" mode. The individual is focused on survival so it's harder for them to learn, respond and process new information. This also can make it the wrong time to help with problem solving.

For everyone's safety, you also need to assess your emotional state before you engage. If you engage with an individual when either you or the individual is stressed, this may re-traumatize the individual you're trying to help, complicating an already tense and delicate situation. If you are stressed, walk away and calm down.

Partnership, Not Pain and Punishment

When you assist children, youth and families involved in the child welfare system, they may not view your assistance as help. They may see your help as a scary intrusion. Work to connect and build a relationship with empathy and avoid pain and punishment.

For those who have experienced trauma, pain can be an all too familiar feeling that won't help people understand you. An individual with a trauma history may use compliant behavior as a coping mechanism – but only for imminent threats. Once that threat no longer exists, neither will the compliance.

Ignoring the Negative, Attentive to the Positive

In addition to ensuring everyone's safety, another priority is to de-escalate tensions. You can use one behavioral technique called **extinction**, where you ignore a certain behavior. You give neither positive nor negative reinforcement. Soon, the individual may stop the behavior. For example, if an individual continues to yell at you, you should continue to ignore the yelling until it stops. Along with extinction, you can use positive reinforcement for desired behavior. For example, if a child has been compliant with your requests, you can give them praise and positive encouragement.

What You Can Do

Here are some de-escalation tactics that you can use while working with children and youth in foster care and their families.

- **Give people space.** Individuals who have been traumatized need more personal space than usual. Stand surely, but off to the side and not head on.
- **Check your tone.** Use a clear, sincere tone and use a volume that requires listening. Start your sentences with emphasis and end your sentences with a flat tone. Don't end your sentences with your voice going up (questioning) or down (unsure). Keep your pitch conversational.
- **Listen well.** Start with this technique called reflective listening that involves three steps. First, listen to understand. Second, paraphrase what you heard. Last, verify what you think you heard. Then move on to active listening, where you only respond to what you have heard. You do not respond with your unsolicited opinions or with answers to unasked questions.

Resources

Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Children Exposed to Violence Toolkit. Retrieved from International Association of Chiefs of Police website: <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-children-exposed-to-violence-toolkit>

The Role of Law Enforcement in the Response to Child Abuse and Neglect – Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/law/>

Stanford Children's Health. Understanding the Teen Brain. Retrieved from <https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=understanding-the-teen-brain-1-3051>

Trauma Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System. (2015). Retrieved from National Institute of Corrections website: <https://nicic.gov/trauma-among-youth-juvenile-justice-system>

Understanding Difficult Behavior: For Foster and Adoptive Parents. (2010). Retrieved from GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog website: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/therapy-adoption-child-behavior/>