



# EFFECTIVE POLICE RESPONSES to Traumatic Stress in Children of Different Ages

## No matter what the child's age police can:

- Ascertain the presence of children on-scene.
- Communicate in an authoritative and respectful way that can help to calm both caregivers and children.
- Support parents or caregivers in recognizing and reducing immediate symptoms of distress in their children.
- Consider phase of development and symptoms of distress when interacting directly with a child.

## Infants (0–12 months)

### Typical Development

#### Keep in mind, infants:

- Rely completely on their parents or caregivers
- Center their sense of security on their parents or caregivers
  - The sooner that parents or caregivers are calm and in control, the more that they are able to be responsive to the infant's needs
- Need to be nurtured and cared for in a reliable way that ensures that basic physical and emotional needs are met
  - Separation from a parent or caregiver can be terrifying
  - A child's sense of safety and security can be shattered by witnessing violence

### Common Responses to Exposure to Violence

#### Watch for these symptoms of distress in infants:

- Inconsolable crying
- Flailing
- Extreme body tension or physical rigidity
- Demanding of physical closeness, but not being soothed by it
- Whimpering

#### More worrisome responses to watch for:

- Calm, quiet, docile, lethargic, glassy-eyed
- Asleep in the midst of chaos

### What Police Officers Can Do

#### What you can do for infants on-scene:

- Recognize that scenes to which police are called are frequently chaotic and that infants are exposed to tremendous stimuli
- Ensure that the infant is in the least chaotic part of the scene to which you have responded
- Show concern for children's safety with your words and actions
- Remind parents or caregivers of how important it is to get as calm as possible in order to support their young children
- Help parents or caregivers decrease their own distress in order to be able to attend to their children
- When parents or caregivers are not able to respond to your attempts to help them calm down and attend to their children, identify alternate caregivers to monitor and attend to infants
- Ensure parents or caregivers have a support system such as family, friends, neighbors, or community services prior to leaving the scene

## Toddlers (12–36 months)

### Typical Development

#### Keep in mind, toddlers:

- May be crawling by 8–12 months and walking by 12–18 months
- Speak some words around 12 months and two-word sentences by 24 months
- Have clearly defined relationships with their primary caregiver and heightened vulnerability to separation fears
- Assert their independence – “Terrible Twos”
- Have heightened concerns about physical safety

### Common Responses to Exposure to Violence

#### Watch for these symptoms of distress in toddlers:

- Screaming, crying, clinging, acting “babyish”
- Loud demands for attention
- Whining
- Toileting accidents
- Increased displays of characteristic features of this phase (e.g., separation fears—loud and vocal demands for attention, more and louder demands for uninterrupted physical contact)
- Withdrawn and too quiet

#### More worrisome responses to watch for:

- Calm, quiet, docile, lethargic
- Asleep in the midst of chaos
- Overly familiar and friendly with unknown adults (including the officer)
- Repeating what they saw and heard and can't be stopped

### What Police Officers Can Do

#### What you can do for toddlers on-scene:

- Ensure that toddlers are physically safe and are being sufficiently monitored
- Help parents or caregivers find a place to sit and address them in a calm and respectful but authoritative manner
- Assist parents or caregivers in decreasing their own distress while reminding them that staying calm is the best way to safeguard the children from distress
- Seek out an alternate caregiver, if necessary

## Preschoolers (3–5 years)

### Typical Development

#### Keep in mind, preschoolers:

- Use play to express ideas and feelings
- Have increased cognitive, language, and physical capacities
- Have increased ability to differentiate reality from fantasy, but still often believe in the magical power of their thoughts and feelings
- May believe that they caused a bad thing—an accident, fire, fight, or arrest— to happen
- May also believe that their behavior or wishes are responsible for a parent's or caregiver's arrest or removal
- May see police officers as larger than life, or imagine police officers as action figures who can help, hurt, or take them away

## Common Responses to Exposure to Violence

### Watch for these symptoms of distress in preschoolers:

- Increased difficulty separating from caregivers
- Increased worries about their bodies
- Difficulty eating, sleeping, toileting
- Increased tantrums, clinginess, baby talk
- Fearful avoidance and phobic reactions
- Withdrawal
- Inattention and inability to follow directions
- Provocative or demanding behavior

## What Police Officers Can Do

### What you can do for preschoolers on-scene:

- Help caregivers become calm and in control
  - The most important people in young children's worlds are the parents or caregivers and the extent of the parents' or caregivers' distress and anxiety will play a central role in determining the level of both immediate and longer-term impact of events on children
- Seek out an alternate caregiver, if necessary
- Get down on the children's level by kneeling or sitting
- Find out if the children have any questions and what those questions are
- Help children to re-engage the thinking part of the brain through fine-motor activity. Drawing is one activity that enhances children's ability to become more focused and organized in both thoughts and emotions.

## School Age Children (6–12 years)

### Typical Development

#### Keep in mind, school-age children:

- Develop intellectual, sensory-motor and social skills
- Develop self-awareness and self-esteem
- Channel impulses into school, sports, friends, etc.
- Demonstrate an increased ability to form relationships outside the home and family with peers and other adults and may be susceptible to their influence
- Can turn to other figures, in addition to parents or caregivers, who can offer reassuring/calming/authoritative presences (e.g., relatives, family friends, teachers, clergy, and police officers)
- Are especially concerned with issues of right and wrong, fairness and justice

## Common Responses to Exposure to Violence

### Watch for these symptoms of distress in school-age children:

- Frightened
- Challenging authority
- Hyperarousal
- Jittery
- False bravado
- Clinginess
- Apparent excitement about violence and traumatic events or apparent indifference
- Social and emotional withdrawal
- Crying, hyperventilating

## What Police Officers Can Do

### What you can do for school-age children on-scene:

- Attempt to limit the child's further exposure to out-of-control behavior once you arrive on-scene
- Find out what questions children have and talk to the children about what happened in direct and plain language
- If children are so distressed that they are unable to put their thoughts and questions into words:
  - Teach the Tactical Breathing Technique
  - Help children to re-engage the thinking part of the brain through fine-motor activity. Drawing is one activity that enhances children's ability to become more focused and organized in both thoughts and emotions.
- Emphasize the current plan to keep them safe
- Support caregivers in meeting the children's needs
- Seek out an alternate caregiver, if necessary

## Adolescents (13–18)

### Typical Development

#### Keep in mind, adolescents

- Experience physical changes that have an impact on psychological development
- Develop a sense of themselves as individuals who are distinct and independent
- Attempt to distinguish themselves from their parents
- Test limits to secure evidence that they are still connected and protected
- Teenagers' relationships with authority figures provide opportunities to test limits and independence, and teenagers are very good at drawing police into their struggles about authority
- Focus on appearance, competence, sexual exploration and intimacy
- Experience a greater ability to think abstractly
- Feel that a sense of belonging is incredibly important

### Common Responses to Exposure to Violence

#### Watch for these symptoms of distress in adolescents:

- Rage and anger
- Anxiety
- Crying
- Excitement
- Physical dysregulation (e.g., rapid breathing/hyperventilation, agitation, restlessness, etc.)
- Disorganized language/thinking
- Expressed disinterest (don't know/don't care)
- Talking obsessively about what happened

## What Police Officers Can Do

### What you can do for adolescents on-scene:

- Take behaviors of concern or verbalized unsafe thoughts seriously
- Know that adolescents are especially vulnerable to humiliation and help teenagers "save face"
- Offer support and guidance
- Set clear expectations and firm limits
- Be aware that when officers respond to adolescents with respect and genuine engagement, teens can be surprisingly eager and receptive to the calming authority that officers can offer in the aftermath of overwhelming events

This resource is part of the *Enhancing Police Responses to Children Exposed to Violence: A Toolkit for Law Enforcement*. Visit: [www.theIACP.org/Children-Exposed-to-Violence](http://www.theIACP.org/Children-Exposed-to-Violence)

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