Empirical and anecdotal evidence continue to demonstrate the powerful impact law enforcement officers have when interacting with children during the course of their work. This is clearly demonstrated through the implementation over the past 20 years of various forms of community policing, neighborhood-based officers, school resource officers and police-sponsored outreach programs. But where does the role of the tactical officer fit within this current push to connect law enforcement officers and children?
Tactical officers fill a variety of roles based on their agency structure and mission, ranging from multi-agency SWAT teams, narcotics or high-risk warrant service squads and street crime interdiction units. With the variety of formats and responsibilities of these units, what should the individual officer or his supervisors expect of tactical operators when responding to situations involving children? The basis of understanding for any officer in regards to responding to children lies in some level of initial training related to the normal development of children from birth through at least adolescence. It is important for officers and deputies to understand healthy developmental progression at various ages so that they are then able to recognize situations in which a child is exhibiting symptoms of current or previous trauma.

**INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN ON SCENE**

After the location has been cleared and secured, consider moving the child away from adults being questioned, perhaps to a play area or the child’s bedroom where they may feel more comfortable. Removing obscuring garments such as a balaclava or ballistic helmet can humanize the interaction between the child and the officer, of course always deferring to the individual policies and SOPs of your agency.

With older children, being able to make a simple statement about why the police need to be there, such as “in order to interrupt illegal activity,” can be important. Officers might comment on the fact that there were loud noises and now they are over.

Ask the child generic questions about toys present or items he or she appears interested in, such as sports

It is important for officers and deputies to understand healthy developmental progression at various ages so that they are then able to recognize situations in which a child is exhibiting symptoms of current or previous trauma.
Law enforcement officers have a tendency over their careers to become desensitized to the effect that their professional presence can have on people they interact with, particularly children.

A lack of crying, screaming, visually expressed fear or apprehension does not mean the child is unaffected, but rather has been so affected that the baseline for emotional response has been severely altered by overexposure to negative stimuli.
K9 or aviation units for search and tracking support, there is a need for an officer to have support to deal with children exposed to violence that they encounter while on duty. Depending on your local municipality, state or tribe, there may be previously identified resources such as child protective services, social service agencies or non-profit groups who provide clinical support to children. Identifying these resources prior to the officer needing them while on a scene is critical to law enforcement personnel being able to effectively address the child’s needs.

The efficacy of these programs and professional relationships can be enhanced through cross-training of the involved personnel and encouraging ride-alongs by the clinical providers so they are afforded an opportunity to establish a greater understanding of the situations in which officers and deputies are encountering children in their work. Taking the time to identify and develop a professional partner (optimally one who specializes in providing trauma-informed mental health responses) can have immediate on-scene benefits to the officers as well as the children.

If the intelligence briefing for your tactical operation indicates the presence of children, consider contacting one of these providers and have them staged nearby with a patrol officer or at a team office or substation so they are not too far removed from the incident location as to impede a prompt response. A professional provider may be better able to determine if the information being provided by the child is more likely to lack veracity because of the child’s developmental stage, which could be of use to the investigation.

At a minimum, the presence of the professional partner allows additional officers to be available for assignment to other on-scene tasks. Having one of the officers present to initiate the clinical response for the children on scene at a traumatic event enhances the safety of the scene and establishes a connection between the child and the officer. This not only provides an immediate psychological and physiological benefit to the child, but does truly establish a greater understanding of law enforcement and the officer’s overall mission in that house, apartment complex or community.

Responding to Children Exposed to Violence

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), in partnership with the Yale Child Study Center (YCSC), supported by the U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has a new toolkit for law enforcement on how to identify and respond to Children Exposed to Violence (CEV). The impact that law enforcement officers can have when interacting with children during the course of their work has been most powerfully demonstrated by the Child Development-Community Policing (CD-CP) program begun in New Haven between the YCSC and the New Haven Department of Police Services and replicated in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, and numerous communities across the country. The toolkit grows out of more than two decades of innovative law enforcement-mental health collaboration with the CD-CP program at the core, and benefits from IACP’s deep experience in creating tools needed by the field. Tools include:

- Agency Self-Assessment and Action Planning Tool
- Classroom Training Program for Frontline Officers
- Factsheets and Tipsheets
- Model Protocols for Acute On-Scene Response and Domestic Violence Incidents
- Cross-Platform Mobile App (Pocket Guide)
- Online Training Series
- Model Policy on Safeguarding Children of Arrested Parents
- Library of CEV resources for law enforcement at IACPYouth.org
- Roll Call Training Video

These resources were also developed in collaboration with the New Haven (CT) Department of Police Service, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Police Department and Mecklenburg County (NC) Trauma & Justice Partnerships.

To obtain resources or for more information, contact CEV@theiacp.org
TRAINING

As with any program or strategy, the key to successful and consistent implementation is the demonstrated support of the command or executive staff of the individual law enforcement agency. Commanders must ensure that all of their officers are exposed to training which focuses on their response to children encountered during their tour, as well as establishes a set of expectations for the officers. We all place emphasis on and devote resources to the things that are most requested of us and that our command places in priority.

Leadership must continue to encourage officers to take an active role in identifying and addressing children present during traumatic events. Contact your local community college, social service provider, professional law enforcement association or even the hospital. They may be able to provide direct training to your officers or refer your agency to curriculum which can be delivered by your agency’s training staff.

Seek a resource in your community who may be able to present basic information regarding childhood development which can aid an officer in identifying when a child is in need of additional clinical or medical resources. (See insets.)

Officers should not be expected to be clinical service providers, but they are a very powerful part of addressing something in need of stability, support and safety: the life of a child.

Commanders must ensure that all of their officers are exposed to training which focuses on their response to children encountered during their tour, as well as establishes a set of expectations for the officers.

Top 5 Considerations for Tactical Officers When Responding to Children Exposed to Violence

1. Check for signs of children’s presence when planning operations.
2. Avoid making an arrest in a child’s presence, if at all possible.
3. Consider moving the child away from adults being questioned.
4. Acknowledge that something upsetting happened when talking to children and avoid saying, “Everything is going to be OK.”
5. Reassure the children that you are there to keep them safe and can return if something scary happens.

Source: IACP/Yale/DOJ Children Exposed to Violence Initiative

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Sarah M. Greene, LCSW, is program administrator of Trauma & Justice Partnerships at Mecklenburg County and has partnered 18 years with Charlotte-Mecklenburg PD serving children exposed to violence (CEV) and coordinating the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) program. She was trained in replication of the Child Development-Community Policing program at Yale University in 1996, and her continued collaboration with colleagues at the Child Study Center includes consultation with IACP regarding improvement of law enforcement identification of and response to CEV.