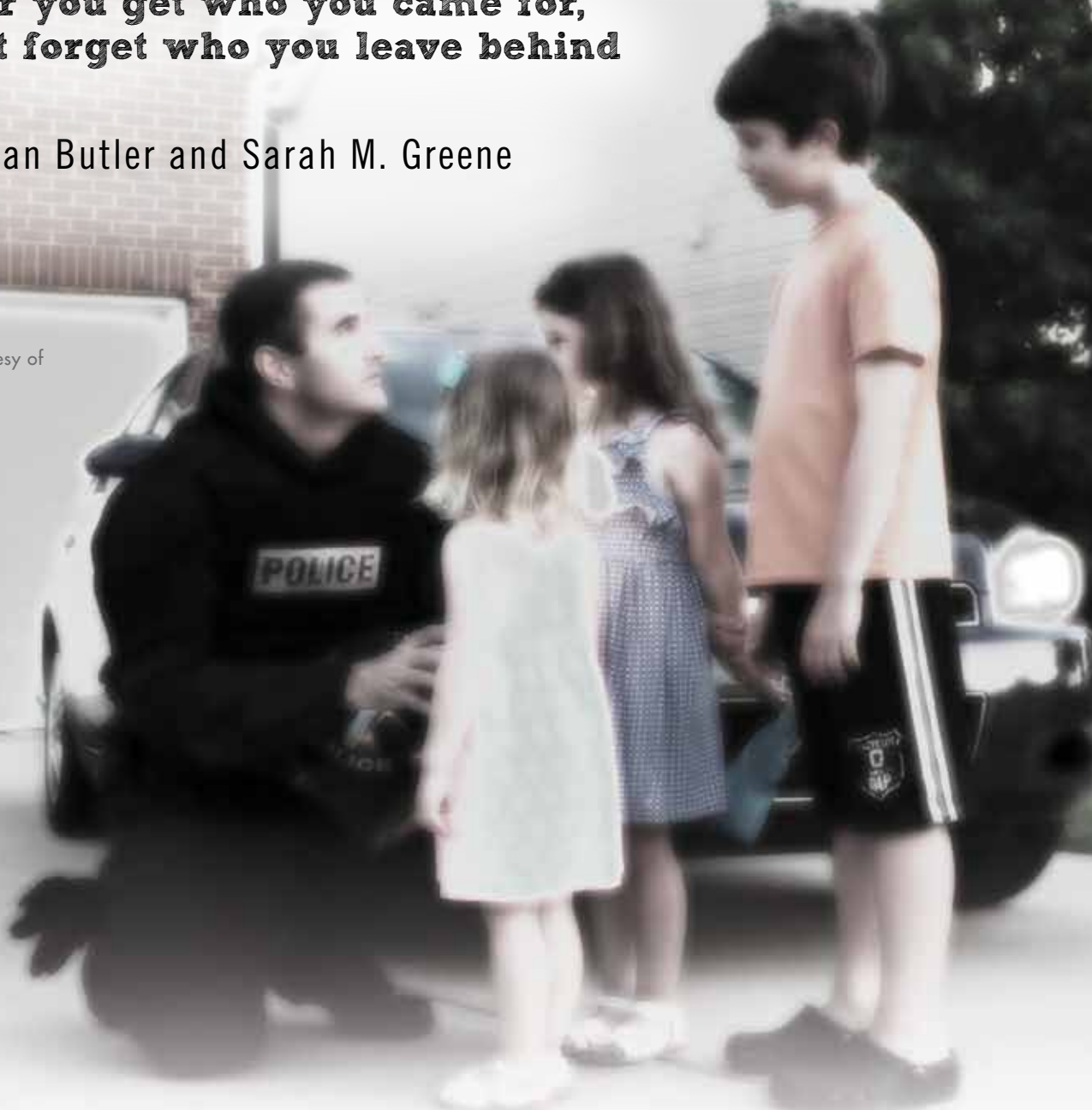


# THE OFFICER'S ROLE IN RESPONDING TO TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

**After you get who you came for,  
don't forget who you leave behind**

By Ryan Butler and Sarah M. Greene

Photos courtesy of  
Stacey Butler



**E**mpirical 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.

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Tactical units, by their very nature, engage in dynamic activities that are detailed, thoroughly pre-planned and involve extensive training prior to their execution. Just as a pre-raid briefing will review the expected layout of the target location, suspects and weapons intelligence indicates may be present, it will also review other household members likely present, including children. The knowledge of children present is not just a tactical consideration from a safety standpoint, but provides a very serious issue for the case officer or

tactical officers involved in the operation to consider. Is the child's presence at this location an ongoing safety issue? How will children be addressed while the target location and suspects are being secured and searched?

Just as a tactical team ensures it has the appropriate breaching equipment, they also must plan for after the scene is secured and how they will address children they encounter. The age of the children present certainly plays a factor in how an officer may tailor his response; however, of greater importance during the operational planning is the officer's cognizance of the fact that a dynamic entry of a child's home, the arrest of a parent or family member or the mere presence of several armed law enforcement officers can be a lot for a child to process mentally and physically due to the potential release of stress hormones.

## **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

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teams, video games or other apparent hobbies. This not only refocuses the child from the stress he or she may be feeling from the recent incident, but also aids in restabilizing, both psychologically and physiologically, from an acute stress response. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers require special attention due to their inability to protect themselves or meet their own basic needs.

Children under the age of five often need immediate attention to physical needs, like diaper changes, food or protection from an unsafe environment. School age or adolescent children may be resistant to attempts at communication or rapport-building because of a need to act older or not seem “child-like.”

If operational security allows, you may choose to utilize a primary caregiver or family member who is present to provide care for these younger children. If a primary caregiver is not present, or due to security limitations cannot be allowed to provide care, one of the officers should be designated to ensure the child’s needs are met.

Afford older children or teenagers an opportunity to speak to you or ask questions. Be frank with them to establish mutual respect while using age-appropriate language during your interaction. If your agency’s SOP precludes a tactical officer fulfilling this role, you may need to request assistance from patrol or a youth detective.

Many officers, particularly those without children, feel uncomfortable or marginalized when tasked with “babysitting” a child on scene. This task should not be viewed in a pejorative sense, but rather as an extension of the law enforcement mission of public safety and ensuring that the child sees that the purpose of the officers’ presence is to ensure a safe and stable environment.

Officers can work within their own comfort level around children on scene, whether that involves playing with trucks on the floor or simply asking the children about a picture they drew or

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their favorite football team. 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. For many children and adolescents, though the latter may not admit it to their peers, a law enforcement officer still evokes an image of a real-life superhero. This image can be used to the officer’s benefit while trying to calm a child during or following a tactical operation.

Officers can conduct a safety check of the child’s room, closet and under the bed. An officer can take a few moments to reassure the child that he is there to keep the child safe and will return if something scary happens again.

If the child has a school resource officer, contact that officer and explain the recent incident in which you encountered the child. This provides continued reassurance to the child and demonstrates that law enforcement has an overall concern for the child’s welfare. School provides a stabilizing environment for a child and utilizing the school resource officer as a regular partner in your agency’s response to children exposed to violence is a force multiplier.

Tactical response situations also provide an excellent opportunity for

an officer to identify children who are exhibiting signs of current traumatic distress or perhaps behavior that suggests an extensive trauma history. In both situations, children who do not appear to react or acknowledge the presence of law enforcement during the initial phase of a tactical action are providing a very strong cue to the officer that they are in fact having traumatic reactions. 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.

### **RESOURCES**

While the role of officers in identification and initial response to these children is critical, addressing their behaviors or clinical, emotional and mental health needs is beyond the capacity of a law enforcement officer’s training. This is, however, the opportunity for the officer to utilize additional resources to assist with the resolution for the incident scene that includes the best interest of the affected children.

Just as an officer may request a crime scene unit for evidence processing, or

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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

## 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](http://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](mailto:CEV@theiacp.org)

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 physio-

logical 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.

## 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. ■

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## 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



**Ryan Butler** is a captain with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Police Department. During his 13-year career he has held assignments in field services, investigations and support services, including being a member and commander of division-level tactical units. Capt. Butler is a CD-CP fellow and is Crisis Intervention Team-certified.



**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.