

# DEFENDING CHILDHOOD

## PROTECT HEAL THRIVE

The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) launched the Defending Childhood initiative to address a national crisis: the exposure of America's children to violence as victims and as witnesses. Research clearly shows that children exposed to violence are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic disorders; fail or have difficulty in school; become delinquent and engage in criminal behavior; and experience repeated victimization. The goals of Defending Childhood are to (1) prevent children's exposure to violence; (2) mitigate the negative impacts of exposure when it does occur; and (3) develop knowledge and spread awareness about the issue.

### **Understanding the Challenge**

In announcing the initiative, Attorney General Eric H. Holder also announced findings from the National Survey on Children Exposed to Violence (NATSCEV). This ongoing study has found that children are more likely to be exposed to violence and crime than adults, and the majority of American children have been exposed to violence, crime, or abuse in their homes, schools, and communities (Finkelhor, et. al., 2009).

- Almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of 2 or more violent acts, and 1 in 10 were victims of violence 5 or more times.
- Almost 1 in 10 American children saw one family member assault another family member, and more than 25 percent had been exposed to family violence during their life.
- A child's exposure to one type of violence increases the likelihood that the child will be exposed to other types of violence and exposed multiple times.

### **Finding Solutions**

DOJ's CrimeSolutions.gov website uses rigorous research to determine what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services. CrimeSolutions.gov assembles research on program effectiveness that is reviewed and rated by expert reviewers, and provides ratings based on the evidence that indicates whether a program achieves its goals. CrimeSolutions.gov currently includes profiles for 20 programs rated as "Effective" in addressing issues related to children exposed to violence, and another 20 programs identified as "Promising."

DOJ also created a National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence to review research and conduct public hearings across the nation to collect input from experts, advocates, and impacted families on policy options for improving the prevention, identification, assessment, and response

to children's exposure to violence. The Task Force will issue a final report to the Attorney General presenting its findings and policy recommendations in the fall of 2012.

### **Taking Action in Communities**

DOJ is providing grant funding to 35 U.S. communities to support direct action to reduce children's exposure to violence. For example, DOJ is supporting eight localities - including six U.S. cities and two tribal communities – to develop and implement comprehensive strategic plans focused on children's exposure to violence of all kinds in the home and in the community. These plans include multi-disciplinary efforts to prevent exposure to violence and mitigate the impacts of violence when it does occur, with an emphasis on the use of evidence-based approaches. A multi-site evaluation of this work is ongoing and will be used to further develop knowledge of best practices in addressing children's exposure to violence.

### **Protect, Heal, Thrive**

The Defending Childhood Initiative operates on three key guiding principles:

#### **PROTECT**

- Recognizing the range of negative consequences for children that become direct victims or witnesses to violence and understanding that violence takes many forms, may come from many sources, and may occur in various settings.
- Working together with community members and partners in multiple disciplines to raise awareness, provide education, and build capacity of those who interact with children.
- Committing to preventing exposure to violence by reducing the occurrence of violent incidents and reversing belief systems that accept childhood exposure to violence as normal or inevitable.

#### **HEAL**

- Recognizing that proper interventions, support and services can mitigate the negative effects of exposure to violence and the natural resilience of children can be enhanced.
- Developing a comprehensive and coordinated system of response to ensure seamless delivery of services and resources.
- Identifying and assessing children immediately or soon after exposure to violence to provide support and services tailored to the needs of the child and his or her family.
- Engaging first responders, service providers, medical professionals, teachers, and other community members to help identify children exposed to violence and contribute to healing.

#### **THRIVE**

- Encouraging and supporting healthy families.
- Providing opportunities for enrichment and growth for all children and building positive bonds among family members.
- Providing safe communities in which families and children may prosper.
- Supporting a culture of non-violence in communities and households.