



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Children's Exposure to Violence: The Safe Start Initiative

by Kristen Kracke

Throughout the United States, millions of children are exposed to violence—current estimates indicate that as many as 10 million children have witnessed or been victims of violence in their homes or communities. Children's exposure to violence has been significantly linked with increased depression, anxiety, anger, and alcohol and drug abuse and with decreased academic achievement. In addition, approximately 2 million adolescents ages 12–17 appear to have suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, presumably stemming from violent experiences in their past. Exposure to violence shapes how children remember, learn, and feel.

Children who experience violence, either as victims or as witnesses, are at increased risk of becoming violent themselves. These children begin committing crimes at younger ages, commit nearly twice as many offenses as nonabused children, and are arrested more frequently than nonabused children.

Preliminary research shows that children who witness domestic violence experience higher levels of childhood behavioral, social, and emotional problems than children who have not witnessed such violence and that the emotional consequences of viewing or hearing violent acts may often have the same lasting effects on children as being a direct victim of violence. These dangers are greatest for the youngest children, who depend almost completely on their parents and other caregivers to protect them from trauma.

The Safe Start Initiative

In response to emerging statistics and research on the prevalence and impact of children's exposure to violence, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) worked with Federal partners in the Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Office of Justice Programs and the Department of Health and Human Services to develop the Safe Start Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to prevent and reduce the impact of family and community violence on young children (primarily from birth to age 6) and their families.

The goal of the Safe Start demonstration project is to expand existing partnerships among service providers in key areas such as early childhood education/development, health, mental health, child welfare, family support, substance abuse prevention/intervention, domestic violence/crisis intervention, law enforcement, courts, and legal services. The project seeks to create a comprehensive service delivery system that will meet the needs of children and their families at any point of entry into the system. This comprehensive system should improve the accessibility, delivery, and quality of services for young children who have been exposed to violence or are at high risk of exposure.

This 5½-year demonstration project is divided into three phases: a 1-year planning phase, a 1½-year initial implementation phase, and a 3-year full implementation and sustainment phase. Nine sites were competitively selected in 1999 and 2000 to develop the Safe Start comprehensive system: Baltimore, MD; Bridgeport, CT; Chatham County, NC; Chicago, IL; Monroe County, NY; Pinellas County, FL; San Francisco, CA; Spokane, WA; and Washington County, ME. OJJDP also is currently identifying one or two tribal sites for participation.

Each Safe Start demonstration site received up to \$250,000 for the first-year planning phase and is eligible for up to \$670,000 per year for implementation. The sites are currently at the end of the planning phase and have undergone a comprehensive, data-driven community assessment and strategic planning process that has included identification of risk and protective factors, resources, and gaps; mapping of services; and analysis of policy and fiscal issues. The process has involved collaboration and input at all levels, including key community leaders; agency administrators, midlevel managers, and direct line staff; and families. The plans that result from this process will identify a 5-year vision and strategy for expanding current efforts and resources and making changes to improve service coordination and response, with the goal of effectively meeting the prevention, intervention, and treatment needs of children who have been exposed to violence or are at high risk of exposure.

The Safe Start Initiative includes both evaluation and training and technical assistance components. A national team—consisting of Caliber Associates (the team leader), the Association for the Study and Development of Community, Research Triangle Institute, and Roper Starch Worldwide—is collaborating with local representatives at each site to conduct an intensive evaluation of Safe Start activities and inform the field about the promising practices and strategies being demonstrated. In addition, the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence provides national training and technical assistance to the Safe Start sites, in conjunction with a significant level of local training and technical assistance provided by each site. This Federal-local partnership facilitates the evolution of systems changes and will lead to greater knowledge about how communities can effectively prevent and respond to children’s exposure to violence.

For Further Information

Much of the background information in this Fact Sheet is drawn from *Safe From the Start: Taking Action on Children Exposed to Violence* (OJJDP, 2000, 76 pp., NCJ 182789). *Safe From the Start* and other DOJ publications related to the issue of children’s exposure to violence are available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse and may be ordered by phone (800–638–8736) or online (www.puborder.ncjrs.org). Publications may also be viewed

online and downloaded at OJJDP’s home page (www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org).

For further information on the Safe Start Initiative, contact Kristen Kracke, OJJDP, 810 Seventh Street NW., Washington, DC 20531; 202–616–3649.

For information on Safe Start training and technical assistance and for additional information on children’s exposure to violence, contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence, Yale Child Study Center, 230 South Frontage Road, New Haven, CT 06520–7900; 877–49–NCCEV (877–496–2238); www.nccev.org.

For information on the Safe Start national evaluation, contact Caliber Associates, 10530 Rosehaven Street, Suite 400, Fairfax, VA 22030; 703–385–3200; www.calib.com.

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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