

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING CHILD TRAUMA AND CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

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Introduction

This document provides a set of best practice guidelines for journalists in order to help ensure ethical and sensitive reporting of child trauma and crimes against children. It is based on the “Minimize Harm” section of the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, and its purpose is to provide a set of concrete guidelines for journalists to help with adherence to the Code of Ethics when reporting crimes and trauma against children.

These guidelines have been formatted to be easy for journalists to consult quickly, easily, and repeatedly in the course of their work. To that end, the document is structured in the form of a succinct “tip sheet,” divided into sections by topic. These sections are: education and preparation, respect and sensitivity, confidentiality, offering hope to the public, and oversight. The guidelines are drawn from the work of prominent agencies, including the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the National Child Advocacy Center, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as from accepted psychological and medical literature on trauma and its effects, child development, and other pertinent fields of study.

The scope of this document is limited mainly to elements of how these stories are reported. Journalists are encouraged to consult additional resources, such as those listed at the end of this document, for more in-depth information on each guideline or topic, as well as for related topics such as the interviewing of minors or journalist self-care.

Reading or hearing about trauma and crimes committed against children can create undue stress in many people, including activating traumatic reactions in teens and adults who experienced the same thing or something similar earlier in their lives. In some cases, details provided in news stories could be used inappropriately by others to retraumatize or further victimize a child; can cause humiliation in front of peers; and can reactivate severe trauma reactions if the story is re-encountered later in life. Reading about or hearing these kinds of stories can sometimes encourage “copycat” crimes.

Traumatic events against children should never be used for public entertainment nor as a currency to garner views or ratings. By following the guidance provided in this document, journalists can ensure that their stories minimize harm to vulnerable children who have already been harmed, as well as to the general public.

Guidelines

EDUCATION AND PREPARATION

Being informed about trauma and its effects, as well as about helpful resources, gives journalists a richer and more informed framework for reporting on child trauma cases.

- Become educated about child trauma topics such as child abuse, how trauma affects children, lifelong consequences of trauma, the existence of effective treatments for trauma recovery, etc.
- Be familiar with trauma-related resources in the community
- Cultivate relationships with psychologists, pediatricians, counselors, and other relevant professionals who can provide consultation about specific types of details or stories when needed.

RESPECT AND SENSITIVITY

Respect and sensitivity are the basis for minimizing harm. Care must be taken for (1) the children who have been victimized, and their families, and (2) members of the public consuming the story, who may be traumatized or retraumatized by exposure to the content.

- Ensure that the tone and content of the story is respectful to child victims and their families, as well as the public.
- Ensure there is no insinuation that the victim is to blame in any way.
- Ensure that there is nothing in the article that blames the parent or another family member for the crime unless someone has already been arrested and charged.
- Use accurate and correct language to describe the crime or traumatic event.
- Make sure all information in the story is accurate. Do not speculate about unknown details.
- Do not air child trauma stories during hours when children are likely to be watching television.
- Newscasters should keep their tone neutral or sympathetic when delivering the story, and should take care to refrain from appearing amused or bored.
- Stories about child trauma should contain a warning at the beginning of the story. Television news stories should include a pause to allow the viewer the option to turn off the television before the content is presented.
- Do not include descriptive or graphic details of crimes committed against minors.
- Do not include verbatim statements made by child victims to a third party, such as statements made to police or the courts.
- Avoid showing graphic images or playing audio recordings of screaming or intense distress (such as on 911 calls) wherever possible. If a shocking image or audio clip cannot be avoided, a warning with a pause should be provided first in order to allow the viewer the option to turn off the television before the content is presented.
- Do not interview preteen child victims or witnesses, or teen victims.
- Obtain parental consent for interviews with teen witnesses and follow best practice guidelines for interviewing minors.

- Do not interview a parent who has not yet been told what has happened to their child.
- Do not print or air a story of child trauma before the parent(s) has been informed of what has happened to their child.
- If a child has been abused or neglected by, or traumatized while in the care of, an adult who is not the child's parent, do not assume that the child's parent is at fault or could have known what would happen. Be careful to not communicate blame or suspected blame of the parent.
- When reporting about a child who has been sexually victimized by another child, use accurate descriptors such as "problematic sexual behavior." Do not refer to children as "abusers" or "perpetrators" or "offenders."

CONFIDENTIALITY

It is imperative that minors be afforded confidentiality regarding their identity and aspects of their traumatic experience.

- Take steps to conceal the identity of the child victim and the child's family.
- Do not name the child.
- Do not show the child's face, or any distinctive clothing or other objects in photographs or video.
- Do not include any details, such as house numbers or license plates that would allow the public to identify the child or the child's family or home.
- Do not provide extraneous details that could be viewed as a violation of the child's confidentiality or privacy.
- Be careful to not reveal identifying details of the perpetrator or the perpetrator's relationship to the child victim that could, by extension, inadvertently identify the child victim.
- Try to avoid airing or publishing child 911 calls. If a call is included, ensure that the parent has given consent, and has been warned, as part of that consent, that members of the public may be able to identify the child based on the call.

OFFERING HOPE TO THE PUBLIC

People consuming news stories about child victims are typically concerned about the child and/or concerned about the possibility of their own children having to face a similar problem. Offering hope can help alleviate anxiety in people and leave them feeling empowered instead of helpless, as well as directing the public to helpful resources.

- Include relevant information about available resources.
- Include information about positive actions people can take to protect their children and/or to receive help if something similar were to happen to their family.
- Include information that could be expected to provide a sense of hope or relief to members of the public listening to or watching the story, such as if the child is receiving needed help, the child is expected to recover, etc.
- Highlight relevant safety precautions parents can take to protect their children.
- Include information about pertinent resources in the community

- Include helpful hotline numbers pertinent to the type of trauma being reported.
- Educate the public and extend the story by including helpful information such as information about the impact of child trauma on people later in life, recommended prevention strategies, what local schools are doing to help with the problem, how psychotherapy can be beneficial, etc.

OVERSIGHT

News agencies can require their journalists to adhere to ethical standards as a condition of employment, and the presence, and continuous operation, of systems providing oversight is needed in order to ensure compliance. The following guidelines are for employers.

- Require your journalists to adhere to these guidelines.
- Designate systems to ensure compliance with these guidelines, including informal systems of available advising, and a formal system of oversight.
- Have a system in place for corrective action when the guidelines are not followed.
- Regularly provide education to your journalists on child trauma topics, including how failing to follow these guidelines causes harm to child victims and to the public.
- Ensure journalists are familiar with helpful area resources for traumatized children and adults.

References and Resources

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. <https://dartcenter.org>

Covering Children and Trauma. A Guide for Journalism Professionals. By Ruth Teichroeb. Document published by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Available for download at <https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-children-trauma>

Ethical Reporting on Traumatized People.
<https://dartcenter.org/content/dvd-launched-ethical-reporting-people-affected-by-trauma>

Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for the Media. Document published by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Available for download at <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/childhood-traumatic-grief-information-for-the-media>

Tips for Media Covering Traumatic Events. Document published by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Available for download at <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/tips-media-covering-traumatic-events>

Media Guide for Reporting on Child Abuse. Document published by the National Children's Advocacy Center. Available for download at

<https://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Journalist-Media-Guide3.pdf>

Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect. Document published by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Available for download at

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment/journalists-guide.pdf>