

Dane County District Attorney's Office Efforts to Reduce Corporal Punishment Through Criminal Justice Reform & Community Engagement

Paula Graves, LPC, LMHC

The Dane County District Attorney's (DA) Office, in Madison, Wisconsin, is engaged in a mission to reduce the prevalence of, and reliance on, corporal punishment and thereby protect children in the surrounding community (Van Stelle & Goodrich, 2015).

In 2013, after months of research and development, the Dane County District Attorney's Office began working toward integration of a Child Abuse Initiative (DP-CAI) into its already robust Deferred Prosecution Program. Staff observations and referral data collected had revealed that many of the Intentional Physical Abuse of a Child (IPAC) referrals were due to excessive use of corporal punishment by caregivers. Staff members engaged in internal and external analysis to determine ways in which the DA's Office could best address these cases, with the hope of improving outcomes for both children and caregivers. Based on this examination, the office devised an effort to explore whether a paradigm shift from the use of corporal punishment to alternative, healthier parenting methods could not only reduce physical abuse of children but also impact racial disparities and multi-generational system involvement in both the short and long term (Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008). An additional hope was that this model would aid in reducing the potential negative outcomes associated with early trauma and criminal justice involvement for all families (Gershoff, 2008, 2010).

To serve the greatest number of families and ensure that each case receives fair consideration, all IPAC referrals are assessed for program eligibility immediately upon

receipt of referral for charges. If found eligible, the individual is considered for one of three options: a pre-charge referral for which no charges are filed, a post-charge referral for which charges are dismissed upon successful completion, or a reduction referral for which charges are reduced upon successful completion. Following eligibility determination, potential participants proceed through the assessment process with the Child Abuse Specialist. During this process, individuals engage in a bio-psycho-social-based needs assessment, complete an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) screening tool, and engage in additional screening or testing as determined necessary (The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, 2007). After assessment, if potential participants are found appropriate for the program, they are invited to sign a Deferred Prosecution Agreement (DPA)—a contract detailing individualized requirements the participant must meet to successfully complete the program. The DPA always includes a requirement to refrain from the use of any physical punishment and a requirement to participate in parenting services, but it may also include participation in treatment, educational programming, or other requirements dependent upon individuals' and their families' needs.

An integral component of the DP-CAI is consideration of the child victim's well-being and needs. As such, the DA's Office consistently requests and utilizes forensic interviews to minimize the potential need for additional interviews of children. This also offers an opportunity for multi-disciplinary communication and case planning, service coordination, and linkages to needed services that may not otherwise be accessible to victims or families. Furthermore, services to support and monitor the safety of children are often included as requirements of each participant's DPA.

The DA's Office staff identified additional programming needs following the launch of the program, particularly relating to participants' ability to access affordable parenting and treatment services in the community. Staff members continue to seek more comprehensive solutions to this issue; however, they were able to address part of this challenge by having staff members complete training and certification in the "Adults and Children Together (ACT): Raising Safe Kids" parenting program. The ACT curriculum was implemented as an in-house service starting in August of 2014, and it has been repeated with both co-ed and female-specific groups. These groups are offered free of charge to participants who cannot afford other community-based parenting options due to being uninsured or underinsured. The outcomes of the in-house groups have been positive, matching the current research on ACT nation and worldwide (Knox, Burkhardt, & Cromly, 2013; Knox, Burkhardt, & Hunter, 2010; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). Notably, ACT was also recognized as one of only three parenting programs recommended by the World Health Organization: European Region in a recent report (Hardcastle, Bellis, Hughes, & Sethi, 2015).

The DA's Office has developed and offered the "Cultural Context of Corporal Punishment--Keeping Kids Safe" conference in both 2014 and 2015 to educate professionals on how to better aid families in reducing their use of corporal punishment and physical abuse through culturally responsive assessments, investigations, and interventions. The conferences were possible through collaboration and support from community partners, including the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health--Department of Pediatrics, as well as the University of Wisconsin Office of Continuing Professional Development, Bureau of Justice Assistance, American Bar Association, Children's Trust Fund, Dane County Child Protection Collaboration,



Nadine Block, the Green Bay Packers, and American Family Children's Hospital. Both conferences offered participants an opportunity to hear from national and local experts, including Lisa Aronson-Fontes, PhD, Stacey Patton, PhD, Barbara Knox, M, and Victor Vieth, JD. Participants completed "intent to change" forms following both conferences, and responses demonstrated a significant desire and motivation to engage in conversations and work that will enhance service delivery and prevention and intervention services for families in Dane County and surrounding communities.

In addition to traditional learning, conference participants and community members were invited to attend community conversations. These events provided a unique opportunity for members of faith-based commu-

nities and professionals to dialogue about corporal punishment and brainstorm ideas for moving communities toward abandoning this parenting option. It also allowed for the dissemination of research widely accepted by professionals, but which has not yet extended to the general public. The discussions were rich with sharing of personal

experiences, observations, and ideas on how to make progress in communities that often believe in or even embrace the use of physical punishment. The DA's Office continues to support opportunities that educate the community about culturally responsive service delivery and encourage healthy parenting practices. In demonstrating their commitment to this, staff members have engaged in numerous additional community conversations and presentations within faith-based communities, educational institutions, and medical and community service agencies, both locally and beyond.

Stemming from their ongoing commitment to preventing child maltreatment, the Dane County DA's Office also became a leader by developing and implementing the first government-based No Hit Zone (NHZ). In August 2014, staff members in a variety of roles received

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in-depth training on the concept. Further, they were provided with information and tools to enable them to communicate the office NHZ policy and more effectively and meaningfully intervene in difficult situations in which visitors to the office appear to be at risk of escalating to verbal or physical altercations. NHZ signs are visible throughout the public spaces of the office, along with brochures that contain information on corporal punishment as well as helpful local and Web-based resources for families struggling with parenting.

The NHZ magnet, developed by a team member, has proven to be exceptionally popular with office visitors and has become an invaluable part of the office's efforts to diffuse the NHZ concept further. The DA's Office has also provided training on the NHZ to several local law enforcement agencies, community agencies, and educational groups. Staff members have responded to requests for information from professionals around the country, participated in workgroups on the NHZ, and disseminated materials developed in-office to both local and national organizations and agencies.

None of these accomplishments would be possible without an invested leader, and in Dane County, District Attorney Ismael Ozanne is just that. In 2014, he collaborated with American Family Children's Hospital to create a public service announcement educating the public about the negative outcomes associated with

caregiver use of corporal punishment. The PSA aired on local radio stations during the summer of 2014, and since the fall of 2014, the U.S. Alliance to End the Hitting of Children assumed sponsorship. Today, the PSA can be heard on local and national Web sites, during professional trainings, and on the DA's Office Web site.

Currently, the Dane County DA's Office expects to forge ahead in the pursuit of reducing, and ideally ending, the use of corporal punishment locally and beyond. This will be achieved through continued outreach, education, conversation, and development of new and effective programs to address the many challenges families currently face. The Dane County DA's Office is eager to collaborate with and learn from other individuals, groups, and agencies interested in advancing this work.

About the Author

Paula Graves, LPC, LMHC, is the Deferred Prosecution Child Abuse Specialist for the Dane County District Attorney's Office in Madison, Wisconsin. She provides direct services to and monitoring of caregivers referred for charges related to physical abuse or neglect of a child, and she facilitates training and advocacy efforts on corporal punishment and the office's Child Abuse Initiative. Her prior work focused on assessment and treatment of child and adult survivors of trauma, non-offending and offending caretakers, and community education related to abuse and trauma. Contact: paula.graves@da.wi.gov



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