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Predictable and Consistent Parental Behavior Is Key for Optimal Child Brain Development

by Tallie Z. Baram

Scientists have long known that the experiences you have during infancy and childhood play an important role in shaping how your brain matures and how you behave as an adult (Short & Baram, 2019). But figuring out why this happens has been difficult.

Over the past 15 years, my team and I have been studying child brain development to identify what aspects of early life experiences affect brain maturation. In our recently published paper summarizing our findings across multiple studies in animals and people, we found that unpredictable or inconsistent parental behavior can disrupt the development of a child's emotional brain circuits (Birmie & Baram, 2022). This can lead to an increased risk of mental illness and substance abuse later on in the child's life.

Predictability and Consistency

To tackle the challenge of figuring out what signals affect how the brain's emotional systems develop, we took cues from how the brain's sensory systems, like vision and hearing, develop. Environmental signals are important to sensory development (Crair et al., 1998).

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Statewide Juvenile Court Prosecution Standards: Guidance From Career Prosecutors

by Rachel Larsen

Ideally, juvenile courtrooms are reserved for the most serious juvenile crimes. A system of checks and balances in the courtroom prevents any one courtroom player from becoming outsized. The judge, prosecutor, and juvenile probation officers work to represent the needs of the victims and the goals of offender rehabilitation and community safety. The juvenile defense attorney works to represent the stated interest of the juvenile. All of these perspectives and interests, combined with the mandates and protections of state and federal law, are intended to work to create a just juvenile system free from corruption.

But the system can get dangerously off track, as happened from 2003 to 2008 with the "Kids for Cash" scandal in Luzerne, PA. For those unfamiliar with the scandal, it is what it sounds like. Two juvenile court judges invested in a for-profit juvenile detention center. As a result, juveniles in the judges' jurisdiction were sent to detention for very minor crimes, such as stealing CDs, in order to line the pockets of the judges. When the story was cracked, it ripped open the national consciousness, and two documentaries and numerous crime drama episodes were created about the disturbing facts.

Infamous Corruption Case Led Prosecutors to Re-examine Their Practices

While the inexcusable corruption was on the part of the judges, there was much soul-searching on the part of the prosecution as to how detaining so many minor juvenile offenders could have gone on so long before the scandal broke. After all, juvenile court prosecutors, no matter what state they practice in, have the goal of juvenile rehabilitation. In other words, the goal of the juvenile court prosecutor is not primarily punishment, but protecting community safety and rehabilitation of offenders, and therefore prosecutors should not have willingly participated in a courtroom made punitive by corruption.

The judges abused their power over juveniles to profit themselves. Prosecutors abused their power by failing to use it, because doing nothing when action is required is a form of corruption.

Interbranch Commission Develops Juvenile Court Prosecution Standards

A commission was formed in Pennsylvania to conduct hearings to assess what had gone wrong. The Interbranch Commission on Juvenile Justice included judges,

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defense attorneys, victim witness advocates, and prosecutors. George Mosee was one of two prosecutors appointed to the commission. Mosee, the head of Philadelphia's juvenile division, had recently served as a member of the American Prosecutors Research Institute of the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA) and as chair of a statewide group, the Juvenile Prosecutors Network of the

courtrooms were, as Mosee put it, "fresh off the street" with no training in what the juvenile courtroom is all about.

Mosee knew what had to be done in Pennsylvania to fight the complacency of prosecutors in Luzerne who had failed to act to protect juveniles from *ex parte* proceedings, unnecessary detention, and disproportionate outcomes. Mosee said:

Working on the National Standards was an eye-opening process for me, and I knew that prosecutors in my

juvenile court prosecutor's mindset. With funds from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, juvenile court prosecutors were trained on the standards, which include a duty to report suspected wrongdoing and any juvenile rehabilitation programs that are not performing. The training on the juvenile standards continues today and takes place every year in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania is not alone in its efforts to create educated and mission-informed juvenile court prosecutors. Headed by Assistant Ocean County Prosecutor Anthony Pierro and the New Jersey Juvenile Prosecutors' Leadership Network, the state recently joined the effort to create statewide juvenile court prosecution standards. Pierro has spent his career working in juvenile court in New Jersey. Unfortunately, people like Pierro are a rarity because of the erroneous belief that juvenile court is "kiddie court" and merely a place to practice before moving to Criminal Court. Pierro says, "Nothing can be further from the truth. Serious crimes are committed by juveniles every day that affect victims and communities."

Pierro believes communities deserve protection from juvenile crime to the same extent as adult crime. Pierro went on to say:

Untrained juvenile prosecutors are simply not equipped to manage the competing interests that exist in a juvenile court that is focused on rehabilitating offenders and

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Juvenile court prosecutors must work to craft a plan for rehabilitation, which involves understanding risk and adolescent development, community and school system resources, and what stakeholders need to feel safe.

Pennsylvania District Attorney's Association. He was very familiar with the NDAA standards for juvenile court prosecutors and was working with the Pennsylvania Juvenile Prosecutors Network to develop state standards even before the Luzerne County scandal broke. After the Luzerne investigation, Mosee became involved in the Juvenile Prosecution Leadership Network, whose national standards for juvenile court were included in the NDAA Standards in 2016.

One of the findings of the commission that Mosee served on was that prosecutors who worked in the corrupt

state would benefit from guidance on the goals of juvenile court and what is required to be an effective, ethical juvenile court prosecutor.

Mosee worked with prosecutors across Pennsylvania to create juvenile court prosecution standards modeled on NDAA's standards.

Pennsylvania Serves as Model as New Jersey Develops Standards

Mosee did not stop there because he knew prosecutors needed training to adopt those standards as part of the

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protecting victims and the community. Plus, the work continues after adjudication because juvenile court prosecutors must work to craft a plan for rehabilitation which involves understanding risk and adolescent development, community resources, local school system resources, and what victims and communities need to feel safe.

Gathering Input From All Jurisdictions to Set Standards. Pierro met with the juvenile court prosecutors in all 21 counties to get input for New Jersey's Juvenile Court Prosecution Standards. For the intensive work of writing the standards, he relied on a core group of five prosecutors with a combined 60 years' experience in the juvenile courtroom. Talking with this group, each member emphasized including every jurisdiction in the input process. Anthony Higgins, director of the Juvenile Justice Unit in the Essex County Prosecutor's office in New Jersey said:

You cannot assume the same level of resources in each jurisdiction in your state. So, you must accommodate some jurisdictions' lack of resources, and yet, at the same time write standards that commit jurisdictions to prioritize juvenile court.

The proposed New Jersey Standards include professional education

requirements for juvenile court prosecutors in New Jersey, as do Pennsylvania's standards. However, for jurisdictions that do not have funding for juvenile-court-specific training but want to adopt education requirements, free on-demand training for juvenile court prosecutors is available online. (The NDAA offers such training at its website with CLE credit in all states.)

Process Requires Buy-In From State-wide Organizations. As this article goes to press, the New Jersey Juvenile Prosecutors' Leadership Network is waiting for approval from the County Prosecutors Association of New Jersey to adopt the Juvenile Court Prosecution Standards for the state. But, as you can imagine, the process from writing the standards to getting them adopted is a long one that requires buy-in on many levels.

To help other states considering creating statewide juvenile court prosecution standards, Pierro wrote this to-do list that captures the basics of what his team did in New Jersey:

1. Consult with your elected DA and ask for permission to pursue statewide standards.
2. Consult with your statewide prosecutor association to ensure they are on-board throughout the process and to pave the way for the organization's approval later.
3. Identify prosecutors with extensive juvenile court experience from across your state and convene a meeting.

4. Be sure to include rural, suburban, and urban jurisdictions.
5. Adapt NDAA's national standards to fit the needs of your state. It is easier to use a template than to recreate the wheel. (For the latest version of the National Prosecution Standards for Juvenile Justice, visit <https://ndaa.org/programs/juvenile-justice/publications/>)
6. Ask the executive board of your statewide prosecutors' organization to adopt the standards.

Rehabilitation Is Prevention

The kind of work that goes into creating standards and getting buy-in from across your state is, to say the least, not trivial. So why have Mosee, Pierro, Higgins, and others dedicated so much time to the process? As Mosee puts it:

No work that prosecutors do is more important than the work done in juvenile court. If we get it right there, we may never see that juvenile again in the juvenile justice or criminal justice system and that is what we all want. Prevention is a primary part of our mission, and the juvenile court standards help form our road map and mission statement.

Rachel B. Larsen is senior attorney with the National District Attorney Association, Arlington, VA. She can be reached at RLarsen@ndaajustice.org. ■



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