

## When a Youth Is Victimized

### How to Respond

We may not like to think about it—or even believe it—but youth today face a high risk of becoming crime victims. In fact, young people ages 12 to 24 suffer more violent crime than any other age group in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

As a parent, teacher, coach, or other adult, you may have a unique opportunity to help a young person who has been hurt by crime, whether assault, homicide, bullying, robbery, hate crime, sexual assault, stalking, or any other victimization.

### How Youth Victims React to Crime

The first step in helping youth victims is to recognize the common—and varied—reactions they might have, including:

- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Aggressive or inappropriate behavior
- Mood swings
- Attention-seeking behavior
- Increased risk-taking
- Difficulty concentrating
- School absences
- Declining school performance
- Withdrawal from friends
- Physical distress (e.g., headache or stomachache)
- Nightmares or insomnia
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Depression or anxiety

One or more of these behaviors doesn't necessarily mean a youth has been victimized, but rapid changes in personality or temperament may indicate an underlying trauma or victimization. If you feel that something may be wrong, it's important to check in with youth and communicate that you are available to talk.

### Why It May Be Hard for Youth to Talk about Victimization

Youth who have been hurt by crime may tell trusted friends about victimization, but they often avoid or delay telling adults about such traumatic experiences. Many youth must overcome significant hurdles before becoming comfortable enough to disclose what might be the worst experience of their lives:

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<sup>1</sup> Shannan M. Catalano, "Criminal Victimization, 2006," (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics), 4, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cv06.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2009).

- ***Fear of consequences:*** Youth may believe that disclosing victimization will only make things worse. For example, sexual abuse victims may fear that the abuser will retaliate against them or their families, and victims of theft may fear punishment from their parents if a valuable item was stolen.
- ***Shame:*** Fear of others' reactions is a leading reason that youth delay getting help for victimization. Youth victims may feel responsible for not preventing their victimization and think others will blame them, too. They may feel ashamed about what happened and fear that others will look down on them.
- ***Trust issues:*** Many forms of youth victimization include a violation of trust. Adolescents are sometimes distrustful of adults, and youth victims may think that adults won't believe them or won't understand what they've been through.
- ***Lack of awareness:*** Youth victims may not be aware that a crime has occurred or that anyone could help. For example, when abuse occurs in a dating relationship, a young girl's inexperience may lead her to believe that a boyfriend's aggression is a sign of love.
- ***Desire for privacy:*** As youth move from childhood to adolescence, the need for personal privacy becomes increasingly important, and victims especially may feel ashamed to have people know the details of their victimization.
- ***Need for independence:*** As adolescents are struggling for personal autonomy, they may try to resolve problems on their own rather than involve adults. A youth victim may fear that adults will take over and the youth will lose control and decision-making power in the situation. Youth may also worry that adults' efforts to protect them after victimization will result in lost privileges or freedom.

## How Adults Can Help

### 1. Recognize What Youth Need after Victimization

- ***Safety:*** Youth need to be protected from further victimization and need to know what adults can do to help them be safe.
- ***Support:*** Youth need to know they are not alone after victimization and that there are people in their support network, as well as professional helpers, who will listen, understand, encourage, and care.
- ***Non-pressuring environment:*** Adolescents need time to build rapport and trust with adults, and disclosing details about victimization is often a gradual process for youth victims. Youth need reassurance that adults are ready to listen when they are ready to communicate.
- ***Information:*** Youth need age-appropriate information about types of crimes against youth, normal reactions to trauma, how to heal, and victims' rights and choices after victimization is disclosed.
- ***Privacy:*** Youth need adults to respect their privacy concerns but also to provide honest information about mandated reporting of certain crimes against youth, such as child abuse and neglect, and what to expect when a

report to authorities is made.<sup>2</sup>

- **Respect and empowerment:** Youth who have been victims of crime need to know that adults will listen to them, hear their concerns, help them weigh their options, and support them through making choices in the aftermath of crime.
- **Hope:** Like all victims of crime, youth victims need hope that they can recover from their victimization and rebuild their lives.

Youth victims' needs vary significantly. Some victims will want to see offenders brought to justice; others will resist confronting the abuser. Adults need to support youth victims wherever they are in the process of addressing the crimes against them.

## 2. Offer Support

Adults can play a major role in building trust with teens, reducing their fears, and helping them receive additional help. For youth, telling someone about victimization is often a process rather than a single event—so a disclosure of victimization can take some time. If you notice a teen is trying to tell you something, observe signs of distress, or suspect that a youth is struggling, the issue may be past or current victimization. You can work on building rapport and trust with the teen and create opportunities for the youth to share confidences when he or she is ready. You might:

- **Create a supportive atmosphere:** Look for opportunities to point out that crimes against teens are wrong and that victims are not to blame. For example, you can raise the subject of sexual abuse by asking teens their opinions about sexually explicit songs or television dramas. Once the issue is out in the open, you can explain how sexual abusers threaten and manipulate young people and discuss ways young victims might get help. Such an approach shows that you understand the conflicts young victims suffer and sets the stage for teens to confide in you.
- **Start a conversation:** You might mention how often teens are victimized and find out if teens are concerned about these issues, too. If a teen responds by disclosing abuse, remain calm, maintain eye contact, and check your body language (stay physically relaxed and open). If a teen talks about victimization, ask open-ended questions (e.g., “How can I help?”), and don't press for details until a youth is ready to share.
- **Reserve judgment:** Listen actively and avoid criticizing, second-guessing, or shaming the youth who confided in you. Never ask “Why didn't you tell me sooner?” when a teen musters the courage to tell. Don't blame teens for mistakes or misjudgments that may have put them at risk.
- **Let youth know the limits of confidentiality:** Inform teens exactly what adults may keep private and what information you may be required to disclose to other authorities. Remain calm and supportive if such information causes the teen to halt or retract the disclosure, and offer anonymous sources of support, such as a helpline.
- **Respect teens' perspective on the crime:** If a youth victim seems to minimize the impact of the crime, you can acknowledge his or her feelings while suggesting that the effects may be more serious than the teen realizes. A victim of crime may resist the message that the victimization is not his or her fault; understand that, by taking responsibility for his or her decisions related to the victimization, a youth victim may be trying to regain some sense of control in the situation.

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2 Each state has laws requiring certain people to report concerns of child abuse and neglect. While some states require all adults to report their concerns, many states identify specific professionals as mandated reporters; these professionals often include social workers, medical and mental health workers, teachers, and childcare providers. For more information, contact the Child Welfare Information Gateway of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov).

### 3. Get Additional Help

After providing an immediate, supportive response to a youth who has been victimized, connect him or her to help. After a recent victimization, youth may need medical care, mental health care, child protective services, police intervention, victim advocacy, or other services. You may want to contact:

- **Victim advocates:** Specially trained victim advocates may provide youth and their adult caregivers with information and counseling on crime victims' rights, victim services, and options, including:
  - Safety planning to think through ways to stay safe.
  - How to report a crime to police or child protective services and what to expect at different points during the process.
  - Emotional support and counseling to heal from victimization.
  - Advocacy and accompaniment while dealing with the educational, medical, social service, and legal systems.
  - Referrals to other helpers and resources.
- **911:** Call the police if you or a youth victim needs emergency help or to report a crime.
- **Helpline:** For support, information, and help connecting to local services, contact the National Crime Victim Helpline at 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) or [gethelp@ncvc.org](mailto:gethelp@ncvc.org). We will listen, support you, and direct you to resources. The National Crime Victim Helpline provides direct assistance, information about victims' options, and referrals to local victim advocates, child protective services, and other victim services across the country.



2000 M Street NW, Suite 480 • Washington, DC 20036

**National Crime Victim Helpline**

Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 8:30 p.m., ET

**1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)**

TTY 1-800-211-7996 • [gethelp@ncvc.org](mailto:gethelp@ncvc.org)

*The National Center for Victims of Crime is dedicated to forging a national commitment to help victims of crime rebuild their lives. The Youth Initiative of the National Center for Victims of Crime builds the nation's capacity to support youth victims while working to advance their rights and ensuring youth leadership on issues that affect youth.*

This project was supported by Grant No. 2007-VF-GX-K001 awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.