

Responses to Children With Special Needs

1. Caseworkers may recommend that children with certain conditions are incapable of testifying. These could include children with psychotic, severe dissociative, autistic, or dangerous suicidal/homicidal problems.
2. Caseworkers may recommend that children with certain conditions receive mental health evaluation and treatment before testifying. These could include children with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, some children with suicidal/homicidal problems, and children with oppositional defiant behaviors. Children with borderline abilities or mild mental retardation may be competent to testify, just as preschoolers can be. Boys ashamed of abuse by older males may respond to treatment and become able to testify, as can children with loyalty conflicts.
3. Caseworkers may recommend consultation with medical professionals to determine whether children with certain medical conditions can testify, or whether medication should be adjusted for the purposes of testimony. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, for example, may do better at certain times of day, or shortly after receiving medication.
4. Caseworkers should recommend intervention if threats have been made. Death threats by alleged perpetrators and their associates are serious and should be dealt with both therapeutically and practically. Here, cooperation with law enforcement is essential. Caseworkers should not make safety promises to children that they cannot keep.

Note: Copen (2000) offers other safety plan strategies to help children and families who have been threatened. (See Handout # 9 entitled Resources)

Without these interventions, children who could otherwise testify competently may appear to be incompetent or to lack credibility. Thus:

- depressed children may respond with one-word answers and no apparent affect.
- children who are dissociating may seem to be day dreaming or to be emotionally unaffected by their testimony.
- anxious children or children with post-traumatic flashbacks may freeze on the stand and be unable to respond at all.
- embarrassed children may freeze, or may deal with their humiliation by oppositional and bravado clowning.