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Children Exposed to Trauma to be 'Handled with Care' by School

District Attorney, Police and Schools Unite to Launch New App

When children encounter police because they were a witness to violence or a traumatic event, they can sometimes show up to school the next few days feeling upset, setting off a cycle of poor school performance or acting out, whether in school in person or virtually. Unless a teacher knows the student experienced recent trauma, the child could end up in trouble instead of receiving support. The District Attorney's Office, the San Diego County Office of Education, local law enforcement and local school districts are addressing this issue through an app called 'Handle with Care,' which was developed just before the pandemic shuttered schools.

Under the new program, when police come into contact with a child during a traumatic event such as domestic violence in the home, a neighborhood shooting, arrest of a family member or violent crime, police use the app to alert the child's school and school district that the child should be handled with care. No other details about the incident are given to the school.

"Children who experience trauma in the home often don't complete homework, do poorly on tests, and are withdrawn," District Attorney Summer Stephan said "This pilot program is a simple way we can alert teachers and school administrators and provide important context so they can monitor the child's behavior and provide support if necessary."

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Our community uses
Handle with Care
so all children can feel safe and learn.



What is Handle with Care? If a law enforcement officer encounters a school-aged child during a call that could be traumatic to him or her, the child's name and three words: HANDLE WITH CARE are forwarded to the student's school and school district before school starts the next day. The purpose is to ensure that children who experience trauma are "Handled with Care" to reduce the negative effects experienced by exposure to trauma.

San Diego County District Attorney

The program, which has been endorsed by the San Diego County Office of Education, began as a pilot program in Chula Vista with the Chula Vista Police Department, the Chula Vista Elementary School District and Sweetwater Union High School District. Now, the program is also being implemented in El Cajon by Cajon Valley School District and the El Cajon Police Department. Other police agencies and school districts in San Diego County have expressed an interest in implementing the program and training is already underway to continue to expand the program to support students countywide.

The District Attorney's Information Technology Department wrote the code for the secure app, which may be loaded onto the law enforcement phones and computers

After police have had contact with a child, the 'Handle with Care' notice is sent to the child's school and school

district. The goal is then to notify the child's teacher before school starts. While the notification is given to the student's teacher it is not part of the child's permanent record. Teachers have received trauma-informed training and resources, and the alert does not mean that the child will be approached by the teacher. Instead, the alert is meant to give the teacher an understanding of why the student may not have completed homework, may be tired, or be acting out. **Watch the Handle with Care video, [here](#).**

"Trauma can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom, whether virtually or in person, said Francisco Escobedo, Superintendent of the Chula Vista Elementary School District. "Given the turbulent nature of our times, we are facing unprecedented levels of life-changing events. The Handle with Care Program will provide improved communication, compassionate engagement, and teacher sensitivity."

When children do poorly in school, get into trouble and don't attend class as much, they are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. During the pandemic, participating schools are using the notifications to check-in with students and offer additional support and resources dependent on the child's circumstances.

"We can change the course of a traumatized student's life by being trauma informed and giving them support instead of punitive measures," said Chula Vista Police Chief Roxana Kennedy.

The San Diego County Office of Education has provided training materials on how to use a trauma-sensitive lens when dealing with students, which includes what behavior to be alert for and what to say in response.

“When teachers have this knowledge, they can build a climate of caring in which students are more apt to feel safe, valued, and more likely to learn,” said Paul Gothold, the County Superintendent of Schools. “We’re proud to be part of this work and look forward to expanding Handle with Care.”

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About the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office

The San Diego County DA’s Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.