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## Long-term benefits for children who testify in abuse cases

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Should parents let their children testify in cases of child sexual abuse? The verdict from the McMartin Preschool case must telegraph to every parent doubt about whether the agony is worth it.

In the months following disclosure, children often appear to be recovering well from their experience, and both they and their parents want nothing more than to put the experience behind them. So why cooperate in a prosecution? Because people who would hurt children need to know that they will be held responsible for their actions. Furthermore, people who molest one child appear likely to molest other children unless stopped.

Although testifying is stressful for anyone, it is not bad for a child. Participating in the legal process gives the child an opportunity to tell

the story and to make a contribution to serving justice.

The McMartin case, however, underscores for parents the uncertainty of our legal system and the potential pain, exposure and disruption associated with a public trial. Fears that a child could be devastated by an acquittal are inevitable in the face of such a verdict, and may tip the balance of parents' decision-making away from cooperation with prosecution. I hope this will not be so.

Sincere and courageous acts by children, even if not successful, may have positive longer-term effects. In part, this is because major experiences in children's lives, including traumatic experiences, are lived not once, but many times.

As children grow older, their capacity to understand experience changes, allowing them to revise earlier impressions. For example,

young children are egocentric; they believe that they cause the events in their lives. Thus, preschool children whose parents divorce typically feel that divorce is their fault. As children grow older, however, divorce is usually reinterpreted from a broader perspective, and it comes to be understood as a consequence of the parents' feelings and behavior. During adolescence, children can comprehend social and economic forces which may have stressed the parents' relationship.

In addition to being egocentric, young children judge an act by its outcome rather than by the intentions of the actor. For example, Jean Piaget, the founder of the modern science of cognitive-development psychology, has found that children under the ages of six or seven, when asked whether it is naughtier to break 15 cups by accident or one cup on purpose, replied that breaking more cups was naughtier. In contrast, older children considered the

child who broke one cup on purpose more blameworthy.

When applied to children testifying in court, development theory would suggest that young children judge their testimony, and perhaps themselves, by the outcome of the trial. If a defendant is acquitted, the child may conclude that his testimony was bad and the verdict his failure.

Cognitive-development theory suggests, however, that as children grow older, they become able to understand that testifying in court was an act whose merit lay less in its outcome than in its intentions: to tell the truth and to do one's part in influencing justice. In adolescence, the child should also be able to take a broader, legal perspective to know that acquittal does not prove innocence but indicates that guilt was not proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

Although children at any age will be outraged and pained by seemingly unjust resolutions, children at all ages can be helped to understand

that their testimony was good and important, and that the bad outcome was not their fault. On the other hand, children denied the opportunity to tell their story may later feel disappointment and anger at not having been allowed to try to make a difference.

Whether to allow a child to testify is not an easy decision. Each case is different, and every child is different. Parents facing this agonizing decision should obtain psychological consultation and legal counsel. In coming to a decision, however, it is important to recognize that the court process, although stressful and uncertain in outcome, may give the child an opportunity to take action on his or her own behalf, and that development provides renewed opportunities to process that experience and to reach new levels of understanding and resolution.

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