

5 tips for Navigating Scenes with Children

One of the hardest scenes to work as a law enforcement officer is a scene involving a child. Whether it's a missing child, a child that has sustained a physical injury, or one that you must arrest. Child scenes can bring feelings of anger, frustration, happiness, sadness, and even make you question if there are still good people in the world. To answer the later; yes, there are good people in the world. You. And having the right tools in your tool kit can help you navigate the ins and outs of child scenes. Let's look at the initial contact between you and a child on scene.

For many children the uniform and badge can be scary and/or intimidating. Depending on their history with law enforcement, their friends, family, or even within their culture your initial contact sets the tone for the entire investigation. Your interactions with them can also help reshape any negative thoughts and feelings from prior law enforcement contact.

Tips: After securing your scene, keeping officer safety in mind, here are a few tips.

1. **Introduce yourself.** Just like adults on scene, children want to know who you are and why you are there. Give them your first and last name. Explain why you are talking to them and that speaking to them is important.
2. **Speak at and on their level.** Having an authority figure standing over you when you are already scared can make any person be hesitant. Now picture that person as a five-year-old child who just witnessed their dad taken away in handcuffs and their mom taken away on a stretcher. Speaking to them eye to eye and in language they can understand can calm their feelings.
3. **Be honest.** Children have many of the same questions adults have on police scenes; what happens next? Am I in trouble? Will I see my family again? Does my mom or dad have to go to jail? Is this my fault? All these are valid questions and, at times, difficult ones for officers to answer and explain, but honesty goes a long way. Reassuring the child on scene that an arrest or police presence is not their fault goes a long way in their participation throughout the entire investigation.
4. **Ask before touching.** Children that have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse can have triggers just like adults. Always ask before you touch them. "Thank you for talking to me, can I shake your hand?" Not only is asking a sign that you respect their personal physical boundaries, but it also shows them any amount of touch should be something they are comfortable with.
5. **Be aware of your body language and tone.** As an officer, it is easy for us to get into our "police mode." Not showing emotions on our face while we are on scene. Standing in a bladed stance, ready to defend ourselves. Using our authoritative voice and command presence. All these things we are trained to do to keep us safe and alive should not be thrown out the window just because you are speaking with a minor, but you should be aware of these things on scene and how the child you are speaking to is responding. Whenever possible find a location on scene that is has been cleared to

talk. Have an additional unit come to the scene so you can focus on speaking with the child. If you are the only officer on scene position yourself where you can scan your scene while facing the child.

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