

Supporting Heroes In mental health Foundational Training (SHIFT)

Upper-Level Management (Administrator's) Guide

An Administrator's Guide to Understanding
the Needs of Individuals Exposed to Child
Pornography in the workplace



The most heinous crimes we face in our society today involve child sexual abuse images – crime scene images of local children being raped and abused. Criminal justice professionals who investigate these crimes face significant obstacles, such as lack of funding, extremely low levels of manpower and the ever progressing technological advances that assist offenders in concealing their crimes. Just as importantly, individuals who view child sexual abuse images at work experience stressors associated with their exposure to images or videos depicting child sexual abuse. Many of these stressors can be managed if negative effects are recognized in time and adequate support is provided.

A healthy work environment is one of the best tools that can be provided to professionals coping with exposure to child sexual abuse images. Flexibility, along with an educated and understanding command staff, provided the highest level of support for this taxing, and often toxic, line of work. High-level supervisors and administrators who understand and implement the following elements into their working culture will have a better chance of supporting and thereby retaining healthy employees.

This guide will help supervisors and administrators understand the unique challenges exposed individuals face.

The Purpose of this Guide is to:

- Educate supervisors and administrators on child sexual abuse images and their effect on employees
- Provide suggestions that will help exposed individuals in the workplace
- Understand the role of the mental health provider in the workplace
- Provide additional resources for assistance

Child Pornography and Its Effects

People often think child pornography is just nude images of children in the bathtub or playing on the beach. In reality, however, child pornography consists of actual crime scene photos or films of children being sexually abused and exploited. Law enforcement officers regularly seize hundreds or thousands of images and videos that depict sexual assaults of very young children.

In fact, a study* published in 2005 of child pornography collections seized by law enforcement showed that:

- 83% had images of children between the ages of 6 and 12,
- 39% had images of children between the ages of 3 and 6,
- 19% had images of children under the age of 3,
- 80% had images depicting sexual penetration, and
- 21% had images depicting rape or torture.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimated in 2003 that 20% of all pornography traded over the Internet was child pornography, and that since 1997 the number of child pornography images available on the Internet had increased by 1500%.

In response to this overwhelming problem, the federal government created Internet Crime against Children (ICAC) Task Forces. The ICAC Task Force is a multi-agency network of state, local and federal law enforcement personnel whose mission is to:

- Apprehend and bring to justice Internet sexual predators and child pornography offenders.
- Conduct investigations on the crimes of sexual exploitation of a minor and the luring of minors for sexual exploitation

Law Enforcement Says:

Victims are getting younger

Many are babies or toddlers

Abuse is getting more violent and sadistic

Live webcam and streaming video is used more regularly

ICAC task forces and their affiliates face many challenges with these investigations, including dealing with a lack of resources that make it difficult to identify victims and apprehend more than a fraction of suspects. In addition to law enforcement, forensic analysts, prosecutors, judges, and others may also be exposed to images in the course of a criminal investigation or trial. Those who are exposed to these images may feel distress from viewing the images, combined with additional distress due to the scope of the problem facing them.

“I have only been doing this for a couple months. What I saw made me sick to my stomach and affected me outside of work.”

--ICAC Task Force Member

The negative effects of viewing images can include:

- Burnout- Feeling overwhelmed, interpersonal problems at work or home, sudden health problems, substance abuse, feeling unmotivated
- Compassion Fatigue- the gradual lessening of compassion for co-workers, family members, even victims
- Vicarious Trauma- negative changes that happen over time as a result of witnessing other people’s suffering and need. Over a prolonged period of time the exposed individual may feel as if he/she is unable to utilize the same coping mechanisms that they once relied on to assist them with the effects of trauma.

Unique Challenges

Employees exposed to child pornography in the workplace may face unique challenges that differ from other personnel within an agency. These challenges may include:

- Little preparation for the job
- Feeling “stuck” or unable to transfer out
- Workplace isolation
- Need for more flexibility
- Misunderstanding by other employees in the workplace
- Lack of understanding by administration about the mental health challenges of the job

Currently, few agencies prepare their personnel for the potential psychological reactions they may experience, before those personnel begin working child pornography cases. Without proper understanding of what the position entails, a new investigator may be shocked and appalled by the nature of these crimes. A request to transfer may result in loss of rank, status and pay.

Additionally, these investigators or analysts may find themselves isolated – both physically and socially. Many agencies send child sexual abuse investigators to dark basements, warehouses or back rooms to do their jobs. Professionals struggling with crushing workloads may allow themselves few breaks to interact with others. Colleagues and supervisors may demean and belittle the job.

Command staff may fail to realize the significant and unique needs of personnel exposed to child sexual abuse images. Budget constraints add additional challenges. Qualified mental health professionals may not be brought on board until too late.

All of these challenges can be overcome by adopting the following best practices.

Recommendations and Guidelines

The following steps will help administrators and supervisors create a supportive work environment for professionals who experience the negative effects of viewing child sexual abuse images:

Preparation for new employees

- Develop an interview process in which the potential candidate is educated about the true nature of the crime, asked questions about their suitability in entering the unit, and allowed to voice any concerns they may have.
- Allow the candidate to “shadow” an investigator in the unit to observe the work being done.
- Encourage the candidate to speak with other investigators about the job.
- Explore a “transition” process in which the employee does the job for a period of time and then re-evaluates whether the job is a fit.
- Offer training for the employee such as child pornography investigation workshop and SHIFT foundational mental health training for exposed individuals.
- Discuss the availability of mental health support.

Less than 10% of agencies asked personnel about having histories of or personal experiences with child sexual abuse before deploying them in the ICAC unit.

-Work-Related Exposure to Child Pornography in ICAC Task Forces and Affiliated Agencies: Reactions and Responses to Possible Stresses- Wolak- Mitchell

Workspace considerations

The physical location in an office should be conducive to feeling comfortable while at work. Consider the following:

- Sometimes just having a window or television in the office may help the individual feel connected with the outside world.
- Use an area that is private, but not totally isolated from others. These investigations are sensitive and accidental exposure should be managed. But the professional also should feel part of the “team”, and be near other colleagues and “normal” work environments.

Work flexibility

Allowing investigators and others who are exposed to child pornography to have some flexibility is an important component in staying healthy. Try:

- Frequent breaks- no more than four hours at a time viewing images.
- Spreading large cases out over several days of viewing.
- Encouraging switching to other projects, which will allow professionals to get relief from viewing images and come back recharged and refreshed.
- Having an open-door policy that allows the employee to leave the unit without negative ramifications (i.e. decrease in rank, status, or pay).
- Asking professionals to stop viewing images at least one hour before going home.

Educating colleagues

Colleagues should learn that:

- Viewing of child sexual abuse images should be treated as serious, restricted and stressful.
- Trivialization or unnecessary interruption disrupts vital concentration.
- Respect for the job is important to professionals as well as the victims.
- Phrases like “kiddie porn” are unacceptable.

Mental Health Providers

A qualified mental health provider can provide useful assistance to supervisors as well as staff. He or she should provide:

- Recommendations for care for unit staff,
- Training regarding self-care and stress management,
- Education for supervisors, staff, family members and interested friends,
- Team cohesion exercises,
- One-one-one sessions for exposed individuals.

Choosing a Mental Health Provider

When choosing a mental health provider, it is imperative to find one who is not only qualified, but understands the unique trauma associated with exposure to child sexual abuse images. The provider should be able to develop trust with criminal justice professionals.

Finding a qualified provider may not be easy. In fact, only 15% of ICAC task forces surveyed said that their EAP was equipped to deal with work related exposure to child pornography. This is why it is essential to find a mental health provider who possesses the following:

- Understanding of the true nature and scope of child sexual abuse images,
- Experience in dealing with criminal justice professional trauma,
- Specialized training like SHIFT training for mental health professionals,
- The ability to develop trust with criminal justice professionals.

Summary

The work of professionals exposed to child sexual abuse images is intense, challenging and often heartrending. The enormous satisfaction and pride professionals and agencies experience when a local child is rescued or a prolific offender is incarcerated, however, more than make up for these difficulties.

By implementing these recommendations and guidelines, administrators and supervisors can provide a healthy environment for this urgent and life-saving service to the community. Just as vehicles require periodic maintenance, so do agencies and individuals. Periodically checking on the well-being of exposed individuals and implementing policies to assist them is an invaluable investment for supervisors and administrators. The results will be better trained, more resilient, committed and healthy staff.

Supporting Heroes in mental health Foundation Training (SHIFT)

For more information and training dates see: <http://SHIFTWellness.org>

SHIFT for Individuals Exposed to Child Pornography: This three-hour course team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer will offer professionals who are exposed to child pornography, and who may be required to interact with pedophiles on a regular basis, the opportunity to learn about the causes and symptoms of negative effects that may occur as a result of their duties. Participants will learn how to develop effective coping strategies. In addition the exposed individual will be given the tools to help facilitate a supportive work environment for themselves, effectively understand and utilize mental health support, and solicit support through and for their families and their peers.

SHIFT for Mental Health Professionals: This four-hour workshop team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer will offer mental health professionals insight into the challenges faced by professionals exposed to child pornography and other operations involving pedophiles. The course will cover how to help these professionals avoid vicarious traumatization, burnout and compassion fatigue. In addition, mental health professionals will learn how to gain the trust of criminal justice professionals, which techniques show promise in reducing the negative effects of exposure, and how they can help individuals build resiliency and balance in this very challenging field. This course offers not just education, but also tools that the mental health provider can immediately implement to assist frontline heroes in maintaining positive mental health.

SHIFT Train the Trainer: For those wishing to teach the course locally.