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SUCCESS STORY

Protecting Child Witnesses

Program aims to lessen fears, misperceptions child witnesses face



Photo: USAID/South Africa

Child witnesses in South Africa receive counseling and short- and long-term care in a program aimed to prepare them for testifying in court.

"This program has given me back my child. Her character has come back," said a mother interviewed after the pilot of a child witness protection preparation program in South Africa.

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At Cape Town's Vista University is the unit for Child Witness Research and Training, where Dr. Karen Muller, a lawyer and researcher, has devoted her career to the thousands of children who pass through South Africa's courts. With support from USAID, the unit has developed and piloted South Africa's first child witness preparation program.

By law, child testimony in South Africa must take place in a separate room and be broadcast on a closed-circuit TV system. Distraught children have access to an intermediary who simplifies complex questions. Most children endure the trial process alone. Extensive research, 500 interviews with young witnesses and consultative workshops with judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers and police have helped the unit gain an understanding of the fears and misperceptions that hamper children in the courtroom.

The unit developed a child witness preparation program for children ages six to twelve. Hour-long interactive sessions address a different topic every week. Games, visual tests and role playing exercises touch on everything from key role players in the courtroom to post-testimony procedure.

A trial test involving 11 children awaiting testimony in court was conducted with the Child Line Family Centre (a USAID-supported center for interventions with child abuse victims and child witnesses), to gauge the program's potential to empower and educate witnesses. Over sixteen weeks, the unit's staff worked with the children, introducing them to the courtroom and all of its procedures. The behavioral transformation among the children was beyond what anyone of the team had hoped: reticent children started to speak, interact, and participate, and fearful, abused children began to trust each other.

A mother best described the impact of the program, saying, "This program has given me back my child. Her character has come back."