Connect with the Kids’ Court School

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(520) 621-4158
KidsCourtSchool@cals.arizona.edu
http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/kids-court-school

The Kids’ Court School is a program of the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families, which is a research arm of the John and Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Arizona. The McClelland Institute serves as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary research on children, youth, and families with the goal of improving basic understanding to enhance the lives of the people of Arizona and the world.

“I personally felt that it really allowed the kids to address some of their hidden fears in terms of testifying.”
— Attorney Katy Hoying

“I just think it’s a great program, and it’s important to let more people know about it.”
— Parent Kim Lewis-McClellan, who signed up her eight-year-old son for the program

“It’s a nice way to take that edge off the unknown for both kids and parents.”
— Teresa Lowry, assistant district attorney over the family support, juvenile and child welfare divisions who started a policy of referring all child witnesses under the age of 13 to the program

From a 12/21/08 article by Carri Greer Thevenot in the Las Vegas Review Journal entitled “Kids have their day in court.”
The Challenge


Whatever the reason, a courtroom experience can be traumatizing for children and teens. Evidence suggests that the Kids’ Court School can decrease their court-related stress and increase their credibility as witnesses — helping youth be effective when they take the stand.

Professionals and parents who refer youth to this unique program can be confident that the curriculum is not only evidence-based and effective, it is standardized so that parties on all sides of a case know exactly what youth participants are hearing and learning.

The Kids’ Court School was established by Rebecca Nathanson, Ph.D., in the Boyd School of Law at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2003 and is now part of the Frances McClelland Institute at the University of Arizona as well.

The program has gained national attention as a model for child witness education. The Kids’ Court School is the only program of its kind in Arizona.

The Research

Effects of the Courtroom on Children’s Memory and Anxiety

Results of this study conducted by Drs. Nathanson and Karen Saywitz (2003) revealed that when children were interviewed in a courtroom (versus a small private room) about a past event, they recalled less than half of the amount of information than children interviewed in a small private room. Moreover, analysis of children’s anxiety revealed that children interviewed in the small room demonstrated heart rates that ranged from 60–120 beats per minute, whereas children interviewed in the courtroom had heart rates ranging from 60–240 beats per minute — indicative of a significant stress response.

Effects of the Kids’ Court School on Children’s Court-Related Anxiety

A primary Kids’ Court School goal is to reduce the potentially traumatic effects of the courtroom on children. A study conducted by Dr. Nathanson (2010) examined the effects of the program on children’s court-related stress. Analyses revealed that participation in the Kids’ Court School significantly reduces children’s anxiety about participating in the judicial process.

The Program

Kids’ Court School can help maximize the capabilities of youth witnesses.

The first of two one-hour sessions addresses the pretrial and trial processes; Kids’ Court students are then introduced to the roles and functions of the courtroom participants. Stress reduction is the focus of the second session; youth learn breathing techniques and positive self talk as coping skills to reduce anxiety while testifying. The ideas and concepts presented throughout the curriculum are then reviewed and the program concludes with a mock trial.

Eligibility: Any young person from 4 to 17 years of age who is scheduled to appear in court may participate in the Kids’ Court School. The program is free-of-charge.

When & Where: Participants attend two one-hour sessions, which are conducted at the James E. Rogers College of Law at the University of Arizona, 1201 E. Speedway Blvd. (NW corner of Speedway and Mountain). For more information about weekly dates and times, go to http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/kids-court-school

The Founder

Rebecca Nathanson, Ph.D., is collaborating with other professionals and faculty at the McClelland Institute and the UA’s James E. Rogers College of Law to establish Pima County’s first Kids’ Court School. She also is the James E. Rogers Professor of Education and Law at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Dr. Nathanson received her doctoral degree in special education from the University of California at Santa Barbara and her training in the area of children’s testimony as a research fellow at the UCLA School of Medicine. She has merged her training in these areas and developed a research focus that examines the capabilities and limitations of child witnesses with and without disabilities.