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SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN U.S. LEGAL PROCEEDINGS:

Descriptive and Attitudinal Data From a National Survey of Victim/Witness Assistants

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Abstract

We conducted a national survey of 786 victim/witness assistants (VWAs) to provide descriptive and attitudinal information about support person use in U.S. legal proceedings involving children. VWAs ($N = 414$) from 46 states returned completed surveys (response rate = 53%). Prosecutor-based VWAs or parents/guardians most frequently served as support persons. One support person was almost always or often used with child victims and/or witnesses of all ages. Support persons were extremely common in cases involving child sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and adult domestic violence. Overall, support persons provided more informational than emotional support. The most common informational support was to provide referrals to community resources, conduct courtroom visit/orientation, and disseminate relevant procedural information. The most common emotional support was to accompany the child to trial. Support persons rarely or never questioned children directly during investigative interviews or in court. Respondents believed support persons decrease children's stress and increase accuracy and credibility; however, this effect varied as a function of who provided support, child age, case type, and type of emotional or informational support. Respondents believed that support person presence at trial probably does not prejudice jurors against defendants. These survey data provide a benchmark for legal professionals and a foundation for future social scientific research examining the effects of support person use on children.

Keywords

support persons; victim/witness assistants; alternative testimony; child witness

Children come into contact with the legal system for a variety of reasons, the most common of which is maltreatment. In 2009 alone, an estimated 763,000 children were victims of child abuse or neglect, resulting in a victimization rate of 10.1 per 1,000 children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Children participate in cases unrelated to maltreatment as well. For example, every state allows judges to consider children's wishes when making custody determinations after divorce (Crosby-Currie, 1996), and judges frequently interview children about their preferred living arrangements (Felner, Terre, Farber, Primavera, & Bishop, 1985; Jones, 1984). Children also may be called to testify in cases involving adult domestic violence or other crimes they have witnessed. No matter how children become involved in the legal system, they must participate actively and effectively to ensure that justice is served for all parties involved.

Several barriers to children's active and effective participation in legal proceedings exist, including the stress associated with multiple interviews containing complex vocabulary and

exposure to unfamiliar personnel and procedures (Quas, Wallin, Horwitz, Davis, & Lyon, 2009; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990; Tedesco & Schnell, 1987). In criminal cases, children consistently cite the fear of confronting the accused as the most intimidating aspect of legal involvement (Goodman et al., 1992; Sas, 1993). These barriers are detrimental not only in that they discourage children's reporting and discussion of events such as maltreatment, but also because they can compromise the quality of children's reports (Goodman et al., 1998; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993).

Evidentiary and Procedural Innovations in Legal Proceedings Involving Children

Various evidentiary and procedural innovations have been introduced during the past two decades in the United States and abroad to overcome the barriers associated with children's participation in legal proceedings, including the use of hearsay exceptions, videotaped testimony, and closed-circuit television or CCTV (Hall & Sales, 2008; McAuliff & Kovera, 2002; Sandler, 2006). Although children's videotaped and CCTV testimony is more common in England (Davies & Noon, 1991; Davies, Wilson, Mitchell, & Milsom, 1995), Scotland (Murray, 1995), and Australia (Cashmore, 1992), these innovations are used infrequently in U.S. courts (Hafemeister, 1996; Goodman, Quas, Bulkley, & Shapiro, 1999; Sigler, Crowley, & Johnson, 1990). A notable exception to this general trend in the United States is the use of support persons. Forty-one percent of state trial court judges reported allowing a child to testify while on an adult's lap (Hafemeister, 1996) and more than 90% of prosecutors in a national survey indicated always or frequently using a support person with children (Goodman et al., 1999). Prosecutors also believed that the presence of a support person in court was especially useful at reducing children's trauma, but somewhat less useful at enhancing guilty outcomes in cases.

Previous research has helped determine what innovative procedures are used with children and how they are viewed by legal professionals. Although informative, those surveys were limited in that they contained questions about a wide variety of innovations. The extreme variability from one procedure to the next (e.g., CCTV vs. hearsay testimony) and obvious length limitations made it difficult to ask specific questions about each innovative procedure in a uniform manner. In this sense, breadth of coverage was achieved at the expense of depth. To overcome this limitation, we designed a survey that focused exclusively on one of the most commonly used innovations with children in court: support persons. The primary goal of the survey was to expand our understanding of this procedure by asking a select group of individuals who work with children in U.S. legal settings (victim/witness assistants or VWAs) a greater number of more specific, detailed questions about their experiences with support person use. Who typically serves as support persons, and in what ways do they provide support? In what types of cases is support person use common, and at what stages do they become involved? What are the perceived effects of support person use on children's stress, accuracy, and credibility?

We believe that answers to these questions will have important implications for professionals and social scientists who work with child victims. Our survey data will provide a benchmark to which VWA units can compare and contrast their individual support person programs, enabling them to identify both strengths and weaknesses in the services they currently provide to children. With respect to social scientists, our survey data will serve as a critical first step in developing a research program to experimentally examine the effects of support person use on children's stress, accuracy, and credibility. Knowing how support persons are used and believed to affect children in actual cases is a must for designing ecologically valid laboratory experiments.

A Closer Look at the Role of Support Persons in Legal Proceedings Involving Children

Both federal and state legislation in the United States permit the appointment of support persons in various legal proceedings involving children. In December 2010, President Obama signed a 5-year reauthorization of the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which requires all states receiving federal funds for the prevention of child abuse and neglect to provide support persons for children involved in child welfare cases. Title 18, Section 3509 of the United States Code declares that “a child testifying at or attending a judicial proceeding shall have the right to be accompanied by an adult attendant to provide emotional support.” At least 47 states and several U.S. territories (Guam, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands) permit the use of support persons with children (National District Attorneys Association, 2010), although some states specify support person use only in statutes pertaining to other accommodations such as CCTV or videotape testimony (e.g., Alaska, Indiana, Kansas).

Trial judges have a fair amount of discretion when determining whether a support person should be allowed or who is qualified to serve as a support person. In some states, the support person is an attorney appointed by the state to represent the child’s interests (guardian *ad litem*), whereas in other states a friend, family member, therapist, staff member, or any individual who contributes to the welfare and well-being of the child can serve as a support person. The support person may or may not be allowed to testify as a witness in the case (e.g., Minnesota and Arizona, respectively), and some states require that notice of intent to use a named support person be filed and served to all parties in the proceeding (e.g., Michigan). State statutes also vary in the degree to which they specify the exact nature of the support person’s role in the trial proceedings. Some states, such as Missouri, restrict the level of communication between the support person and the child during testimony. Other states, such as Idaho and California, specify that the support person can accompany the child witness to the stand or remain in close proximity to the child during his or her testimony, and still others specify that the support person cannot obscure the view of the child from the defendant or fact finders (e.g., Connecticut, Missouri).

Support person use outside the United States varies considerably as well. In Canada, a “designated support person” is someone who is appointed by the judge to sit or stand close to a witness younger than 18 years old while he or she testifies (§486.1, Criminal Code of Canada). The law does not restrict the type of eligible offense or who may serve as the designated support person. However, support persons are not allowed to talk to children about their testimony or to communicate verbally or nonverbally with the child on the witness stand, even if the child looks at or poses questions to the support person (Cunningham & Hurley, 2007). An evaluation of child witness support procedures in Scotland found that only certain categories of witnesses received support (primarily young sexual assault victims) and that the responsibilities for support persons were poorly defined (Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 2000). Legal professionals were concerned that support person use and preparation might undermine children’s believability in the eyes of jurors by making it easier for the defense to claim their testimony was the product of coaching and talking to adults about the case.

Overview

Our review of legislation and case law on support person use with children revealed considerable variation in who may serve as support persons (parents, family members, friends, therapists, staff members, guardians *ad litem*), in what types of cases (abuse, neglect, support, custody), at what stages (investigation, trial), and in what ways they

support child victims (accompanying the child during an investigative interview, sitting next to the child in court, providing relevant procedural information). Legal professionals believe that support persons can benefit children by reducing trauma, but also that they may undermine children's credibility at trial.

Given the lack of previous research on this topic, our survey was largely exploratory in nature. We formed six preliminary hypotheses based on the general trends that we observed in our review of relevant legislation and case law. We predicted that (1) VWAs and nonoffending parents would serve as support persons more frequently than other individuals; (2) support person use would be more common with younger versus older children; (3) support persons would be used more frequently with child victims and/or witnesses than those accused of crimes; (4) support person use would be more common in cases involving child physical or sexual abuse compared with other types of cases; (5) support persons would provide children emotional support more frequently than informational support; and (6) VWAs would believe that support persons decrease stress and increase accuracy and credibility, but this effect would vary as a function of who provides support, child age, case type, and type of emotional or informational support.

Method

Respondents

We sent 786 surveys to VWA programs in 700 offices nationwide. An initial list of programs that included the names and contact information of staff members was provided by the American Prosecutors Research Institute. A team of research assistants subsequently verified and updated the list via telephone. Any additional names and contacts obtained were added to the existing list to create the final database of target respondents.

VWAs ($N = 414$) from 46 states returned completed surveys, for a response rate of 53%. This response rate is similar to other national surveys involving the use of innovations with child witnesses (e.g., 52%; Goodman et al., 1999). Ninety-eight respondents (13%) declined to participate, and 274 (35%) did not respond whatsoever. Looking more closely at the VWAs who responded but chose not to participate, most did not provide a reason for their decision (42%); however, 22% declined because their units did not work with children, 14% were too busy, 12% were not interested in the research, and 3% worked in units that had policies prohibiting research participation. The demographic characteristics of the final sample and intercorrelations are summarized in Table 1. Controlling for population size, jurisdictions with more full-time prosecutors were associated with larger VWA units that were assigned more cases generally and more cases involving children specifically. Larger VWA units were associated with more victim/witness volunteers, as well as more cases overall and more cases involving children. Finally, larger caseloads overall were associated with more cases involving children. The sources and percentages of case referrals appear in Table 2.

Our ability to examine demographic differences between respondents and nonrespondents was limited because only respondents completed this section of the survey. We used 2006 census data to determine the average population for each group and compared them using the nonparametric Mann–Whitney test, which failed to reach traditional levels of statistical significance ($W_s = 67404.00$, $p = .37$). We also divided the population data into quartiles, and the frequency of observed versus predicted responses across the four population groups did not significantly differ, $\chi^2(3, N = 786) = 0.68$, $p = .88$, $\Phi = .03$. From the smallest to the largest population quartile, the frequencies of observed responses were 132, 128, 125, and 127. If certain demographic characteristics such as unit size and caseload are related to the size of the population the unit serves, the observed lack of differences on this variable

increases our confidence that respondents versus nonrespondents failed to differ in other important ways.

Survey Instrument

The survey was three pages long and included 16 multipart questions divided into three sections. The first section included two key measures (frequency of support person use and perceived effects of support person use) that were repeated across five different predictor variables: source of support, victim/witness age, type of case, type of emotional support, and type of informational support. Each predictor variable was broken down into different levels (e.g., source of support: VWA unit staff, parent/guardian, social worker, other relative, guardian *ad litem*, court-appointed special advocate). Respondents indicated on Likert scales how frequently they used support persons (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*) and the perceived effects of support person use on victim/witness stress, accuracy, and credibility (1 = *decrease*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *increase*) for each level of every predictor variable.

The second section included open-ended questions focusing on examples and experiences involving support person use. We asked VWAs to provide specific examples of emotional and informational support they had encountered, and to describe any negative effects of support person use they had experienced. Respondents also estimated the total amount of time a support person usually spends with a child.

The third and final section of our survey gathered additional descriptive and demographic information. We asked VWAs how often none, one, or more than one support person is assigned per child in their unit and how often support persons question children during investigative interviews or in court (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*, for both items). We asked whether juveniles accused of a crime would benefit from support person use, and whether the presence of a support person at trial prejudices jurors against defendants (1 = *definitely no*, 2 = *probably no*, 3 = *unsure*, 4 = *probably yes*, 5 = *definitely yes*, for both items). The survey ended by asking each respondent his or her position title, name of program or unit, whether the program was prosecutor-based, office location, number of full- and part-time prosecutors in jurisdiction, number of staff in unit, total number of cases assigned in 2005, total number of cases involving children assigned in 2005, and a checklist of 10 possible sources of case referrals.

Procedure

We adapted several procedures from the Tailored Design Method of survey research (Dillman, 2000) to increase our response rate. These procedures included an introductory letter, multiple mailings at predetermined time intervals for 9 weeks, follow-up postcards and phone calls, and letters of endorsement from the director of the American Prosecutors Research Institute's Child Abuse Program and the director of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law.

VWAs who responded to our survey read a brief set of instructions explaining that we were interested in learning about their experiences involving the use of support persons with victims and witnesses, particularly children. Definitions of *support person* ("an individual designated to directly assist a victim or witness with his or her involvement in the legal system") and *children* ("individuals less than 18 years old") were also provided. Respondents were asked to read each question carefully and fill in the blank, check the box, or circle the number that best reflected their answer.

Results

We examined the first five hypotheses using a series of general linear mixed model one-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to determine whether frequency of support person use varied as a function of the different levels of the predictor variables in our survey. See Table 3 for all means, standard deviations, univariate effects, Tukey's honestly significant differences (HSD) follow-up comparisons, and effect size estimates (reported as ω^2).

Hypothesis 1: VWAs and Nonoffending Parents Would Serve as Support Persons More Frequently Than Other Individuals

VWA unit staff *always* or *often* served as support persons and did so more frequently than any other individual, followed by parents/guardians (*often* or *sometimes*). Court-appointed special advocates (CASAs) served as support persons the least frequently (*rarely* or *sometimes*), followed by guardians *ad litem*. Falling between these extremes were other relatives and social workers, who served as support persons less frequently than unit staff members and parents/guardians and more frequently than CASAs and guardians *ad litem*.

Hypothesis 2: Support Person Use Would Be More Common With Younger Versus Older Children

Support persons were *always* or *often* used with children of all ages; however, support person use was the least common with children 3 years old or younger. Support persons were used more frequently with 4- to 7-year-olds compared with children 3 years old or younger, but less frequently than all three remaining age groups.

Hypothesis 3: Support Person Use Would Be More Common With Child Victims and Witnesses Versus the Accused

Support persons were *always* or *often* used with child victims, victim/witnesses, and witnesses in descending order. Support persons were *rarely* or *never* used with children accused of crimes or delinquency.

Hypothesis 4: Support Person Use Would Be More Common in Cases Involving Child Physical or Sexual Abuse Compared With Other Cases

In decreasing order of frequency, support persons were *always* or *often* used in cases involving child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, and adult domestic violence; *often* or *sometimes* used in child neglect cases; and *rarely* or *never* used in divorce/custody cases.

Hypothesis 5: Support Persons Would Provide Emotional Support More Frequently Than Informational Support

We created a general support type predictor variable that consisted of separate composite scores for frequency of support person use collapsed across all levels of emotional (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$) and informational support (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). On average, informational support (*often*) was provided more frequently than emotional support (*sometimes*). We also were interested in examining what types of support were most common within each of the emotional and informational support categories.

Are some types of emotional support more common than others?—The most common form of emotional support was *always* or *often* accompanying the child during the actual trial. The next two most common forms of emotional support were to comfort the child and accompany pretrial preparation of the child by attorney. The two least common forms of emotional support provided were to accompany the child to a medical exam and to

accompany the police on a call for service (*rarely* or *never*). Accompanying the child during investigative interviews, during grand jury testimony, and sitting next to the child during testimony fell at the midpoint of the scale. These types of emotional support were used less than the four most common types of emotional support and more than the two least common types. Respondents indicated they *often* accompanied the child during preliminary hearings.

Are some types of informational support more common than others?—The most common forms of informational support were to provide referrals to community resources, conduct courtroom visit or orientation, and to provide the child relevant procedural information (*always* or *often*). Respondents reported that support persons *often* or *sometimes* conduct the pretrial preparation of the child or help the child prepare a victim impact statement.

In their own words, what types of emotional and informational support do VWAs report are used with children?—The qualitative data from the two open-ended questions asking for specific examples of emotional and informational support were coded independently by two raters blind to the study's hypotheses. Of the total respondents, 309 VWAs (75%) provided examples of emotional and/or informational support, 121 respondents (29%) indicated they had experienced negative effects of support person use, and 104 provided examples. After reading all responses, we developed a coding scheme to identify specific types of emotional support, informational support, and negative effects of support person use. Cohen's kappa was used to assess interrater reliability, and values ranged from .63 to .93 for all items. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved between raters. See Table 4 for descriptions of the coding scheme definitions, examples, percentages, and Cohen's kappa values for the different types of emotional and informational support.

Consistent with the results from the quantitative data, VWAs' self-reports indicated that informational support was more common than emotional support. In order of decreasing frequency, VWAs reported the following types of informational support: giving a procedural overview of the legal system and its players, using "child-friendly" communication skills or materials, and physically orienting the child to the courtroom. With respect to emotional support, VWAs reported that support persons engage in distraction, validation, rapport building, and physical contact.

Hypothesis 6: VWAs Would Believe That Support Persons Decrease Stress and Increase Accuracy and Credibility, but This Effect Would Vary as a Function of Who Provides Support, Child Age, Case Type, and Type of Emotional or Informational Support

The sixth hypothesis required a series of general linear mixed model two-way repeated measures ANOVAs to determine whether the perceived effects of support person use (stress, accuracy, and credibility) varied as a function of who provided support, child age, case type, and type of emotional or informational support. We created a general support type predictor variable that consisted of composite scores for perceived stress, accuracy, and credibility collapsed across the different levels of emotional support (Cronbach's alphas = .94, .94, .93, respectively) and informational support (Cronbach's alphas = .96, .94, .95, respectively). As hypothesized, there was a statistically significant main effect of perceived effects of support for every predictor variable (see Table 5 for all main effects, interaction effects, and effect size estimates). VWAs believed support persons decrease stress and increase accuracy and credibility (see Table 6 for means, standard deviations, and Tukey's HSD follow-up comparisons). However, this main effect was qualified by a statistically significant Predictor Variable $\times$ Perceived Effects of Support interaction for every predictor variable except general support type. For these interactions, we describe the simple main effects of each

predictor variable within each level of perceived effects of support (see Table 7 for means, standard deviations, and Tukey's HSD follow-up comparisons).

Individual type—Respondents believed that VWA unit staff were the most effective at reducing stress, followed by social workers and CASAs. These three means differed from parents/guardians and other relatives, who were seen as having a more neutral effect on stress. Falling between these two groups of individuals was guardians *ad litem*, whose perceived ability to reduce stress did not differ from social workers, CASAs, or other relatives, but was lower than VWA unit staff and higher than parent/guardians. A similar but slightly different pattern emerged for the perceived effects of support on accuracy. Respondents reported that VWA unit staff increased accuracy more than any other support person except for social workers and that parent/guardians and other relatives increased accuracy the least. These two pairs of means were significantly different from one another. The only difference observed for CASAs and guardians *ad litem* was that they increased accuracy less than VWA unit staff. Finally, respondents indicated that support person use increased credibility no matter who was providing support; however, the positive effects were greatest for VWA unit staff compared with all other individuals. Across all three dependent measures, over one third and nearly one half of respondents marked “not applicable” for guardians *ad litem* and CASAs serving as support persons, respectively.

Child age—Respondents believed that support person use decreased stress the most for the three oldest age groups (8–12 years old, 13–17, 18 and up) compared with the youngest age group (0–3 years old). The difference between children ages 4–7 and any other age group was not statistically significant. An identical pattern of differences emerged for accuracy and credibility with only one exception: For accuracy, respondents indicated that all four older age groups benefited from support person use more than 0- to 3-year-olds. Nearly one third of respondents selected “not applicable” for support person use with the 0- to 3-years-old age group for the stress, accuracy, and credibility dependent measures.

Case type—For reducing stress, respondents indicated that support persons were more effective in child sexual abuse cases compared with child neglect and divorce/custody cases. With respect to accuracy, support person use was believed to increase accuracy more in child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, and divorce/custody cases compared with child neglect cases. For credibility, the only statistically significant difference was that respondents believed that support person use increased witness credibility more in child sexual abuse cases than child neglect cases. Across all three dependent measures, nearly two thirds of respondents marked “not applicable” for support person use in divorce/custody cases.

Emotional support—Respondents reported that accompanying the child to trial and comforting the child reduced stress more than accompanying the child to a medical examination. With respect to accuracy, respondents indicated that accompanying the child to trial, accompanying the child during pretrial preparation, and comforting the child increased accuracy the most, and that sitting next to the child during testimony, accompanying the police on a call to service, and accompanying the child to a medical exam increased accuracy the least. Ratings for accompanying the child during preliminary hearing or grand jury testimony fell between these two extremes. The effects of accompanying the child during the investigative interview on accuracy did not differ from any other type of emotional support. Finally, the four types of emotional support that increased credibility the most were comforting the child and accompanying the child's pretrial preparation, preliminary hearing, and trial. The three types of emotional support believed to increase credibility the least were sitting next to the child during trial, accompanying the police on a

service call, and accompanying the child to a medical exam. Accompanying the child during an investigative interview and grand jury testimony did not differ from any other mean at a statistically significant level. A high percentage of “not applicable” responses were observed for several of the emotional support items (approximately 50% for accompanying the child during grand jury testimony and nearly 60% for accompanying the police on call for service and accompanying the child to a medical exam).

Informational support—Respondents reported that courtroom visit/orientation, providing relevant procedural information, and conducting the pretrial preparation of the child decreased stress more than helping the child prepare a victim impact statement. Providing referrals to community resources reduced stress less than courtroom visit/orientation. With respect to accuracy and credibility, respondents indicated that a courtroom visit/orientation increased accuracy and credibility more than providing referrals to community resources.

Negative Effects of Support Person Use, Questioning Children, Prejudice Against Defendants, and Potential Benefits to Juveniles Accused of Crimes or Delinquency

Given the exploratory nature of our survey, we did not develop specific hypotheses for every survey item. Nevertheless, VWAs’ response on five remaining questions should be of interest to readers. When asked what types of negative effects they had experienced with support person use, many of the problems VWAs reported involved parents. In descending order, these negative effects included parents generally, uncooperative children, parents increased stress, parents interfered, inadequate services, nonstaff issues, defense allegations of improper influence, and overly confident child. See Table 8 for descriptions of the coding scheme definitions, examples, percentages, and Cohen’s kappa values for the different types of negative experiences. Respondents indicated that each child was *always* or *often* assigned one support person ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.90$, $n = 349$), and that support persons *rarely* or *never* questioned children during an investigative interview ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.03$, $n = 376$) or in court ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 373$). VWAs believed that the presence of a support person at trial probably does not prejudice jurors against a defendant ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 360$), and that a juvenile accused of a crime or delinquency probably would benefit from support person use ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.80$, $n = 379$).

Discussion

Do Some Individuals Serve as Support Persons More Frequently Than Others?

Our first hypothesis predicted that VWAs and nonoffending parents would be the most common support persons used with children, and this indeed was the case. Respondents reported that VWAs *always* or *often* served as support persons and that parents *often* or *sometimes* served as support persons too. Although this result is not particularly surprising in light of our respondent sample (recall that we targeted VWA units because they work with children), the frequency of parents serving as support persons warrants further discussion. In one sense, this finding is reassuring because higher levels of parental support have been associated with positive outcomes in actual child abuse proceedings (Goodman et al., 1992; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; Quas et al., 2005; Sas, 1991, 1993; Whitcomb et al., 1991). Moreover, healthy parental attachment styles (low avoidance and anxiety) have been associated with children’s decreased stress and improved memory performance for painful medical procedures (Alexander et al., 2002; Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberger, & Kuhn, 1997; Quas et al., 1999). Serving as a support person may place the parent in a better position to maintain preexisting levels of parental support and attachment compared with other individuals. This positive outcome, however, assumes that children’s pre-existing level of parental support or attachment style is in fact healthy. If not, parents serving as support persons may have undesirable effects on children’s well-being and

testimony, particularly in cases that involve potentially negative ramifications for the parent such as public humiliation, loss of a significant other to incarceration, reduced family income, or removal of the child from the home (see, e.g., Pintello & Zuravin, 2001).

The finding that guardians *ad litem* and CASAs served as support persons the least frequently of all groups may reflect role-related differences between these individuals and support persons. Guardians *ad litem* are attorneys assigned to represent the “best interests” of children involved in the child protection system, and CASAs are trained community volunteers who provide a voice for children in court by gathering information and submitting a formal recommendation to the judge (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Undoubtedly, these individuals, much like VWAs, provide emotional and informational support to the children with whom they work. However, this support is secondary in that it is provided while serving some other function for the court, whereas the primary role of a support person is just that: to support the child. The fact that guardians *ad litem* and CASAs reportedly serve as support persons less frequently may also be a function of our respondent sample (VWAs who primarily worked in prosecutor-based units) and the type of cases they commonly assist with (criminal vs. family or dependency court).

Does the Frequency of Support Person Use Vary by Age?

Our second hypothesis predicted that support person use would be more common with younger compared with older children. This hypothesis was not supported. Although support persons were used frequently for all age groups, they were less common in cases involving children 0–3 and 4–7 years old. The increased use of support persons with older children is encouraging when we consider research on children’s immediate and long-term reactions to testifying in criminal child abuse proceedings. Goodman et al. (1992) observed that older children were more anxious about having to testify and were more emotional in court than were younger children. Even when children did not actually testify, those who were older reported feeling more negatively about being at the courthouse compared with younger children. The Quas et al. (2005) follow-up study with the same children 12 years later revealed that these negative emotional reactions were related to subsequent impairments in mental health. Based on those findings, the increased use of support person with older children seems appropriate. At the same time, however, Goodman et al. observed that younger children were more likely to encounter adverse legal experiences such as repeated continuances, lack of maternal support, lack of corroborative evidence, the defendant being acquitted or case being dropped, and having to testify repeatedly compared with older children. These difficulties, combined with younger children’s more limited knowledge of court-related terminology, roles, and processes (Cooper, Wallin, Quas, & Lyon, 2010; Flin, Stevenson, & Davies, 1989; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Comparo, 1990; Warren-Leubecker, Tate, Hinton, & Ozbeck, 1989), make an equally strong argument for always or often using support persons with younger children as well as older children.

Does Support Person Use Vary by Child Status?

Dramatic differences emerged in the reported use of support persons with children who were victims, witnesses, or accused of crimes/delinquency. Child victims were supported more frequently than witnesses, both of whom were *always* or *often* accompanied by support persons. In stark contrast, however, support persons were *rarely* or *never* used in cases involving children accused of criminal or delinquent behavior. Perhaps this finding is not particularly surprising given that the majority of our respondents worked in prosecutor-based units (91%). Yet, if this finding reflects a system- rather than unit-based trend, it illustrates an intriguing paradox in the willingness of legal professionals to accommodate children who have allegedly been victimized versus those who have allegedly victimized others. If the rationale underlying support person use with child victims is to decrease stress

and increase accuracy (and our attitudinal data indicate that this is so), might child defendants benefit from the use of support persons as well? VWAs in our survey believed so, and this proposition seems only logical and fair in a legal system in which defendants of all ages are presumed innocent until proven otherwise and during a time when increasing numbers of juvenile offenders are waived to adult criminal court.

Does the Frequency of Support Person Use Vary by Case Type?

Our survey revealed that support persons were *always* or *often* used in cases involving child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, and adult domestic violence; *sometimes* or *often* used in child neglect cases; and *rarely* or *never* used in divorce/custody proceedings. Ample research has shown that children's participation in sexual abuse cases can be extremely stressful, particularly because this experience often involves directly confronting the alleged perpetrator of abuse in court (Doueck, Weston, Filbert, Beekhuis, & Redlich, 1997; Goodman et al., 1992; Gutman, Tonge, King, Myerson, & Wollner, 2001; Oats & Tong, 1987; Sas, 1991). With this in mind, always or often providing support persons for victims in sexual and/or physical abuse cases makes sense.

The less frequent use of support persons in child neglect and divorce/custody proceedings could be the result of several factors. Cases involving child abuse or adult domestic violence are tried in criminal court, whereas child neglect and divorce/custody cases are tried in civil court. Criminal and civil cases involving children differ on a variety of dimensions that may impact the perceived need for support person use, including their mandates (determine defendant guilt vs. the child's best interest), burden of proof (beyond a reasonable doubt vs. preponderance of the evidence), decision maker (jury vs. judge), and evidentiary rules and procedures (presence or absence of cross-examination, questioning by opposing counsel vs. judge, testimony on the stand vs. in judges' chambers, open vs. closed courtroom). These differences essentially result in a more "child-friendly" environment in civil court compared with criminal court and may reduce the perceived need for (and hence actual presence of) support persons in these types of cases.

At the same time, we must remember that even the more child-friendly environment in civil court may not be entirely devoid of stress from the child's perspective. Children involved in dependency court hearings were anxious about their appearances and harbored negative attitudes toward their case involvement (Quas et al., 2009). Guardians *ad litem* in another study reported that children whose parents experienced an acrimonious divorce involving conflict over custody and visitation were extremely emotionally distressed by the process (Ayoub, Deutsch, & Maraganore, 1999). Finally, deficits in children's understanding of legal terminology, roles, and processes are not exclusively limited to criminal proceedings. Quas et al. (2009) and Cooper et al. (2010) observed that children involved in dependency court did not sufficiently understand the identity or function of key legal personnel and often had difficulty comprehending decisions made during their dependency court hearings. Similarly, a qualitative study of children whose parents were divorcing concluded that children rarely had a developmentally appropriate understanding of what the divorce process entailed and provided widely disparate definitions of lawyers and judges (Pruett & Pruett, 1999). When taken as a whole, these studies of children's stress and comprehension in civil cases suggest that support persons may be underutilized in child neglect and divorce/custody proceedings.

Is Emotional Support More Common Than Informational Support?

Our fifth hypothesis predicted that support persons would provide children emotional support more often than informational support. This hypothesis was not supported by our quantitative or qualitative data: Informational support was more common than emotional

support. From a practical standpoint, this finding is understandable because it is easier to standardize and administer many types of the informational support used by VWAs (procedural information, community referrals, courtroom visit) compared with emotional support, which requires a more tailored response that is sensitive to the needs and circumstances of each child victim. Supporting children by providing information also requires less specialized training compared with emotional support and may be less redundant with the services provided by other individuals involved in the legal process such as social workers, counselors, or clinicians. Providing informational support is also consistent with empirical research documenting deficits in children's understanding of legal terminology, roles, and processes (Cooper et al., 2010; Crawford & Bull, 2006; Flin et al., 1989; Freshwater & Aldridge, 1994; Saywitz et al., 1990; Warren-Leubecker et al., 1989) and studies indicating that such deficits are related to increased levels of stress for children participating in legal contexts (Goodman et al., 1998; Quas et al., 2009).

Two concerns with respect to the increased frequency of informational versus emotional support should be mentioned. Although it may be true that informational support requires less individualized tailoring than emotional support, support persons must avoid a "one size fits all" approach by striving for accuracy when assessing the information levels of the children with whom they work. Research has shown at least one other professional group that routinely works with children (guardians *ad litem*) tends to overestimate children's court-related knowledge in family court proceedings (Eltringham & Aldridge, 2000). Support persons must be careful not to succumb to this same tendency because doing so may result in the failure to provide child victims the information they truly need. Finally, without equating less emotional support to the complete absence of emotional support, we would like readers to recall that the primary fear cited by children testifying in criminal abuse proceedings is having to confront the alleged perpetrator (Goodman et al., 1992; Sas, 1991). Disproportionately emphasizing informational support (touring the courtroom, providing procedural details) over emotional support (accompanying the child during trial testimony, sitting next to the child) may not be the most effective way to combat children's confrontation-related stress.

Even differences between certain types of emotional support could have important implications for children in court. Our data revealed that support persons are much more likely to accompany children to court than to sit next to them during testimony. Such a strategy might minimize the anticipated negative effects of support person use on jurors' perceptions (i.e., that the child is coached or unable to testify without being coaxed by an adult), but at the same time we must be mindful of the potential effects of support person proximity on children's stress and accuracy. Should future research demonstrate that children benefit more from a support person sitting next to them on the witness stand versus simply being in the courtroom, we should explore other alternatives, such as judicial instructions, expert testimony, or attorneys' closing arguments, that might mitigate the negative, indirect, and unintended consequences of support person use on jurors' perceptions.

What Factors Influence VWAs' Beliefs About the Effects of Support on Stress, Accuracy, and Credibility?

Our final hypothesis was that VWAs would believe support person use decreases stress and increases accuracy and credibility, but that the predictor variables in our survey would moderate this effect. The data supported our hypothesis, and all but one predictor variable (general support type) influenced the pattern of effects across stress, accuracy, and credibility. It is reassuring to see that there was remarkable consistency between the frequency of support person use and perceived effects of support responses. Generally

speaking, the most frequently used types of support were perceived to be the most (or one of the most) effective at reducing stress and enhancing accuracy and credibility. Examples include VWA unit staff, children from the three oldest age groups, child sexual abuse cases, and accompanying the child to trial. One might be tempted to conclude that these forms of support are used most frequently *because* they are the most effective; however, we do not know whether one variable affects the other (causation) or whether the two variables simply covary (correlation). Similarly, although it may be true that these forms of support are used most frequently because they are the most effective, the reverse may also be true: VWAs believe these forms of support are most effective because they are used most frequently.

One notable exception to the general trend between frequency of use and perceived effects of support was that respondents rated parents/guardians the second highest in frequency of support person use (*often* or *sometimes*) but the least effective at reducing children's stress and enhancing their accuracy and credibility. When considering this paradox, it is instructive to recall VWAs' responses to the open-ended question asking whether they ever had experienced negative effects of support person use and to provide details. Parents were the mostly commonly reported problem, with almost half of respondents describing negative experiences involving parents. Examining these descriptions more closely, we see that respondents identified several parent-related sources of stress, including children's reluctance to discuss abuse details in front of their parents, children's sensitivity to parental expectations regarding their testimony performance, and the fact that a parent's own stress can exacerbate that of the child. VWAs also reported that parents sometimes pressure children to not disclose abuse or to recant previous disclosures and that they may try to coach children's testimony in ways that hinder children's accuracy and credibility.

Whether parents/guardians who serve as support persons help or impair child maltreatment victims (and why) remain unanswered empirical questions because no study to date has systematically varied the presence of support or the identity of the support person. Only two correlational studies have examined support person use and yielded somewhat conflicting results: Support person use was associated with positive outcomes for child victims (decreased stress, increased consistency) in a study by Goodman et al. (1992); yet, researchers in a second study observed that children's responses were shorter and less detailed when given in the presence of a support person (Santila, Korkman, & Sandnabba, 2004).

Experiments in other related fields of inquiry, such as the effects of parental presence on children's reactions to medical procedures, have yielded mixed results as well. Researchers in an early study found that children 4 – 6 and 7–10 years old who were randomly assigned to condition cried more before a venal puncture blood test when their mothers were present versus seated outside in the waiting room (Gross, Stern, Levin, Dale, & Wojnilower, 1983). No differences on any other measures in the study (crying during the blood test, attempts to escape, acts of resistance, or acts of aggression) emerged. Piira, Sugiura, Champion, Donnelly, and Cole (2005) systematically reviewed this literature and found that most studies reported no significant differences in children's distress as a function of parental presence or absence. Moreover, many of the studies reporting positive effects were "less methodologically rigorous" than studies in which no effects emerged. Clearly, additional research is needed to determine whether these findings generalize to child maltreatment cases and the degree to which they help explain the paradox between the high frequency and questionable effectiveness of parents/guardians serving as support persons reported in our survey.

A second exception to the increased frequency/perceived effectiveness trend was VWAs reported that providing referrals to community resources was the most frequently used type

of informational support, but believed a courtroom visit/orientation was most effective at reducing stress and increasing accuracy and credibility. Although we do not know for sure, this seems like a resource-driven decision: It is much easier and less time-consuming to provide a list of community resources to children and their families than it is to give a courtroom visit or orientation.

Looking more broadly at how our data compare with previous surveys, we see that VWAs share prosecutors' (Goodman et al., 1999), judges' (Hafemeister, 1996), and jurors' (McAuliff & Kovera, 2012) optimism regarding the potential for support persons to reduce children's stress. However, unlike the legal professionals in Plotnikoff and Woolfson's (2000) study, there was little evidence VWAs fear that support person use decreases children's credibility in the eyes of jurors by making it easier for the defense to claim the child's testimony was the product of coaching or talking to adults about the case. Across all forms of support, VWAs believed that support person use increased (and not decreased) children's perceived credibility. Of the VWAs who reported experiencing negative effects of support person use, only 12% of their responses were coded as indicating that support persons result in the perception and/or accusation of improper influence, coaching, rehearsal, or preparation by defense attorneys. Only 2% of responses indicated that children might appear too confident or bold because of support.

Given the dearth of research on support person use, we have no way to assess whether the VWAs in our survey (or the prosecutors, judges, and jurors in earlier work) are correct. Their beliefs are consistent with early work examining other innovations such as videotape (Swim, Borgida, & McCoy, 1993) and CCTV (Lindsay, Ross, Lea, & Carr, 1995; Ross et al., 1994) testimony: Mock jurors' perceptions of child witnesses in those experiments did not differ as a function of traditional versus alternative testimony. Yet, more recent, ecologically valid research has yielded results somewhat at odds with VWAs' beliefs. Goodman and colleagues (1998) demonstrated that allowing children to testify outside the courtroom via CCTV reduced their stress and suggestibility without unfairly prejudicing mock jurors against the defendant. However, mock jurors in that study perceived CCTV children to be less believable, less accurate (during both direct and cross-examination), less accurate in recalling the event, more likely to have made up the story, less likely to have based their testimony on fact than fiction, less attractive, less intelligent, and less confident than children who testified in court (reported in Tobey, Goodman, Batterman-Faunce, Orcutt, & Sachsenmaier, 1995). Mock jurors in a related study by Bottoms, Rudnicki, and Nysse-Carris (2004) rated children who were interviewed in a supportive manner as being less credible, more nervous, and marginally more suggestible than children interviewed in a nonsupportive manner. To the extent that these findings generalize to other types of innovative procedures, we must consider the possibility that support person use may adversely affect children's perceived credibility contrary to VWAs' beliefs.

One potential explanation for this undesirable effect is that innovative testimony procedures, including support person use, are designed to reduce children's stress. Decreased stress may mute the emotional impact of children's testimony by eliminating many of the verbal and nonverbal features jurors expect victims of sexual abuse to display while testifying (McAuliff & Kovera, 2012). McAuliff, Maurice, Neal, and Diaz (2008) observed that when a child witness's nonverbal behavior violated jurors' expectancies (i.e., she did not cry, was not nervous, and maintained eye contact), jurors perceived the child to be less credible than when she confirmed these expectancies. Thus, it is possible that using innovative procedures with children, although effective at reducing stress, may undermine their credibility at trial. Recent research also suggests that the emotional tone of a victim's testimony may affect jurors' ability to remember that testimony (Block, Greenberg, & Goodman, 2009). Participants were better able to remember a victim's testimony when it was conveyed using

a fearful, emotional tone than when these features were absent. Albeit somewhat premature because we do not know how support person use affects children's stress and testimony behavior, we urge VWAs and other legal professionals to consider these potential drawbacks when deciding whether (and how) to use this and other innovative procedures with child maltreatment victims.

Does Support Person Presence at Trial Prejudice Jurors Against Defendants?

VWAs believed that the presence of a support person at trial probably does not prejudice jurors against defendants. Again, much like the perceived effects of support person use on children's stress, accuracy, and credibility, we simply do not know whether VWAs' beliefs are correct because no research exists on this topic. Both early (Eaton, Ball, & O'Callaghan, 2001; Lindsay et al., 1995; Ross et al., 1994; Swim et al., 1993) and more recent, ecologically valid research (Goodman et al., 1998) on children's videotaped and CCTV testimony has revealed few differences in verdicts or perceptions of defendants as a result of children's alternative testimony. When differences have emerged, they have tended to favor defendants. Swim et al. (1993) found that mock jurors were less likely to convict a defendant when the alleged child victim testified via videotape (30%) versus live in court (48%). A similar trend emerged in a CCTV study by Ross and colleagues (1994): Mock jurors were less likely to convict when the child used CCTV to testify outside rather than inside the courtroom. However, this outcome only occurred when the researchers concluded the trial immediately after the child's testimony; conviction rates did not differ when the complete trial simulation was used. Most recently, Eaton et al. (2001) compared children's live, videotaped, and CCTV testimony and found that jurors rendered guilty verdicts more often when the child testified live versus via videotape or CCTV. Given a defendant's right to a fair trial and due process under the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, future research examining how support person use affects jurors' perceptions of defendants, as well as children, is a must.

Limitations and Implications

Before we discuss the implications of our data, it is only fitting that we acknowledge certain limitations inherent in our survey and methodology. The first two limitations concern the representativeness of our sample and the results we obtained. The rationale underlying our decision to survey VWAs regarding their experiences with support person use was both practical and logical. A national database of VWAs already existed at the American Prosecutors Research Institute that only required updating (as opposed to having to compile this information entirely from scratch). We also realized that VWAs, by definition, frequently assist child victims and therefore would serve as a rich source of the information we were seeking. That said, however, we realize that the responses we received may not be representative of all VWAs (recall that 35% of those surveyed failed to reply in any way despite our diligent efforts), and surveying a different professional group that works with child victims such as guardians *ad litem*, CASAs, judges, or attorneys might yield different information than we obtained from VWAs.

More specifically, the fact that many of the VWAs we surveyed worked in prosecutor-based units may have influenced the responses we received. Recall VWAs reported that support persons *rarely* or *never* accompany police on a call for service or accompany a child during an abuse-related medical exam. These data could reflect the true state of affairs with respect to support person use or could be biased by the fact that VWAs serving as support persons are unlikely to have knowledge of these activities *until* the child has been referred to the district attorney and then to their specific VWA unit. Similarly, the fact VWAs reported that support persons *rarely* or *never* accompany children in divorce/custody proceedings could be accurate or simply reflect the tendency of these cases to be handled by private attorneys

in civil court instead of prosecuting attorneys in criminal court. If this indeed were the case, our data may better reflect support person use at the tail end of the legal process (i.e., once cases are referred to district attorneys' offices) than at the front end.

Readers must also keep in mind that our results may have been influenced by certain biases involving our survey methodology and the specific questions we included. In essence, our data are only valid to the extent that respondents' memories for support person use are valid. If respondents selectively recalled cases in which support persons were used (or vice versa), their memories cannot accurately reflect support person use in actual cases. Moreover, despite our steadfast efforts to write questions in a neutral and objective way, the presence of demand characteristics (i.e., respondents telling us what they think we want to hear), a socially desirable response bias, or a self-serving bias could affect the validity of our findings. Although we have no direct evidence that such errors or biases occurred, we urge readers to keep these concerns in mind when considering the implications of our research.

A final potential limitation of our data concerns the issue of statistical versus practical significance. The large sample size and repeated measures design of our study yielded extremely powerful statistical tests of our hypotheses. As a result, many differences that achieved statistical significance may have little practical value in reality. One way to gauge the statistical versus practical significance of our findings is to keep in mind the magnitude of the effects that emerged. Certain differences such as those observed for the child's status and type of case were quite large and robust (ω^2 s = .78 and .57, respectively), whereas other differences such as those related to the child's age and type of informational support were quite small in comparison (ω^2 s = .10 and .13, respectively). From this perspective, larger differences may be more practically meaningful than smaller differences.

Despite these limitations, our survey represents the first systematic examination of support person use in the United States and has important implications for professionals and researchers who work with child maltreatment victims. For professionals, we believe our data provide a national benchmark to which local VWA units can compare and contrast their individual support person programs. This should enable VWA units to identify both strengths and weaknesses in the services they provide to children. We also hope our research stimulates dialogue between VWAs from different states and facilitates the open exchange of information between units. Anecdotally, we observed that VWAs are extremely dedicated to child maltreatment victims but equally frustrated by the lack of coordination (both regionally and nationally) in their efforts to support children. Smaller or understaffed VWA units could benefit immensely by receiving materials from units with support person protocols already in place. Doing so would eliminate the need for VWA units to "reinvent the wheel" and allow them to direct more of their efforts to serving children. Last but not least, we believe our data give voice to an entire population of professionals who have been overlooked in previous research examining the use of innovative procedures with children. Often unnoticed and unthanked by society at large, VWAs play a crucial role in the investigation and prosecution of crimes against children and in doing so help ensure the well-being of one of our nation's most valuable resources.

Our data have implications for researchers as well. We now know that support persons routinely are used with child maltreatment victims in at least 46 states. Despite their widespread use, we know virtually nothing about the effects (perceived or actual) of support persons on children and their testimony. An experiment that systematically varies the presence of a support person and the type of support provided is needed to clarify the effects of support person use on children, and this research is currently underway in our lab. Also of interest is our finding that support persons were much more likely to accompany children to court rather than to sit next to children during their testimony. What effect does the

proximity of a support person have on children's stress, accuracy, and perceived credibility? These data will help ensure that support persons are used in a manner that truly maximizes children's active and effective participation in legal proceedings, thus promoting justice for all parties involved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have learned much from our survey. VWAs or parents/guardians commonly serve as support persons with children of all ages involved in maltreatment cases. They almost always provide referrals to community resources, courtroom visits, and procedural information, as well as accompany children to trial. Typically, one support person is assigned per child and does not question the child during investigative interviews or in court. Support persons are believed to decrease children's stress and increase their accuracy and credibility without prejudicing jurors against defendants. Most perceived negative effects of support person use involve parents/guardians, who may increase children's stress or interfere with testimony. Future research is necessary to evaluate the accuracy of respondents' beliefs and perceptions regarding support person use with children.

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Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Medians, Modes, and Correlations Among Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Characteristic	Mean (SD)	Median	Mode	n ₁	n ₂	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Full-time prosecutors in jurisdiction	12.89 (17.48)	6.00	4	352	343	—	.21*	.64**	.07	.24**	.19*	-.07
2. Part-time prosecutors in jurisdiction	0.95 (1.54)	0.00	0	311	307		—	.16	.16	.14	.01	.05
3. Victim/witness staff in unit	3.43 (3.56)	2.00	1	375	368			—	.28**	.55**	.23**	.05
4. Victim/witness volunteers in unit	1.43 (3.36)	0.00	0	345	342				—	.13	-.04	.05
5. Cases assigned to unit in 2005	1080.45 (1199.37)	650.50	200	263	252					—	.32**	.06
6. Cases involving children assigned to unit in 2005	187.07 (254.61)	100.00	150	241	236							.04
7. Total hours spent with child	8.95 (7.55)	6.50	3	204	198							—

Note. n₁ = original number of respondents providing information for each demographic item; n₂ = final number of respondents after outliers were removed using a stringent cutoff of 3 standard deviations above the mean for each item. Means, medians, standard deviations, and modes were calculated using n₂. All correlations controlled for population of city where VWA unit was located.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Percentage of Respondents Indicating Cases Referred by Various Sources

Referral source	%
Law enforcement	90
District attorney	68
Child protective services	65
Counseling/crisis center	53
Self	48
Department of Social Services	55
Hospitals	42
Judges	30
Private agencies (e.g., Legal Aid Foundation)	24
Internet	10

Table 3

Frequency of Support Person Use Means, Standard Deviations, Univariate Effects, and Follow-Up Comparisons for Predictor Variables

Predictor variable	Mean (SD)	F	df	p	ω^2	n
Individual type		183.03	5, 1675	.0001	.31	2,023
VWA unit staff	4.24 (1.12) _a					
Parent/guardian	3.66 (1.03) _b					
Social worker	3.08 (1.09) _c					
Other relative	2.97 (0.87) _c					
Guardian <i>ad litem</i>	2.63 (1.17) _d					
CASA	2.36 (1.21) _e					
Child age (years)		52.96	4, 1516	.001	.10	1,909
0–3	3.81 (1.36) _a					
4–7	4.23 (1.04) _b					
8–12	4.36 (0.92) _c					
13–17	4.40 (0.83) _c					
18+	4.36 (0.87) _c					
Child status		1692.72	3, 1038	.001	.78	1,396
Victim	4.58 (0.72) _a					
Victim/witness	4.29 (0.87) _b					
Witness	3.76 (0.93) _c					
Accused	1.23 (0.59) _d					
Case type		604.08	4, 1476	.001	.57	1,854
Child sexual abuse	4.58 (0.83) _a					
Child physical abuse	4.38 (0.95) _b					
Adult domestic violence	4.20 (1.09) _c					
Child neglect	3.73 (1.33) _d					
Divorce/custody	1.70 (1.06) _e					
General support type		787.82	1, 387	.001	.50	779
Emotional	3.18 (0.75) _a					
Informational	4.06 (0.79) _b					

Predictor variable	Mean (SD)	F	df	p	ω^2	n
Emotional support		421.23	8, 3032	.001	.50	3,422
Accompany child to trial	4.53 (0.91) _a					
Comfort child	4.33 (0.87) _b					
Accompany child during pretrial preparation	4.27 (1.07) _b					
Accompany child during preliminary hearing	3.91 (1.37) _c					
Accompany child during investigative interview	2.62 (1.33) _d					
Sit next to child during testimony	2.54 (1.69) _d					
Accompany child during grand jury testimony	2.47 (1.70) _d					
Accompany police on call for service	1.91 (1.10) _e					
Accompany child to medical exam	1.87 (1.16) _e					
Informational support		73.41	4, 1536	.001	.13	1,927
Provide referrals to community resources	4.37 (0.90) _a					
Courtroom visit/orientation	4.28 (0.91) _a					
Provide child relevant procedural information	4.27 (1.01) _a					
Conduct pretrial preparation of child	3.83 (1.32) _b					
Help child prepare victim impact statement	3.53 (1.18) _c					

Note. VWA = victim/witness assistant; CASA = court-appointed special advocate. For each predictor variable, means with different subscripts were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Emotional support and informational support were composite variables. Frequency of support person use was rated on a Likert scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*.

Table 4

Coding Scheme, Examples, Frequency, and Interrater Reliability for Self-Reported Types of Emotional and Informational Support (n = 309)

Support category	Support type	Coding scheme	Example	Frequency (%)	Cohen's kappa
Emotional	Distraction	Engaged child in tasks unrelated to the case and/or activities meant to distract them	"Sit and color or play a game, watch a video. Get them talking about school and friends. . ." "Bring games for the child, draw with the child, play with child, create a comforting environment"	26	.73
	Validation	Validated the child or provided positive verbal reinforcement regarding child's disclosure	"Emphasize that they are right to feel conflicted about their feelings; let them know that abuse is not their fault" "Let the child know that we believe them" "Tell child you believe them, they did nothing wrong, they are brave for telling the truth"	19	.79
	Rapport building	Built rapport or bonded with the child	"Establish a rapport with victim and family" "Building a rapport with the child, helped them feel safe and secure . . ." "We will talk to the child; get to know him/her to build a relationship of trust"	11	.76
Informational	Physical contact	Provided some form of physical contact to calm or support child	"A lot of hugging and personal contact unless child prefers not to" "Hug and pat child's back" "Hand holding and physically getting down to their level when attorneys won't"	9	.86
	Overview	Provided process-, procedure-, or role-related information to child or family	"Explain what a jury trial is and why there is both a prelim and a trial—why they have to tell their story 3 times; explain the purpose of sentencing and help prepare victim impact statements, provide case status updates and explain in simple terms other court jargon" "Explain exactly what will happen in the courtroom from being sworn in to identifying the defendant"	64	.74
	Child-friendly information	Provided information in an age-appropriate manner or in a way designed to educate children	"Age appropriate questions that could be asked of child" "Give 'going to trial' coloring book and video; field trip to the courthouse" "Play court game with child to show them roles of each person in court room and what to expect" "Using coloring books explaining court system to provide info to children"	37	.88
	Court orientation	Took child to a courtroom prior to trial	"Give child a courtroom tour to familiarize child with the court" "Always do court orientation in a courtroom"	22	.76

Table 5
Statistics for Main and Interaction Effects of Predictor Variables and Perceived Effects of Support

Predictor variable	Source	F	df	p	ω^2	n
Individual type						
	Individual	2.40	5, 4180	.035	.00	355
	Effects of support	754.37	2, 4098	.0001	.25	
	Interaction	20.48	10, 4072	.0001	.04	
Child age						
	Child age	4.86	4, 4501	.001	.00	364
	Effects of support	2131.74	2, 4500	.0001	.47	
	Interaction	10.58	8, 4469	.0001	.02	
Case type						
	Case	1.96	4, 3851	.098	.00	359
	Effects of support	1384.41	2, 3814	.0001	.40	
	Interaction	4.31	8, 3792	.0001	.01	
General support type						
	General support	1.12	1, 952	.289	.00	299
	Effects of support	304.42	2, 763	.0001	.67	
	Interaction	2.73	2, 757	.066	.01	
Emotional support type						
	Emotional support	5.31	8, 6265	.0001	.01	366
	Effects of support	2752.12	2, 6232	.0001	.45	
	Interaction	6.82	16, 6205	.0001	.01	
Informational support type						
	Informational support	3.56	4, 4597	.007	.00	366
	Effects of support	2845.72	2, 4603	.0001	.53	
	Interaction	5.16	8, 4575	.0001	.01	

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations for Main Effects of Perceived Effects of Support and Follow-Up Comparisons

Predictor variable	Perceived effect of support		
	Stress mean (SD)	Accuracy mean (SD)	Credibility mean (SD)
Individual type	2.40 (1.04) _a	3.40 (0.84) _b	3.43 (0.84) _b
Child age	2.10 (1.04) _a	3.63 (0.86) _b	3.64 (0.83) _b
Case type	2.13 (1.04) _a	3.61 (0.84) _b	3.63 (0.84) _b
General support type	2.07 (1.06) _a	3.70 (0.80) _b	3.68 (0.79) _b
Emotional support type	2.00 (1.09) _a	3.64 (0.88) _b	3.62 (0.86) _b
Informational support type	2.00 (1.10) _a	3.72 (0.88) _b	3.69 (0.85) _b

Note. Means with different subscripts within each row were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Perceived effects of support were rated on a Likert scale: 1 = *decrease*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *increase*.

Means and Standard Deviations for Simple Main Effects of Predictor Variables Within Each Level of Perceived Effects of Support and Follow-Up Comparisons

Table 7

Predictor variable and levels	Perceived effect of support							
	Stress				Accuracy			
	Mean (SD)	n	NA %		Mean (SD)	n	NA %	
Individual type								
VWA unit staff	2.07 (1.03) _a	331	9.2	3.65 (0.83) _a	313	12.0	3.66 (0.84) _a	312
Social worker	2.38 (0.94) _b	267	23.5	3.50 (0.79) _{ac}	258	24.0	3.46 (0.79) _b	259
CASA	2.38 (0.96) _b	149	47.2	3.37 (0.85) _{bc}	147	46.4	3.41 (0.84) _b	147
Guardian <i>ad litem</i>	2.42 (0.89) _{bc}	193	38.8	3.35 (0.87) _{bc}	188	36.7	3.37 (0.86) _b	191
Other relative	2.57 (1.01) _{c,d}	251	17.6	3.20 (0.74) _b	249	19.9	3.27 (0.79) _b	249
Parent/guardian	2.65 (1.18) _d	317	11.0	3.27 (0.87) _b	304	13.0	3.33 (0.87) _b	304
Child age (years)								
0-3	2.30 (0.97) _a	260	29.8	3.40 (0.83) _a	248	32.1	3.43 (0.81) _a	251
4-7	2.14 (1.01)	343	8.7	3.58 (0.85) _b	327	12.0	3.58 (0.82)	322
8-12	2.03 (1.00) _b	355	5.9	3.68 (0.85) _b	341	8.4	3.68 (0.81) _b	339
13-17	2.04 (1.06) _b	357	5.4	3.73 (0.87) _b	342	8.4	3.74 (0.82) _b	342
18+	2.02 (1.09) _b	352	5.9	3.71 (0.87) _b	335	8.9	3.72 (0.83) _b	334
Case type								
Child sexual abuse	2.03 (1.03) _a	342	7.9	3.69 (0.82) _a	327	10.5	3.69 (0.84) _a	331
Child physical abuse	2.08 (1.04)	340	7.7	3.65 (0.83) _a	327	9.9	3.66 (0.83)	329
Adult domestic violence	2.18 (1.02)	287	8.7	3.56 (0.85)	287	11.5	3.59 (0.84)	285
Child neglect	2.28 (0.93) _b	94	20.7	3.32 (0.85) _b	114	20.4	3.38 (0.84) _b	116
Divorce/custody	2.18 (1.11) _b	336	66.3	3.63 (0.84) _a	319	61.5	3.67 (0.83)	322
Emotional support type								
Accompany child to trial	1.92 (1.13) _a	358	4.1	3.76 (0.89) _a	339	5.4	3.70 (0.87) _a	338
Accompany child during pretrial preparation	1.95 (1.08)	342	8.4	3.74 (0.87) _a	326	9.7	3.73 (0.84) _a	321
Comfort child	1.91 (1.06) _a	356	3.6	3.71 (0.86) _a	337	5.1	3.68 (0.85) _a	335
Accompany child during investigative interview	2.12 (1.05)	238	34.2	3.60 (0.86) _{ab}	229	32.4	3.58 (0.82)	229

Note. VWA = victim/witness assistant; CASA = court-appointed special advocate; NA% = percentage of respondents who selected "not applicable." For each predictor variable, means with different subscripts within each level of perceived effects of support were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Perceived effects of support were rated on a Likert scale: 1 = *decrease*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *increase*.

Coding Scheme, Examples, Frequency, and Interrater Reliability for Self-Reported Negative Effects of Support Person Use With Children (n = 104)

Table 8

Negative effect	Coding scheme	Example	Frequency (%)	Cohen's kappa
Parents general	General reference to parent(s)	"In some cases, parents can be a problem" "Inappropriate behavior by family member"	43	.92
Uncooperative child	Child was uncooperative and/or did not bond with support person	"Sometimes children just want to play and be silly; difficult to explain the need to be serious and truthful" "Some children don't want to speak or be with a stranger" "When child doesn't connect with support person and doesn't want to participate in the process"	20	.84
Parents increased stress	Child reluctant to discuss abuse in front of parents and/or parents' presence in court impeded child's testimony	"Sometimes children won't disclose the worst details in front of parents" "Parents can cause the child increased stress because the parent has expectations that the child has to do a perfect job testifying" "Very often the parent is just as stressed as the child and the parent will pass that on to the child/victim"	19	.63
Parents interfered	Parent pressured child not to disclose or testify, to recant, and/or coached child	"Parents, relatives try to change, influence, or interpret child's testimony for various reasons" "Parents coach children, jeopardizing the pending investigation and case"	18	.80
Inadequate services	Inadequate training, education, and/or skills impaired the support process	"If the support person does not have the skills requisite for the job, insensitivity" "Someone who is not trained properly may say the wrong things and make it worse"	15	.66
Nonstaff issues	Nonstaff members (guardians <i>ad litem</i> , CASAs, social workers) impaired the support process	"I've had counselors from the local sexual assault crisis center give victims false information about court proceedings" "Guardians <i>ad litem</i> appointed were counterproductive, uninformed, failed to follow through or outright were unaware of their role"	14	.71
Defense allegation of improper influence	Perception and/or accusation of improper influence, coaching, rehearsal, or preparation	"Occasionally a defense attorney will allege that the support person planted the idea in child's mind" "Defense counsel argues child was rehearsed" "Accusations of improper influence"	12	.75
Confident child	Child appeared too confident or bold	"Made them too bold by an elevated sense of reassurance"	2	.66