

CRYSTAL SCALES OF JUSTICE 2023

PRESENTATION

Being a Judge for almost all my life, I have witnessed a number of cases involving young children who have been sexually assaulted. Many of these cases had either been dismissed or were withdrawn and the reason for the adverse outcome was not that the case was weak in its merits. It was mainly due to two factors.

The first was that for many years, children who were summoned to give evidence in court were never prepared for the challenges they were about to face along the way and for what was going to happen in Court.

Children, as vulnerable witnesses, are not familiar with legal terminology and court processes and are overwhelmed with feelings of fear and stress. This usually affects their testimony, which may in turn have adverse effects on the outcome of a court hearing.

The second reason was that children, as vulnerable witness, and their families were not given sufficient psychological and other support. This would result in their decision to withdraw their complaint at some stage of the process, as they couldn't cope with the pressure and all the intimidating court procedures that will follow.

The entire process and especially giving evidence in court, is a traumatic and stressful experience for adults, let alone children.

Hours of waiting are involved, sometimes in the presence of the cameras and journalists, in unfriendly court buildings, with advocates and judges appearing strict in their black and white attire. These situations, without a doubt, can intimidate a child, who, let us not forget, has already been through an enormous ordeal. Furthermore, when the child finally reaches the courtroom, he/she will most likely have to face extremely embarrassing questions from the accused's lawyer, which often carry an undertone that the child provoked the accused or that the incident never happened.

In response to these challenges we have created an innovative tool which in effect is a Board Game, the "Kids in Court Psychoeducational Tool".

After having seen all aspects of the tool, the Cyprus Judicial Training School embraced the whole concept and took the initiative to submit it to the Crystal Scales of Justice Competition. With its well thought out process and its unique method of gamification, this research-driven tool not only helps prepare a child psychologically for the 'ordeal' of giving evidence in court but helps familiarise children with the court environment and their rights.

The Game aims at explaining, in simple terms that a child can understand, his or her rights, the procedure that will follow, who the main actors will be, the way that they speak, the waiting time that sometimes is involved, the delays that might occur, that there is nothing to be afraid of in telling the truth, etc. The bottom line is that a child

who is well-informed about his/her rights, is a more confident witness, something which is of great assistance to the Court when assessing his/her evidence. This substantially enhances the efficiency and quality of justice.

From August 2022, **the KiCGame prototype, which has been developed based on the Cyprus reality and is in Greek has already been put in practice by the humanitarian organization “Hope For Children” CRC Policy Center** and is available through the Children’s House, to all professional supporters who are responsible to prepare children for their court appearance. The Children’s House is a multidisciplinary center that deals with child sexual abuse cases, run by “Hope For Children” supervised and funded by the State and more specifically, the Social Welfare Services.

We have prepared a short video which explains the Game in practice.

The results from the initial stages of implementation of the Game in Cyprus, are very encouraging and could easily be adopted as a good practice throughout Europe. We consider that the Game falls within the wider policy of the European Union and the Council of Europe, for a system of child friendly justice, which guarantees not only the due process of law and fair trial, but also a system that respects children’s rights including the right to understand court proceedings.

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