

Someone has hurt me... and now, what is going to happen?

A support guide for children in criminal proceedings

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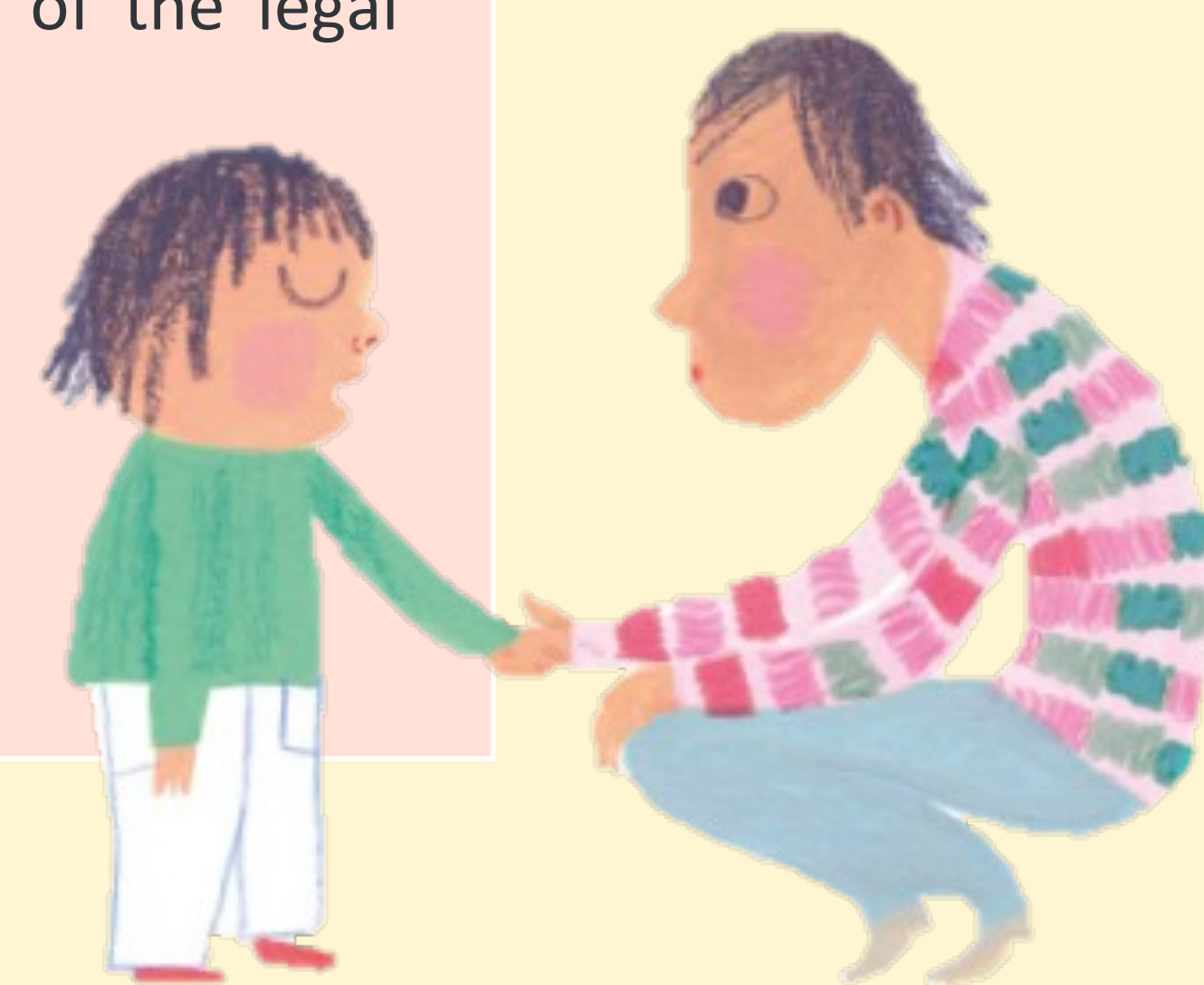
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Introduction

Undergoing criminal proceedings is always a stressful experience, especially for children (Sempere, 2020). Factors such as the judicial environment, potential contact with the perpetrator, the obligation to respond to questioning, and a general lack of knowledge regarding the legal system can generate anxiety and discomfort in children involved in any judicial process (Quas & Goodman, 2012). Furthermore, this negative emotional state can alter memory and, as a result, impact the quality of testimony (Thoman, 2013), thus exerting negative effects on the judicial process. In order to reduce this impact, some authors highlight the importance of developing preparatory interventions to facilitate children's and adolescents' understanding of the legal environment (Quas et al., 2009). Several guides have been written with guidelines and recommendations for professionals and caregivers (see the guidelines for caring for victims of child sexual abuse during the judicial process by Echeburúa & Subijana, 2008). However, resources for children and adolescents themselves are limited. In Spain, these resources are even scarcer, and the ones that do exist are poorly adapted to the needs of minor victims involved in criminal proceedings. That is why our aim was to develop a resource that assists professionals in preparing children who are required to face criminal proceedings. As a result, we have created a storybook to help children who have experienced abuse or violence understand the judicial process and become familiar with its key participants.



Method

For the design of this resource, a survey was conducted among 216 professionals in the legal field or those specializing in child and juvenile victimology in Spain. The survey aimed to gather their perception regarding various tools and resources for preparing child and adolescent victims involved in criminal proceedings. Professionals agree that there is a pressing need for a manipulative resource specifically designed for primary school children. This resource would provide a comprehensive description of the key actors involved in the process, along with addressing the physical and psychological aspects of the child's exploration. We sought the input of a group of experts and collaborated with them to develop the script for the story. Subsequently, we engaged an illustrator, and the text underwent thorough review by experts in children's story writing.

Results



The resulting creation of this process is a free access storybook in Spanish for children between 6 and 9 years old who must face a criminal proceeding. This book describes, in simple and adapted language, the whole process followed in criminal cases involving children in Spain. From the moment someone hurts a child, through the filing of a complaint, the medical evaluation, the forensic interview and ultimately, the hearing. The purpose of this storybook is to help children who have experienced abuse or violence understand the judicial process and become familiar with its main actors.

The book is accompanied by two guidelines that serve to provide counselling for both professionals utilizing this resource and caregivers who will support children and adolescents throughout this process.



Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that providing knowledge and comfort to child victims undergoing criminal justice processes reduces their anxiety and discomfort (Quas et al., 2009). This resource not only imparts knowledge to children but also assists professionals and caregivers in the challenging task of preparing a child for court proceedings. More than 300 copies of this resource have been distributed free of charge to various entities, organizations, and professionals who work directly with children who have experienced abuse or violence. In addition, an online version of this resource is freely available on our research group's website (also available in the QR next to these lines).

