For many years, you have been prosecuting serious child physical and sexual assault cases. You have learned to handle your caseload effectively and to deal with your successes and defeats in court. Over time, you have established a reputation as a fair and capable prosecutor. You know what you are doing.... until your elected District Attorney taps you to head up the Child Abuse Prosecution Unit.

You are suddenly thrust into new territory, moving from the familiar world of discovery deadlines and motions in limine to the evolving demands of staffing needs, budgetary constraints, community concerns, and morale issues. Before heading for the door and back to your old office, consider the following ten practical tips for child abuse prosecutors who assume managerial roles.

1. Retain and recruit a quality team of child abuse prosecutors. It is imperative as a manager to retain prosecutors in the unit despite the management change. It takes much time and money to train a new prosecutor, so be sure to take affirmative steps to keep good staff already employed in the unit. Be prepared to recruit from your current office's prosecutorial staff or to reach out to the local bar or law schools to find prosecutors who truly desire to handle child abuse cases. Prosecuting child abuse cases takes a certain fortitude and a special kind of spirit and commitment. Focus on prosecutors who exhibit a strong work ethic, even temperament and keen interest in child abuse prevention issues. Seek out those prosecutors both inside and outside your office. Make it known throughout your office that prosecutors interested in joining the Child Abuse Unit should approach you directly. Be sure to encourage all prosecutors in the unit to attend conferences and continuing education on child abuse issues. Finding funds and making schedules available for this training is something that the manager should oversee in order to have trained staff effectively handling these difficult cases.

2. Immediately establish an open door policy (literally) with your prosecution team and administrative staff. Nothing is more off-putting to staff members than approaching the constantly-closed door of their supervisor. An open door sends a clear message to your staff that you are available to supervise, strategize, and listen to their concerns. Consider also stepping out of your office frequently to check in with your staff at their work stations or offices. This is an excellent opportunity for you as manager to assess the morale of your unit as well as caseload management and staff interaction.

3. If possible, do not assign yourself a caseload. You are used to the action of the courtroom. Though you may have complained about it in the past, you secretly thrive on it. Now, as a manager, you may think you can continue to handle your own caseload and still be an effective manager. This approach risks the success of the unit and steals precious time away from the demands of your new position. A chief of a child abuse unit will spend many work hours on budgetary matters, community meetings, and human resources issues—leaving little time to effectively undertake day-to-day trial work. To do the job well, you must dedicate your efforts full-time to the burgeoning responsibilities that come with running a successful child abuse prosecution unit. Of course, some prosecutors' offices do not have the luxury of sufficient staff to eschew a personal caseload. Some managers feel strongly that to assign themselves one or two cases a year keeps them in touch with their front line prosecutors. The U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics recently released details that the increase in total staff in the prosecuting attorneys offices nationwide has leveled off since 2001. However, even in these instances, it is important to try to reduce your caseload and delegate other tasks to qualified staff in order to focus on the proper management of the unit.

4. Be consistent and thorough in your pre-charging case analysis. One of the most important functions of a manager in any child abuse prosecution unit is the pre-charging analysis and review of cases. The decision as to whether a case is charged lies with you. When you are reviewing cases for charging, ask yourself if you would want to be assigned as the prosecutor on this particular case. Is there sufficient evidence to support a conviction? Never let outside pressures, such as media interest, bear on your decision. Be consistent. Stand your ground. You will have tough days when you have to tell a mother of a child victim that charges will not issue in her child's case or inform law enforcement that there is insufficient evidence after your review of their criminal investigation to go forward with prosecution. But always remember your prosecutorial duty is to seek justice, not merely to convict.
5. Collaborate with your community. As manager of the child abuse prosecution unit, you play a key leadership role in navigating your unit in the 21st century. A recent survey indicates that 24% of all prosecutors’ offices nationwide assign prosecutors to oversee community related activities. Your local community will expect you to take the lead on many community-based projects such as Child Death Review Teams, child abuse prevention initiatives and educational endeavors. Consider participating in mock trials at local schools as well as charity events sponsored by child protection agencies in your community. Be a regular participant at your neighborhood crime watch. Coordinate a major yearly multidisciplinary child abuse prevention conference sponsored by your office that brings together varied members of the community. Consider volunteering at your local family violence shelter or for Big Brothers-Big Sisters. Do not shy away from this public role. You have a valuable opportunity to make significant strides to enhance the lives of the most vulnerable members of our society, and community outreach is essential.

6. Foster long-term relationships with professional partners. Look to your position as manager as a long-term commitment. You have the ability to make long-range productive changes. By choosing to dedicate substantial time to this new role, you can cultivate enduring relationships with the local medical and law enforcement communities and child protection agencies. Consider forming a monthly child protection roundtable comprised of medical, law enforcement and social service agencies. Use these monthly meetings to establish protocols, network, and achieve a better understanding of the responsibilities of each participating agency or department. These relationships with your colleagues in other agencies will turn out to be invaluable multi-disciplinary resources in the continuing battle against child abuse. No one agency can eradicate child abuse. Only by working together can we achieve this common goal.

7. Don’t micromanage your staff. Your prosecutors and administrative staff are professionals and deserve to be treated as such. As the manager, establish general guidelines for your prosecutors concerning proper case preparation, trial tactics and sentence recommendations. Assign work responsibilities and define expectations. Encourage and facilitate discussions on case management and sentence recommendations. Listen to the concerns of your front line prosecutors. Allow them to develop their own particular prosecution style, yet be available to supervise and strategize concerning the many legal and emotional issues attached to child abuse prosecution.

8. Become a strong mentor and advocate for your staff. Believe in your prosecutors and your staff and become a vocal supporter of their needs. Address new and long-standing concerns in the unit as soon as practicable. Let your staff know you are willing to go to bat for them on important issues such as an unsubstantiated or unwarranted complaint lodged against one of your prosecutors. Requests for a salary increase or a modified work schedule are common. Be prepared to address these issues swiftly and effectively with the upper management of your office. In addition, do not ever forget, as you take the helm of this unit, how it felt to win or lose a child abuse case. Trying cases can be a lonely occupation. Check in with your prosecutors during your everyday management style, you can provide your staff with all the resources and support they need to comprise a dynamic and effective child abuse prosecution unit. As a result of your unit’s efforts, there will be many children who will live a safe and secure childhood. In the end, that is what counts.

9. Be even-handed on personnel issues. Unfortunately, law school did not prepare you to get along with and to supervise others. At the end of the work day your staff just wants to be treated fairly and even-handedly. Showing favorites as a manager is a quick route to low morale in your unit. Fairness is the key to a successful management style. Consider taking some management workshops or courses. Decide what management style works for you. Are you a manager who delegates or are you more of a hands on manager? Maybe you thrive on a hybrid approach.

10. Promote a healthy work/life balance among your staff. The prosecution of child abuse is a unique profession that can take its toll on the entire staff—both lawyers and support personnel. Vicarious trauma symptoms may be a natural outgrowth of aiding those who have suffered serious traumas. These symptoms, depression, exhaustion, sleeplessness, and profound feelings of hopelessness can negatively impact one’s personal and professional life. Since even close family and friends may shy away from hearing the disturbing facts of these cases, child abuse prosecutors and staff tend to form a strong bond among themselves. Encourage your prosecutors to vent about cases and let off steam in appropriate ways. Humor can also be an effective tool to combat prosecutor burnout. Encourage your prosecutors to seek a healthy balance between their work and personal lives. Assist them in finding appropriate mental health services, if needed. Impromptu office outings to celebrate the happy events in the life of your staff is a sure way to lift spirits and boost morale.

In summary, a manager of a child abuse prosecution unit has a challenging and exciting position. By incorporating the above ten tips into your everyday management style, you can provide your staff with all resources and support they need to comprise a dynamic and effective child abuse prosecution unit. As a result of your unit’s efforts, there will be many children who will live a safe and secure childhood.