

Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Child Advocacy Center: A Vital Step in Conducting a Child Abuse Investigation

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Introduction¹

While the United States today is a leader in child protection efforts, that wasn't always the case. Historically, in the United States, there was generally a disjointed response to child abuse allegations. Improvement occurred in the early 1980's with the creation of the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) approach to address child abuse investigations. The MDT approach has been widely adopted as a best practice in responding to child abuse allegations not only in the United States but throughout the world. We have come a long way and learned a lot about protecting children even through the investigative process.



In the beginning, utilizing the MDT approach generally improved the effectiveness of a child abuse investigation because law enforcement would sometimes conduct joint investigations with Child Protective Services and connect all of the relevant organizations together. However, some crucial problems still remained. For example, some members of the MDT teams would work independently from other team members in following up with the child or others, which led to miscommunication, delays and gaps in providing services to children in need.

In addition, children believed to have been abused often had to recount details of their trauma multiple times to the different agencies involved with the MDT, such as: Law enforcement, Child Protective Services, doctors, prosecutors, etc. These interviews were typically conducted by untrained individuals, occurring in intimidating environments such as police stations, hospitals, in Child Protective Service offices, or even in front of the "non-abusive caretaker" in a child's home. This disorganized interview process greatly increased stress for the child, increased the risk for inconsistent statements by the child, and weakened potential prosecution. In fact, I observed, on several occasions, a child who had been interviewed multiple times "close down" and share, "My head hurts and I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Child Advocacy Centers today

Over time, incorporating the Child Advocacy Center as a member of the MDT made a tremendous difference for the welfare of the child and the overall investigative process. The first Child Advocacy Center was established in 1985, in Huntsville, Alabama, by U.S. Congressman Robert "Bud" Cramer, a former Madison County district attorney who had seen firsthand the failures of the traditional investigative system in child abuse cases. Cramer's goal was to create a child-centered approach that prioritized the well-being of child victims. This goal included envisioning the construction of private, child-friendly/decorated, interview rooms with child-sized tables and chairs.

Since the National Child Advocacy Center (NCAC) opened in 1985 in Huntsville, it has served as a model for the creation of thousands of other Child Advocacy Centers operating in the United States and in several countries throughout the world. By way of illustration, during an investigation of a suspected multiple victim sexual abuse case that I supervised, making use of the forensic interview services of a CAC near the courthouse was invaluable to help the child, obtain information quickly and help the case proceed.

Typically, a CAC is purposefully located geographically separate from police stations, child protective service offices and courthouses. While all CACs share the same philosophy, they vary in size and capabilities. Some may be located in a hospital, while others are situated in a small house.

While offering child forensic interviewers, many CACs also offer counseling, sexual specific medical exams, courtroom preparation, victim advocacy services, therapeutic services, case management, and other resources.

How does it work?

There are many barriers that make it difficult for children to disclose child abuse. Due to the manipulation of the abuser, children may be reluctant, afraid and often embarrassed to talk about the abuse they experienced. Now, when law enforcement or Child Protective Services suspect a child has been abused, a forensic interview is scheduled at the community or regional CAC. In most cases, the child is brought to the CAC by a non-abusive caretaker or other "safe" adult. At the CAC, in a safe, child-focused environment, the child is asked to tell their story, **just once**, to a specially trained, forensic interviewer who knows the questions to ask and in the manner in which those questions should be posed so as to not re-traumatize the child.

The child forensic interview is a structured, friendly and neutral discussion about an event that is in question, which provides the child with a reasonable, non-leading opportunity to disclose or share information. Often, the forensic interview will corroborate or refute allegations or suspicions of child abuse.

Depending on the CAC's physical setup, the investigative members of the MDT can observe the verbal forensic interview through a one-way mirror, via a streamed live video or by reviewing a digital video recording of the interview. Only people directly involved in the investigation are allowed to actually observe the interview. Typically, the interviewer will take a break during the interview process to ask the investigation team for feedback or if certain questions or answers need clarification.

In more recent years, the forensic interviewer will also look for any indicators of human trafficking and/or the commercial sexual exploitation of children. If the interviewer determines that these indicators are present, the CAC will provide ongoing therapeutic and support services with the trafficking victim or those children who are determined to be at high-risk for trafficking.

Following a disclosure of abuse, the entire MDT investigative team, which includes law enforcement, Child Protective Services, a prosecutor, a physician or a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, victim advocates, and other professionals can jointly make thoughtful decisions as to how best to support the child with legal, protective and mental health interventions.

Next steps

Following the forensic interview, a non-abusive caretaker will be given the opportunity to speak with the members of the investigation team. If the child has disclosed abuse, the MDT will only tell the non-abusive caretaker what was learned in general terms because the role of the CAC is only one component in the comprehensive investigative process.

Witnesses still need to be located and interviewed, forensic medical exams are scheduled, and physical evidence may need to be located along with an interview or interrogation of the offender. Child Protective Services, if involved, must also assess safety issues, such as the risk and danger of the child potentially being re-abused or the risk for other children in the family potentially being abused. Trauma-informed therapy and counseling are offered for the child and the family. Lastly, the prosecutor will conduct a review of the entire investigation process and then make a decision as to whether or not the offender will be prosecuted.

Conclusion

In addition to being a critical component of child abuse investigations, CACs also frequently provide additional resources and services within their community. Many CACs may provide therapeutic or counseling services to children who have experienced abuse, or community outreach involved in preventing child abuse. CACs remain an integral part in the proper response to child abuse. As a dedicated advocate for children's safety, you may need to make a call to child protective services regarding a youth in your care, and may ultimately make use of the services of your local CAC. These centers exist to assist professionals and caregivers, who provide critical services for children. Thank you for your commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of youth. Your awareness and support are vital in fostering a safer community for everyone.

1 Note from the Author: This article is dedicated to my good friend and professional colleague retired Dallas Police Department Lieutenant Bill Walsh, who passed away on January 28, 2025. Bill, a tireless advocate for child protection, co-founded the Dallas Children's Advocacy Center in 1991, which today is recognized as one of the nation's leading child advocacy centers. Additionally, 36 years ago, Bill created the Crimes against Children Conference, held annually in Dallas. It was my great honor to speak at that conference numerous times. The conference is the largest and most influential of its type in the world with annually over 300 speakers and 5,000 child abuse professional attendees.

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