

# PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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*In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.*

## Let us hear from you!

If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Address your comments to:

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## FORENSIC INTERVIEWING AND CHILD WELFARE

The forensic interview, a technique used to obtain a statement from a child in an objective, developmentally sensitive, and legally defensible manner, often plays a key role in child maltreatment investigations.

If you do not already have a clear grasp of the who, what, when, where, why, and how of forensic interviewing, this issue of *Practice Notes* is a good place to start.

If you are familiar with forensic interviewing, you may have questions about how this technique—which can seem so adversarial, given its focus on collecting court-worthy evidence—fits with the emphasis North Carolina puts on family-centered practice. This issue of the newsletter will also help you explore these concerns so that you can enhance your work with families. ♦

## THE CONNECTION WITH FAMILY-CENTERED PRACTICE

Perhaps the best way to illuminate the connection between forensic interviewing and family-centered practice is to talk about North Carolina's new child welfare system reform effort, the **Multiple Response System (MRS)**. MRS is an approach to children's services being piloted in 10 of the state's 100 counties. MRS consists of seven strategies, one of which changes the way participating agencies respond to reports of child maltreatment.

Under MRS, rather than treating every report as if it were potentially a serious case of criminal child abuse/neglect, intake reports are carefully sorted into one of two approaches. The first, the **investigative assessment approach**, resembles the classic child protective services (CPS) response in which workers perform a rigorous investigation, using forensic interviewing techniques when appropriate. In the second, the **family assessment approach**, child safety is still the first concern, but the overall nature of the agency's contact with the family is much more supportive. It is anticipated MRS will become the new statewide standard for child welfare practice in the near future.

When thinking about the MRS strategy for CPS it is important to keep in mind there is an expectation of family-centered practice in

both the family assessment AND the investigative assessment approaches.

Some people initially have difficulty with this notion. They ask: How can we be family-centered when we use a technique such as the forensic interview, which is designed to collect evidence that will stand up in court if the investigation leads to criminal prosecution? Isn't it too adversarial?

It is true that some parts of forensic interviewing and the overall investigative approach cannot be changed—for example, it is recommended that CPS interview children before speaking with parents. Yet even with these constraints, when we embrace family-centered principles, we can almost always manage to treat families in a way that makes it clear we value and respect them.

When we do, chances are greatly increased that we will win the trust of the child and parents, gather the information we need, reduce trauma for the entire family, and help them achieve the positive outcomes we seek. ♦



How does forensic interviewing fit with family-centered practice?

## WHAT IS FORENSIC INTERVIEWING?

Forensic interviewing is a first step in most child protective services (CPS) investigations, one in which a professional interviews a child to find out if he or she has been maltreated. In addition to yielding the information needed to make a determination about whether abuse or neglect has occurred, this approach produces evidence that will stand up in court if the investigation leads to criminal prosecution. Properly conducted forensic interviews are legally sound in part because they ensure the interviewer's objectivity, employ non-leading techniques, and emphasize careful documentation of the interview.

A fuller understanding of forensic interviewing and its role in child welfare can be gained by comparing it with **social work interviewing**, another type of interviewing commonly used by child welfare workers. The social work interview allows social workers to assess and identify a family's strengths and needs and develop a service plan with the family. This broad, versatile approach incorporates the use of a variety of interviewing techniques. Social work interviewing is used at every step of child welfare, from intake through case closure; it is used with individuals and groups, children and adults.

Although it employs some of the same techniques as the social work interview, such as open-ended and forced choice questions, the forensic interview is much more focused. Generally it is used only during the assessment portion of a CPS investigation, and involves only the children who are the subject of the investigation.

Although of vital importance in investigations where it is likely substantiation will lead to criminal prosecution, such as cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, forensic interviews occur in virtually all CPS investigations. Mark Everson, an expert on forensic interviewing with the Child Forensic Evaluation Program, emphasizes that even in responding to reports of neglect, when workers begin exploring the allegations with a child,

"they should approach this as a forensic interview, not as casual conversation."

### WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

Because most perpetrators deny the abuse and most acts of maltreatment are not witnessed, the victim's statement is critical evidence in child abuse cases. Yet developmental issues, such as children's varying abilities to recall events and use language, as well as the trauma they may have experienced, complicate efforts to obtain information about the abuse. The forensic interview is designed to overcome these obstacles (HCCAC, 1999).

The goal of the forensic interview is to obtain a statement from a child in an objective, developmentally sensitive, and legally defensible manner (Davies, et al., 1997). To ensure facts are gathered in a way that will stand up in court, forensic interviews are carefully controlled: the interviewer's statements and body language must be neutral, alternative explanations for a child's statements are thoroughly explored, and the results of the interview are documented in such a way that they can bear judicial scrutiny.

### WHO, WHEN, AND WHERE

In North Carolina, the backgrounds and professions of the individuals who conduct forensic interviews vary from community to community, and from investigation to investigation. Sometimes they are conducted only by child welfare workers in the field; sometimes another, secondary forensic interview is conducted by a therapist or other specially-trained professional in a controlled, child-friendly environment.

**Initial Interviews.** In most North Carolina counties, initial forensic interviews are conducted by CPS investigators because state law (NCGS § 7B-302) requires that, once it accepts a report that a child has been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused, CPS must have immediate face-to-face contact with the child. During this meeting, which must occur within 24 hours after the report is made, child welfare workers assess risk and determine

whether steps need to be taken to ensure the child's immediate safety. Forensic interviewing can be quite useful at this juncture.

Child welfare workers often conduct these interviews in whatever private place they can find, such as their cars or empty classrooms. Although expedient, these "improvised" settings may not be ideal. Because a person's ability to recall past events is significantly influenced by his or her surroundings, best practice in forensic interviewing—even if it occurs "in the field"—means identifying prior to the interview a location that is neutral, reassuring, and child-friendly.

The extent of initial forensic interviews by CPS workers can be influenced by a number of factors. These include the specific circumstances being investigated (for example, the child may need to be referred for a medical examination, which is often accompanied by a secondary forensic interview); the investigating DSS's proximity to and ability to access forensic interviewing resources (such as child advocacy centers); the protocols and procedures adopted by each agency (since we have a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system, each DSS sets its own policies regarding interagency collaboration and use of outside resources); and the worker's skill and comfort level.

One of the objectives of forensic interviewing is to reduce the number of times children are interviewed. The concern is **contamination** of the child's memory of the incident(s) being investigated. Research and clinical experience indicate that the more times a child—especially a young child—is interviewed about alleged abuse, the less reliable and legally defensible that child's testimony may become (Sattler, 1998).

Lauren Flick, a psychologist *cont. p. 3*

**Forensic: (adj.) suitable for a law court, public debate, or formal argumentation.**

who has conducted more than 3,000 child interviews, describes contamination this way: “If I am the first person to talk to a child about an event, that event is like a design on the bottom of swimming pool filled with clear water—it is easy to read. But each conversation this child has with someone about the alleged abuse clouds the water. If he has talked with his principal, parents, a police officer, etc., it can be very hard or impossible to discern the design at the bottom of the pool.”

### **Secondary Forensic Interviews.**

More in-depth forensic interviews sometimes occur after the initial stages of a CPS investigation. These are usually conducted by specially-trained psychologists or professionals with graduate-level education in the areas relevant to this type of interviewing. These interviews usually take place at centers that facilitate the interview process—therapists and doctors sometimes have such facilities, as do most providers of child medical evalu-

ations. Child advocacy centers (CACs) can be excellent resources for forensic interviewing. CACs offer comfortable rooms with children’s furniture, toys, interviewing props, and other aids for observing and documenting interviews. (To learn more about CACs in North Carolina, see page 6.) Agencies should work with CACs and other secondary forensic interviewing resources to avoid harmful delays—some providers can schedule interviews within days, but others can take much longer.

### **MULTIDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS**

In North Carolina, as in other states, forensic interviews can be multidisciplinary, meaning that more than one agency participates in or observes the interview. The two agencies most commonly involved in multidisciplinary investigations are DSS and law enforcement, but other frequent participants include representatives of men-

tal health, the district attorney’s office, and others. Those in favor of multidisciplinary investigations argue that they:

- **Reduce** the number of child interviews, thereby reducing stress on the child. Repeatedly asking a child to relive abuse amounts to revictimization.
- **Improve evidence quality** so that perpetrators can be held accountable for harming children and the public can be protected.

Close collaboration and joint investigation of serious child physical and sexual abuse by county DSS’s and law enforcement does occur in North Carolina, but because we have a state-supervised, county-administered system, the degree of collaboration varies from county to county.

### **IMPACT**

Since the 1980s, child welfare systems have embraced the forensic interview because it promised to be a tool that would help them investigate reports of child maltreatment and keep children safe. What impact have forensic investiga- *cont. p. 8*

## **HOW TO BE FAMILY-CENTERED WHILE INVESTIGATING “TOUGH” CASES**

Cooperation, which increases the chances that the issues that brought the family to the agency’s attention will be resolved successfully, is possible even when coercion is required (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). The following family-centered suggestions may help you inspire family cooperation, even during investigations of reports of serious child abuse and neglect.

**Take time to engage families.** Your relationship with the family is at the heart of your investigation and everything that follows. Invest the time needed to build a rapport with the family and you will probably obtain more and better information, and you and others from your agency will have a solid foundation for working with the family. Here your ability to **listen empathically** is key—when you listen respectfully, with an open mind, and withholding judgment, families feel heard and understood, defensiveness becomes unnecessary, and solutions can be sought (BIABH, 2002). Underlying principle: *Everyone needs to be heard.*

**Look for family strengths.** Point out positives to the family when you learn about them. Use strengths-based language in your documentation. Underlying principle: *Everyone has strengths.*

**Help families with transitions.** Be clear, informative, and supportive as you explain things to the family, and whenever it is time to move to the next step in the process. Underlying principle: *Families are our partners.*

**Give families empowering choices.** Research tells us that when clients feel they have been given a say and presented with options, they respond favorably (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Underlying principle: *Partners share power.*

**Pay attention to the words you use.** Present information in as non-threatening a way as possible. Practice using nonadversarial, nonauthoritarian language before you interact with families. For example, you may wish to come up with alternatives to phrases such as, “I’m not at liberty to say.” Underlying principle: *Judgments can wait.*

**Provide families with constructive alternatives.** If alcohol is contributing to a safety risk, it is not enough to tell a parent to stop drinking. “Change and safety in child protection is about the presence of something new, not just the absence of risk” (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Underlying principle: *Families are our partners.*

**Exercise your authority only when necessary.** Invoking your authority is easier and requires less skill than being family-centered. Avoid, to the extent possible, actions that minimize/undermine parents’ power. Instead, look for opportunities to put the family in a position of authority—for example, by asking for permission, when appropriate. People are more disclosing, open, and cooperative if they don’t feel threatened and judged. Underlying principles: *Families are our partners, and Partners share power.*

## CONDUCTING FORENSIC INTERVIEWS

Because forensic interviews can play a pivotal role in investigations of sexual and emotional abuse of children, child protective services (CPS) workers need to know how they are conducted.

### MANY MODELS AND TECHNIQUES

The first important point to know about forensic interviews is that there are many ways to conduct them, and that there is no single model or method endorsed unanimously by experts in the field. Some of the many forensic interviewing models in use today are the Child Cognitive Interview, Step-Wise Interview, and Narrative Elaboration. Like many of the others in existence, these three have been shown to be more effective at helping children recall information than standard interviewing techniques. For example, one study found that school-aged children trained in Narrative Elaboration provided 53% more accurate information in a narrative report of a past school activity than did children in a control group who received no intervention (Saywitz & Goodman, 1996).

There are, however, some basic elements common to most forensic interviews, which usually include phases such as introduction, rapport building, developmental assessment (including learning the child's names for different body parts), guidelines for the interview, competency assessment (where, among other things, it is determined if the child knows the difference between lying and telling the truth), narrative description of the event or events under investigation, follow-up questions, clarification, and closure (Cordisco & Carnes, 2002). Forensic interviews may also incorporate the use of aids and props, such as anatomically detailed dolls, anatomical diagrams, dollhouses, puppets, etc. Despite the differences that exist in the approaches interviewers take, it is possible to get a general sense of what a forensic interview is like. To do this, we will examine the Step-Wise Interview.

### THE STEP-WISE INTERVIEW

Developed by researcher John Yuille and his colleagues, the Step-Wise interview employs techniques to: minimize any trauma the child may experience during the interview; maximize the amount and quality of the information obtained from the child while, at the same time, minimizing any contamination of that information; and maintain the integrity of the investigative process for the agencies involved. The steps in this method begin with the most open, least leading, least suggestive form of questioning and, if necessary, proceed to more specific and more leading questioning (Gray, 1994). For an illustration of the different types of questions asked during this method and where they fall in the continuum of leading/non-leading questions, see the figure on page 5.

The Step-Wise method begins with a **rapport building** phase during which the interviewer puts the child at ease by asking

questions about the child's interests. During this phase, the rules for the interview are discussed (e.g., "If you are unsure about an answer, please say so") and the child's level of development (e.g., linguistic, cognitive), body language, and affect are assessed. The child is commonly asked to recount two specific past experiences, such as a school outing, etc. The interviewer uses these narratives as a basis for assessing the level of detail the child ordinarily conveys, and also as a way to teach the child to tell a story in a way that fits with the "rules" of the interview.

The interviewer then introduces the **topic of concern** with a general question such as "Do you know why we are talking today?" The objective at this phase is to encourage the child to give an unprompted, free narrative account of the event under investigation. Younger children are less responsive to this kind of prompt. After the child has exhausted his or her free narrative, the interviewer moves to **questioning**. This begins with open-ended questions and then, if necessary, the interviewer proceeds to employ specific, but non-leading questions, closed questions, and leading questions. As indicated in the figure on page 5, as the interviewer descends in this hierarchy of questions, he or she can have less confidence in the accuracy of the child's responses, which make them less useful either for drawing a conclusion about abuse or as forensic evidence.

The interviewer ends the Step-Wise interview by thanking the child for participating, asking if the child has any questions, and explaining what will happen next (Flick & Caye, 2001; Yuille, et al., 1993; Gray, 1994).

### MUCH MORE TO KNOW

In its guidelines for investigative interviewing in cases of alleged child abuse (1997), the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) states that "Investigative interviewing in cases of alleged abuse requires specialized knowledge. This knowledge can be acquired in a variety of ways (e.g., formal course work, individual reading, workshops and conferences, professional experience and supervision), and should include familiarity with basic concepts of child development, communication abilities of children, dynamics of abuse and offenders, categories of information necessary for a thorough investigation, legally acceptable child interviewing techniques, and the use of interview aids (such as drawings or anatomical dolls). Specialized knowledge is especially important when young children are interviewed."

Clearly, transmitting useful knowledge about this *cont. p. 5*



All CPS workers need to know how and why forensic interviews are conducted.

wide range of fields is beyond the scope of this brief newsletter. We can, however, tell you about resources that will help you build your knowledge in this vitally important area. Yet it is important to recognize that written materials cannot adequately prepare you for forensic interviewing, which should not be undertaken without sufficient training, observation, and practice. That said, we suggest you consult the sources listed in the references on page 7 to learn more.

### TRAINING ON FORENSIC INTERVIEWING

Just as there is no one "right" method of performing a forensic interview, there is no one training or credentialing program for forensic interviewers. There are, however, several programs on the national level that have been recognized as the "gold standard" of training in this area. One of the best known is *Finding Words*, an intensive, five-day course that instructs teams of child abuse professionals in the art of interviewing children about abuse and defending that interview in court. To learn more, call Grant Bauer (703/518-4385) at the American Prosecutors Research Institute. APSAC also offers 40-hour foren-

sic interviewing training clinics. To be added to the waiting list and receive information about future clinics, e-mail a request to [www.APSACEduc@aol.com](mailto:www.APSACEduc@aol.com) including your name, affiliation, address, phone, fax, and e-mail address. To learn more, visit <http://www.apsac.org/training/clinics.html>.

In the realm of child welfare training, North Carolina provides child welfare workers with a useful introduction to forensic interviewing through its course, *Introduction to Child Sexual Abuse*. During this advanced-level curriculum, participants learn about and have an opportunity to practice the Step-Wise method and other techniques used in forensic interviews. To learn when and where this course will be offered, consult your agency's copy of the Division's current training schedule, or visit [http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/training\\_schedule/train\\_sched\\_welcome.htm](http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/training_schedule/train_sched_welcome.htm). Training in forensic interviewing may also be available through North Carolina's Area Health Education Centers. To access their on-line calendars, visit <http://www.med.unc.edu/ahec/calendars.htm>. Your local child advocacy center (CAC) may also offer training in this area. ♦

## A Continuum of Types of Questions To Be Used in Interviewing Children Alleged to Have Been Sexually Abused

Kathleen Coulborn Faller, MSW, PhD

Question Type	Example	Child Response	
<b>Open-Ended</b> 	A. General*	Do you know why you came to see me today?	To tell you about my daddy.
	B. Focused	How do you get along with your daddy?	OK, except when he babysits for me.
		What happens when he babysits?	He plays a game with my hole.
		What does he use to play with your hole?	His "wiener."
	C. Multiple Choice	Does he play with your hole with his finger, his "wiener," or something else?	He used his "wiener."
		Did he say anything about telling or not telling?	Don't tell or you'll get punished.
		Did you have your clothes off or on, or some off and some on?	I took my pants off.
	D. Yes-No Questions	Did he tell you not to tell?	Yup.
		Did you have your clothes off?	No, just my panties.
	<b>Close-Ended</b> 	E. Leading Questions**	He took your clothes off, didn't he?
Didn't he stick his "wiener" in your hole?			Yup.
			<b>More Confidence</b>  <b>Less Confidence</b>

\*Children usually are not very responsive to general questions. \*\*Not appropriate when interviewing children.

Source: Faller, K. C. (1993). *Child sexual abuse: Intervention and treatment issues*. Washington, DC: USDHHS Administration for Children and Families. Online <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/pubs/usermanuals/sexabuse/index.cfm>.

## IMPORTANT RESOURCES RELATED TO FORENSIC INTERVIEWING IN NC

A description of child forensic interviewing in North Carolina would not be complete without information about the following resources.

### THE CFEP

When asked about resources to assist them with investigations, experienced North Carolina child welfare workers may think of the Child Mental Health Evaluation Program (CMHEP). However, this program is being phased out, to be replaced by the **Child Forensic Evaluation Program (CFEP)**. Although this transition is not yet complete—the CMHEP is still in operation and the CFEP is still in a pilot phase—this article will concentrate on a description of the CFEP.

The CFEP provides brief forensic evaluations for children and adolescents who are being actively investigated by child protective services (CPS) as possible victims of abuse or neglect. This program is administered through the UNC Chapel Hill-based Child Medical Evaluation Program (CMEP). CFEP services are available free of charge to departments of social services in all 100 North Carolina counties when there is an open investigative assessment. Funding of the program is handled directly by the CFEP—no local funds are involved.

The CFEP serves such a broad geographical area by certifying doctoral- and masters-level mental health professionals with specialized training in conducting abuse-focused evaluations. There are 80 or so child forensic evaluators working with the CFEP at present; efforts are underway to identify and certify additional evaluators.

Funding is provided for a brief forensic mental health evaluation of the child (up to 12 hours for one child in the family and an additional 8 hours for each additional child) as part of the investigation and case disposition. During this process, the CFEP's child forensic examiners interview the child and others to determine whether the child has been abused or neglected, who the perpetrator might be, and the nature and

extent of the abuse or neglect. The CFEP cannot be used to replace medical evaluations and interviews or to fund the examiner's court testimony.

Although still in a pilot phase—there is only enough funding available to subsidize 100 CFEP evaluations this year—it is anticipated the CFEP will replace the CHEP within the next few years.

When preparing the CFEP's child forensic examiners for child interviews, child welfare workers should keep their questions specific and focused on the determination of abuse or neglect. The child forensic examiner may also answer questions about the child's safety from further abuse/neglect and possible changes needed to ensure the child's well-being.

To access the CFEP, social workers should complete the Authorization Request for Child Forensic or Mental Health Evaluation and the form DSS 5143 and fax or mail these forms to the CMEP office. After the case is approved for funding, the form will be returned to you. You may then schedule an appointment with any CFEP-approved examiner in North Carolina. Take the authorization form and the 5143 to the provider. The completed report will be sent to you by the provider.

A list of CME and CFEP providers is available at the CMEP/CFEP office (t: 919/843-9365; f: 919/843-9368; <http://www.med.unc.edu/peds/cmep/welcome.htm>).

### CHILD ADVOCACY CENTERS

CPS investigators should also know about North Carolina's growing network of **child advocacy centers (CACs)**. Right now there are 20 CACs in North Carolina, some of which serve large geographical areas—the Tedi Bear Center in Greenville, for example, works with 30 counties in its region. These loosely-affiliated community centers provide support and services for abused children and the agencies that serve them. Child-focused and child-friendly, these centers often contain facilities for conducting

child interviews, complete with comfortable children's furniture, toys, interviewing props, and other aids for observing and documenting interviews.

CACs provide trained, experienced forensic interviewers who can also testify effectively in court. CAC-based interviewers may be certified to conduct child forensic examinations through the CFEP.

CACs also exist to encourage a multidisciplinary review of child abuse cases. They do so by providing space where representatives from many disciplines can meet to discuss and make decisions about investigation, treatment, and prosecution of child abuse cases. CACs bring together all the professionals and agencies needed to offer comprehensive services under one roof—including CPS, law enforcement, prosecution, mental health, and the medical community. CACs produce a variety of benefits for their communities, including more coordinated, effective responses to child abuse reports, more efficient medical and mental health referrals, a reduction in the number of child victim interviews, and consistent support for child victims and their families.

Because they are community-based and designed by professionals and volunteers to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve, the services and programs offered through CACs can vary across the state. Child advocacy centers may offer facilities for conducting medical exams, educational resources and support for victims and their families, and interviewing training for social workers and other professionals.

If you are a North Carolina child welfare worker and do not know if there is a CAC serving your community, please visit <http://www.nca-online.org/states/northcarolina.html>, a listing of North Carolina's CACs found on the web site of the National Children's Alliance Headquarters. ♦

## INTERAGENCY PROTOCOLS

It is hard to discuss forensic interviewing without talking about the overlap that often occurs between child welfare services and law enforcement in some child maltreatment investigations. Indeed, North Carolina state law requires that evidence of abuse be reported to law enforcement and the district attorney. The N.C. Division of Social Services believes that this close working relationship with law enforcement is an integral component of child welfare services. It therefore encourages all counties—especially those participating in the Multiple Response System (MRS) pilot—to develop a close working relationship with law enforcement.

An important facet of building this relationship is the development of written agreements or protocols that spell out how each agency will respond to child abuse investigations. The common goals that make these protocols so helpful are the desire to keep children safe, to hold perpetrators accountable for harming children, to reduce the number of interviews for children, and to enhance the evidence-gathering process for law enforcement (NCDSS, 2002).

The level of cooperation that occurs between child welfare and law enforcement agencies in North Carolina varies. Factors that contribute to this variability include the prerogatives agency directors have in a state-supervised, county-administered system; the size and complexity of the communities being served (e.g., in some counties, child welfare agencies must develop independent relationships and agreements with multiple law enforcement agencies); historical relationships; and the personalities currently involved.

As Orange County DSS's Denise Shaffer notes, this last factor is often the most important when it comes to collaborating on forensic interviews and other activities. Although she says her county has had an excellent written protocol with law enforcement agencies for some time, it all comes down to the people involved. "If you don't have solid, respectful relationships with other professionals—which, thankfully, we do—the protocol is just a piece of paper."

If you wish to see an example of an interagency protocol, please visit <[http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol8\\_no1.htm](http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol8_no1.htm)>. ♦

## GOALS SHARED BY PROFESSIONS INVOLVED IN FORENSIC INTERVIEWS

Although they differ on their particular short-term objectives, all the various disciplines involved in forensic interviewing hope to:

- Stop future abuse by the same perpetrator of a child who is identified as a victim
- Intervene with the child and family to reduce the probability of re-victimization of the child by future perpetrators
- Prevent "secondary victimization" of the child by the system
- Reduce chances the perpetrator will victimize other children in the future
- Promote healthy ways for families to interact and healthy ways for children to form relationships with others
- Prevent other future behavioral/emotional/lifestyle problems associated with a child sexual abuse history, such as substance abuse, joining in exploitative adult relationships, criminal lifestyles, mental health problems, raising children who become abused, etc.

These overall goals could be expressed in even simpler terms: all agencies involved in forensic interviews wish to foster **healthier and safer relationships** for children and to **prevent further exploitation and harm**. (Adapted from Holmes, 2001)

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## WHAT IS FORENSIC INTERVIEWING? *continued from page 3*

tions had on child and family outcomes, and on the community as a whole?

**Prosecution and conviction.** Although punishment of child abusers is not a goal of child welfare—our focus is on children's safety, well-being, and permanence, and on supporting families—many people do view conviction of offenders as a positive community outcome. Therefore, it is reasonable for us to ask: does forensic interviewing result in more prosecutions and convictions of child abusers?

Unfortunately, we don't know. There are no national or state statistics that effectively track this phenomenon. This lack of information is primarily a result of the inability of child welfare and criminal justice systems to coordinate data they collect. Until they do, we will have no clear understanding of how forensic interviewing affects what happens to child abusers.

The information we do have suggests that less than half (42%) of substantiated child sexual abuse cases—cases likely to have used forensic interviewing—are forwarded for prosecution. "When prosecutions occur, the major-

ity—about 75% in one study—result in convictions. However, most of these convictions (over 90%) result from guilty pleas and plea bargains . . . Even when accused sex abusers are convicted, their sentences are not terribly stiff. Studies suggest that 32% to 46% of convicted child sexual abusers serve no jail time. Only 19% receive sentences longer than one year" (Finkelhor, 1994).

**Reduction in child trauma.** Traumatization can occur each time a child relates an abusive incident. This is why forensic interviewing, especially when done in a multidisciplinary way, is so appealing—it fits well both with our efforts to safeguard and enhance child well-being and with the social work code of ethics, which prohibits us from causing harm to our clients.

### CONCLUSION

The forensic interview is a crucial tool in child welfare in North Carolina. Forensic interviewing is often the only way an agency can learn enough to make a fact-based determination of whether child abuse has occurred. Forensic in-

terviewing can also yield information DSS needs to build a safety plan for the child and to support the child's family.

Forensic interviewing is important for the way it brings child welfare agencies together with other community and state agencies. Because it is used so often in combination with a multidisciplinary response to child maltreatment, forensic interviewing helps professionals learn about each other's roles and how the larger system serving families and children operates. It enables these professionals to see that, despite differences in their missions, human services and law enforcement agencies share two common goals: fostering healthier, safer relationships for children and preventing further exploitation and harm. ♦

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**Forensic interviewing is important for the way it brings child welfare together with other disciplines.**

## IN THIS ISSUE: FORENSIC INTERVIEWING AND CHILD WELFARE SERVICES IN NORTH CAROLINA

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