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Child forensic interviewing in Children's Advocacy Centers: Empirical data on a practice model[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) aim to improve child forensic interviewing following allegations of child abuse by coordinating multiple investigations, providing child-friendly interviewing locations, and limiting redundant interviewing. This analysis presents one of the first rigorous evaluations of CACs' implementation of these methods.

Methods: This analysis is part of a quasi-experimental study, the Multi-Site Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers, which evaluated four CACs relative to within-state non-CAC comparison communities. Case abstractors collected data on investigation methods in 1,069 child sexual abuse cases with forensic interviews by reviewing case records from multiple agencies.

Results: CAC cases were more likely than comparison cases to feature police involvement in CPS cases (41% vs. 15%), multidisciplinary team (MDT) interviews (28% vs. 6%), case reviews (56% vs. 7%), joint police/child protective services (CPS) investigations (81% vs. 52%) and video/audiotaping of interviews (52% vs. 17%, all these comparisons $p < .001$). CACs varied in which coordination methods they used, and some comparison communities also used certain coordination methods more than the CAC with which they were paired. Eighty-five percent of

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CAC interviews took place in child-friendly CAC facilities, while notable proportions of comparison interviews took place at CPS offices (22%), police facilities (18%), home (16%), or school (19%). Ninety-five percent of children had no more than two forensic interviews, and CAC and comparison differences on number of interviews were mostly non-significant.

Conclusions: Relative to the comparison communities, these CACs appear to have increased coordination on investigations and child forensic interviewing. The CAC setting was the location for the vast majority of CAC child interviews, while comparison communities often used settings that many consider undesirable. CACs showed no advantage on reducing the number of forensic interviews, which was consistently small across the sample.

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Introduction

One of the primary goals of Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) is to improve child forensic interviewing following allegations of child sexual abuse. They aim to coordinate law enforcement, child protective, medical, and other agencies, and typically use a single interviewer to provide information to every investigator involved in the case. CACs have spread rapidly, as enrollment in the National Children's Alliance (NCA), the membership organization of CACs, has grown from 22 in 1992 to over 650 accredited or associate centers in 2007 (National Children's Alliance, 2007). In 2004, NCA member CACs served more than 148,000 children (National Children's Alliance, n.d., a), and that number has undoubtedly increased. Many communities, however, do not have a CAC and may use more traditional methods of investigative interviewing in which agencies work independently.

Traditional methods for interviewing children have often been criticized as ineffective in assessing the truth and unnecessarily stressful for children (see, e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Whitcomb, 1992). Three specific criticisms of these methods are that (1) investigation activities and decision-making are not coordinated across the multiple agencies involved, (2) children are interviewed too many times by too many interviewers and have to "tell their story over and over again," and (3) children are interviewed in stressful or compromising locations that disturb them further and make it difficult to talk. CACs have aimed to change the practice of forensic child interviewing by coordinating multiple investigations, limiting the number of interviews and interviewers children have, and providing "child friendly" locations for interviews. Methods to promote these outcomes are codified as accreditation standards by the National Children's Alliance (NCA), the membership organization for CACs (National Children's Alliance, n.d., b). Given the contrast of the accreditation standards with traditional methods, forensic interviewing should differ in CACs from communities without CACs. Few studies, however, have compared CAC and non-CAC methods. Given the substantial effort devoted to creating CACs, the promise ascribed to them, and child victims' needs for protection and support, it is essential that the child abuse professional field evaluate CACs to see whether they can really implement positive changes in investigation.

This analysis focuses on *investigative* or forensic interviews by police, child protective services and other professionals to assess the truth about a suspicion of child abuse following an official report. It should be noted that children may be questioned several times by parents, teachers, pediatricians, or

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