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Do Children's Advocacy Centers improve families' experiences of child sexual abuse investigations?☆

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Abstract

Objective: The Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) model of child abuse investigation is designed to be more child and family-friendly than traditional methods, but there have been no rigorous studies of their effect on children's and caregivers' experience. Data collected as part of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers were used to examine whether CACs improve caregivers' and children's satisfaction with investigations.

Methods: Nonoffending caregiver and child satisfaction were assessed during research interviews, including the administration of a 14-item Investigation Satisfaction Scale (ISS) for caregivers. Two hundred and twenty-nine sexual abuse cases investigated through a CAC were compared to 55 cases investigated in communities with no CAC.

Results: Hierarchical linear regression results indicated that caregivers in CAC cases were more satisfied with the investigation than those from comparison sites, even after controlling for a number of relevant variables. There were few differences between CAC and comparison samples on children's satisfaction. Children described moderate to high satisfaction with the investigation, while a minority expressed concerns about their experience.

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Conclusions: The CAC model shows promise for improving families' experiences, but to build upon this promise, agencies will need to systematize procedures for refining and adapting the model as new research becomes available. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; Children's Advocacy Centers; Client satisfaction; Forensic interviews; Multidisciplinary coordination

Introduction

Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) seek to increase multidisciplinary coordination in sexual abuse investigations and provide an independent, child-friendly environment for forensic interviews, increase training for interviewers, and increase children's access to medical and therapeutic services. The agencies have developed rapidly: in 2007, over 650 CACs had been established in all 50 states in the U.S., a dramatic increase from the 22 centers registered in 1992 (National Children's Alliance, 2007). Although CACs vary and emphasize different objectives, all aim to improve the experience of children and families with sexual abuse investigations (Walsh, Jones, & Cross, 2003), and this outcome could be considered a primary goal of the model. This study presents results from new instruments measuring caregivers' and children's experiences with child abuse investigations. Responses by families served by CACs are compared to those from families served in communities without a CAC.

CAC efforts to improve families' experiences

Numerous child advocates have expressed concern that the professional response to sexual abuse allegations could unduly exacerbate children's and caregivers' stress, particularly when multiple investigating agencies are involved (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Goodman et al., 1992; Henry, 1997; Newberger, 1987; Runyan, Everson, Edelsohn, Hunter, & Coulter, 1988; Sas, Hurley, Hatch, Malla, & Dick, 1993; Weiss & Berg, 1982). One concern has been that children may be distressed by multiple and redundant child protective service (CPS) and criminal justice interviews (Jaudes & Martone, 1992; Tedesco & Schnell, 1987; also see Cross, Jones, Walsh, Simone, & Kolko, 2007). Lack of sensitivity by investigators could also cause children distress. Untrained investigators may rely on suggestive questioning and make other interviewing errors (Wood & Garven, 2000) confusing children and making it harder for them to answer questions (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Children may also be stressed by the environments in which forensic interviews are conducted. Traditionally, child forensic interviews have taken place in police departments, schools, and CPS offices. Such settings may be intimidating for children and could increase children's beliefs that they are in trouble or have done something wrong. Guidelines for improving child forensic interview procedures include recommendations to create a comfortable and developmentally appropriate interview environment for children (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997; American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1997; U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, 1999).

Despite the concerns, research suggests that children's impression of investigations is generally positive (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Davies, Seymour, & Read, 2000; Sas et al., 1993). Support and sensitivity conveyed by investigators appear to be key factors in children's evaluation of the process. Identification of a trusted professional is related to lower trauma scores for children (Henry, 1997) and more positive

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