

## **Development of the National Children's Advocacy Center's Child Forensic Interview Structure**

The National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) was established in 1985 under the guidance of former Congressman Robert E. "Bud" Cramer in Huntsville, Alabama. Then District Attorney Cramer and a group of committed professionals envisioned a child and family friendly center where law enforcement and child protective services would coordinate the investigation of allegations of child abuse. The birth of the NCAC marked the beginning of children's advocacy centers (CACs), a model approach to child abuse that has been adopted by over 900 communities nationwide.

An essential component of the CAC approach is the provision of high-quality, non-duplicative, and non-leading forensic interviews of children. While child protection and police officers have been questioning children for years, the tremendous surge in research conducted since the mid-1990s shows that a child's ability to disclose abuse is impacted by many variables: age and developmental stage, memory development, history of traumatic experiences, and the influence of culture and family environment. Research also shows that the success and accuracy of the interview is greatly influenced by the skill of the interviewer: the use of effective questioning strategies, an ease in building rapport with a variety of children, and flexibility to adapt to different developmental and narrative abilities. While forensic interviews may be conducted by investigators or by child interview specialists, best practice recommends that children be interviewed by trained personnel in a child friendly location.

In 1998, the NCAC launched a Training Academy for child protection professionals in conjunction with the National Children's Alliance and the Regional Children's Advocacy Centers. Money for the development and early implementation of the training, again under the leadership of Congressman Cramer, came from a supplemental discretionary grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The Training Academy offered three types of trainings: Multidisciplinary Team training, CAC Management training, and a week-long training for Investigative (Forensic) Interviewers. In developing a curriculum for each of the trainings, separate workgroup committees were established. The Investigative Interviewing training committee was chaired by Connie Carnes, Clinical Director of the NCAC and committee

members included Dr. Thomas Lyon, Dr. Karen Saywitz, Pauline Lucero-Esquivel, Dr. Sandra Hewitt, Deborah Davies, Donna Pence, Erin Sorenson, and Ann Graffam-Walker.

Since Forensic Interviewing training was implemented in 1999 at the NCAC, class sizes have been limited to 30 to 35 trainees per session, in order to foster a dynamic and unique learning experience. All information and techniques presented are research-based and reflect “best practices” in interviewing. Practicing forensic interviewers serve as the training faculty. In 2001 the Investigative Interviewing Training was renamed Forensic Interviewing of Children and became a standard NCAC training offering. Between 1999 and 2018, a total of 281 Basic Forensic Interviewing trainings have been provided to 6,936 trainees, at the NCAC campus and in communities throughout the U.S. and in other countries. NCAC has also provided Forensic Interviewing training to U.S. Navy and Air Force personnel, Spanish speaking interviewers, Navajo tribal investigators and social workers, and the United Nations. Out of the 281 Basic Forensic Interviewing trainings provided, over 4,023 people have received the full one-week training, which includes: lecture, skills practice, observation of interviews, a child interview practicum day, and a day on legal considerations. Additionally, over 3,180 forensic interviewers have attended one of 122 Advanced Forensic Interviewing trainings. These trainings focus on special issues in interviewing and/or special populations, along with peer review of actual child interviews.

The NCAC Child Forensic Interview Structure has been presented at national and international conferences including the Annual San Diego *International Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment*, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Colloquium, the NCAC’s *International Symposium on Child Abuse*, the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect’s annual conference, the annual conference of the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect, and numerous state conferences.

The NCAC Child Forensic Interview Structure grew out of the curriculum developed through the advisory workgroup, ongoing trainings, and review of the literature and research in 2003. To ensure that each component of the interview structure reflects evolving best practice, as defined by the most current research, the model is reviewed annually for appropriate additions or adaptations, by a panel of practicing experts.