



## A grounded theory study of collaboration in multidisciplinary teams

Teresa L. Young & Debra Nelson-Gardell

To cite this article: Teresa L. Young & Debra Nelson-Gardell (2018): A grounded theory study of collaboration in multidisciplinary teams, Journal of Public Child Welfare, DOI: [10.1080/15548732.2018.1436112](https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2018.1436112)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2018.1436112>



Published online: 06 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## A grounded theory study of collaboration in multidisciplinary teams

Teresa L. Young<sup>a</sup> and Debra Nelson-Gardell<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Clinical Health Sciences, Texas A&M University Kingsville, Kingsville, TX, USA; <sup>b</sup>School of Social Work, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

### ABSTRACT

The multidisciplinary team response to child abuse emerged during the 1980s as increasing numbers of reports brought recognition that one agency alone lacked the expertise and resources to effectively deal with this complex issue. Using constructivist grounded theory, we interviewed a diverse sample of frontline team members about how they perceived collaboration and working with representatives from different agencies responsible for child abuse investigations. The study revealed how team members rely upon relationships built over time through shared experiences to facilitate communication and information sharing. Findings suggest multidisciplinary team members face challenges and collaborative relationships may mitigate these circumstances.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2017  
Revised 23 January 2018  
Accepted 30 January 2018

### KEYWORDS

Grounded theory; child abuse; multidisciplinary team; collaboration

The multidisciplinary team response to child abuse in the United States emerged during the 1980s in response to increasing numbers of child abuse reports involving allegations of suspected child sexual abuse and the need to coordinate diminishing community resources more efficiently (Jacobson, 2001). Through the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study obtained the perspectives of frontline multidisciplinary team members to develop a theory to explain how collaboration affects team functioning in child abuse investigations.

For this study, we relied on Appley and Winder (1977) who defined collaboration as:

A relational system in which: (1) individuals in a group share mutual aspirations and a common conceptual framework; (2) the interactions among individuals are characterized by “justice as fairness”; and (3) these aspirations and conceptualizations are characterized by each individual’s *consciousness* of his/her motives toward the other, by *caring* or concern for the other, and by *commitment* to work with the other over time provided that this commitment is a matter of *choice*. (p. 281)

The findings describe the importance of collaborative relationships built over time through shared experiences and the need for additional research focused on more effective communication and information sharing to improve outcomes for children and families involved in child abuse cases.

## **Background and significance**

Understanding the relevance of collaboration among these professionals requires a brief retrospective of the evolution of the multidisciplinary team response to child abuse in the United States. In 1974, the U.S. federal government enacted the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in response to increasing concerns expressed by medical professionals and others about the need to support states in the assessment, investigation, and prosecution of suspected child abuse (Children's Bureau, 2017). In response, many states that previously did not require reporting of suspected child abuse, implemented mandatory child abuse reporting statutes. These policies resulted in a significant increase in child abuse reports during the decade that followed. Amid these increasing numbers of child abuse reports, one landmark court case caught the media's attention and caused legal investigative and prosecutory systems to come under scrutiny. In 1983, the McMartin Preschool investigation in Los Angeles involved the arrest of daycare center owners charged with more than 300 counts of child abuse (Faller, 1996; Garven, Wood, Malpass, & Shaw, 1998; Scheriber et al., 2006). The 4-year investigation preceded one of the longest court actions in American history involving two trials that occurred over a period of another 3 years. Allegations of pornography and ritualistic child abuse fueled the initial attention given the McMartin case, but eventually the media focused on what they called the failure of the child welfare and legal investigative systems to coordinate activities and the belief that coercive interview techniques resulted in false allegations. In 1990, the case ended when all criminal charges against the adults were either acquitted or dismissed (Faller, 1996).

From this high-profile case and similar ones, concerns emerged about investigative procedures that involved multiple interviews, intrusive medical procedures, separation from support systems, intimidating courtroom procedures and tactics, and lack of communication and information sharing among investigative agencies that were believed to cause additional trauma to abused children and their families (Jacobson, 2001; Kolbo & Strong, 1997). Government agencies began to view interagency cooperation and collaboration as a way to maximize limited resources by bringing together different disciplines to deal with the complex issues associated with child abuse. In an effort to use the available resources more effectively and reduce the potential for systemic trauma to children, the U.S. federal government enacted the Children's Justice and Assistance Act of 1986 that encouraged states to establish multidisciplinary task groups aimed at improving the investigation and prosecution of child

abuse cases (Jacobson, 2001). The efforts of these task groups led to increased recognition for the need to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to child abuse and the development of teams based on the needs and resources of local communities. A majority of states eventually adopted the approach, including some states that mandated the use of multidisciplinary teams (National District Attorneys Association, 2010).

Now more than 30 years since the federal government enacted the first child protection legislation, current statistics reflect how child abuse remains a significant social problem in the United States. In 2015, child protective service agencies responded to an estimated four million referrals of suspected child abuse (Children's Bureau, 2015b). Of that number, child abuse investigations found 70,353 children to be victims of physical abuse, 44,611 children who were sexually abused, and 1,256 children who experienced both physical abuse and sexual abuse. Approximately 1,670 child deaths resulted from child abuse (Children's Bureau, 2015b). Collaboration between agencies and disciplines responsible for child abuse investigations holds importance in terms of how child welfare and legal systems respond and how that response affects outcomes for the children and families involved in these cases.

## Literature review

The literature provides a rich history describing the state and local models that developed in response to federal legislation and the need to coordinate investigative activities among multiple agencies and disciplines. Here we describe the models of community response to child abuse reports that served as the basis for the current study and present the previous research that supports each of these approaches.

## Traditional child protective services model

Prior to the implementation of multidisciplinary team legislation in the 1980s, communities often relied on traditional child protective service units within local public welfare agencies to respond to suspected child abuse and, except for the most extreme cases of physical and sexual abuse, without law enforcement involvement. Researchers conducted few studies regarding the effectiveness of this approach probably due to the unavailability of data prior to the establishment of a nationwide data collection system in 1988 (Children's Bureau, 2015a). Today some rural communities continue to rely on this traditional model in which child protective service agencies remain responsible for assessing the child's safety and notifying law enforcement when allegations involve criminal child abuse offenses.

## Child protection teams

One of the earliest models using a team approach to child abuse reports emerged in 1978 when Florida state laws designated child protection teams as the responsibility of the Children's Medical Services Program in the Florida Department of Public Health (Florida State Senate, 2012). These child protection teams led by medical directors respond to more complex and severe abuse investigations (e.g., severe physical abuse, sexual abuse, and medical neglect), where they are involved in the medical diagnosis and evaluative services that child abuse victims and their families receive. In an early study of child protection teams, Hochstadt and Hardwicke (1985) concluded that a multidisciplinary approach provided accountability to ensure that families received recommended services and reduced fragmentation and duplication of agency services through case coordination. In a more recent study, Wolfeich and Loggins (2007) reported that investigations conducted by child protection teams found more substantiated cases of abuse than the traditional CPS model. The child protection team model remains unique to the state of Florida that frequently contracts with local non-profit and for-profit agencies to provide on-going counseling and family advocacy for children and families.

## Child advocacy centers

In the mid-1980s, the child advocacy center model evolved from a multidisciplinary approach first used in Huntsville, Alabama (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2016). It originated with the idea of co-locating law enforcement and child services in a facility of their own while focusing on coordination of child interviews that take place in a neutral and child-friendly environment (Newman & Dannenfelser, 2005). Services provided include case reviews, education and support for parents and caregivers, forensic interviews of children, medical examinations, and mental health counseling for child abuse victims and their families. There were 795 child advocacy centers that provided services to 311,688 children throughout the United States in 2015 (National Children's Alliance, 2016).

Because of the prevalence of child advocacy centers, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency funded a major research project to study the effectiveness of child advocacy centers in the United States. (Crimes Against Children Research Center, 2014). That multi-site evaluation resulted in research that suggested child advocacy centers increased coordination of child abuse investigations, use of medical examinations, and led to greater satisfaction among non-offending parents of alleged victims (Cross, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2005; Cross, Walsh, Simone, & Jones, 2003; Faller & Palusci, 2007; and Jones, Cross, Walsh, & Simone, 2005).

## Child abuse assessment centers

Following guidelines similar to child advocacy centers, child abuse assessment or interview centers developed in the 1990s in California and the western United States. Child interview centers provide an alternative to child advocacy centers when communities lack adequate funding or sponsorship for a more comprehensive program (Sheppard & Zangrillo, 1996). Child abuse interview centers aim to enhance joint investigations of child sexual and severe physical abuse cases and to reduce the trauma of repeated child interviews. Child abuse interview centers evaluate the child to determine whether abuse or neglect occurred but do not provide therapy or ongoing support and advocacy for the child and family (Joa & Edeelson, 2004). Sheppard and Zangrillo (1996) surveyed CPS workers and law enforcement investigators and concluded that working within the child assessment center model enhanced the quality of evidence for criminal prosecution, provided essential information to family services organizations, and minimized the likelihood of conflict among agencies with differing policies and procedures.

## Justice model

The justice model represents a more recent approach to child abuse investigations where civilian employees within law enforcement agencies conduct child abuse investigations. In 1997, the State of Florida began contracting with seven county sheriff's offices that volunteered to accept responsibility for child abuse investigations (Jordan et al., 2011). Civilian child protective service investigators, based inside the local county sheriff's office, investigate reports of suspected child abuse. Either a law enforcement officer or civilian director employed by the sheriff's office supervises the work of these investigative units. A statewide child abuse hotline screens the initial child abuse report and then routes the information to the investigative unit in each jurisdiction. On-going services to children and families are provided through contracts and purchase of service agreements with case managers employed by local human service agencies.

As researchers, we make no claim the models discussed here represent all the ways that diverse communities currently respond to reports of suspected child abuse. The flexibility of local communities to develop their own individual multidisciplinary teams results in a wide variation in the nature and purpose of such teams. However, this diversity among teams in different communities limits empirical research and the ability to measure team collaboration or the effect of collaboration on multidisciplinary team functioning (Faller & Palusci, 2007; Jones et al., 2005). In a review of child welfare research, Lalayants and Epstein (2005) found a number of studies based on retrospective data and suggested the need for more qualitative studies of multidisciplinary collaborative processes.

## Study purpose

We selected qualitative research methods to explore how professionals from each of these models of community response view collaboration among different agencies and disciplines responsible for child abuse investigations. The question of “how do front-line members of multidisciplinary teams perceive collaboration and its effects on team functioning in child abuse investigations” guided this qualitative inquiry.

## Method

We chose grounded theory as the method to explore the perspectives of current multidisciplinary team members as we hoped to discover theory from data collected from frontline multidisciplinary team members concerning their experiences with collaboration in child abuse investigations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to go beyond describing the process of how teams work together to investigate cases but to analyze the meaning of collaboration from the perspectives of frontline team members representing diverse models of community response to child abuse reports (Charmaz, 2006). The Institutional Review Board at The University of Alabama approved the study. In addition, we obtained state and local permissions from multidisciplinary teams, child welfare and legal agencies, and/or oversight organizations when necessary.

## Sample

We used convenience sampling to select a total of 43 current multidisciplinary team members representing seven disciplines to participate in individual interviews for the study as shown in [Table 1](#). The data collection sites involved four states—Alabama, California, Florida, and Georgia—selected because of the different multidisciplinary models used to respond to suspected reports of child abuse in each of these states. Local CPS program directors and/or multidisciplinary team coordinators served as key informants and disseminated the study information and informed consent via email to potential study participants. The frontline team members then contacted the researcher directly to schedule the face-to-face interview at a location convenient to the individual participant.

## Data collection

Face-to-face interviews requiring extensive travel were used to collect data from March through July 2014. Each interview occurred at the study participant’s place of employment or a neutral setting he or she selected. Interviews averaged from 45 to 60 minutes, and each participant voluntarily signed written

**Table 1.** Disciplines and team models of participants.

Disciplines	CAC	CPS	CPT	CPT/Justice	MDCIC	Total
District Attorneys	1	1		1	4	7
Case Management <sup>a</sup>				3		3
Child Protection <sup>b</sup>	1	6			2	9
Forensic Interviewers <sup>c</sup>	2			1	3	6
Law Enforcement	2	1	1	3	4	11
Medical			1	1	1	3
Mental Health	1		1	1	1	4
Total	7	8	3	10	15	43

Note: CAC = child advocacy center model (Alabama and Georgia); CPS = traditional child protective services model (Alabama); CPT = child protection team model (Florida); CPT/Justice = combines child protection team and justice model (Florida); MDCIC = multidisciplinary child interview center (California).

<sup>a</sup>Case management refers to persons employed in social service agencies that coordinate and/or provide concrete services to children and families, usually through a contract with the state public welfare agency.

<sup>b</sup>Child protection refers to frontline workers and supervisors employed in public child welfare agencies having the mandated responsibility for child abuse investigations.

<sup>c</sup>Forensic interviewers are persons specifically employed, trained, and identified as “forensic interviewers” in their respective agencies (i.e., child advocacy centers and child interview centers).

permission to audio record the interview. An interview protocol comprised of 10 open-ended questions guided the data collection process (see [Appendix](#)).

In addition to audio recording the interviews, handwritten field notes documented the interviewer’s observations of non-verbal cues and overall impressions of the interview. The first author transcribed each interview verbatim within 24-hours of the interview and wrote memos simultaneously during the transcription process in order to begin the initial coding and identify emerging themes. Each study participant received a copy of the transcribed interview, which he or she reviewed for accuracy. The first author also kept a journal to document the steps taken during the data collection and coding process in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Nvivo for MAC software (version 10.0.4) was used to organize and store interview data.

### **Data analysis**

Using principles of constant comparative methods of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first author conducted iterative readings of transcripts while documenting coding decisions and justifications in written memos. Initially the first author attempted to use line-by-line coding but quickly found that fracturing the data into lines sometimes diminished or confused the meaning of the data—instead efforts were made to code the complete thought conveyed by the participant. The initial phase of coding resulted in a significant number of *in vivo* codes that reflected the diversity of the study participants. Subsequent rounds of focused coding enabled the researchers to sift through and reduce the initial codes to a manageable number. Two graduate students coded a sample of interviews and assisted in refining the initial codes identified by the first author.



The data analysis also relied on member checking to ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the findings. Once data analysis was in process, the first author returned to the field to conduct a second interview in which she shared preliminary findings with a sample of participants representing different disciplines.

## Findings

The theme of collaborative relationships emerged early from the comments of participants about the importance of relationships to effective communication and information sharing. We first asked each participant to define the meaning of collaboration in terms of working with other members of the multidisciplinary team. Their responses often prompted the interviewer to explore the issue of how relationships were built and maintained within the context of the team.

## Sharing and knowing

When asked what the term collaboration meant to him, one assistant district attorney, who served as team leader, responded with the following:

So it's called a 'multidisciplinary team' for a reason. I think every discipline has to have a voice at the table so what collaboration means to me is each of the disciplines doing the best they can for the kid with the tools they have as a discipline, bringing that to the table and then saying 'ok this what I can do, what can you suggest, what else might I do and let me suggest, here's what I can't do, but I think this case and this kid might need, [and] can the other disciplines pick up the ball in this regard?'

Participants identified two primary avenues for the development of collaborative relationships. First, they described how working together on individual child abuse cases builds relationships over time through sharing of experiences. Second, they discussed how training that included representatives from other agencies and disciplines provided informal opportunities to get to know the other team members on a more personal level. Thus, the term "knowing" as used here refers to not only knowing the work of their own and other agencies and disciplines but also knowing the people behind the roles and responsibilities.

When asked what they needed from other team members to do their work, all participants identified information as what they needed most from other members of the team. Information sharing took the form of consultation in which the professional provided specific case information or used his or her specific expertise to assess a given situation. Perceptions of how helpful other team members were in providing needed information varied—often times depending on the strength of the relationship with a particular team member.

Participants were also asked what other members of the team from different agencies needed from them to do their work. For the most part, the participants knew well what other agencies on the team needed from them. The majority ( $n = 31$ ) indicated that other team members needed the same thing they needed and that being case information. Those with knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of other agencies on the team responded in detail about what team representatives from other agencies or disciplines needed to do their work.

Often participants acknowledged the strengths and recognized the limitations of other agencies on the multidisciplinary team. Knowing and understanding the information other agencies and disciplines needed positively affected perceptions of team effectiveness. Although some participants learned about the information needs of other agencies through formal cross trainings, the majority ( $n = 39$ ) indicated that they knew about other agencies from the day-to-day experiences of working together with them on child abuse investigations. This discussion often led participants to talk about how their relationships with other team members affected communication and information sharing within the team.

One law enforcement supervisor described establishing relationships as key to communication and information sharing among the different agencies on the team. Knowing the other team members and being able to put a face with a name was significant for this participant. She wanted to be able to call other team members and “talk it out” when problems occurred. She represented law enforcement on an advisory committee that she referred to as a “team within the team” in a large metropolitan area. This particular advisory committee dealt with procedural issues among the agencies on the multidisciplinary team. The law enforcement supervisor linked “knowing” to having respect for that person and understanding the boundaries of his or her work, specifically what another member of the team could or could not do when it came to working with child abuse cases.

Participants explained how team members in urban and metropolitan areas face unique challenges in knowing other team members and building relationships with representatives from other agencies. Asked about building collaborative relationships with other team members in a city of one-half million people, one physician responded “sometimes yes and sometimes no.” However, relationship building can and does happen at least for this particular physician employed in a child trauma center. He discussed how during the past 15 years he worked with the same sergeant in-charge of the special victims unit, and he previously worked with the current law enforcement lieutenants when they served as frontline investigators.

Participants emphasized the need for communication and information to be reciprocal and for give-and-take relationships to exist among the agency

representatives in order to share information and communicate effectively. The basis of these reciprocal relationships was more than just knowing the roles and responsibilities of other team members but understanding how the actions of one agency affect that of another and the outcome of the child abuse case. Being able to accept that one agency alone does not have the expertise or resources to handle every aspect of the child abuse investigation serves as the rationale for establishing a multidisciplinary team approach to child abuse investigations. This involves accepting and acknowledging the limitations of the individual team member's own agency or discipline. It also means acknowledging the strengths of others on the team. Being unafraid to be vulnerable and ask for help from other agencies seemed essential to collaborative relationships. Participants who described their teams as effective recognized the limitations of their individual agencies. They were open to asking for help and consulting other agencies on their respective teams. One forensic interviewer explained how collaboration with other agencies evolved over time as "people getting used to the idea of having a social worker do their forensic interviews, now it's the norm."

While the participants provided numerous examples of the willingness of team members to assist other agencies on the multidisciplinary team, seven participants described one-sided relationships that resulted in poor collaboration and communication. These participants described how they grew tired of helping other agencies on the team, only to be rejected when they asked something in return. Eventually they just stopped asking for assistance from other agencies on the team. Participants also questioned the results of child abuse investigations conducted independently by one agency alone. Because these investigations represent only one agency's perspective of the child abuse case, the results may lack valuable information and fail to provide what one participant called the "big picture" of the circumstances surrounding the abuse allegations.

### **Respecting and trusting**

Often participants identified respect and trust as what they needed from other members of the team and described how respect and trust of other team members was often demonstrated through consultation and relying on others for case information. Approximately one-half of the participants reported how being able to consult with other team members strengthened their investigations. Prosecuting attorneys described how consultation early in the investigative process provided law enforcement with the information they needed in difficult child abuse cases. One attorney described his role in consulting with frontline law enforcement:

I know from the years of experience, if they are concerned, there is something there. They feel a child needs to be protected, it's there, and the attorney just needs to assist them with pointing them in the right direction.

Often participants described how being available to consult with other team members constituted meeting the needs of other team members. Consultation occurred throughout the investigative process in teams where participants described communication and information sharing as effective. Team members frequently scheduled time to meet to discuss the case prior to and following child interviews. The more experienced professionals talked about how they encouraged consultation. Regarding his own availability to team members, one physician commented:

One of my pet peeves is when people are struggling with something yet they don't reach out to try and fix it and one of the things that I say all the time is 'my pager is on 24/7' which is a true statement and my cell phone which is sitting right next to me is my adjunct pager basically. So I am literally available 24/7. The goal is always to be available.

Relying on another agency also involved recognizing and acknowledging the strengths or expertise of other team members and/or their agencies. For example, study participants representing law enforcement frequently discussed how child protective services often knew families better than anyone else on the team and were better at getting families to cooperate and allow the child to be interviewed. Participants recognized that whichever agency maintained the best rapport with the family was probably going to be the one mostly likely to get cooperation from the family. One child protective services supervisor related a case example in which she talked directly to a family in order to secure a signed release of information for a law enforcement investigator on the multidisciplinary team.

The majority of participants ( $n = 35$ ) commented on how being able to depend on other team members with specific knowledge and skills strengthened child abuse investigations. Both child protective services and law enforcement appreciated the medical professionals who took time to explain their findings and write clear and understandable reports. They also recognized the forensic interviewers for their skills in interviewing children. However, the decision to call on these other professionals rests with the individual team member, and team members may be reluctant to call on others for consultation because they do not want to appear incompetent or dependent (Lee, 1997). The concept of trust held importance for collaboration because it involved a personal choice of the individual team member. One study participant described the importance of trusting other professionals while working under what she called "unique circumstances":

Because it is just a weird dynamic that we work in, we talk about really private things before 9:00 in the morning. Just having to share some of those intimacies

and talking about things that are pretty disturbing. You have to trust that people can take that; people are going to be able to deal with that. I think that just on the level, the depth of our investigations and what we are talking about sometimes builds at least relationships, you know, not how we want them to be built but it is kind of a unique environment. I always say ‘I can’t believe we are talking about sodomy at 8:45 in the morning’ and having to just be talking about things I think it builds relationships in a weird way too.

Study participants regardless of discipline identified trust as an important aspect of collaboration. Believing in the honesty and sincerity of other team members served as the basis for feeling they could rely on other agencies. Many participants reported how trusting relationships were built over time through shared experiences. One law enforcement investigator describing his experience with trusting other team members as:

There is a lot of trust here on the team, so because of that level of trust and level of confidentiality, all I have to do is ask and they will give me the information, and it is a lot easier than being in the field and doing something outside of [the team].

He also explained that his local multidisciplinary team conducts frequent training for team members leading him to conclude that being trained and knowing how the team works supports understanding and trust.

### **Frustrating experiences**

Even though participants generally viewed collaboration as positive and necessary in child abuse investigations, they described times when working with other agencies resulted in issues they perceived as frustrating. Participants focused primarily on differing policies and procedures, inadequate communication, and the effects of ever-changing team members as barriers to building and maintaining trusting relationships.

#### ***Differing policies and procedures***

Both child protective services and law enforcement perceived differing timeframes for initiating child contact and completing investigations as making collaboration more difficult. The participants from child protective services described timeframes for initiating child contact as varying from less than 2 hours to 24 hours for reports deemed to be “high priority” and from 24 hours to as much as 10 days for “low priority” reports. The timeframes for completing child protective service investigations varied from 30 to 90 days depending on the state child protection statutes and administrative codes. Unlike child protective services, no timeframes existed for law enforcement as to when to initiate or complete the criminal investigation.

Generally, child protective services viewed differing timeframes as a child safety issue when waiting on law enforcement, while law enforcement perceived the risk of alerting the alleged offender when child protective services moved too quickly. How the different agencies and teams dealt with differing timeframes indicated to some extent the degree of collaboration within the particular multidisciplinary team. One law enforcement investigator made the following comment related to differing timeframes and what child protective services needed:

But I think just in talking to some [CPS workers] that I know, I think they want to see law enforcement jump on these cases quicker than what we do. I think we try to do that but I don't think we can get around to them as fast as they have to.

One deputy district attorney weighed in on the side of law enforcement in the issue of differing timeframes by commenting on how “sometimes you have to wait for somebody.” However, we found that it was not always child protective services having to wait on law enforcement. One attorney offered this perspective:

We have had cases where from the beginning of the investigation until arrest, it is less than 24 hours. Those are the cases where you need a lot of collaboration between social services and law enforcement.

Much of the frustration related to differing timeframes appeared to result from inadequate communication between child protective services and law enforcement.

### ***Inadequate communication***

Communication was closely linked to the need for information sharing and coordination of team members activities related to the child abuse investigation. One law enforcement supervisor highlighted the need for effective communication and coordination between law enforcement and child protective services to prevent issues related to the differing timeframes from becoming problematic. She described a situation in her jurisdiction where one child protective services worker in her efforts to meet agency timeframes repeatedly alerted the alleged offender about the allegations before law enforcement began their investigation. The law enforcement supervisor eventually contacted the child protective services supervisor to resolve the issues with the child protective service worker. The law enforcement supervisor experienced frustration by what she termed “sabotaging the child, the investigation, and everything” just to close the case. The supervisor expressed her frustration with how the team continued to receive reports about the family “without anything being solved.”

One deputy district attorney, who also served as team leader, discussed her frustration when team members attended case review meetings but still did not communicate with one another. She described how “you can’t collaborate, if you can’t communicate with the representatives from the other agency” but when team members begin to communicate they also begin to collaborate. She noted how the lack of communication made it difficult for agencies to do their work. Communication among team members appeared even more challenging when staff turnover resulted in limited experience working with other agency representatives.

### ***Ever-changing team members***

When asked how collaboration with other agencies and disciplines made their work more difficult, participants often described the effects of staff turnover that resulted in different levels of work experience among members of the multidisciplinary team. One law enforcement supervisor with 26 years of experience described how staff turnover affected the ability of law enforcement to rely on and trust other members of the team:

Child abuse, sexual abuse is a very different animal from any other crime and you have to learn it’s a lot more than talking to the child, talking to the mom, talking to the suspect because you have to be able to corroborate what happened and the way you do that is through everybody else [on the team]. Every now and then you get lucky and the suspect will confess and there’s a great sex assault exam that says this happened but that’s one percent and the rest of it is talking to everybody else trying to get some answers. So the new player, the new person, be it the investigator, or what have you, has got to learn to rely on others for the information and trust their knowledge.

One finding from the study demonstrated that team members not only recognized that staffing issues made their own particular jobs difficult, but they also understood its impact on the work of other agencies. One attorney described the following issue related to staff turnover in child protective services:

What happens is there is not enough people to do their job, you have inexperienced people, then you have a tragedy occur, then there is an investigation of the tragedy, and then they come out with all these recommendations for the people that could not do their job in the first place to do twice as much work, so that the tragedy doesn’t happen again and then another tragedy happens and it’s just endless. It’s just endless.

One forensic interviewer also commented on the effect of staff turnover in child protective services on collaboration with law enforcement:

In this county, there’s been a lot of really high turnover so there are a lot of new CPS workers and so they don’t work very well with law enforcement right now. We try to help those issues by trainings, by introducing the different departments, by having them come here [child advocacy center] and learn more about the

process, but CPS and law enforcement, it's just not good. I think that CPS is really scared to do certain things and to talk to the child with law enforcement there. It's a little hard and frustrating. I think CPS very often, new CPS workers, will go out and talk to the suspect and not give law enforcement the opportunity to do that first. Whereas they will let the suspect know that there's an investigation so they will flee or they will do something and that really hurts the whole investigation. I think that collaboration needs to be worked on.

Although study participants frequently commented on staffing issues in child protective services, participants from law enforcement agencies presented a different perspective. They reported that policy in some jurisdictions limited the amount of time that law enforcement officers served in special victims units responsible for crimes against children. Participants described how law enforcement investigators worked in these units 3–5 years on average and then rotated back into patrol units. One participant made the following comment about staffing issues resulting from law enforcement's policy in his particular jurisdiction:

Five years probably does not cut it, because at the end of five years, we're going to be bringing somebody else in cold that doesn't know anything about it and hasn't developed those relationships and everything. That's really the challenging part, it's really when I leave, there's going to be someone else who needs to get caught up on all this. It's really challenging.

### ***Having the choice***

Another issue unique to law enforcement and prosecution was whether the assignment to child abuse or sexual assault cases constituted a choice. The participants from law enforcement indicated that they chose to work child abuse investigations. However, they emphasized that not all investigators assigned to child abuse units have a choice. Participants agreed that law enforcement investigators not given a choice typically did not collaborate well with other agencies on the multidisciplinary team. One law enforcement supervisor with 24 years of experience commented on the issue:

I think for the position, the law enforcement person, the actual person who does the child abuse investigations, and is part of the multidisciplinary team, has to want to do it and understand and believe in that team concept. If you just put someone in that position that doesn't, it's not going to work and it's going to affect the rest of the team.

The importance of how a professional comes to be assigned to work with child abuse cases was not limited to law enforcement. One deputy district attorney commented on the willingness of prosecutors to work with child abuse cases:



In our office, because of the nature of the assignment, the child sexual abuse cases, they won't put you into this assignment unless it is something you are willing to do, because there are some people in our office that just flat out won't do it. They say it's too hard.

Study participants from outside law enforcement and prosecution also observed how team members who chose to work in child abuse investigations displayed better attitudes about doing the work and were more likely to collaborate with other agencies. The participants reported that special victim units where law enforcement investigators opt to work in the unit tended to run more smoothly than units where law enforcement officers were arbitrarily assigned to child abuse investigations. They also agreed the law enforcement investigators that chose to work crimes against children had slightly longer tenures than the ones who had no input into their assignment. One participant noted "their superiors realize he or she doesn't want to be there, so they try to get him or her out as soon as possible."

Although law enforcement had the option of working with child abuse cases in the jurisdictions involved in the study, none of the law enforcement participants had a choice about how long they stayed in child abuse investigations. The issue becomes even more complex when one considers that multiple law enforcement investigators familiar with the team protocols, as well as the other team members, may be scheduled to rotate off the team at the same time. This law enforcement policy coupled with the ever-changing landscape in child protective service workers who frequently leave within the first two years of employment (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003) presents challenges to building and maintaining collaborative relationships among members of the multidisciplinary team.

How team members perceived staffing issues appeared closely linked to how they viewed experience of other team members and how experience related to building and maintaining trusting relationships with other team members. Study participants often viewed more experienced investigators as more knowledgeable about what other team members needed and more willing to get and share that information. There appeared to be an issue of trusting newer members of the team and being willing to share information with them. One law enforcement investigator commented:

If you are brand new and walked in the door here and this was your first three months on the job, it takes longer. So my experience is very good, positive with these other [agencies] because I have developed nine years worth of relationships. If you are brand new, you might be having a totally different conversation from me.

One child protective services worker also linked experience with being invested in the team process, or the value the team member placed on that process:

They still need to learn how to work with people, but when you are newer and I think sometimes when they come in, it is their first or second job out of college, they have no plans on staying so their investment in working with other members of the team is a little different.

This participant discussed how she valued the team process and was frustrated by the fact that newer professionals did not share her enthusiasm or appreciation for work of the team.

Participants who described their teams as highly effective often were members of multidisciplinary teams guided by clearly written protocols to deal with aspects of collaboration that could lead to frustration. The participants who described their teams as effective in responding to differing timeframes, inadequate communication, and staff turnover recounted conversations with other agencies about handling these issues. These conversations took place not only among frontline team members, but also involved program supervisors and agency administrators.

## **Limitations**

While children and families do not often interact with the multidisciplinary team as a whole, they experience indirectly how collaboration affects communication and information sharing among team members. The absence of the perceptions of parents and caregivers affected by the outcomes of collaboration among multidisciplinary team members constitutes a major limitation of the current study. Future research on this topic should specifically include parents and caregivers (and perhaps older children) to determine their views on how effectively team members communicate and share information with each other and with families and children.

The volunteer nature of the study participants constitutes another important limitation of the current study. While these participants shared an enthusiastic interest in multidisciplinary teamwork related to child abuse investigations, their perspectives and experiences may not be typical of professionals less supportive of team-based investigations.

## **Discussion**

The current study provides the perspectives of frontline team members about the impact of collaboration on multidisciplinary team functioning in child abuse investigations. The findings emphasize the importance of collaborative relationships to enhance communication and information sharing. The study participants clearly indicated that what they most needed from other team members in order to do their jobs was information. They referred to case information, but they also needed information about the roles, responsibilities, and limitations of other team members. They appreciated the ability to consult with experts for

thoughtful opinions and guidance, specifically from legal and medical professionals. The information that they gained from other professionals enhanced their own responses to child abuse reports.

We also found that collaborative relationships depended on reciprocity, or give-and-take, related to information sharing and coordination of case activities. Team members found reciprocity important to the idea of respect and trusting other team members. Participants indicated they were more willing to consult and share information with other team members who they had grown to respect and trust over time through shared experiences. The previous research on child abuse investigations clearly indicates that one agency or discipline alone does not have the resources or the expertise to respond to the complexity of child abuse. The perspectives offered in the current study support that idea as well as the importance of collaborative relationships to communication and information sharing among agencies responsible for child abuse investigations.

## Conclusion

The importance of collaborative relationships with other team members emerged from the study's beginning and remained strong throughout the data collection and analysis process. The professionals who participated in the study described how factors, such as differing policies and procedures, inadequate communication, and staffing issues, negatively impact the ability of agencies to form and maintain relationships with representatives from other agencies and disciplines. However, strong collaborative relationships built over time through shared experiences appeared to mitigate these circumstances among team members as they worked together to find ways to deal with these issues. These relationships appeared to be built on knowing and understanding the work of other agencies and disciplines, having realistic expectations, and ultimately relying on and trusting the other members of the team.

The diverse perspectives of the agencies and disciplines working together appeared to enhance team functioning and strengthen the community response to child abuse. Even though they did not always agree on policies and procedures, participants discussed the value of differing perspectives when team members were open to sharing their thoughts and opinions. Being a member of a multidisciplinary team—albeit it to carry out the investigation or offer supportive services—provides the opportunity to collaborate and learn from different agencies and disciplines, which can be an enriching experience for the individual.

## References

- Appley, D. G., & Winder, A. E. (1977). An evolving definition of collaboration and some implications for the world of work. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 13(3), 279–291.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Children's Bureau. (2015a). *About NCANDS*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children and Families. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/about-ncands>
- Children's Bureau. (2015b). *Child Maltreatment 2015*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2015.pdf>
- Children's Bureau. (2017). *About CAPTA: A legislative history*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/about.pdf>
- Crimes Against Children Research Center (2014). Multi-Site Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Center (CACs). Retrieved from [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/multi-site\\_evaluation\\_children.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/multi-site_evaluation_children.html)
- Cross, T. P., Finkelhor, D., & Ormrod, R. (2005). Police involvement in child protective services investigations: Literature review & secondary data analysis. *Child Abuse, 10*(3), 224–244.
- Cross, T. P., Walsh, W. A., Simone, M., & Jones, L. M. (2003). Prosecution of child abuse: A meta-analysis of criminal justice decisions. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse, 4*(4), 323–340.
- Faller, K. C. (1996). Interviewing children who may have been abused: A historical perspective and overview of controversies. *Child Abuse, 1*(2), 83–95.
- Faller, K. C., & Palusci, V. J. (2007). Children's advocacy centers: Do they lead to positive case outcomes? *Child Abuse & Neglect, 31*(10), 1021–1029.
- Florida State Senate (2012). *The 2012 Florida Statutes, title V, Chapter 39, Section 303*. Retrieved from <http://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2012/39.303>
- Garven, S., Wood, J. M., Malpass, R. S., & Shaw, J. S. (1998). More than suggestion: The effect of interviewing techniques from the McMartin Preschool case. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*(3), 347–359.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Hockstadt, N. J., & Hardwicke, N. J. (1985). How effective is multidisciplinary team approach? A follow-up study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 9*(3), 365–372.
- Jacobson, M. (2001). Child sexual abuse and the multidisciplinary approach: Contradictions in practice. *Childhood, 8*(2), 231–250.
- Joa, J. R., & Edelelson, M. G. (2004). Legal outcomes for children who have been sexually abused: Impact of child abuse assessment center evaluations. *Child Abuse, 9*(3), 263–276.
- Jones, L. M., Cross, T. P., Walsh, W. A., & Simone, M. (2005). Criminal investigations of child abuse: The research behind “best practices.”. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 6*(3), 254–268.
- Jordan, N., Yampolskaya, S., Gustafson, M., Armstrong, M., McNeish, R., & Vargo, A. (2011). Comparing child protective investigation performance between law enforcement agencies and child welfare. *Child Welfare, 90*(2), 87–105.
- Kolbo, J. R., & Strong, E. (1997). Multi-disciplinary team approaches to the investigation and resolution of child abuse and neglect: A national survey. *Child Abuse, 2*(1), 61–72.
- Lalayants, M., & Epstein, I. (2005). Evaluating multidisciplinary child abuse and neglect teams: A research agenda. *Child Welfare, 84*(4), 433–458.
- Lee, F. (1997). When the going gets tough, do the tough ask for help? Help-seeking and power motivation in organizations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 72*(3), 336–363.
- National Children's Advocacy Center. (2016). *Celebrating thirty years of service*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalcac.org/about/celebrating-30-years-of-service.html>

- National Children's Alliance. (2016). *Annual report 2015: Empowering local communities to serve child abuse victims*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/sites/default/files/downloads/2015-NCA-Annual-Report.pdf>.
- National District Attorneys Association. (2010). *Multidisciplinary child protection teams*. Retrieved from <http://www.ndaa.org/pdf/Multidisciplinary/Multi/Agency/Child/Protection/Teams.pdf>.
- Newman, B. S., & Dannenfelser, P. L. (2005). Children's protective services and law enforcement: Fostering partnerships in investigations of child abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 14*(2), 97–111.
- Scheriber, N., Bellah, L. D., Martinez, Y., McLaurin, K. A., Strok, R., Garven, S., & Wood, J. M. (2006). Suggestive interviewing in the McMartin Preschool and Kelly Michaels daycare abuse cases: A case study. *Social Influence, 1*(1), 16–47.
- Sheppard, D. L., & Zangrillo, P. A. (1996). Coordinating investigations of child abuse. *Public Welfare, 54*(1), 21–32.
- U.S. General Accounting Office. (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff*. GAO-03-357 *child welfare staff recruitment and retention*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Wolfteich, P., & Loggins, B. (2007). Evaluation of the children's advocacy center model: Efficiency, legal and revictimization outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 24*(4), 333–352.

## Appendix

---

### Interview Protocol

---

1. What does the term collaboration mean to you?
  2. What do you need from other team members to do your work?
  3. How effective would you say that other team members are in meeting your needs?
  4. What do you think other team members need from you to do their work?
  5. How effective do you believe you are in meeting the needs of other team members?
  6. How does working with a team generally affect your investigative findings?
  7. In general, how have your investigations been strengthened by collaboration with other team members?
  8. In general, how have your investigations been made more difficult by collaboration with other team members?
  9. Overall, how well do you think your team works together? Explain.
  10. Is there anything else you think that I need to know about your work as a member of the multidisciplinary team or collaboration with other members of the team?
-