



POLICY

"The Backlash" in Sociological Perspective

—by
David Finkelhor

News stories and a focus on current events do not necessarily give you a very accurate perception of what is going on in a society, who is calling the shots, who is on the side of history.

This article is the transcription of the keynote speech delivered at the opening session of APSAC's Third National Colloquium in Tucson, Arizona, on June 7, 1995.

This has been a hard year for child advocates. As I talk to people, I would say the mood ranges from discouraged paralysis to sky-is-falling panic. You know the particulars. Every other story in the newspapers seems to be about "false memory syndrome." High-ranking academics seem to be sounding off all over about the unreliability of children's memory. Therapists are being successfully sued for believing that children or adults were sexually abused. Convictions in highly publicized child molestation cases are being overturned. Legislation is being introduced to regulate what therapists do. Law enforcement officials seem to be returning to "Joe Friday"-style interviewing when crimes involve children. The mandated reporting system is under attack. The U.S. House of Representatives wants to eliminate the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, and with it the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect and immunity from liability for professionals who report child abuse. The overall lesson is clear: we are no longer in a golden

era of relatively easy sledding on child welfare issues.

But I do not find myself as alarmed as most of my colleagues. It may be that I am an "ivory tower" type, and just out of touch with the reality of the trenches. But I think some of my optimism comes from my training as a sociologist. I see the phase we are in now as a predictable development in the course of work on social problems. From a sociological perspective, current events in this field are less discouraging. This is a skirmish, not a Waterloo. Since there seems to be very little to cheer people up these days, I want to try to share this perspective with you to see if I can't rekindle a little bit of hope.

The sociological perspective

The sociological perspective trains you to take the news of the day with a grain of salt and to look for deeper social structures and social forces. News stories and a focus on current events do not necessarily give you a very accurate perception of what is going on in a society, who is calling the shots, who is on the side of history. Horror stories about alleged malpractice or venality among child abuse professionals, although they seem to be the headline *du jour*, are not the whole story

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NEWS

APSAC and "The Backlash"

—by Theresa Reid

This issue of *The APSAC Advisor* features two articles derived from plenary addresses given at APSAC's Third National Colloquium in Tucson, Arizona. Both of these addresses pertain to what many have taken to calling "the backlash": the current wave of attacks on such issues as children's credibility, adults' "recovered memories," and the skill and even motives of the professionals who work in this field.

David Finkelhor, PhD, takes the long view (i.e., "the sociological perspective") on this phenomenon, and draws conclusions more hopeful than those of many professionals who are in the thick of battle, whose own work or that of colleagues is being decried and even dismantled.

"The backlash" is also addressed, less directly, in the article beginning on p.3, "The 'abuse excuse': Limits of the child abuse defense." The warning in this article (from the plenary session by Jacquelyn Campbell, RN, PhD, Jon R. Conte, PhD, and John E. B. Myers, JD), is that the blanket use of the "abuse

excuse" to waive responsibility for criminal acts can help fuel a backlash against professional practice that most Americans don't approve.

Clearly, "the backlash" is much on the mind of APSAC's leaders. APSAC's members have repeatedly asked us to "do something" about the mounting attacks they see in the media. As the only interdisciplinary professional society in the nation founded to address the problems caused by child abuse, we are the obvious source for comment, clarification, and rebuttal when professional practice in this field is the subject of media coverage.

As members know, we have often taken strong public stands against inaccurate, high-profile media events. Our sharply critical response to the Frederick Crews articles, "Revenge of the Repressed," was prominently published in the *New York Review of Books* in January (and is reprinted in V.8, n.1 of *The APSAC Advisor*). Our press release about "Indictment," the HBO movie which

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An obvious illustration of the limited importance of such bad press is provided by lawyers and lobbyists. Members of these professions get an unbelievable quantity of very bad publicity. As you are well aware, our culture has a rich genre of lawyer jokes, and lobbyists are the favorite brunt of editorial cartoonists. To my knowledge, there are not as yet any CPS-worker jokes. But is the legal profession on the ropes? Are lobbyists about to go down the tubes? No: they continue to wield an inordinate amount of power in society. This power results from the social structures that support these professions.

Supportive social structures

Obviously, we do not hold the clout that lawyers do, but we have more structural leverage than we sometimes think. What is the power of the child abuse related professions, what are the social structures that bolster us?

Public awareness

As I see it, the current concern about child abuse is the result of an extraordinarily successful social movement, carried forward by some powerful—and permanent—social transformations of the last 50 years. When I say that the social movement has been extraordinarily successful, I mean when it is judged objectively, compared to other social problem mobilizations, not necessarily from the point of view of the advocates themselves. Because we don't get even a fraction of what we really want, we think of ourselves as puny. Yet compared to those who have tried to transform society around many other issues, from educational reform to electoral reform, we have been very successful. Our movement has reached a huge audience and galvanized a great deal of professional, public policy, and governmental activity.

Child abuse has captured an enormous wave of public attention. All the media have focused on it extensively. Surveys have consistently shown that people are knowledgeable and concerned about child abuse, and supportive of efforts to prevent and respond to it. Social institutions like the courts and the schools have been visibly transformed. Moreover, the child abuse problem is occupying center stage for longer than many social issues do—thirty years now in the case of physical abuse. Dozens of other social problems—from lead poisoning to family abduction—have not been nearly so successfully mobilized.

Professional development

This success is explained by some very important underlying social transformations. One of these is the emergence in the last generation of a new set of occupational categories whose function it is to

minister to families and children, directly and indirectly. These occupations now comprise a large part of a service sector of our economy that did not exist a generation ago. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 35 million people have contact with children as part of their occupational activities, including professionals in education, health care, law enforcement and public welfare. Of those, at least 8 million have children as their primary occupational responsibility. America has 2.7 million teachers, 1.6 million day care workers, 438,000 social workers, 382,000 mental health professionals, 89,000 guidance counselors, and 38,000 physicians with a major practice involving children. Even in law enforcement, 329,000 people have a special focus on child abuse.

The issue of child abuse galvanizes these groups, because it clearly symbolizes and justifies their mission and is consistent with their self-perceived role in society: to protect children by exercising professional expertise. As professionals, they have had the time, the energy, and the skills to build and solidify this movement.

These professions are one of the faster-growing sectors of the economy. One of the real assets of child abuse advocacy is the huge number of professionals in related fields like medicine, law, and education who have been trained and educated in child abuse concepts over the years and who have developed a certain confidence in them as a result of cumulative personal experience. Overall, these professionals have a strong allegiance to core concepts in this field, an allegiance that will resist erosion. I do not see signs that these key constituents have lost their fundamental trust in the child abuse concepts about which they have been so painstakingly educated over the past generation.

Furthermore, the coalition of professionals knowledgeable about and dedicated to this issue continues to grow and expand. In the last year, the American Medical Association undertook a major initiative to educate physicians, the public, and policymakers about the prevalence and effects of family violence. The AMA initiative follows upon systematic work on this topic at the Centers for Disease Control. APSAC's membership continues to increase. There is a dramatic growth in the coalitions supporting the Healthy Families America child abuse prevention initiative: virtually all states have begun some planning, and there are now 120 pilot sites for home health visitors in 23 states.

Women's movement

The other important and powerful social transformation behind the child abuse movement has been the change in the role of women in society. Historically, progress in child welfare has been linked politically to the success of feminism; the fact that women are disproportionate victims of

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sexual abuse cemented this linkage in the modern period.

The women's movement has faced considerable backlash itself in recent years, although it remains fairly potent. But from the sociological point of view, the economic and political engines behind the women's movement—the increasing participation of women in the labor force political process—have not abated. True, in the late 1980s the feminist agenda turned from child abuse to other more central women's issues like abortion rights, in response to increased threats to that agenda. But what is most crucial is the inexorable trend of women gaining access to positions of authority, both in the professions and in government. This access has not slowed: consider Janet Reno, Donna Shalala, Hillary Clinton. As they rise in authority, women

will carry with them, as they have in the past, a strong tilt toward issues of child welfare. This is a major and long-term advantage for child advocacy.

Symbolic strength

In addition to having a strong interest coalition, child abuse has been a successful social issue because of the terrific symbolic strength it carries. We live in an era in which, because of our relative prosperity, our ability to control fertility, and our medical advances over childhood mortality, we are psychologically invested in our children and their welfare in a way that is qualitatively new. The child abuse movement has been able to tap into the very evocative and sentimental imagery of protecting, rescuing, and comforting vulnerable children. No one who has seen the public service announcements for groups such as the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse can doubt the power of this imagery.

But sexual abuse has been even more symbolically powerful than child abuse in general. The issue of sexual abuse has managed to unite symbolically three of the central preoccupations of the period and the generation. The first is sexuality: the new passion, after generations of silence and repression, to discuss and understand sexuality. The second, related, preoccupation is the relationship between the genders and the changing character of family. And the third preoccupation is that of crime and justice. Current popular cinema provides ample evidence of the historical centrality of these three themes: its subject matter is primarily about sex, crime, or changing gender and family relations. Sexual abuse is the perfect conjunction of these themes. It has fascinated people, because through learning about it and understanding it, they have gotten another vehicle to explore some of these preoccupying themes.

Public exposure to and knowledge about the problem of child abuse has been good and is getting better. Parents are highly approving of the abuse prevention instruction children get in schools.

Backlashes are a lot less scary when you realize that they are normal, predictable, and on the whole not that successful.

Denial or fascination?

It is fashionable to say in this field that society would like to deny the existence of sexual abuse, that it would be more comfortable to sweep it under the rug and discover that it was all a hoax and we could all go back to the images and belief system of *Life with Father*. Frankly, I don't think society does want to deny the existence of sexual abuse, and I think we should stop saying it. Attitudes about sexual abuse are to some extent ambivalent. There is some disbelief, particularly when the problem strikes close to home, just as there is with other personal problems like infidelity or alcoholism. But large numbers of people are actually very fascinated by sexual abuse as a general social problem. It is a compelling issue in the culture, filling novels, TV programs, and the newspapers. People not only believe it occurs, many people, if we believe the surveys, exaggerate its occurrence. We have gained enormous attention for child sexual abuse, and I think it sounds completely paranoid and out of touch with reality when experts in this field say that as a culture we are eager to deny that it really exists.

Public support for child protection

Public support for protecting children from abuse is still very strong. In a recent NCPA national survey, 82% agreed with the statement, "Some families are simply too dangerous to be trusted with the care of their young children." Eighty-eight percent agreed that, "A child should always be removed from the home in cases of child sexual abuse in which the person accused remains in the home." Support for aggressive child protection actions has not declined. Over two-thirds of those surveyed agreed in 1995, just as they had in 1988, that children are harmed or die for lack of sufficiently aggressive investigations. This reflects support for CPS interventions that takes into account the fact that innocent people are sometimes accused.

Public exposure to and knowledge about the problem of child abuse has been good and is getting better. Parents are highly approving of the abuse prevention instruction children get in schools. Public opinion surveys also show that corporal punishment is on the decline—people are taking our messages to heart. Studies about the prevalence of child abuse in the general public suggest that there is a huge cadre of individuals who have personally experienced child abuse in some form. Many of these individuals have felt liberated and validated by the media attention child abuse has received. In surveys, they are among those most concerned about and supportive of our efforts to alleviate these problems, and it seems likely that they will continue such support, if not publicly then at least within their informal social networks.

In summary, the social bases and support for the child abuse movement itself appear strong at the

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present and for the near-term future. This is one base for the optimism I feel.

Prospects for the "backlash"

A second source of optimism is what sociology tells us about backlashes. Backlashes are a lot less scary when you realize that they are normal, predictable, and on the whole not that successful. Sociological analysis teaches us that, to paraphrase a common bumper sticker: Opposition happens. Every social problem mobilization, even the most successful, faces opposition. In fact, success ensures opposition. You are aware that many of the most fundamental institutions of our society, things we take for granted—like social security, environmental regulations, government action on behalf of consumer protection—all faced, and still face sometimes, massive political opposition. This opposition has been far from fatal to these institutions.

Countermovements vs. backlashes

Opposition to social change comes in two forms: organized opposing interests, on the one hand, and what have been termed "countermovements," on the other. The cigarette companies and the tobacco lobby are an example of an organized opposing interests in relation to the anti-smoking movement, for example. From the beginning of the attempt to reduce tobacco-related morbidity, they were there, fighting. They represent an organized, powerful interest opposed to that social movement. Similarly, the paper industry is an opposing interest to the environmental movement for clean water.

In contrast, a countermovement or backlash is an opposition that develops in response or in reaction to the success of another social movement. It doesn't already exist, it develops later. Phyllis Schlafly and the Eagle Forum represent backlashes, organized in response to the women's movement and the lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment. What we are calling the child abuse backlash is also such a countermovement.

Counter-movements are different in important ways from organized opposition groups. If you have to face one or the other, you definitely want to pick a backlash. One crucial difference is that organized opposition groups are generally much stronger than backlashes. They have historical and economic roots—the tobacco industry is a clear example. They

often have massive resources, political powerbases, and a great deal of experience in public relations and political activism.

Backlashes can in some cases achieve a lot of power and be a major obstacle for a social movement, but only under certain conditions. One such condition is when an initial social movement goes way beyond a prevailing social consensus.

Who actually is the child abuse backlash? The main group is aggrieved parents and other aggrieved caretakers of children who have been accused of or investigated for child abuse and believe, sometimes with good reason, that they have been unfairly treated or stigmatized in the process.

Limits of backlashes

Overall, in spite of the controversy they provoke, backlashes tend not to be enduring or successful, for a number of reasons. For one thing, since they are late in getting organized, the initial movement usually has a big advantage over them. The social movement around physical child abuse dates from the early 1960s and is 30 years old; the movement around sexual abuse is close to 15 years old. The backlash—which only acquired an organizational framework in the late 1980s—is thus mobilizing late in the game by comparative standards.

Second, backlashes are usually focussed on means rather than ends. They don't say that fighting child abuse or racial segregation is bad, they just say that you're going about it the wrong way. This is true about the current backlash: proponents don't object to ending child abuse, only to overzealousness on the part of child abuse authorities, or therapists' techniques for recovering memories. Compare this to the tobacco industry, which actually denies that smoking is bad and promotes it. Since backlashes are reactionary and focused on means rather than goals, they have a hard time inspiring people broadly. People get inspired through idealism and visions of progress; arguments about means are not inspiring. Since the focus of a backlash is so narrow, its proponents have a hard time building coalitions.

Backlashes can in some cases achieve a lot of power and be a major obstacle for a social movement, but only under certain conditions. One such condition is when an initial social movement goes way beyond a prevailing social consensus. This can happen when the movement seeks and achieves changes through influencing an elite without building a base of support in the public at large. This was partly the condition that produced successful countermovements against both school busing and abortion rights. The advocates for abortion rights and school integration initially achieved dramatic social changes, but mainly from the top. They succeeded through the courts (in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade*), rather than through the grass-roots, coalition-building, political process. The changes came quickly, but without firm public support, leaving both movements vulnerable to a backlash.

However, this does not seem to apply (at least yet) to the case of child abuse. The child abuse movement has been very good at educating the public, and building support for its viewpoint. From the available evidence, there seems to be widespread public, professional, and political support for current levels of child abuse prevention, intervention and even prosecution activities. Opinion polls suggest that the public wants more aggressive child abuse activity, not less. If we were to suddenly succeed in outlawing physical punishment, we would be vulnerable to a strong backlash; but we are not in such a situation right now.

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It takes independent organizations and independent ideologies to build movements.

A final problem with backlashes is that their social bases tend to be narrow and mostly volunteer in nature. They aren't maintained by powerful economic or social institutions like tobacco companies or organized religion. This *ad hoc* quality makes sustaining a mobilization difficult. Who actually is the child abuse backlash? The main group is aggrieved parents and other aggrieved caretakers of children who have been accused of or investigated for child abuse and believe, sometimes with good reason, that they have been unfairly treated or stigmatized in the process. They are motivated by anger. This is a volunteer social base.

They have an important group of professional allies, one of whom is attorneys. As child abuse reports have grown, so have prosecutions, and as allegations have touched even the middle class, more and more attorneys have in recent years found themselves representing people who were confronting child abuse allegations. As a result, a more specialized and defined field of legal practice has evolved.

But backlash attorneys are not a strong social base by themselves. Hired attorneys influence litigation, but they do not make social movements on their own. Moreover, defending against child abuse charges is not a legal subspecialty that will ever offer huge financial or status rewards. The number of lawyers involved, their influence, and their power are likely to remain small.

The backlash also has some academic allies, but they tend to be just what you find everywhere in academia—iconoclasts, free thinkers, people who want to ask hard, unpopular questions. They do not really build movements in the absence of other strong social bases. In any case, most of these iconoclasts would feel grave discomfort in any serious ideological alliance with the popular backlash advocates.

Role of media

Finally, what about the media? Some of the biggest successes of the backlash to date have been in the form of extensive, ongoing and apparently sympathetic media coverage. Dozens of articles, editorials, and television programs critical of the child abuse movement arose out of the McMartin preschool school case, and other day care cases as well.

The foiled prosecutions in Jordan, Minnesota, spawned some similar stories and editorials. Some newspapers, such as the San Diego Union, have mobilized relentlessly unfavorable coverage of local child abuse authorities. This is the thing that maybe seems scariest of all. For so long we had a romance with the media. There was an endless stream of articles about child abuse and sexual

abuse. It made child abuse professionals feel as though their cause was created and sustained by the media, and now it feels like it is being taken away. We fear that the media will now do for the opposition what they did for us.

First of all, in spite of perceptions, the media rarely create social movements or countermovements on their own. It takes independent organizations and independent ideologies to build movements. The media start by covering and responding to these organizations and activities; since the public first notices movements through the media, we often think of them as media-inspired. But movements need some strong organization outside the media.

A movement without a strong base can only be sustained by media attention for a short time. Sooner or later the media tire of a subject, are unable to find a new angle, and turn their attention elsewhere. And if there is only a weak social base, the movement dries up. By contrast, an institution with a strong social base weathers even the most devastating media attack. Exxon took it on the chin from the Valdez oil spill, but they have sustaining power and they are doing fine.

The child abuse issue has this kind of sustaining social base. The backlash does not. Child abuse has gotten continuing media attention for over 30 years because it has had an ongoing institutional presence, generating new developments and new angles, new programs, new research. The backlash has very little besides the media attention right now. But that attention will pass, and when it does, there will still be large, state-funded child protection agencies, and child abuse treatment programs, and hundreds of thousands of mental health professionals working in this field, hundreds of researchers, and several large professional organizations all continuing to lobby for and educate people about child abuse. And the backlash will just be a few volunteer organizations, some lawyers, and some academic allies.

Role of federal government

What about the danger from the politicians? The child abuse movement is taking some big hits these days in Washington, with signs that the Republicans are about to sweep away CAPTA, NCCAN, and other key programs. Of course, this could be a major blow, but it is important to keep in mind what is not happening, as well as what is. First, the conservatives have not been primarily attacking child abuse advocacy and child abuse funding in an ideological way. They have given the backlash a bit of a platform, but it has not been their major theme. Mostly, they have just been saying we want to shrink the federal government.

But the silver lining for us is that we are well positioned to adjust to such cuts. Federal funding

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As a social movement the child abuse coalition has a lot of strength, depth, and historical inevitability. In contrast, in spite of its current presence in the news, the backlash is a rather marginal phenomenon.

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has not been essential to child abuse activities (with the exception of research), as it has been in other social policy domains, like clean water or occupational safety. Most funding in the child abuse area in fact comes from the states. Moreover, we are strong at the state level. Many states have several active child abuse lobbies (not just APSAC but state NCPA chapters and Kids Count coalitions), well versed in making their case in state government. Most states are committed to child abuse investigation. The NCPA's recent 50 state survey says that in spite of the general preoccupation with budget cutting, almost every state has had an increase in child abuse funding at some point in the last two years. So if we lose strong federal leadership and funding it will be a serious problem, and I think we should fight as hard as we can to preserve it, but I do not think it will fundamentally undermine the structural elements that support child abuse advocacy.

Effects of backlash

To summarize, as a social movement the child abuse coalition has a lot of strength, depth, and historical inevitability. In contrast, in spite of its current presence in the news, the backlash is a rather marginal phenomenon in comparison.

This is not to say that the backlash has not had its impact. Many individuals in the child abuse field have suffered greatly as a result of the backlash. In some areas, social change has been badly sidetracked. I am not saying that we shouldn't be concerned. But it is counterproductive to be panicked. In trying to

understand the state of alarm I see, I have recognized the impact of an unusual feature of our field: we have never really had a serious opposition. Of course, we have had to deal with the "inertial" resistance like bureaucratic foot-dragging and professional turf guarding. But this was trivial compared to the concerted opposition forces that most social problem movements face. Consider the opposition forces that confront advocates for other social problems: for example, the movement for family planning, contraception and birth control confronting the massive opposition of the Catholic Church; or the movement to combat global warming facing the huge international industrial complex led by producers of fossil fuels. That is real opposition. By contrast, the child abuse movement has been unusually fortunate. We have had a free ride. Not realizing this, many of us can be somewhat skittish, alarmist, and unseasoned when it comes to facing opposition. Movements survive and even thrive in the face of opposition, but because we have seen so little of it, it is easy for us to think that this is the end.

But it may also be true that we child advocates have a low tolerance for conflict. Many of us who go into child welfare work do so to be healers, not

warriors. We also identify with victims. Many people with such an orientation tend to be alarmed by conflict or the possibility of becoming victims themselves. This may result in an exaggerated perception of the power of the backlash compared to our own.

Opposition can be a tonic for a social movement. It can keep it from becoming complacent and arrogant.

Constructive responses

So what needs to be done? Well, we need more warriors. Ignoring the backlash is not the answer. Even though I think history and social forces are on our side, we need to mobilize effectively to deal with it. Clearly, we need to respond as quickly and articulately as we can to claims that are misleading, publicity that is prejudicial, and initiatives that really compromise the interests of abused children.

In framing these rebuttals it is important to recognize who our audience should be. It is not agents of the backlash who need convincing. The appropriate audience is the people who might potentially be enfolded into a countermovement coalition—for example, the politicians, the media, the academics and particularly the beleaguered and dispirited parents. That sometimes calls for a different kind of rebuttal.

In this rebuttal, our research is very important. Research is a valuable currency in the market of social problem advocacy. It is also a currency that is very difficult for a countermovement to match. We are light years ahead when it comes to access to credible research evidence. Already we have had some success checkmating some of the more damaging claims of the backlash with research, and APSAC's role in encouraging and disseminating that research has been crucial.

But ultimately, what may most determine the fate of the backlash is not simply rebuttal, but how the child welfare movement responds to what is valid and plausible in the backlash critique. If child advocates improve the quality of investigations, provide more rights for parents reported for abuse, establish guidelines for dealing with the recovery of memories and make other changes, it may deprive the backlash of much of its agenda. Such self-scrutiny and reform should be relatively easy for a movement in as secure a position as the child abuse movement is today. Again, APSAC has been instrumental in encouraging and providing professional training solidly grounded in rigorous research and current knowledge.

Finally, we need to not just respond to the backlash, but to lay out new initiatives ourselves. These initiatives need to be conceptualized and framed in ways that draw public attention, that are responsive to the values and concerns of the public and professional community, and that build bridges to new allies and social bases.

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We child advocates have a low tolerance for conflict. Many of us who go into child welfare work do so to be healers, not warriors. We need more warriors.

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Two themes in particular may be very useful strategically: the theme of supporting families and the theme of fighting crime. We have initiatives that encompass both of these themes. The work being done around home health visiting clearly catches the family support theme. The work being done in prevention education catches the crime fighting idea.

I don't have time to go into these proposals in any detail here. But my bottom line message is, "Don't get discouraged." Those of you who work with depressed people know how a negative mindset can selectively ignore everything that is good and

positive and paralyze a person in his or her depression. This paralysis can happen to social change activists too. We need to be able to take defeats and setbacks and unfair attacks, and still see the bigger picture. Find whatever is useful to remind yourselves of how much we have accomplished, how big we are, how many resources we have at our disposal, how many talented and caring people we include, how good and honest we have been so much of the time. There is a battle here, but what we stand for and what we aspire to are going to prevail

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presented a flagrantly distorted view of the McMartin trial, got the attention of entertainment editors across the country (see V.8, n.2 of the *Advisor*). In this issue of *The APSAC Advisor* is reprinted a letter to the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* strongly condemning their irresponsible editorial stance on the "Fells Acre" day care case in Massachusetts (see p. 25).

With these and other steps, APSAC's leaders hope simultaneously to challenge distortions widely repeated in the media, establish APSAC as the source of reliable information about issues in child abuse and neglect, and, ultimately, serve APSAC's primary aim: to ensure that everyone affected by child maltreatment receives the best possible professional response.

APSAC's leaders have sometimes made decisions, however, that might frustrate members who want us to be more active in the battle against the backlash. The purpose of this editorial is to articulate the thinking that has informed APSAC's activities in this regard and to invite members' participation as that thinking evolves.

Many factors shape APSAC's actions in responding to the backlash. Among the most pressing of these is the availability of resources. APSAC's success sometimes obscures the fact that APSAC is a young organization with a small staff and a limited budget. Like it or not, APSAC's ambitions still far exceed its capacity. In deciding where to invest APSAC's limited resources, we have opted most frequently to strengthen professional education and training by encouraging research and disseminating its results in usable form: we have produced *The APSAC Advisor*; developed APSAC's new journal, *Child Maltreatment* (see p. 32 for a list of contents in the first issue); generated *The APSAC Study Guides* and *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* (due out from Sage Publications early next year); produced guidelines for practice (four new sets have been published just this year); developed the national Colloquium, day-long advanced training institutes, and other forums for professional educa-

tion; and actively supported members in their efforts to develop APSAC state chapters to deliver training and other services to professionals locally. Recently, as members know, we have devoted much time and energy to influencing federal legislation affecting abused and neglected children and their families—educating members of Congress, establishing a new standing committee of the Board to direct legislative initiatives, and establishing a Legislative Network of members to organize grass-roots activism (see p. 23 for a reminder on how to sign up).

Providing ongoing professional education and training is an important end in itself, one that can justly claim the bulk of APSAC's resources. Improving professional practice has the secondary benefit, however, of depriving the backlash of some of its ammunition. Another factor informing APSAC's response to the backlash is that professional practice has *not* always been exemplary. As many commentators have pointed out (including David Finkelhor and Jon Conte in this issue of *The APSAC Advisor*, John E.B. Myers in his recent book, *The backlash: Child protection under fire* [Sage, 1994], Ken Lanning in his chapter in the forthcoming *APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* [Sage, 1996], and others), a good deal of the backlash is a self-inflicted wound. In some cases practice is faulty because, inexcusably, professionals are poorly informed about the knowledge available at the time. In other cases, new research has caused us to question professional practice that was solidly based on then-current knowledge. Whatever their cause, mistakes in professional practice in this field can have devastating results

Professional practice inspired by such beliefs as that children's accounts of sexual abuse are invariably accurate; that not remembering any abuse is evidence of traumatic repression of abusive experience; that certain fairly common behaviors (e.g., bedwetting and nightmares in children, eating disorders and sexual dysfunction in adults) are solid evidence of abuse, has helped fuel the backlash we are facing today. The possibility that professionals in this field, acting with the best of intentions on faulty assumptions or information proven inaccurate by subsequent research, might have hurt inno-

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cent individuals and families is very painful for us to contemplate. The appropriate response to legitimate criticism is not angry rebuttal; it is, clearly, to eliminate the source of its legitimacy. That means fixing the practice.

A third factor shaping the decisionmaking of APSAC's leaders is a consideration of our long-range goals. One of APSAC's most important assets is credibility. If APSAC is to retain the authority it is building with the media and general public, it must be seen as a consistent source of balanced and reliable information. As a professional society, we are particularly vulnerable to the charge of self-interest when we defend professional practice or argue for more resources to support it. We are subject to such charges no matter how fair we are: although our response to Crews in the *New York Review of Books* was balanced, solidly argued, and data-based, Crews attempted to dismiss it as self-interest by referring to it glibly as "an adroit brief for her guild's rank and file." We justify such dismissal, and sacrifice both integrity and credibility, if we respond to attack with heat rather than light, and with arguments that are not scrupulously faithful to *all* of the evidence.

As APSAC's organizational capability grows, we intend to be increasingly active in efforts to improve the accuracy and depth of media coverage of the critical issues affecting the protection of children. We feel that we can meet APSAC's several objectives by adhering to a few key principles:

- Do everything we can to ensure that professional practice is excellent by fostering research and disseminating its results in usable form.

- Always base our stance on the data, no matter how painful.

- Stand firm in the face of hysteria, whether it comes from "friends" or "foes"

The common message in many backlash attacks seems to be that the bigger problem Americans face is not the abuse of children, but the people who draw attention to it. As we have acknowledged, sometimes the people who draw attention to child abuse *have* been part of the problem. But it is absurd and irresponsible to focus so much attention on comparatively small missteps that the vast problem of child maltreatment in America is obscured. The backlash is a distraction from the indisputable fact that the abuse and neglect of American children are widespread, horrifying, and incalculably costly to individuals and the society. APSAC will continue to work on many fronts to combat the destructive and misleading elements of the backlash, and to refocus public attention on the real agenda: the huge and often dispiriting task of preventing the maltreatment of children and ameliorating the effects of maltreatment when prevention fails. We solicit member input into the principles guiding these efforts. We hope you will contact us with your ideas.

Theresa Reid is the Executive Director of APSAC.

LEGISLATIVE ALERT

On September 19, when it passed Senator Dole's welfare reform bill, the U.S. Senate also voted to reauthorize the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Voted unanimously out of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee as S.919 last summer, CAPTA was included as an amendment in the Dole-backed bill.

The next step is for a House-Senate "conference committee" to reconcile the House and Senate versions of the bill. Keeping the protections for abused children guaranteed by CAPTA will be very difficult at this stage, since the House of Representatives eliminated CAPTA altogether with the passage of H.R. 4 (the "Personal Responsibility Act"). People who care about preserving CAPTA and

other critical child protection programs need to tell members of the House Ways and Means Committee and members of the House Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee how strongly they feel about the importance of federal leadership in protecting children.

Further information on these matters is offered in "Washington Update," by Tom Birch, Legislative Counsel for the National Child Abuse Coalition (see p. 24). For model letters and names of key committee members, call or fax APSAC. To receive regular updates on federal legislative initiatives affecting maltreated children and their families, join APSAC's Legislative Network. APSAC - Phone: 312-554-0166, Fax: 312-554-0919

POSITION OPENING Child Protection Program

The University of Washington (UW) Department of Pediatrics, in conjunction with the Harborview Sexual Assault Center (SAC) and Children's Hospital Medical Center (CHMC) is recruiting a pediatrician for its Child Protection Program. Responsibilities will be: Administrative leadership as Medical Director of SAC and program development in the UW-CHMC Child Protection Program; direct clinical evaluations of children for physical and sexual abuse; teaching and clinical research; and consultation and collaboration with community child protection services. The individual must be eligible for faculty appointment as Assistant or Associate Professor in the Department of Pediatrics.

To apply, please send letter and curriculum vita by January 31, 1996 to: Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH, Head, Division of General Pediatrics, Box 359960, 325 Ninth Ave, Seattle, WA 98104-2499. Phone (206) 521-1530. Fax (206) 521-1562. The University of Washington and Harborview Medical Center are Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employers.