

## In Search of a New Model for Coordinated Urban Child Abuse Investigations

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Multidisciplinary teams began to emerge as a best practice for investigating child sexual abuse in the mid-1980s (CAG, 2000; CDSS, 2003; Pence & Wilson, 1994; OVC, 1997). As time passed, the lessons and successes of team investigation led many communities to extend the team model to all forms of serious child abuse. Today the team model is also being applied to coordinated efforts to respond not only to child sexual abuse and serious physical abuse but also in other circumstances, such as domestic violence cases in which children are involved and to drug cases in which children are considered in harm's way.

The team concept has become one of the foundational elements of the child advocacy center (CAC) movement (Walsh, Jones, & Cross, 2003), which has developed across the nation based on the initial efforts of the National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama, and later the National Children's Alliance (NCA). Indeed, membership in the National Children's Alliance requires a community to establish a team model (NCA, 2000).

Although a broad consensus appears to exist that multidisciplinary teams are the best way to approach serious abuse, there is less agreement about what the word *team* really involves. The membership standards of the National Children's Alliance, for example, do require that the team be established through a written protocol and include specific agency representatives (law enforcement, child protection, prosecution, medical, mental health, victim advocacy, and the child advocacy center). The NCA standards go on to require that a team participate in a case review process and that the case review system be utilized to increase the understanding of team members of the complexity of child abuse cases. Beyond those elements, the community has great latitude in forming its teams.

The very word *team*, however, implies different things to different people. Some might suggest the word is often misapplied to groups that lack the common traits of true teams. A recent *Webster's Dictionary*, for example, will provide little guidance and defines *team* as a number of persons associated together in work or activity. For many people, the most common use of the word in everyday language brings to mind sports teams. In this context, teams, whether comprising 8-year-olds playing soccer or professional athletes competing in the World Cup or the Super Bowl, are typically associated with a formal sense of membership (you are on the team or you aren't, or you wear the team jersey or you don't), a common mission (to win as a team not as an individual), some degree of role definition (forwards vs. goalies or quarterbacks vs. wide receivers), and some elements of trust in each other (needed to pass the ball or puck from one player to another or to stay focused on the player's specific job, such as guarding the left side of the field without being "drawn out of position"). In fact, success in sports teams depends not just on the skill of the individual players, but also on their ability and willingness to integrate those skills into a cohesive whole.

Authors in the business literature have drawn a distinction between mere working groups and teams. A work group has been characterized as a collection of individuals who come together for a joint effort, but whose outcomes rely primarily on individual contribu-

tions; whereas a team is characterized as one in which members work collectively to magnify the group impact beyond that which individuals alone can attain (Maxwell, 2002). Further, Katenbach and Smith (1999) have defined *teams* as "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves accountable." Anne Donnelon (1996), writing about product development teams, defined *team* as "a group of people who are necessary to accomplish a task that requires the continuous integration of the expertise distributed among them."

Some authors (Fisher, Rayner, & Blgard, 1995) have identified key components of successful teams, such as the following:

- Common purpose**—The members share commitment to the common mission
- Trust**—The members work for each other's success and can count upon one another
- Clear roles**—Members know what is expected and what to expect from one another
- Open communications**—The team is characterized by continuous sharing of information
- Diversity**—Teams enjoy a mix of styles, ideas, cultures, background, and expertise
- Balance of tasks and relationships**—The team focuses on the mission and on the need to maintain a strong relationship among members

Donnelon (1996) also observed in her research that successful workplace teams have at least three common elements:

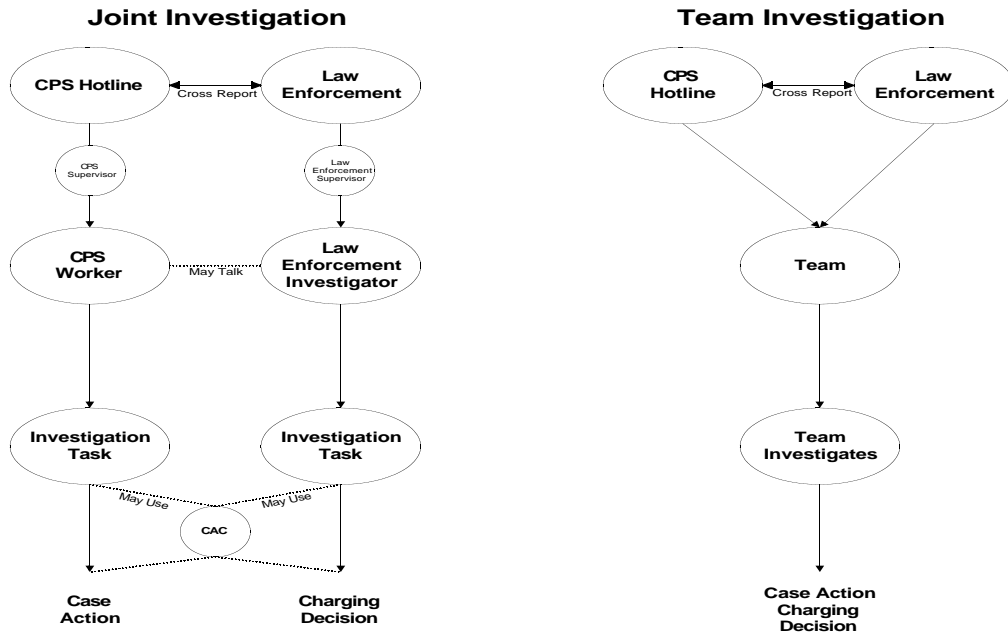
- Team identity**—Like those on sports teams, members know that they are on the team, and they know who are the other members of this joint enterprise with a common mission
- Interdependence**—They depend upon each other to accomplish the task before them; no one member can do it all, and they must share the workload
- Trust**—True interdependence cannot be achieved unless the members of the team trust one another to fulfill their respective roles and duties

Although many communities attempt to coordinate their child abuse investigations at least some of the time and may call their response a "team" model, not many truly fit the team model as defined above. Their efforts can better be described as "joint investigations." Joint investigations involve parallel investigative efforts in which those involved share information while maintaining their independent mission and decision making. Joint investigations have their limitations. For example, such investigations increase the potential to inflict inadvertent secondary trauma on the victim through redundant interviews or the possibility for one entity to inadvertently interfere with the investigative plans of the other (i.e., CPS talks with the suspect in such a way that he seeks a lawyer prior to law enforcement's interview). Such efforts are contrasted with a team model (see Figure 1), in which the investigative tasks are divided

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among the team members, roles are clearly defined and delimited, actions are coordinated, information is shared, and the outcome meets the needs of all involved.



**Figure 1. Joint Investigation Versus Team Investigation**

To achieve a team model, successful child abuse teams must master Donnelon's (1996) three team components in unique ways:

**Team identity**—Individuals often come to a team assignment having a strong identification with their own discipline or agency and not with the collective mission. To become a team, child protective services staff, law enforcement investigators, prosecutors, medical practitioners, and mental health professionals who are part of the team need to know that they belong to “the team.” Without such an identity, interdependence and pursuit of a common mission are very challenging. Some communities have been very effective in accomplishing this by building a true team culture in which team members identify as much with the multidisciplinary team as they do with their own agency. These members understand the team's unique language (they talk in the language of their team: protocol, forms, laws, and a unique slang that they understand but that others might find confusing), customs (going to lunch together after the case review meeting or rotating who brings food to the meetings), and even clothing (they may have special team shirts made). In some places, multiagency teams are colocated in shared office space at the CAC or elsewhere, making team identity clear.

**Interdependence**—Child abuse teams typically are guided to some extent by a team protocol that sets out broad roles and expectations for all participating agencies. Each member depends on his or her colleagues for some aspect of the process. These protocols only lay the groundwork for interdependence. Success, however, is often built on the experiences the members have in repeatedly working with one another on a range of cases. Through experience, they learn who does what well, how to backstop for each other, and when to let a team member “have the ball.”

**Trust**—Just as with all teams, interdependence requires the team members to trust one another. If the protocol provides for one person to conduct the child interview on behalf of the team, then the other team members must trust that person to do so in the interest of all or must trust that any questions suggested by team members observing the interview are asked in a skillful and effective way. Likewise, law enforcement is often best trained to gather information from alleged perpetrators of abuse who may have a vested interest in hiding the truth from investigative agencies. Many child abuse teams give law enforcement the lead in such interviews, but child protection agencies must trust that their colleagues will gather the information CPS needs or, at the very least, not say anything that will unnecessarily make subsequent interviews more difficult. The same is true for the other elements of the team, from trusting the medical provider to conduct a competent exam to trusting the prosecutor to aggressively pursue the case in court.

Child abuse teams, like all successful teams, require one other vital element:

**Skills**—Trust is not, however, built in a vacuum or merely upon team identity and interdependence. It must also be built upon the solid professional skills of team members at performing the tasks involved. If team members are going to trust one member to conduct an investigative interview for all of them, then the interviewer must possess the prerequisite skills in child interviewing or the trust will be quickly lost. The same is true for each and every member, just as an outstanding quarterback will not trust the receiver to catch the ball if the receiver has not demonstrated the skills needed to do so.

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Many communities have found that achieving this level of team operation is challenging and elusive for a number of reasons, from time and staff experience to interpersonal conflict or varying degrees of commitment to the team process (Pence & Wilson, 1994). A casual review of these components reveals that they are facilitated, however, by a clear sense of team membership and ongoing personal interactions and peer review among the team members. This level of interaction is facilitated by familiarity born of experience together, and it has been supported by a wide range of efforts from team-building retreats to colocation of the team members in a common office suite.

Although such strategies have much promise, they are most elusive in large metropolitan areas, where literally hundreds of social workers, police, prosecutors, and even many doctors and mental health professionals all work on the most serious child abuse cases. For example, in San Diego, California (population 2.9 million), where over 10,000 reports of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse are made each year, a case may be assigned to any one of over 100 "immediate response" social workers and 60 specialized law enforcement child abuse investigators working in one of 16 law enforcement jurisdictions. If prosecuted, the case may be assigned to any one of 29 deputy district attorneys who specialize in child abuse, and it may be seen by any one of 40 therapists at the Chadwick Center (local CAC) or any number of other counseling agencies or private practitioners. The medical assessment is the most centralized, and all sexual abuse or serious physical abuse is likely to be seen at one of three hospitals.

In such an environment, applying the lessons of successful teaming is challenging. How can such large urban environments implement the lessons of team development? In some large communities, the sense of team may be reserved for the "case review team." In this model, a core of professionals (often in supervisory roles) meets regularly to staff cases, with individual investigators or child protection workers attending on a case-by-case basis or participating through their supervisor or agency representative. Although such teams have many benefits, they touch only a small percentage of the cases reported. For example, in San Diego only about 500 cases a year, out of over 10,000, are reviewed at one of the county's two child protection teams' case review meetings. In many urban communities, this leaves most actual field investigation in the hands of front line staff who do not really perceive themselves to be part of "the team," who may not know their counterparts in the other agencies, and who, despite a county protocol, have no prearranged plan for who is going to do what, in what order, and how the information will be shared. Nevertheless, there are many examples of individual workers and investigators reaching out to each other and forming very effective ad hoc teams. The challenge is to routinely aspire to the benefits of standing teams who know and trust each other well, and doing so in an environment in which it is not practical to establish standing, cross-agency partnerships on an ongoing basis at the individual investigator level.

Though sports and workplace teams serve as a useful analogue for child protection teams in smaller and mid-sized communities, they often do not work as well for urban environments. A search for another analogue from which to draw leads to the concept of "crews" as they are defined in the airline industry and military. The aircraft cockpit crew must function as a cohesive team, each member having his or her own roles and responsibilities. The failure of the crew to function as a "team" can, and on occasion has, spelled true disaster causing the deaths of hundreds. These crews, however, often meet only the day of the flight; the realities of aircraft scheduling make it impossible for most airlines and some military applications to create tight-knit standing teams who routinely work together as a unit. In this way, these crews are like the child abuse professionals in an urban area. They must function as a team in this case, even if they have not previously worked together (Helmreich & Foushee, 1993).

An examination of cockpit crew management literature reveals some common characteristics of crew management (Helmreich, Merritt, & Wilhelm, 1999; Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Helmreich & Foushee, 1993; Harvey, 2001; Wickens, Mavor, & McGee, 1997; Bounds, 2004) that may be applied to child abuse teams. Clearly, crews are different from teams in some important ways (see Figure 2).

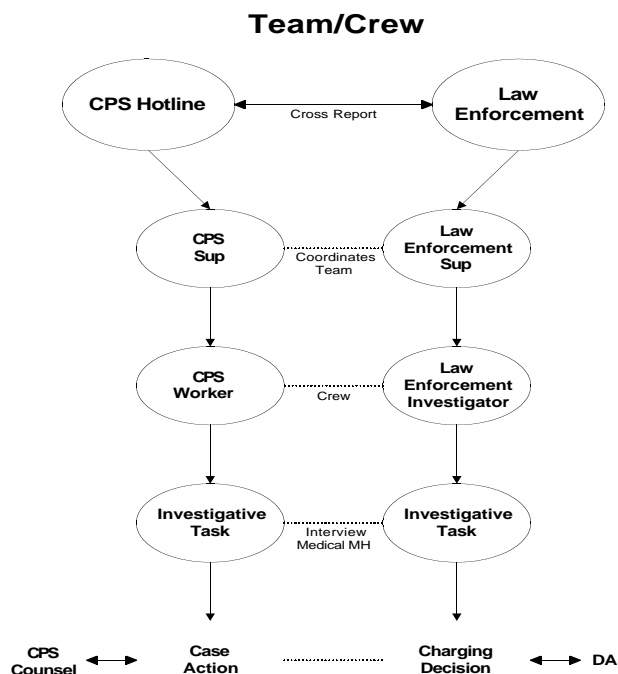
| Team vs. Crew   |   |   |
|-----------------|---|---|
|                 | Team  | Crew  |
| Membership      | Stable  | Variable  |
| Role Definition | General—Very flexible within broad parameters | Clearly defined—Flexible within narrow parameters |
| Identity        | Team and others with similar training         | Overall System and others with similar training   |
| Interdependence | High—Based on interpersonal experience        | Limited—Defined by roles                          |
| Accountability  | Individual/Team                               | Individual/System                                 |
| Communication   | Open/Business/Casual Non-business             | Structural/Business                               |
| Leadership      | Personal/Shared Role Defined                  | Role Defined                                      |
| Team Building   | Develops over time                            | Must be accomplished quickly                      |
| Trust           | Built on interpersonal experience             | Built on training                                 |

**Figure 2. Team Versus Crew**

In applying the crew concept to child abuse investigations, however, it may be best to create a hybrid model (see Figure 3). Such a model could include a coordinating team (at the supervisory level within the agencies) with a clear sense of identity, interdependence, and trust that manages the system and assignment of cases and interchangeable crews being formed for each case of serious child abuse that requires the attention of child protection and law enforcement—and potentially, medical, mental health, and prosecution. This system can be examined in five stages: referral, assignment, crew formation, crew operation, and case decision making.

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**Figure 3. Team/Crew Hybrid Model**

This will require some difference from existing practice in many communities. For example,

**Protocol**—Most child abuse protocols are general and egalitarian in nature. They leave a great deal of latitude for teams to decide who does what in a specific case. This allows the team to tailor its response to the unique fact set. A “crew” protocol may actually require greater structure in the defined roles for each party and clear lines of authority. This could be accomplished using a “Pathway” or algorithm to paint a visual image of how the case should be managed. As such, the pathway would guide the work of the crew just as a flight plan and operations manual guides the actions of a flight crew. The crew protocol might include a preinvestigative checklist to outline decisions that need to be made before initiating the investigation and an investigative checklist to track the actions (APRI, 2003). As with cockpit crews, clear role descriptions are needed. The protocol may need to stipulate the typical order of actions, such as who is to interview the referent, the child, and the suspect and which cases should be scheduled for case review. The crew can deviate from the protocol as needed upon mutual agreement and approval of the supervisors.

**Training**—Cockpit crews are extensively trained to work in mutually supportive ways with others they do not know. A crew model would need to focus training not just on the skills needed to conduct an investigation or fulfill the appropriate role of the discipline but also with significant attention to standardized ways to accomplish interchanges with the other disciplines. Additionally, each “crew member,” like is done with flight crews, must be trained to understand the roles, functions, and responsibilities of each of the other members of the crew. Without a thorough knowledge of each crew member’s roles, functions, and responsibilities, successful control of a complicated aircraft or complicated investigation cannot be effectively handled by a group of personnel who may have met each

other for the first time minutes before a flight or in the lobby of a hospital.

**Team Building**—Successful teams have rituals that foster team identity and interdependence. Likewise cockpit crews engage in preflight rituals each and every time to facilitate the operation as a cohesive team despite individuals’ relative unfamiliarity. These rituals include a standardized preflight briefing before embarking—to get acquainted, to go over normal procedures, to consider any special circumstances (i.e., weather), and to discuss risks particular to their specific flight and mission. Once on the plane, members go through a standard preflight checklist to familiarize themselves with the plane and one another.

**Crew Formation**—The child abuse team equivalent of crew formation could include the following, depending on how cases develop:

- a standardized way for the child protective service worker to contact the law enforcement investigator (if known) or law enforcement supervisor (if assigned investigator is unknown) to touch base and share known information, such as prior referrals or arrest records;
- a standardized way for the law enforcement investigator to contact the child protective service worker (if known) or child protective service supervisor (if assigned worker is unknown) to touch base and share any information known at this point, such as prior referrals;
- standardized initial briefing to include normal procedures, coordination of investigations, division of responsibilities, prioritization of actions, and standardized guidelines to coordinate plans, as is done with flight crews.

**Investigative Planning and Tasks**—The crew, following the crew protocol and preinvestigative checklist, would need to formally discuss who is going to take what action, and how and when the information gained will be shared with one another.

**Crew Decision Making**—The crew protocol would need to clearly articulate which decisions can be made only after consultation, and with whom (such as the return of a child previously removed only after consultation with other crew members, or arrest in consultation with prosecutor), and which decisions would be made without formal consultation, and how those decisions will be shared (charging decisions, placement decisions, treatment decisions).

The crew and team models can be put together in a modified way at the urban region level as a system. Such a system would have four levels (see Figure 4):

**Stakeholders**—The community response would be guided by “stakeholders,” who meet at least annually to reaffirm their commitment to collaborative efforts to effectively protect children. Stakeholders in this case are community leaders at the senior executive level of the involved agencies, such as the district attorney, chiefs of police, the sheriff, the director of the department that has child protection responsibilities, the executive leadership of the CAC, and others. If the actual elected or appointed officials cannot participate, this group should include at least their senior deputies.

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**Child Protection Management Team**—In this model, actual design and management of the system would be the responsibility of the “child protection management team.” This team is composed of designated management staff of the respective agencies, such as the child welfare manager for child protection agency, captains and/or lieutenants of the child abuse squads in the law enforcement agencies, the head of the child abuse prosecution unit, and the executive director of the child advocacy center. This team would meet regularly to address system-level issues and modify the community response to issues as they emerge. In San Diego, for example, this team meets monthly and includes law enforcement and child protection managers, the chief county counsel (who represents and advises CPS in court actions), the leadership of the Family Protection Unit at the district attorney’s office, a representative of Navy Family Advocacy, child abuse physicians from Children’s Hospital, and the senior leadership from the Chadwick Center (the CAC).

**Coordinating Team**—The actual day-to-day operational management of investigations would fall to a series of coordinating teams. For example, each major law enforcement jurisdiction could participate in at least one such team, and larger departments might participate in several teams, perhaps one for each child abuse sergeant who supervises child abuse investigators. These law enforcement supervisors would be paired with child protection counterparts. A designated prosecutor (and perhaps a CPS legal advisor) would support these two disciplines and be available for advice, as needed. These would be standing teams, so that members will develop a sense of team membership, interdependence, and trust. As with every other form of team, the practical realities of professional and personal lives would require the acceptance of substitutes and temporary assignments across teams, to support one another when time conflicts, illness, vacations, and other logistical factors impact on team operation.

These coordinating teams would receive the referrals and assign them to individual crew members they designate. The coordinating team members would consult with their investigators and with one another, as needed, on case-specific investigative strategy and decision making. These coordinating team members would share a common mission and hold one another and their crewmembers accountable for the collective outcome.

**Crew**—The crew, individuals selected by the coordinating team members, would conduct the actual investigations. The crew members would review the referrals and any historical information in their agency records and make contact with their counterpart(s) in person or over the phone. During this initial contact, the assigned members will introduce one another and engage in whatever preinvestigative rituals have been established by the child protection management team. This could include simply getting to know each other and working through a brief preinvestigative check list that describes what initial steps are in order, who is going to do what, which tasks they may want to do together (such as interview or watch the interview of the child at the CAC together), and how they will keep each other informed. The crew would then conduct the investigation following the protocol, sharing tasks and information much like a standing team.

**Case Review**—In this model, in which thousands of cases come to the attention of the system, a criterion should be established for the type of cases most appropriate for case review. This may include cases in which complicated medical or mental health information needs to be shared with all agencies at once, or cases in which the agencies may have divergent perspectives on the events or on how best to proceed.

Even though such a system will never function as well as the best true team models, it may allow large, complex urban environments to approach the benefits of team environments. In fact, one could anticipate that the pool of professionals (as defined by the coordinating team’s range of responsibilities) from which the crews are drawn will be small enough that individual members will find themselves working together repeatedly over time. This repeated interaction will result in some of the interpersonal challenges and benefits of teams (which will range from interpersonal conflict on the downside to trust and respect on the upside). In the end, if the stakeholders, child protection management team, coordinating teams, and crew members all understand the collective mission, children and the community will be safer, those who abuse children held more accountable, and maltreated children will be less likely to suffer long-term effects of the abuse and the systems’ response to it.



Figure 4. Four-level System of Hybrid Crew and Team Models

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