

A Recent Russian–American Collaboration in Child Protection Reform

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Globally, child protection is a relatively new and rapidly evolving field of practice. For most of history, the majority of the world's communities acknowledged the existence of orphaned and abandoned children and devised strategies to care for them. However, the frequency, scope, and dynamics of both physical and sexual abuse of children, particularly within families, remained largely unsuspected and unrecognized.

The prevalence of intrafamilial *physical abuse* as a source of significant harm to children was not publicly identified until the early 1960s, when pediatrician Henry Kempe and colleagues published a seminal article, "The Battered-Child Syndrome," in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962). In this article, the authors identified physical abuse as a frequent cause of serious morbidity and death in children. They reviewed the types of injuries that constituted abuse and outlined the role of physicians to identify and respond to abuse to prevent its recurrence. The article was widely regarded as the single most significant impetus to increasing public awareness and exposing the reality of intrafamilial child abuse (Kempe Foundation, 2008). However, it wasn't until approximately 15 years later, on the heels of the women's rights movement, that child *sexual abuse* also became more widely acknowledged. Subsequently, both physical and sexual abuse came under the purview of nascent child protection systems—developing under the auspices of governments that recognized the State's responsibility to protect the rights of maltreated and vulnerable children.

The passage in 1989 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child served as a major impetus for global child protection reform. The Convention was the first legally binding instrument to address the full range of human rights for children. These rights were spelled out in 54 articles that declared, for example, that all children had the right to survive, the right to develop to their potential, the right to be protected from harmful influences such as abuse and exploitation, and the right to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life. By ratifying the Convention, national governments committed to adhere to its provisions, to protect these rights for their nation's children, to consider the best interests of children in all legislative and policy decisions, and to be held externally accountable by the interna-

tional community to uphold these commitments (UNICEF, 2005a, 2005b).

Children's right to protection comprises one of four broad categories of rights included in the Convention. The intent is to protect children from various forms of child abuse, neglect, exploitation, and cruelty. The Convention also designates families as the best environment to ensure the growth and well-being of children. According to the Convention, governments must acknowledge and respect the primary responsibility of parents to provide care and guidance to their children, and must enable parents by developing programs that provide material assistance and essential supportive services. The Convention further asserts the importance of preventing the separation of children from their families, except in those situations where such separation is in a child's best interests (UNICEF, 2005b).

Signing the Convention has had major implications for national governments and the societies they represent. The Convention requires governments to accept responsibility to confront and remedy the many familial and social conditions that impinge on children's rights, such as poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, lack of preventive medical care, unequal access to education, and justice systems that fail to recognize children's special needs (UNICEF, 2005c). Full adherence to the provisions of the Convention requires the development and strengthening of child protection systems that can offer an array of family services and treatment interventions to keep children safe in their own families, as well as to ensure safe, permanent families for children already living in out-of-home care. As many Western societies fully understand from having spent decades developing and strengthening their child protection systems, it is a daunting task. Not surprisingly, many nations remain in the early stages of such development.

In most of the world, orphanage care has historically been a primary strategy to deal with dependent, neglected, disabled, and abandoned children. Countries vary in their historical evolution from dependency institutions to family-based care as the primary intervention for orphaned and dependent children. Statistics are inconsistent regarding the number of children in the world designated as orphans, but in 2005, UNICEF estimated there were

over 132 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean alone (UNICEF, 2008).

Current statistics for Russia and former Soviet countries suggest that the number of children considered to be orphans is at least in the tens, and more likely in the hundreds, of thousands. While some of these children are bona fide orphans, having lost both parents, the majority are considered *social orphans*—children whose parents and families have abandoned them or lack the capacity to care for them. In some cases, the children have run away from home or have been removed from their families by the State as a protective measure, and often, the parents’ legal rights have been permanently terminated. Many children will remain in orphanage care until they are emancipated in early or middle adolescence, without sufficient education or preparation and generally with nowhere to go. They are at high risk of homelessness and involvement in crime and prostitution, and they are highly susceptible to serious illness, injury, and early death. They are frequently victims of child trafficking.

Due to large numbers of dependent children and bureaucratic inertia, orphanage care has persisted in many parts of the world, in spite of the many deleterious effects of institutional care on children’s development, all of which have been well documented for decades. Early work conducted by psychiatrist Dr. René Spitz in the 1940s described the serious and enduring depression and attachment problems observed in infants who were cared for in institutional settings (Spitz, 1945, 1946). A more recent longitudinal research study, the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, documented the prevalence of attachment disorders and stark delays in all developmental domains observed in children (age 3 and under) who had been raised in institutions, when they were compared with children raised in their own families. One encouraging finding was that children who were moved to foster families within the first year or so were able to regain some—but not all—of the developmental milestones lost as a result of early institutionalization (Nelson, Fox, Zeanah, & Johnson, 2007).

From these findings, the obvious policy imperative for governments is to adopt as “best practice” the systematic provision of family-based care for all infants and young children who cannot remain safely with their own families, and ultimately to close the “baby homes”—the hospitals and orphanages designated for the care of infants and very young children. In 2011, UNICEF and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a call to action urging governments throughout Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia to end the practice of placing children below age 3, including children with disabilities, into institutional care (UNICEF, 2011). Simultaneously, the world community has come to better understand the negative outcomes of orphanage placement on *all* children, regardless of age. This recognition, strengthened during the 23 years since passage of the Convention of the Rights of the

Child, has spurred the development of national and international initiatives to promote deinstitutionalization. Grassroots initiatives have developed in several nations, such as the Russia Without Orphans and Ukraine Without Orphans movements promoting family placements for dependent children, and many international child welfare organizations have adapted their programming accordingly.

Because of the relative newness of child protection as a field of practice and the inherent complexity of its supporting laws and programs, nations have taken to seeking out, borrowing, and sharing innovations and strategies across borders as a means of jump starting or enhancing what is inherently an extremely complex, time-consuming, and ethically-challenging reform effort. Both governmental and nongovernmental (NGO) agencies have sought assistance from nations that have a longer history of child welfare reform, seeking practice models, examples of enabling legislation, organizational infrastructures, and well-tested service programs that might be adapted and adopted to strengthen their own child protection systems—and to learn from these countries’ mistakes as well as their successes. The United States, particularly through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has directed financial support to developing nations to help strengthen their services for maltreated and vulnerable children. This approach of international cooperation and synergistic development is particularly timely, because countries are realizing that some of our most troubling and destructive child protection issues, such as child trafficking and child pornography, demand close collaboration and integration of effort by the world community.

It was in this environment that the idea of creating a Russian–American Child Welfare Forum was conceived.

In 2009, President Barak Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev jointly formed the Bilateral Presidential Commission with a mission of “identifying areas of cooperation and pursuing joint projects and actions that strengthen strategic stability, international security, economic well-being, and the development of ties between the Russian and American people” (U.S. Department of State, 2009, para 1). The Commission established 16 regular working groups. One of them, the Civil Society Working Group, subsequently established four sub-working groups, one of which was Child Protection. The concept of a formal, ongoing Russian–American dialogue on child protection issues and concerns emerged from this sub-working group. In 2011, two of the sub-group members—Ms. Marina Egorova, President of the National Foundation for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NFPCC) in Moscow, and Dr. Ronald Hughes, President of APSAC and Director of the North American Resource Center for Child Welfare (NARCCW)—agreed to collaborate on what was to become the first Russian–American Child Welfare Forum.

Both NFPCC and NARCCW had considerable prior experience developing and strengthening child protective service systems. Between 2002 and 2010, NFPCC worked in partnership with IREX, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, in the design and implementation of the Assistance to Russian Orphans (ARO) program, a multiphase project designed to stop the unprecedented growth in child abandonment, which had been exacerbated by the economic instability that resulted from the breakup of the former Soviet Union. The program worked to support family-based care for orphans and abandoned children and ultimately created more than 900 new abandonment prevention and family-based service programs in targeted regions of the Russian Federation. Over the course of ARO's work, the Russian government devoted considerable attention to the issue, encouraging an enabling environment for reform and increased support from both regional and local government entities (IREX, n.d.).

Simultaneously, after more than 25 years developing child welfare practice and training systems throughout North America, NARCCW and its affiliate, the Institute for Human Services (IHS) in Columbus, Ohio, had been asked to provide training and technical assistance to child welfare professionals in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. The training resources and products used in these initiatives had been developed, refined, and vetted by IHS and its partners—Ohio's state and county-level government agencies responsible for child protection—that, together, managed Ohio's statewide child welfare training system. In 2007, IHS entered a cooperative agreement with NFPCC to provide Russian translations of Ohio's training materials and curricula and of IHS' four-volume textbook, the *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, to enhance and support Russian child welfare reform efforts.

Expanding this partnership to include a Russian–American Child Welfare Forum seemed a logical next step. NFPCC assumed primary responsibility for planning the first Forum, which was held in the Republic of Buryatia in the Russian Federation, largely because of the consistently strong governmental support for child protection reform exhibited by the Republic's President, Mr. Vyacheslav Nagovitsyn. After an assessment of Russia's systemic needs for undertaking reform efforts of this scale, NFPCC and NARCCW identified the need for a U.S. partner with expertise in research, training, and service delivery in the disciplines of psychology, social work, medicine, law, and law enforcement. APSAC was therefore asked to join the child welfare reform effort. Recognizing the Forum as a significant opportunity to advance the mission of APSAC in other parts of the world, the APSAC Board voted to support the Forum, and 8 of the 20 international delegates to the first Forum were APSAC members.

Approximately 150 delegates attended the first Forum, which was held August 1–6, 2011, in Ulan Ude, the capital of Buryatia, and on Lake Baikal. According to Ms. Egorova, the Forum provided an important venue and a basis on which to develop bilateral

cooperation in the field of child protection. The Forum generated a wave of interest across the Russian child welfare field and among the direct service providers and organizations present at the Forum. The positive feedback confirmed the Forum's value as a platform for promoting international and intercultural exchange between Russia and the United States, and it set the stage for the Second Forum, which was scheduled to coincide with APSAC's Annual Colloquium and 25th Anniversary Celebration in Chicago in June 2012.

More than 60 U.S. delegates attended the Second Forum, a high percentage of them APSAC members. They were joined by approximately 50 Russian delegates, who came from many regions of the Russian Federation and who represented a wide spectrum of governmental and nongovernmental organizations responsible for protecting children's rights. The Russian delegates included heads of both central and regional government departments and ministries, directors and managers of governmental and nongovernmental service organizations, direct services practitioners, and consultants. Several of the Russian delegates held positions as the Children's Rights Commissioner for their home republic or region. Mr. Pavel Astakhov, Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation and Chairperson of the Russian Forum planning committee, presented at the opening plenary, as did Ambassador Konstantin Dolgov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Commissioner for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. Mr. Luke Dembosky, Resident Legal Advisor from the U.S. Department of Justice to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow also spoke at the opening plenary. Mr. Bryan Samuels, Commissioner of the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provided a plenary address at the APSAC Colloquium and met afterward with members of the Russian delegation to answer questions about U.S. government policy and practice in the field of child maltreatment.

The Forum offered 18 workshops, each with multiple presenters. Simultaneous interpretation of these sessions made them equally accessible to both Russian and American participants. In addition, 12 APSAC workshops and all APSAC plenary sessions were interpreted into Russian, although Russian delegates who spoke English were free to attend any of the APSAC Colloquium offerings.

The Russian delegates presented on topics that ranged from child protection policy, law, and management to innovative service models and approaches. Many presenters described their community's responses to a wide range of child protection issues, including identifying and serving children at risk of harm or abandonment, serving children with disabilities, child sexual abuse, child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, cyber violence, training and support of professional staff, and emancipating youth from orphanage care to independent living. American presenters delivered presentations on topics such as child pornography and

commercial sex trafficking, using the Internet and Web-based technologies to enhance child protection, promoting and sustaining family care for children in need of placement, professionalizing child protective services, risk and safety assessment, child trauma, and permanency planning. Because of the striking commonalities in topics of interest chosen by the two countries, the Forum planners were able to group Russian and American presenters into common sessions that dealt with these topics to promote exchange and dialogue among participants.

In keeping with the vision of international and interagency collaboration, NFPCC and APSAC were assisted in Forum planning and implementation by the Institute for Human Services and the U.S. Department of Justice.

From a long-term perspective, establishing enduring partnerships between nations can only enhance and expedite the ongoing development that is necessary to solve some of our most challenging child welfare concerns. For many years, child maltreatment professionals have recognized that without cross-discipline collaboration and the integration of services, effective child protection is not just daunting—it's practically impossible. This philosophy of partnering underlies many of our most effective program models, including child advocacy centers, interagency clusters for children with complex needs, community child abuse teams and child fatality review teams as examples. APSAC itself was founded on this same principle and represents the largest and strongest multidisciplinary organization devoted to increasing the quality of services for maltreated children. APSAC's involvement in this partnership provides a cadre of highly trained professionals who can provide both training and technical assistance in most of the topic areas and issues facing child protection. APSAC can also provide an organizational model for the development of a Russian prototype of APSAC to promote interdisciplinary collaboration within the Russian Federation on behalf of its children.

Collaboration between Russian and American child welfare professionals has initiated a promising process with the potential to help both nations in their development of civil society infrastructures necessary for effective child protection policies and legislation, and improved practice. It was made possible by bilateral initiatives and a commitment between the governments of the United States and Russia. With a continuation of this commitment and ongoing support, these efforts hold promise for better and safer lives for children in both countries.

The Third Russian–American Child Welfare Forum is currently being planned for the summer of 2013 in St. Petersburg. APSAC members who are interested in receiving more information about the Forum or in potentially providing training or technical assistance in Russia can contact an APSAC Board member or e-mail the authors at jsrycus@aol.com.

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