



Jon R. Conte, PhD

Celebrating 35 Years of Improving Society's Response to Abuse and Neglect of Children: An Interview with Jon Conte, Co-Founder and Lifetime Member of APSAC

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In the mid-1980s, a handful of professionals dedicated to the prevention of child sexual abuse recognized the need for a more comprehensive response to the abuse and neglect of children. This group of experts consisted of academic researchers, direct practice clinicians, and law enforcement professionals all of whom were engaged in serving maltreated children and their families. Research on child maltreatment at the time was sparse and confined by and large to just two journals, *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *Victimology*. Professionals who worked with maltreated children and their families did not have adequate access to specialized services and education. These early conversations culminated in a call for the establishment of a professional society for child maltreatment specialists to collaborate and disseminate information.

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) was founded in 1986 as a nonprofit organization focused on meeting the needs of professionals from all disciplines who provide services to maltreated children and their families. What started in the basement office of

the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* has now grown to a nationally recognized organization with chapters established in eight states and prospective chapters being developed in seven more. APSAC boasts several publications dedicated to the dissemination of both research and practice-oriented information on the prevention and response to child maltreatment. Over 9,000 child maltreatment professionals benefited from specialized training seminars provided by APSAC in 2020 alone.

The success of APSAC is due in no small part to the handful of professionals who recognized the need for a professional society dedicated to the development and dissemination of expert training and education for child maltreatment professionals. Among these early founders is Jon R. Conte, PhD, a teacher and scholar whose expertise is grounded firmly in child maltreatment and trauma. Dr. Conte was the editor of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* when he and the managing editor, Teresa Reid, PhD, decided to house the nascent APSAC project in their basement office. Dr. Conte served as the founding president of APSAC and helped shepherd the organization from its early stages to the respected association it has become today. To celebrate the 35th anniversary of APSAC, he recently spoke about his experiences as a co-founder, the accomplishments of APSAC to date, and where he sees the professional society moving toward in the future.

Early Career and Current Work

Dr. Conte began his academic career at Whittier College in California, where he earned a bachelor of arts in sociology–anthropology. He then went on to complete a master’s degree in social work from the University of Washington in Seattle before serving as Caseworker at the Seattle Children’s Home 1974–1975. Dr. Conte returned to the University of Washington for doctoral studies and completed his PhD in social welfare in the summer of 1979. During the last year of his doctoral program, he served concurrently as Director for Program Evaluation and Research at the Seattle Children’s Home, 1978–1979.

Following his doctoral education, Dr. Conte’s first academic faculty position was at the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), where he served as Assistant Professor. After three years there, he accepted a position at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. Dr. Conte remained at the University of Chicago for about nine years, where he served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Doctoral Program Director before returning to the University of Washington as Professor in 1990.

In addition to his work as an academic researcher, Dr. Conte has also contributed to the field of child maltreatment as a clinician in direct clinical practice. While in Chicago, he established a clinical practice working with children, youth, and adults who experienced sexual abuse in childhood. Although primarily serving as a psychotherapist within his practice, Dr. Conte also contributed to family law in determining if a child had been sexually abused. Eventually he started a forensic practice in Chicago, where he evaluated and served as a plaintiff expert for individuals claiming harm and or damage from sexual abuse. He maintained his clinical work after moving to Washington State, where he continued to provide psychotherapy and forensic services to thousands of individuals. Dr. Conte maintains that, after decades of research and clinical practice, any expertise he has in victimization comes from the

thousands of survivors he has worked with and who were willing to share their lives and internal world in the process of healing.

Although Dr. Conte officially retired from faculty five years ago, he continues to serve the profession as full-time Director of the Joshua Center on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention at the University of Washington. His most recent work is with a youth participation program in which young people from 16 to 22 years old are helping to develop prevention messages and other interventions directed at their peers. After working within academic settings with other child welfare researchers and practitioners for many years, Dr. Conte is excited and honored to have the opportunity to elevate the voices of these ambitious young people.

APSAC Then and Now

Dr. Conte speaks fondly of the founding members of APSAC, who included psychologists, social workers, law enforcement officers, and at least one federal agent. Dr. David Corwin is among the chorus of voices in the organizing committee of APSAC to whom Dr. Conte remembers talking about the mission of the fledgling organization. The real focus of this early-stage venture was on the dissemination of professional education materials for those responding to child sexual abuse. The original *APSAC Advisor* was a newsletter meeting the needs of these professionals who had few other resources for scholarship in their field. The first readers of the *Advisor* were primarily therapists who were the easiest population to access in the early stages of APSAC’s founding. Although there was a constant interest among the founders of APSAC to attract Child Protective Services workers and law enforcement, these populations proved difficult to attract due to high turnover rates and professional cultures at the time.

Dr. Conte recalls that when he was selected to serve as the founding president of APSAC, there was an absence of specialized professional organizations dedicated to child sexual abuse. As he remembers, no professional organizations had yet developed

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special focus groups in which child maltreatment was their primary focus. APSAC met the immediate need for a specialized home for practitioners from multiple disciplines who were in search of a professional society to share information and develop better interventions. Clinical content led most of the agenda at the first APSAC Colloquium, which later expanded to include forensic interviewing techniques as well as seminars dedicated to the development of community-centric, culturally inclusive, and socially relevant child maltreatment interventions.

APSAC was the first organization to utilize actors during forensic interview training, an innovation that later became common practice among various organizations and disciplines. Early iterations of the APSAC Colloquiums included day-long seminars from the Cultural Institute, in which the sole focus of the gathering was on the dissemination and development of culturally inclusive child maltreatment practices. APSAC functioned as a leader in the field of child maltreatment and introduced many innovations that are now standard practice in the field.

Although the early development of APSAC was marked with great success under the leadership of several presidents and various board members, the rise and expansion of the organization has not been without challenges. Although Dr. Conte has never himself enjoyed the idea of reflecting on his own legacy, there is a particular story that comes to mind when he reflects on his contributions to APSAC. He was asked to return to serve a second term as president when APSAC was on the verge of bankruptcy. The situation was quite dire for APSAC when, for example, the organization was a year delinquent on rent for a building rumored to be owned by the Mob. He recalls returning to an empty APSAC office as president to diligently guide the organization back to financial stability and professional efficiency. Dr. Conte shares affectionately the relief he felt when, after handing over to an intimidating property manager an envelope with the overdue back rent for the APSAC

building, she declared, “I’m going to kiss you if that’s what I think it is!”

Dr. Conte considers it a great honor that his colleagues trusted him to guide APSAC both in its early stages and when the organization was struggling through growing pains later in life. He was honored by APSAC in 2012 with an emeritus for life designation, an award for which he is quite proud. Although acknowledging his role and thankful for the opportunity, Dr. Conte believes very strongly that effective presidents and leaders should be able to disengage and leave room for incoming leadership when the time comes. An early criticism of APSAC was that the organization consisted of an “in-group” that were not welcoming to outsiders. Dr. Conte concedes that perhaps he and his colleagues did not do enough early on to encourage membership; however, joining APSAC in the early stages was a labor of love and did not carry paid expenses or other perks that are present today. He is proud of being trusted by his colleagues to step in for the organization during times of grave importance. The relationships developed and maintained through APSAC have sustained him and been central to his professional development.

Dr. Conte is the first to point out that there remains no other multidisciplinary professional society with a national presence like that of APSAC. One of the most powerful qualities of the organization is its ability to coalesce experts from many different fields. Although APSAC was criticized early on for a perceived inability to attract professional diversity, APSAC’s board members today consist of clinicians, social workers, legal scholars, medical doctors, and academics all of whom are dedicated to strengthening child maltreatment practice. The impact of APSAC as a professional organization has grown exponentially over the past three decades with outreach efforts expanding far beyond the board of directors. APSAC training seminars are attended by thousands of professionals annually and continue to expand every year. APSAC membership is steadily increasing as are the quantity, quality, and diversity of training programs offered.

The Future of APSAC

When APSAC was founded, there were no known professional societies dedicated to the production and dissemination of information on the abuse and neglect of children. Today, virtually every discipline can access information on child maltreatment from its own professional society. Dr. Conte sees this change as a marker of APSAC's success as well as one of the biggest challenges APSAC will need to address moving forward. The adoption of child maltreatment domains in other professional societies nationally will require APSAC to adjust its strategy to preserve the multidisciplinary nature of the organization.

The continued recruitment of large numbers of multidisciplinary professionals will become increasingly difficult as other professional societies expand their reach to include content on child maltreatment. One of the issues that remains to be addressed substantively, however, is meaningful cross-disciplinary child abuse prevention efforts. The APSAC organization is well positioned to expand on this work and coordinate child abuse prevention efforts across disciplines. A major question for Dr. Conte moving forward is What can APSAC do to organize child abuse interested originations to coordinate child maltreatment prevention activities?

In addition, identifying and addressing the needs of current and future APSAC members will be a distinct priority for the society and its guiding board members. APSAC has begun to venture into virtual training seminars and has experienced a lot of success in the last few years doing so. Dr. Conte believes spending more time and resources building APSAC's virtual training infrastructure is a good investment for the future of the organization. It remains an open question for Dr. Conte and other professionals in the field whether the student of the future will attend a single college or university. It seems clear that students and professionals both will likely access specific training content virtually through consortiums attached to universities and professional societies. In anticipation of this change, there needs to be a bigger discussion on how

APSAC can become a go-to source for training at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional level for child abuse specific practice. Who better to conduct classes on assessment, prevention, and child maltreatment research than the deeply qualified multidisciplinary team at APSAC?

Dr. Conte qualified this suggestion with some of his own experiences as a researcher, educator, and practitioner. There is an incredible need for current child maltreatment professionals practicing in the field to better understand the mechanisms of child maltreatment, assessment, and prevention. Many undergraduate and graduate programs do not have specific content on child abuse and neglect and significant numbers of students enter the field without a functional understanding of basic prevention principles, including the national standards for mandated reporting. Child maltreatment prevention trainings need to be available for students at the master's and bachelor's level across a broad range of disciplines, including therapy, counseling, criminal justice, and child protective services. Many master's level students will move into supervisory roles in a short period of time following graduation and need to be able to address child maltreatment prevention broadly as well as the needs of the professionals they are supervising specifically. Education regarding vicarious trauma, assessment, and prevention are all critical to effective child maltreatment prevention.

Advice for Future Leaders

Understanding the formulation of the future is a critical gap that will need to be addressed by the leaders of APSAC moving forward. Child maltreatment prevention is an inherently multidisciplinary field. How can we help identify and correct the problems and issues in that practice? Dr. Conte points out that there are serious errors still made in the field where children are hurt in child welfare practice for reasons that are distinctly preventable. For example, experts have known for decades now that moving foster care involved children from placement to placement can lead to serious negative social health outcomes, and

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yet it happens quite often. Children experience revictimization at the hands of other children while in the care of child welfare professionals who often fail to communicate these risks to foster parents. Even more basic, child welfare professionals may use trash bags to carry children's belongings when moving children from home to home even though the profession has already identified that practice as damaging to children and adolescents.

One of the problems the field faces according to Dr. Conte is that child welfare continues to be a separate field from APSAC. It stands to reason that child protective service (CPS) employees need to be members of and have access to APSAC and related services. CPS employees should be getting the *Advisor* sent straight to their inbox and have access to continuing education content via APSAC's expanding training platforms. Licensed clinicians should be required to participate in specific content on child maltreatment as part of their continued education requirements attached to renewal of their credentials. Advocating for and servicing these growth areas need to be a focus of APSAC moving forward.

Reflections from an Aspiring Child Welfare Researcher

As I reflect on my conversation with Dr. Conte, I am struck by his dedication to the field and humility in self-reflection. He shared that he is a firm believer in the idea that a person is lucky if they see, in one lifetime, that the contributions they made are no longer relevant. The field is benefited from innovations, progression, and the influx of new scholarship. Although the recruitment and training of new practitioners and scholars in the field of child welfare are both promising and exciting, what animates Dr. Conte the most is the encouragement of authentic voices in child maltreatment education, research, and practice.

Although not every authentic voice is at a point in their healing to contribute to the development of child maltreatment practice, Dr. Conte believes strongly that it would be unconscionable for the field

to go much further without meaningfully including the voices of parents and abuse survivors who have critically important feedback for the professionals who serve them. Child welfare professionals working toward developing expertise in the field should not only be interested in honing their skills as scholars but also constantly engaged with youth who have lived expertise that should be brought into the conversation.

Dr. Conte believes that his generation of child welfare practitioners and scholars were convinced that they would end child abuse in their lifetime. After several decades of concerted efforts in that direction, it is now clear that they will be leaving the field with this lofty goal left unmet. A word of advice from Dr. Conte—be prepared for the long haul. Communities are benefited from prolonged engagement, and change is incremental. He suggests that as developing scholars and practitioners, you need to follow your interests. In any way possible, avoid the pressures of senior faculty and supervisors who provide pragmatic advice to get publications or quick certifications. Dr. Conte maintains that although these have value, the most valuable parts of his own career have come from authentic relationships developed both within the profession and the community at large.

Connection and community were common themes throughout my interview with Dr. Conte. One of the founding principles of APSAC as an organization was the formulation of a professional society for specialists to connect and share ideas with one another. Clinicians, mental health practitioners, child protective specialists, and aspiring child welfare academics such as myself are all benefited from the development and maintenance of community both professional and personal. Authenticity is the active ingredient of success that has helped guide Dr. Conte through his storied career. Although decades of changes have altered the collective view of the field, our mission remains the same—to improve our prevention of and response to the abuse and neglect of children.

As I finished my call with Dr. Conte, he excitedly shared more details about his recent work with the Joshua Children's Foundation Center on Child Sexual Abuse. Since retiring his tenure and teaching responsibilities, he has served without salary as Center Director. He explained the most exciting aspect of the Center's work has been the Youth Participation Program guided by the leadership and expertise of authentic youth voices from 16 to 22 years old who are recognized as experts on being youth and on reaching other youth. Youth involved in the Center have developed prevention messages and other interventions directed at their peers. Conte believes much will be gained by APSAC expanding work to involve youth in middle and high schools who truly will be the next generation of leaders responding to child maltreatment.

As this is written, Dr. Conte has announced that he is fully retiring from the University and will devote a significant portion of his time to developing a

national strategy to end child sexual abuse. He sees this effort as a community organization, one eliciting the collaboration of a wide range of child abuse professionals and other organizations. These will move beyond complex plans to end child maltreatment to a more basic effort that creates a national movement to garner, even demand, action to end child sexual abuse. An ecumenical initiative that spans multidisciplinary practice, it is perhaps the best example in Dr. Conte's career that perfectly summarizes his professional dedication and contribution to the field of child maltreatment prevention.

Thank you, Dr. Conte, for taking the time to speak with me and share your wisdom on this 35th anniversary of the *Advisor*. Your contributions to the field and continued work, both of which are invaluable to the future leaders and practitioners of this field, are truly examples of authentic community engagement.

About the Author

Esaa Mohammad Sabti Samarah is a doctoral student at Florida State University College of Social Work. His research interest is focused broadly on child welfare, displacement, and system accountability. Informed by his practice experience, Esaa is interested in community-informed translational research that improves outcomes for children exposed to the child welfare system.

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