



Celebrating 35 Years of Child Protection in Research and Forensic Interviewing: An Interview with Kathleen Coulborn Faller, PhD

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Kathleen Coulborn Faller, PhD

Kathleen Coulborn Faller, PhD became involved as a member of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) in 1988. She served as a Board Member from 1991 to 1997 and then again from 2013 to 2019, and served as Chair of the APSAC Publications Committee from 2015 to 2019. With a small laugh, she thinks of herself now as one of the “old buffalos” of the association, as she has been involved with APSAC since its inception. Dr. Faller’s notable work within APSAC includes co-creating the association’s forensic interview guidelines.

Early Career and Current Work

Dr. Faller’s contributions to the field of child interviewing and child maltreatment can hardly be summed up in words. Her work has had incredible influence how children who may have experienced abuse and trauma are treated and on how we as a society can ensure they receive justice and the best treatment. She, along with colleagues such as Dr. Linda Cordisco Steele, Dr. David Corwin, Dr. Mark Everson, and many others, have set the framework for how to best talk to children about abuse in order to elicit the most accurate and objective information. While Dr. Faller’s contribution to forensic interviewing is extraordinary, she, along with her colleagues, have also provided insight into other areas involved in assessment of child abuse.

These include sexual abuse disclosures during divorce, extended interviews of child victims, use of anatomical dolls in interviews, testifying in court for the professional, and recruitment and retention of child welfare professionals.

Dr. Faller received her doctorate in social work and psychology in 1981 from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She points to the importance of the 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) for shaping changes in defining child abuse and designating who was mandated to report concerns. As a result of this act, cases of child physical and sexual abuse and child neglect began to be investigated, and an expanded list of professionals became mandated reporters. As a result, CAPTA brought about an increased number of child maltreatment cases.

In 1985, Dr. Faller opened the Family Assessment Clinic (FAC) at the University of Michigan under a contract with the state’s child welfare agency. The clinic’s focus was providing comprehensive assessments of children and families involved in child abuse investigations. In the first year, the clinic received 50 referrals, mostly concerning sexual abuse. Dr. Faller recalled how new to the field she and her colleagues were in the beginning, charting their own course of action as it pertained to interviewing children.

Dr. Faller’s clinic was the first to videotape child interviews, beginning this practice in 1990. Dr. Faller recalled reviewing her interviews to observe patterns of best practice on how to talk to children;

in particular, she was curious about which questions solicited which responses. She also referenced the fact that during this time several other professionals began research on interviewing children (Dr. Gail Goodman, the late Dr. Karen Saywitz, and more recently Dr. Tom Lyon). Dr. Faller recalled how a pivotal study conducted by Margaret S. Steward that involved anatomical dolls, drawings, and computer assisted interviews allowed for Dr. Faller and colleagues to receive a grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to conduct research using computer assisted interviews. The most notable findings from this study related to the relationship between the formation of questions and children's disclosures. Dr. Faller also pointed to the incredible research led by Dr. Michael Lamb and his late wife, Dr. Kathleen Sternberg, who worked with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and partnered with colleagues in Israel to conduct field research that deeply explored the types of questions asked of children, ultimately creating the NICHD investigative interview protocol.

In 1990, Dr. Faller joined the APSAC task force in developing the forensic interviewing guidelines. She felt it was important that APSAC did not create a protocol, but instead a set of guidelines; for a successful interview, the interviewer follows the child, not a protocol. Dr. Faller also noted that APSAC collaborated with a multitude of professions, including law enforcement, child development specialists, and legal experts, to formulate forensic interview guidelines. Dr. Faller has been able to collect data such as disclosure rates among males versus females (female disclosure rates are higher than males), disclosures rates in interfamilial versus intrafamilial cases (a multitude of factors decrease disclosure when abuse occurs within the family unit), and the benefits of utilizing various forms of media during the interview (anatomical drawings, white boards).

Dr. Faller has received numerous awards acknowledging her contributions to the field of child abuse and trauma, including the National

Association of Forensic Social Workers' Sol Gothard Lifetime Achievement Award and the National Children's Advocacy Center's Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award. She presently serves as a member of the Blue Ribbon Commission of National Experts to Examine Failures of Institution to Protect Youth Athletes (Examining the Larry Nassar Scandal), which is a program of CHILDDUSA at University of Pennsylvania Law School; she also serves as a member of the Mental Health Roundtable on Treatment for Victims of Internet Child Pornography, at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

In 2007, Dr. Faller received the APSAC Mark Chaffin Outstanding Research Career Achievement. Her research has resulted in over 100 article publications and 11 books. And while she acknowledged the important role of research for academia, she prefers the practice side of child welfare, recognizing the importance of integrating the research into practice. Dr. Faller is currently working on the 2nd edition of *Interviewing Children about Sexual Abuse: Controversies and Best Practice* and is a Marion Elizabeth Blue Professor Emerita of Children and Families at the University of Michigan, a position she has served in since 2014. She also continues to provide expert testimony in child abuse cases. In fact, during the course of this interview process, she was deposed for six hours in reference to a polyvictimization case—and this was the seventh time that she had been deposed for this particular case.

Commentary on Child Welfare Research

Dr. Faller has been in the child welfare academic world for more than 35 years but decided years ago that she wanted to continue to practice as well as research, while recognizing the importance of research for evidence-based practice and for the development of promising practices. Being at the University of Michigan, she has the ability to work with research assistants who can focus on data analysis, leaving her the time to focus on how the research impacts practice in the field. Research is lacking in the domain of child welfare not only

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due to lack of funding, but also due to the unique nature of the field making it more difficult to meet the standards required for other disciplines (i.e., requirement for control groups and randomized control trials, both not feasible in the study of child maltreatment). Dr. Faller attributed the main reason for lack of funding in child welfare and research to the fact that “children do not vote.”

Much of Dr. Faller’s research has focused on practice integration. She has found the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) to be more flexible sources than institutions that fund biological research. Through a grant from the Children’s Bureau under HHS, Dr. Faller was granted \$1 million over the course of 5 years to conduct a longitudinal study on the child welfare workforce, which resulted in several publications highlighting areas such as retention and recruitment in the child welfare profession.

Furthermore, Dr. Faller worked alongside Linda Cordisco-Steele with the National Children’s Alliance (NCA) and two other colleagues from University of Alabama, Debra Nelson-Gardell and Javonda Williams, to collect data on extended child interviewing, receiving 2,000 survey responses and resulting in four published articles. Some notable findings from this research demonstrated the need to carefully consider the professional training and background of the interviewer and the types of cases that would be appropriate for extended interviews (Faller et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2016). The research also positively correlated the number of interview sessions and an increase in credible sexual abuse disclosures, and, in some circumstances, new disclosures made in later sessions (Faller & Nelson-Gardell, 2010). The findings of this research also emphasized the importance of utilizing narrative elaboration, cognitive interview techniques, and anatomical dolls in child sexual abuse cases (Faller et al., 2011).

Persons of Influence

Dr. Faller recalled those who have been most influential to her in the field of child maltreatment. One such notable individual is David Finkelhor, PhD. Dr. Faller first encountered Dr. Finkelhor’s work in 1978–1979 on the cusp of publishing her first book, *Social Work with Abused and Neglected Children: A Manual of Interdisciplinary Practice*. The Free Press publishing company sent Dr. Faller a copy of Dr. Finkelhor’s book, *Sexually Victimized Children*, which demonstrated the prevalence of child sexual abuse in college-aged males and females. Dr. Faller recalled that the study found that approximately 19% of females and 9% of males had experienced childhood sexual abuse. This study “blew the field away,” as it shed light on a population who was socially and academically high functioning yet had experienced a substantial level of child maltreatment. For Dr. Faller and others, this study, and other works by Dr. Finkelhor concerning polyvictimization and the use of telephone surveys with children, made Dr. Finkelhor a “pioneer” in the child abuse field.

Dr. Faller also fondly recalled the late Diana E. H. Russell, PhD as an “amazing feminist” who was a member of a South African anti-apartheid underground movement, the African Resistance Movement (ARM). The movement’s goal was to eliminate institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa. Dr. Russell graduated from college when she was 19 years old and later relocated to the United States, where she earned her doctorate at Harvard in social psychology with a focus on sociology and the study of revolution. She returned to South Africa to focus her research on sexual exploitation of women. In 1986, Dr. Russell’s first book, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women*, was published. This book was the product of community-based research in California, which included interviewing adult women on their experiences of childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Also influential for Dr. Faller has been Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, PhD, a faculty member at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). In the early 1990s, Dr. Wyatt's research provided evidence concerning the prevalence not only of child sexual abuse among African American women, but also concerning the microaggressions these women endured. Dr. Faller lamented that unfortunately times have not changed; in fact, these situations have worsened since the publishing of Dr. Wyatt's research. Dr. Wyatt has received numerous awards, including the Chancellor's Award for Diversity and Inclusion and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the American Psychological Association, for her work on trauma's impact on mental health. Dr. Wyatt was notably the first African American woman in the state of California to receive a license to practice psychology. Dr. Wyatt has also developed a structured interview questionnaire, the Wyatt Sexual History Questionnaire, to assess women's consensual and coercive sexual experiences.

APSAC Then and Now

Although considerations for the welfare of children started prior to the 1930s, child maltreatment first became a legislative focus in the United States in 1933 with the implementation of the Social Security Act, which included child welfare provisions. Child welfare encompasses maltreatment, foster care, and adoption in both state and federal statutes. Dr. Faller suggested viewing the history of child welfare as a pendulum—alternating between child safety and family preservation.

APSAC was founded in 1986. Initially, the APSAC Editorial Board was composed of doctoral-level psychologists. Dr. Faller applauded APSAC for bringing together a variety of professionals who work in the child welfare world in assessment, intervention, and prevention, creating a space for professionals from many different disciplines to collaborate and promote best practices. Today, APSAC Board Members are a testament to this collaboration among a diverse group of professionals, combining those who are research-focused and those working in the field of child

welfare: medical professionals, attorneys, psychologists, and social workers. In line with its mission to connect with its broader interdisciplinary members, APSAC produces two distinct yet interrelated publications, *Child Maltreatment*, which publishes empirical papers, and the *Advisor*, which publishes translational papers that are relevant for practitioners.

APSAC and its task forces also create and provide professional practice guidelines to promote best practices and access to quality services in areas of child maltreatment investigative work. Dr. Faller described her admiration for APSAC's efforts making these guidelines accessible to members and free to non-members, realizing the importance of accessibility for all professionals.

Challenges and Advice for the Next Leaders of APSAC

Today, there remains the challenge of recruiting and retaining professional members of color to APSAC's board. Dr. Faller said that she believes that APSAC would benefit from collaborating with outside organizations such as the national organization of Black Administrators in Child Welfare, Inc. It is paramount, Dr. Faller explained, that APSAC continue to endeavor to create a team of board members that reflects the views of professionals of color.

Dr. Faller also described her belief in continuing to work diligently on practice guidelines to allow for consistent and quality practice, as well as on providing critical journal publications (*Child Maltreatment*, the *Advisor*, the *Alert*) along with forensic interview training. Dr. Faller praised APSAC's Forensic Training as "some of the best, most sophisticated" training for forensic interviewing. In addition, she noted the fact that the webinar training series for new child welfare professionals has been a useful endeavor and that the annual Colloquium brings together some of the best in the field to provide training and roundtable discussions.

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Additionally, Dr. Faller postulated on the need for more focus on child neglect; this is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, yet APSAC’s focus has historically been on child sexual abuse and child physical abuse, despite the fact that at one point in time child sexual abuse comprised only 13% of abuse cases. Another area that needs attention, in Dr. Faller’s opinion, is the use of paid staff positions. Most APSAC task force and board members are volunteers, thus giving them limited time to devote to APSAC endeavors.

APSAC’s membership increased to approximately 3,500 members at one point, but as other similar organizations were created, APSAC’s membership numbers decreased. Although Dr. Faller recognized that APSAC is a “niche” organization, she said that she would like to see an increase in membership. APSAC has historically worked with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and there are several APSAC members from the FBI (e.g., Special Agent Ken Lanning, who is a retired FBI expert on crimes against children). In this vein, APSAC needs to enhance outreach to various other disciplines to encourage law enforcement officials, district and state attorneys, and child welfare professionals to join the organization.

In terms of child welfare, as a nation, Dr. Faller said that she believes the federal government needs to take more of a stand. The Child Tax Credit that ended in 2021 should be reinstated, Dr. Faller added, as this monthly stipend had a remarkable impact on families in poverty. As is well documented, poverty is correlated to child neglect, as impoverished parents struggle to provide shelter, food, and medical care. For this reason, Dr. Faller said, the government should place more focus on “safety nets” for families, expand the Affordable Care Act, and pass “Build Back Better” legislation. In terms of child welfare, Dr. Faller believes America is a “rich country that is stingy and punitive” compared with less wealthy European countries.

Reflections from a Child Welfare Professional

Our society has made great strides since the 1930s when the Social Security Act brought to light the need for provisions to care for one of our most vulnerable populations—our children. Yet there is still so much more to do. Dr. Faller’s research on forensic interviewing of children are an example of just one area in which growth has happened and must continue to happen, as our profession continues to learn more about ways that child cognition, development, and environment impact children’s statements. The child forensic interview and the interviewer have a crucial role in our justice system, and the skill and art of forensic interviewing must continue to be improved by research and best practice.

In this vein of growth and improvement, in the past several years, our society has embarked on a mission to eradicate the role implicit bias plays in the child welfare and protection world. APSAC plays a critical and vital role in this endeavor and has made strides to recruit board members of color and to diversify the professional representation of its members. Additional efforts are needed, and, I contend, will always be needed in this field. Dr. Faller astutely pointed to APSAC’s need to collaborate with other organizations that represent child welfare professionals of color. Further outreach to the child protection field is a must, as APSAC’s membership of child welfare professionals does not accurately represent the field.

Additionally, we must not underestimate the role our federal government can play in eliminating racial and socioeconomic injustice. We know from previous work in child protection that children are sometimes removed from their families based on poverty alone. I can attest that in the state of Florida we are working to reverse this practice and to view child protection from a lens not focused on our personal beliefs, but instead on supporting families so that children can remain in their homes.

Dr. Faller said that she finds inspiration in those who have marched outside of the confines of social and sometimes physical safety to stand up for human rights. She, along with her colleagues, has done just that with their work involving child forensic interviewing and child sexual abuse. To state it was an honor to interview Dr. Faller is a great understatement; it was awe inspiring to be able to talk with a pioneer in our field.

About the Author

Sarah Scozzafava, MA received her undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and later her master's in psychology from the American Military University. Sarah's professional work within the child welfare and social service field began in 2003, with a 12-year focus in child forensic interviewing. At present, she serves in a multidisciplinary role for the Florida Department of Children and Families. She also serves as a consulting editor for APSAC's Advisor.

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