

# Improving the System's Response to Child Maltreatment: An Interview with Charles Wilson

*Jerri Sites, MA*

## The Early Years

Charles Wilson, MSSW, remembers the exact moment he made the decision to enter the field of child protection. This was in 1972, when he was student teaching at an inner-city junior high school in Miami, Florida. Up to that point in his life, he did not realize that child abuse existed beyond his mother warning him about strangers in trench coats. It wasn't something that was on his mind or in the media at that time.

During his student teaching, he became more aware of the violence his students were being exposed to, which had been unknown to him in the past. It was then that the Florida Division of Family Services (DFS) put a television commercial on the air that had a nursery rhyme playing and babies crawling toward the camera. A male voice said, "Who would hurt a little child?" The child abuse statistics for Florida from the year before then appeared on the screen.

After seeing the commercial, Charles went to the library, did some research, and decided then and there that he wanted to become a child protective service worker (CPSW), which is something he had never heard of before. Two months later, he landed a CPSW job in rural Florida. After three years, Charles realized he was interested in changing the system. The regional manager for Florida DFS took Charles under his wing and encouraged him to obtain his master's degree.

Charles was accepted into the University of Tennessee master's in social work program with an emphasis in administration and planning. Upon graduation, he was offered a position with the Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) starting out as an emergency response CPSW and then, shortly thereafter, working at the regional and state level within the agency. By 1982, at the age of 33, Charles was appointed as Director of Social Services for the state of Tennessee, Department of Human Services. Originally, that position oversaw all social services. Subsequently, the department created the Division of Child Welfare, of which Charles became director. He remained in that position for 13 years.

## Commitment to Change

With great humility, Charles would say he was "lucky" to be an early adopter of several major milestones in child protection throughout his career—one being, during his tenure as Director of Child Welfare, exploring the team response to child abuse. This came on the heels of becoming aware of new research across multiple studies in the early 1980s that reported on rates of child sexual abuse among women. It was then that Charles realized that rates of child sexual abuse reports in Tennessee were minimal when compared with the numbers in these studies. Charles called this the "Sleeping Giant." Soon thereafter, the topic of child sexual abuse became more prevalent in the media and in prime-time television shows. After the airing of the movie *Something About Amelia*, reports of child sexual abuse exploded the very next day and would double in the months to come. Thus, the "Sleeping Giant"

was awakened, and Charles was in a position to raise awareness and address the issue through his work with Tennessee DFS.

During this time (circa 1983), when an episode of the television show *Different Strokes* addressed child sexual abuse, the local NBC affiliate in Nashville became interested and put together a documentary on the topic, *Innocent Shame*, which ultimately won a Peabody award. The documentary, and later a panel discussion, aired in Nashville right after the *Different Strokes* episode. Charles served on that panel and fielded calls from reporters and the public. This, along with several high-profile cases in Tennessee and across the nation, resulted in legislative interest in child sexual abuse. Subsequently, Tennessee State Representative Bill Covington established a special legislative committee to study sexual abuse and began holding legislative hearings around the state. In time, the committee learned of a pilot project DHS had established in West Tennessee to test out the idea of a multidisciplinary team approach. This resulted in the passing of Tennessee's landmark legislation The Child Sexual Abuse Act of 1985. Among other things, this legislation mandated multidisciplinary teams in all 95 counties in the state of Tennessee and established a state child abuse task force. The Department of Human Services was charged with creating the task force in an effort to develop a plan and support the creation of teams.

It was through the task force (1985–1986) that Charles met Special Agent Donna Pence, BS, with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI). Donna was assigned as the Sexual Abuse Specialist for the TBI and became its representative on the task force. In that role, she also organized law enforcement training on child sexual abuse across the state. Charles, Donna, and another colleague, Gloria Manheim, then created the child sexual abuse curriculum for the state law enforcement training academy. They also developed team training, which they took on the road to hundreds of new team members across Tennessee. Donna would later serve on the Board of Directors of APSAC and together with Charles would write the book *Team*

*Investigation of Child Sexual Abuse: The Uneasy Alliance* (Pence and Wilson, 1994) and a host of other publications, including multiple contributions to the APSAC Handbooks, the *Advisor*, and APSAC's journal, *Child Maltreatment*. It is through their tireless work, dedication, and shared goals that Donna and Charles's professional partnership developed into a personal relationship and ultimately marriage in 1987.

During this same time, in the early to mid-1980s, District Attorney Bud Cramer organized a team and developed the first Children's Advocacy Center. Although the team approach had been implemented in several communities around the country, those teams, including those in the state of Tennessee, did not have a dedicated place for the team members to convene or for children to be forensically interviewed. Creating a child-friendly space within the Children's Advocacy Center for the team to find a home to handle its cases was what set the Huntsville model apart from the rest.

The Huntsville team, led by Bud Cramer and community volunteer, Marilyn Grundy, decided to bring child abuse professionals together in Huntsville to share information about the different approaches to child sexual abuse from across the country, which became the first Child Sexual Abuse Symposium. Charles, along with Susan Steppe, a colleague from Tennessee, spoke at the second symposium, where he discovered the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) world.

Charles remained in his role with the Tennessee Department of Human Services until 1995, when he felt the need for a change. At this point in his career, Charles was interested in moving into a leadership position with an organization that also provided important local clinical work and had the potential for making a national impact. Only a handful of places in the country existed that fit the bill at the time, one being National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) in Huntsville and the other, the San Diego Center for Child Protection. Coincidentally, the NCAC in Huntsville was conducting a search for a new executive director. Charles applied and was selected. It was during his 5-year tenure with NCAC that he led the effort to reorganize NCAC, thereafter creating

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the position of chief financial officer, co-locating the multidisciplinary team (MDT), expanding training offerings, and moving forward with the capital campaign to raise funds for the NCAC campus, where it stands today.

It wasn't long before San Diego came calling. Charles, presenting at the San Diego Center for Child Protection Conference on Child Maltreatment since the 1980s, fell in love with the city. He and David Chadwick, Founding Director of the Center, became colleagues through their work in the early APSAC days. In 2000, well after David's retirement, the executive director position at the Center for Child Protection opened, and Charles made the move to San Diego from Huntsville. This is where he remained for the rest of his career. The Center was subsequently renamed after David and is now known as the Chadwick Center for Children and Families at Rady Children's Hospital–San Diego. The Chadwick Center serves as San Diego's Children's Advocacy Center. While in his role as executive director, Charles was closely involved in the Annual San Diego International Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment, the establishment of the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse, the Western Regional CAC, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Trauma-Informed Child Welfare initiatives, all while still managing clinical services. Although he "retired" from his leadership role in 2020, he is still involved with the Chadwick Center as a scientific advisor on multiple grant projects. He is also now a member of the Board of Directors of the National Children's Alliance and Omni Visions, a multistate therapeutic foster care agency based in Tennessee.

### Insights About APSAC's History and Accomplishments

When APSAC was first born and organizing its board of directors in 1989, Charles was asked to serve on the board to represent child protection. At this time, he was Director of Social Services for the state of Tennessee. The opportunity arose due to his relationships with some of the founders of APSAC, including David Corwin, Roland Summit, John

Conte, and David Finkelhor, with whom he had been involved in several national conferences and think tanks.

Charles became President of the Board in 1992. During his time on the board, the group was looking at publishing the *Advisor* and had begun long-term planning for a new journal, *Child Maltreatment*, the APSAC Colloquium, and the *APSAC Handbook for Child Maltreatment*. It was also during this same time that APSAC began to have a presence at the San Diego Conference on Child Maltreatment, which became a great place to nurture organization. As Charles recalls, there were a few years in which registration for the conference included obtaining membership with APSAC. These efforts were instrumental in the growth of APSAC in its early years.

Charles believes that one of the legacies of APSAC is bringing to the national stage a multidisciplinary approach to addressing child abuse. He feels that APSAC has maintained a scholarly position yet, at the same time, has not diminished the important contribution of non-academic professionals in the field of child maltreatment. On the one hand, the *APSAC Advisor* credibly distills scholarly information to make it easily accessible for all professionals who would benefit from such articles. The peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary research in the *Advisor* is often published more quickly than if having gone through the typical journal process, yet many articles appearing there have received top awards in their field. On the other hand, the APSAC journal, *Child Maltreatment*, has a more academic focus overall and sets a higher bar for publication.

The notion of integrating research and practice has played out in Charles' involvement with the San Diego Conference. Years ago, there would be a small separate research track, and most of the workshops would be presented by professionals practicing in the field, often without a clear basis in research. Today, the goal of the conference is to integrate the best and most recent research into the direct service tracks so that practitioners are made aware of the science that supports their work.

## **Future of APSAC**

Charles hopes that the future of APSAC will include “not losing what we have gained with respect to interdisciplinary cooperation and the application of science and research to practice.”

One of the initiatives Charles was involved in when he first went to San Diego in 2000 was the National Call to Action to End Child Abuse. The idea was to bring all the national child maltreatment organizations together to talk about ending child abuse. At that time, it was not quite clear to Charles how we would end child abuse, but he remained optimistic that solutions existed that just needed to be discovered. So, for APSAC, he feels the future includes consolidating and disseminating what we know works and building a culture in which those practices are expected of child abuse professionals. This is not unlike the push to implement evidence-based treatment, which is now the standard for therapy in the children’s advocacy center world and across the board in child maltreatment.

In addition, he hopes APSAC can continue to look for emerging practices that could help improve the lives of children and families and begin to develop those efforts to become everyday practice. This could include clinical applications, ways to determine whether abuse occurred, and further exploration of the role of epigenetics in preventing and responding to abuse.

## **Suggestions for Future Leaders of APSAC**

Charles hopes future leaders of APSAC will continue the commitment to the original principle of the multidisciplinary team approach. One of the challenges for APSAC, or anyone working in this field, is the turnover at the local, state, and national level, especially in child protection, law enforcement, and prosecution. Making sure that we reach out to those disciplines on an ongoing basis is critical to keeping them engaged in the multidisciplinary team response.

The high turnover rates and commitment to the multidisciplinary approach beg the question “How

do we professionalize all the disciplines involved in child maltreatment and make certain all disciplines have access to all that APSAC has to offer?” The challenge for future leaders of APSAC is to ensure that the work of the organization remains relevant to child abuse victims and their families. This will not happen unless those in the field are provided with the most up-to-date information on research-based practices. Charles also recommends that such information is provided to practitioners in a way that is accessible, is translational, and ensures feasibility of adoption. For instance, in 2003 or 2004, trauma-focused, cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) already had a strong research track record and proven efficacy, but it had not spread throughout the country. This was instrumental in the development of the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse, which allowed its creators to distill the description of these modalities in digestible pieces of information. Eventually, it became common knowledge in the child maltreatment field that TF-CBT was one of the most effective evidence-based treatments for children experiencing trauma, and evidence-based therapy became the standard for therapy in the Children’s Advocacy Center movement.

## **Final Thoughts**

For nearly four decades, Charles Wilson has worked to improve the system’s response to child maltreatment at the local, state, and national level. His desire for systems change is evident throughout his career, beginning with his recollection of the moment he chose to become a child protection services worker right out of college.

Charles started out, as he would say, “knocking on doors” as a child protection services worker, which surely provided insight on the need for and value of the multidisciplinary team approach to child abuse. He knows, firsthand, what it is like to try to work with families with minimal resources. This foundation drove him to ensure research-based practices were made available to frontline child abuse professionals. He also credits his wife, Donna, who comes from a law enforcement background, for



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helping shape his perspective throughout his career. Together, their mutual passion for the development of multidisciplinary teams made a tremendous impact in the state of Tennessee and, eventually, at the national and international level. Through training thousands of child abuse professionals, they have influenced the work of multidisciplinary teams around the world and, what is more important, changed the lives of children and families served.

Much of his work with APSAC focused on the implementation of the MDT approach to child abuse, as well as on integrating research into practice. When sharing his hopes for the future of APSAC and advice for future leaders of the organization, his thoughts went back to the value of the multidisciplinary team. He envisions that APSAC will continue to share its knowledge with those professionals who are working cases, making research-based best practice the expectation. He recognizes that even with all the advances we have made, there is still much room to grow and much more to learn.

In listening to Charles share his background and career highlights, it is clear this is a man of great passion, intelligence, and humility. At one point in our conversation, he said that he was “just in the right place at the right time.” That may be true, but one might consider there is something magical, or divine, in the fact that Charles and his peers, all of whom are pioneers in this field, were able to come together with a sense of camaraderie to simply do their best to make the system work better for children and families. They were all in the right place at the right time, and they were the right people to move our field forward.

### Personal Reflection

As I reflect on the life and career of Charles Wilson, as well as my own, it is clear we have come a long way from the days in which multidisciplinary teams and children’s advocacy centers were not

in existence. I am grateful for the pioneers of our field who paved the way for those of us who stand on their shoulders and continue to provide support, training, and technical assistance to child maltreatment professionals. I have experienced the evolution of the children’s advocacy center movement from being “child-focused” and centered on prosecution outcomes, to being family-focused and centered on evidence-based treatment for children and families. That said, there is still much work to be done. In my work as an expert witness, when analyzing cases, I frequently observe a lack of training and expertise on the basics of a child abuse investigation. When providing training and technical assistance, it is evident that many of our child abuse professionals are still, to this day, being placed in their positions with little or no training. This comes as a disservice to those who work in our field and, ultimately, to the children and families we serve.

My hope for the future of APSAC and the future of the field of child maltreatment, not unlike Charles, is that we continue to instill the value of the multidisciplinary team approach and the children’s advocacy center model. However, we cannot lose sight of the need for basic training for child abuse professionals *before* they are assigned cases. This, along with education regarding vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and empathic strain resulting from exposure to the trauma of those we serve is paramount for professional survival. Ultimately, we need to create a culture in the field of child maltreatment in which the expectation is that our professionals will be highly trained in research-based practices, and that our organizations and multidisciplinary teams will have policies and procedures in place to support child abuse professionals through the complexities of this work. Until then, I am certain of one thing. We will all continue to do our best to address the issue of child maltreatment, regardless of the limitations set before us.

### About the Author

*Jerri Sites, MA, has been a member of APSAC since 1998. With 30 years of experience in the field of child maltreatment and the Children's Advocacy Center movement, she now serves as a consultant providing training and technical assistance to child abuse professionals nationwide and as an expert witness in child sexual abuse cases. Her mission is to empower professionals to improve the system's response to child abuse. Contact: [www.childprotectionconcepts.com](http://www.childprotectionconcepts.com).*

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