



An Interview with Tricia Gardner, JD

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Tricia Gardner, JD

“It was never much of a question whether to join or get involved.... I was going to be a member of APSAC.” Professor Tricia Gardner, JD, was first introduced to the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) by her director and mentor at the time, Barbara Bonner, PhD. Her unwavering dedication to the field of child maltreatment and to the mission of APSAC is notable from the start of her career. In celebration of the 35th anniversary of APSAC, Prof. Gardner shared her experience as a past president and board member of APSAC, her past and current work, and her thoughts and advice for the future of APSAC and the field.

Early Career and Current Roles

Tricia Gardner is a lifelong Sooner. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Criminal Justice with an emphasis on Sociology from the University of Oklahoma and a Juris Doctor from the University of Oklahoma College of Law. Influenced by the experiences of her father, who was a law enforcement officer, and her mother, who was a juvenile probation officer, Prof. Gardner had initially aspired to become a prosecutor. Her interest in the field of child maltreatment developed during her undergraduate years when her mother transitioned careers to become a child welfare worker. Her mother would share how the youth she had worked with as a juvenile probation officer were now some of the parents she worked with as a child welfare worker. Prof. Gardner then clerked in a county’s child welfare office during the summers

of her undergraduate years, and she recalled one case in particular that greatly impacted her. There was a child fatality case in which the family had been previously in and out of the system, but was unknown actively to the system at the time. The prosecutor assigned to the case was hesitant to prosecute the parents as they could not believe that a biological parent could commit such an act on their own child. This experience, and listening to the hesitation of the prosecutor, further motivated Prof. Gardner’s career aspiration to become a prosecutor herself. Following her graduation from law school, however, she did not become a prosecutor. She accepted a job with the Interdisciplinary Training Program in Child Abuse and Neglect (ITP) at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, where she found that she could help make an impact on a greater scale than she could have as a prosecutor.

Prof. Gardner was first involved with the ITP, running in its second year, as a law student herself. Now in its 35th year, the ITP remains an interdisciplinary program providing specialized training in prevention, child advocacy, clinical practice, policy formation, research, and administration in the field of child abuse and neglect. The ITP welcomes graduate students throughout the University of Oklahoma and most recently has had law, psychology, social work, medical, dental, nursing, occupational therapy, and sociology students. Prof. Gardner credits the ITP and its director at the time, past APSAC president Dr. Barbara Bonner, for her passion for an interdisciplinary focus within the field. Prof. Gardner is passionate about the connection between different disciplines engrained in child maltreatment and how they can work together to help children and

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families. She applies this in her current work, for example, when working closely with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Department of Health, and Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

It was Dr. Bonner who presented Prof. Gardner with an opportunity to remain with the ITP following her graduation from law school. Prof. Gardner became a Research Tech for the ITP and, after a few years, became a faculty member. Throughout the years, the ITP has exponentially grown and, following Dr. Bonner's retirement two years ago, Prof. Gardner was appointed as the director of the ITP. In addition to this role, Prof. Gardner is the Administrator of the Section of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, a member of the Training and Technical Assistance Team for the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and representative on the Oklahoma Children's Hospital Child Protection Committee.

Contribution to APSAC

Prof. Gardner fondly recalls when she first became involved with APSAC. Dr. Bonner invited her to the first APSAC colloquium in Chicago, and she remembers how in awe she was of being surrounded by scholars whose publications she often read. She was new to her role, and she was struck by how warm and embracing seasoned professionals were to her as a young professional. The child maltreatment field centers around a difficult and emotional topic, but everyone she met at the colloquium was incredibly supportive of one another by checking in on their well-being, sharing ideas, and supporting professionals of all levels across the spectrum of disciplines. Prof. Gardner continued her involvement with APSAC following the colloquium and oversaw her state chapter of APSAC for several years before running for the board. She has held the roles of secretary, vice-president, and president of APSAC.

When asked what she thought would be her legacy in APSAC, Prof. Gardner spoke about her role in the organization during financially difficult times.

APSAC, not unlike other non-profit organizations, has overcome monetary issues over the years. When it was first founded, its office was located in Chicago, a city with high operating costs. When Prof. Gardner was a board member, it was clear that APSAC needed to close its Chicago office and build a better way to operate that was fiscally appropriate. As a result, Prof. Gardner stepped down from the APSAC board and facilitated a contract with her university's Center of Child Abuse and Neglect to run APSAC. Prof. Gardner was appointed as the Operations Manager and, with the help of other team members, handled tasks such as planning educational events by APSAC, answering the main phone number, and running the publications (which were printed out of past board member Terry Hendrix's garage). One of the biggest accomplishments during this time was to hold APSAC's colloquium in New Orleans for the first time. The colloquium was crucial in bringing the funds needed to keep APSAC operating. It was incredibly successful with almost 800 people attending. Prof. Gardner continued in her role for four years until she stepped away to run the training program for new child welfare workers in the state of Oklahoma. When she stepped away, her duties were moved to a management company, which continued for several years.

During Prof. Gardner's second tenure on the board and in her presidency, she and others on the board focused on how to get back to operating under an executive director rather than under a management company. It was a time to reshape what APSAC looked like with an executive director compared with what APSAC looked like run by a management company. The board searched for an executive director with content knowledge in child maltreatment and who could contribute to APSAC's goal in supporting and providing additional resources to its members. Although APSAC is currently searching for an executive director, Prof. Gardner shared that it is now financially stable, continues to have a strong and knowledgeable board and membership, and provides great resources for the field and communities. She looks back at her time on the APSAC board with gratitude, especially

for all of the people who persevered and did not abandon APSAC during such difficult times.

The Future of APSAC

In addition to ASPAC's top-notch educational events, resources, and the *Advisor*, Prof. Gardner sees ASPAC's focus on the interdisciplinary aspect of addressing child maltreatment as one of its greater successes. APSAC has been and continues to be successful in providing information that crosses the spectrum. It has helped convey that working in silos when helping children and families is not fruitful. Too often, this leads to a duplication of services or a child and family getting lost in the cracks. Interdisciplinary professionalism helps to mitigate this, and she sees the encouragement of this approach continuing to be a strength of APSAC.

As APSAC continues to grow and evolve, Prof. Gardner hopes that ASPAC will consider helping emphasize the importance of evidence-based treatments. There continues to be a disconnect between the reimbursement for evidence-based services and those that are not evidence-based. APSAC could play a part in educating insurance companies and other funding sources on the differences between evidence-based and not evidence-based services, which could greatly impact children and families. Additionally, Prof. Gardner believes that this will further help support multidisciplinary interactions while strengthening families. In our field, policies that support providing evidence-based services followed by finding a way to provide accessible education and training on these services should be a priority.

Prof. Gardner relayed two additional areas that APSAC should consider focusing on: schools and Olympic committees. Within schools, APSAC could facilitate resources in middle schools, high schools, and elementary schools on healthy relationships and what they look like as research has shown that early intervention during these school years is effective in breaking the cycle of maltreatment. Additionally, APSAC should consider connecting with the United States' Olympic and sporting committees on sexual

abuse prevention. It is clear that these committees have not handled this well, and while they are making small steps, APSAC could be a resource for organizations to create better policies in how to prevent and respond to sexual abuse.

Advice for Future Leaders

Finding ways to entice the upcoming generation of leaders, according to Prof. Gardner, will be key for APSAC's future. APSAC must consider how it will continue to grow its membership, convey the value of its work, and develop its work to include the new generation. APSAC should continue to spread the passion about the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinary work in the field of child maltreatment. To the future leaders, Prof. Gardner asks that they do not hesitate to ask questions of past and current APSAC board and long-term members. Reach out to the people who are passionate about APSAC and its work as they can offer much advice on the work that they do, and young professionals can learn so much from their experience.

Closing Thoughts from a Student

As a first-year doctoral student, I often feel how Prof. Gardner did when she attended her first APSAC colloquium. I am in awe of the scholars I read about and meet and the magnitude of knowledge that they share. I often feel intimidated or hesitant to speak up and ask questions, and I am appreciative of the advice and encouragement Prof. Gardner shared throughout this interview. Mentorship was a recurring theme in our conversation. Prof. Gardner spoke of the impact her own mentor, Dr. Bonner, had on her and how she could not have asked for a better mentor—someone who taught her to ensure everyone felt supported, to cultivate a non-competitive atmosphere, to be family-oriented, and to work together to make the best decisions in supporting children and families. These are values that I am experiencing within my own program as a student, and that I am grateful to know I should continue to hold as a professional in the field.

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A final thought I am left with is the power of teamwork and collaboration within our field. Prof. Gardner, from the start of her career as a research assistant for an interdisciplinary training program, saw the positive impact of collaboration across the spectrum. She stated, “It takes a village to raise a child for a reason. We need to keep the focus that we are the village that is trying to help children and families, and we need to bring all of the different disciplines together to do so.” This teamwork and collaboration are necessary within a discipline as well. I was struck by Prof. Gardner’s humility in that

whenever she mentioned a contribution or role she had, she always mentioned that she did not do it alone. She was surrounded by a great team and great supporters.

Thank you so much, Professor Gardner, for sharing your experience with me and the readers of the *Advisor*. I have learned so much from you, and I am sure that countless others will, too. I am inspired by your words and work, and will bring this inspiration with me as I continue on in my career as a researcher.

About the Author

Nicole Kim, MSSW, is a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin. Her primary research focus is in child welfare areas such as foster care and preventative services. Nicole’s research is guided by her experience as a foster parent, caseworker, and policy analyst.

