



APSAC Advisor 35th Anniversary Special Issue: An Interview with Viola Vaughan-Eden, PhD, MJ, LCSW

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**Viola Vaughan-Eden,
PhD, MJ, LCSW**

Introduction

Dr. Viola Vaughan-Eden has made significant contributions to the field of child welfare in a variety of ways. As a clinical and forensic social worker, Dr. Vaughan-Eden has acted as a consultant and expert witness in child maltreatment cases, mainly involving sexual abuse. She has contributed to the field through her scholarly work, including university teaching, as well as local and state trainings and national and international presentations to multidisciplinary groups of child protection professionals. In her current role, Dr. Vaughan-Eden is a Professor and PhD Program Director with the Ethelyn R. Strong School of Social Work at Norfolk State University in Southeastern Virginia.

Dr. Vaughan-Eden has made numerous contributions to APSAC through her service and leadership roles. She has served on the APSAC board of directors since 2008 and as President Emerita, having served as president from 2012-2014. In 2019, Dr. Vaughan-Eden was the recipient of APSAC's Outstanding Service award, which recognized her exceptional leadership and service to the organization. Dr. Vaughan-Eden is also the President Emerita of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence (NPEIV) and Past-President of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work (NOFSW).

Early Life and Career

As a child, Dr. Vaughan-Eden decided she wanted to be either a psychologist or a mathematician. She was particularly interested in mental health services, in part because of her experiences related to her parents' divorce. Her childhood and adolescence were shaped by the dynamics of being raised by a single mother in the 60s and 70s, as well as seeing other children and teens struggle emotionally. By the time Dr. Vaughan-Eden began college, computer science was an emerging field, which inspired her to enroll as a double major in psychology and computer science; however, she quickly decided that she was far more interested in psychology.

At the time that Dr. Vaughan-Eden earned her undergraduate degree in psychology in 1985, jobs in psychology were scarce, so, she worked for a time as a salesclerk in a mall clothing store. This clashed with Dr. Vaughan-Eden's mother's beliefs about a "young, single woman living alone," and she insisted her daughter either move back home or immediately enroll in graduate school. On the advice of several friends and colleagues, Dr. Vaughan-Eden enrolled in the MSW program at Norfolk State University, graduating in 1987.

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After Undergraduate Studies

Dr. Vaughan-Eden chose to pursue a graduate degree in social work not just because of her interest in mental health, but also in part because of her family's and her own personal history. Her mother grew up during segregation, and it was not until she was an adult that Dr. Vaughan-Eden appreciated the significance of having an opportunity to go to college as a Black woman. The year that Dr. Vaughan-Eden was born, her mother earned an undergraduate degree and then went on to graduate school. There were no graduate schools in her mother's field of study in Virginia that allowed Black students to attend at that time, but she was accepted at several other schools, ultimately attending Howard University. Dr. Vaughan-Eden spent those three years that her mother was in graduate school living with her great aunt. Dr. Vaughan-Eden believed that since her mother worked so hard to earn a college education, there was no question that she herself must attend college. Her mother went on to become a teacher and minister, so she was always working in service of others. Many of Dr. Vaughan-Eden's aunts, uncles, and cousins worked in the church as well, so these values, instilled in her early on, inspired her to study social work.

As Dr. Vaughan-Eden was earning her MSW, she spent a lot of time in the children's unit and began learning about child sexual abuse. She also worked at a residential treatment center for children and adolescents. It was there that her love of working with young children was solidified; she began to specialize in working with 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children, and she changed the topic of her dissertation to child sexual abuse and parenting. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Vaughan-Eden began her PhD studies and became involved in opening a child advocacy program in Norfolk, Virginia. This program quickly grew, and soon, roughly ten other jurisdictions were requesting their child advocacy services, with 800 referrals in their first year alone.

Becoming Involved with APSAC

Dr. Vaughan-Eden's involvement with APSAC evolved over time. She first learned about APSAC in 1996, after meeting Jon Conte and reading the work of Kathleen Faller, a pioneer in studying and writing about child sexual abuse and forensic interviewing. David Finkelhor's work was another strong influence on Dr. Vaughan-Eden at this time. In order to learn more about the skills required to testify in court, Dr. Vaughan-Eden followed the work of John Myers and connected with him in the early 2000s. Linda Cordisco-Steele and Patti Toth were also instrumental in helping Dr. Vaughan-Eden develop her understanding of forensic interviewing. Dr. Vaughan-Eden then met researcher Lisa Fontes at a conference, and they kept in touch. Both Jon Conte and Lisa Fontes nominated Dr. Vaughan-Eden to join the APSAC Board.

Reflections on the Pandemic and Racial Justice Movement Over the Past Two Years

Dr. Vaughan-Eden believes that teaching Black history is of the utmost importance. During our interview, she discussed her experiences attending a predominantly white school from fifth through twelfth grade—in that school, the mentality was that slavery happened so long ago that it didn't need to be taught. She discussed how we know that so much of what is happening today is another form of or connection to slavery, from mass incarceration to corporal punishment. Dr. Vaughan-Eden described living in Virginia, which was the center of the Confederacy, and driving on her way to work each day over the bay where the first slave boats arrived; yet schools in Virginia have been discouraged from talking or teaching about slavery. Dr. Vaughan-Eden also discussed how difficult it is to get parents to abandon corporal punishment, acknowledging that these practices originated in the past and have carried over to our present without the average

parent understanding their origins. She stressed that many are uncomfortable with acknowledging systemic racism in child welfare, but she added we must shine a light on these issues by celebrating and honoring Black pioneers in any field of child welfare. She also spoke of the importance of ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as to this day, children have no legal rights here in the United States.

Thoughts on Self-Care and Racism Embedded in Child Welfare Work

Dr. Vaughan-Eden was very clear that despite her love of what she does, it can be difficult work. One of the overarching parts of her life that guides her through adversity is her faith and spirituality. One example she gave of her faith helping her cope was when she worked at a psychiatric hospital and was called at the end of a shift to help put two young sisters to bed, ages 3 and 5 years old. She soon learned that they had been sexually abused by their father; one child's injuries were so severe that she wouldn't be able to have children as an adult. Dr. Vaughan-Eden said she went into an empty office because all she could do was cry and pray. As another form of self-care, she also began to regularly attend trainings and conferences to educate herself, recharge, and network with other people who do this work and understand its challenges.

Dr. Vaughan-Eden believes she has improved her self-care routines, as the pandemic has helped her to recenter and prioritize herself, especially while working remotely for 18 months. Dr. Vaughan-Eden cares for herself by taking walks with friends and traveling, which she loves. She has been invited to speak in several countries, including Japan twice. She continues to consult with her colleagues and was grateful for their hospitality, kindness, and compassion. Her mother passed away three years ago but was able to see many of Dr. Vaughan-Eden's accomplishments and was very proud of her. In addition to self-care, Dr. Vaughan-Eden recognizes the power of support networks. She has been married

since 1993, and her husband has been extremely supportive of her career, including during the time she cut her private practice in half to serve as APSAC President.

Next Steps

Dr. Vaughan-Eden decided right before the pandemic began to significantly reduce her clinical work and move upstream to prevent child abuse. As full-time faculty at Norfolk State University, she focuses on providing training to the next generation of social workers, encouraging them to become effective leaders of the profession who recognize their importance as change agents in society. She wants her students to exemplify the values of social justice and a respect for human dignity. Her goals include stimulating students' desire to forge ahead and build the perseverance required to end child abuse and systemic racism. Recently, Dr. Vaughan-Eden was asked to take over a local nonprofit in her community, Prevent Child Abuse Hampton Roads. Along with her business partner, Stacie LeBlanc, the nonprofit was renamed Up for CHAMPIONS and focuses on supporting the professionals working to prevent child abuse and neglect globally, through advocacy, public education, and family support programs.

Advice for Future Leaders in Our Field

Dr. Vaughan-Eden believes that the field of child abuse has greatly evolved but has a long way to go, and that it is imperative for us all to show up to work now if we have any hope of ending child abuse in the future. APSAC has been part of her life for more than 25 years, and during that time, she has learned that no one must go it alone. People need to be involved in such organizations because they serve as brain trusts where professionals must come together to address the crisis of child maltreatment. This includes finding support networks that allow each professional to learn, grow, and reach their fullest potential.

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Author Reflections

I interviewed Dr. Vaughan-Eden in tandem with Megha Sardana, the Project Director at Safe Horizons in New York. My primary takeaway from the interview was threefold. First, I was inspired by Dr. Vaughan-Eden’s passion and commitment to child welfare, particularly to children who were sexually abused. I also admired how hard she worked to achieve her goals. Second, I was impressed by Dr. Vaughan-Eden calling out institutional racism and its overlap with the corporal

punishment of Black children as a remnant of slavery. My third observation, which I am very passionate about, was that I appreciated the way Dr. Vaughan-Eden asked child welfare professionals to work toward the cessation of physical violence against children and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I share her emphatic belief that children, as human beings, have human rights. Overall, learning more about Dr. Vaughan-Eden made me respect her even more than I did before this interview.

About the Authors

Ellen M. Chiocca, PhD, APRN, CPNP-PC is an Assistant Teaching Professor with the University of Missouri Sinclair School of Nursing in Columbia, Missouri. She has been a pediatric nurse for 40 years, working in the PICU and pediatric emergency room, where she encountered many cases of child abuse and neglect. Dr. Chiocca is also a pediatric nurse practitioner and co-authored the NAPNAP position statement “Utilizing Positive Parenting to Eliminate Corporal Punishment.” Dr. Chiocca is a board member of the U.S. Alliance to End the Hitting of Children, of the National No Hit Zone Committee, and of Arkansans Against School Paddling.

Megha Sardana is the Project Director for LIFT UP, a federally funded infant and early childhood mental health initiative across Safe Horizon’s five co-located Child Advocacy Centers and Counseling Center in New York City. She was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, forming a multicultural identity rooted in her Indian heritage and Australian upbringing. Megha spent six years as a victim advocate, forensic interviewer, clinician, and supervisor at the Bronx Child Advocacy Center. She is currently based at the Manhattan Child Advocacy Center and is the Chair of Safe Horizon’s citywide Child Advocacy Centers Anti-Racism Work Group. Megha is also a Peer Review Consultant for the Midwest Regional Child Advocacy Center. She has previously worked in trauma research, domestic violence services for South Asian women, and home-based early intervention for children on the autism spectrum. Megha holds a Master’s degree in Clinical Psychology from Columbia University. She is passionate about community building, social justice, and intergenerational healing.