

Reflecting on the History and Future of APSAC: An Interview with Diane DePanfilis, PhD, MSW

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Over the course of 50 years (and counting) in the field of child maltreatment, Diane DePanfilis, PhD, MSW, has shown a longstanding dedication to the integration of science and practice to promote the prevention of and response to child maltreatment. Through various important roles—including social worker, program developer, consultant, researcher, educator, and mentor—her work has significantly contributed to the field. Her authentic and empathetic approach will surely have a lasting impact. For this special issue of the *Advisor*, marking the 35th Anniversary of APSAC, I interviewed Dr. DePanfilis on her innovative legacy and gathered her insights into APSAC’s history, accomplishments, and future.

Career and Legacy

Dr. DePanfilis got an early start in the field of child abuse and neglect through the completion of a high school assignment in which she was tasked to interview two individuals who were currently in the workforce. Through a connection from her best friend, she talked with the Director of Child Welfare for her local county. She also interviewed a nun who had dedicated her life to the advocacy and protection of children. These interviews greatly influenced her next steps, including where she went to college, the undergraduate degree she sought, and where she would complete her collegiate field placements. Specifically, in-between her junior and senior years at Villa Maria College, she received a stipend to complete a summer internship in which she worked full-time in child welfare, maintaining a caseload of 20 children in a variety of service areas. She also completed her formal field placement with child welfare the next academic year. Before she even graduated with her bachelor’s degree in social welfare and sociology, she had been hired by the public child welfare system.

She went on to work in the public child welfare system in Erie, Pennsylvania, for 10 years, starting out as a caseworker and then moving on to be Court Coordinator (liaison between child welfare and juvenile court), next as Casework Supervisor, and finally, she was Director of the Child Welfare Program. Of note, she did this all without a master’s degree. Though, given her consistent interest in research and grant support, plus the knowledge that additional education could help her move forward in her career, she pursued her Master of Social Work (MSW) degree at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. She sought out a degree there because of the school’s involvement with the Resource Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, which Dr. DePanfilis described as an important phase of her training. As part of her MSW, she completed an internship with the American Humane Association’s Child Protection Division. She also received several local grants to enhance the quality of child protective services. She then worked on Capitol Hill to complete legislative advocacy, including a role as Director of the Washington, D.C., office for ACTION for Child Protection, a national nonprofit. There, she analyzed policies, developed proposals, and communicated with federal programs. In 1990, she pursued a PhD in social work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Her dissertation, an epidemiological study, examined recurrences of child abuse and neglect over a five-year period in Baltimore. From there, she received her first faculty appointment in Baltimore at the University of Maryland.

Around this time, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect announced a federal grant to design, develop, and test a prevention and intervention program focused on child neglect. With Dr. DePanfilis’ experience examining the

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differences between neglect and physical abuse in terms of patterns of recurrence over time through her dissertation, combined with the experience of her co-PI, Howard Dubowitz, MD's, foundational research in child neglect, they completed a proposal that ultimately funded and helped create Family Connections. (Of note, Dr. Dubowitz, a pediatrician, also served on the APSAC Board.) Family Connections is a social work intervention that integrates the use of clinical assessment instruments to understand the complex, unique risk and protective factors that a particular family may be experiencing. In this program, outcomes are derived that are targeted to pick the best array of intervention strategies to help reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors, such as family functioning, social support, and parenting strategies. Intervention strategies are individualized and tailored to best meet the family's needs. Family Connections was funded originally as a demonstration, and then the federal government funded another series of replications. Since then, Family Connections has become "practice as usual" and shown continual value in supporting families and reducing the need for more intrusive interventions, such as out-of-home care.

In 2012, Dr. DePanfilis began a sabbatical in New York City because Family Connections was selected as an evidence-based program that the city's prevention programs could choose to adopt. There, she was recruited to return to Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work, where she previously had served as a visiting professor. Now, she is a full professor who currently teaches a two-semester research course for MSW students. She spends approximately half of her time collaborating with the Administration for Children's Services, the public child welfare system, on workforce development. She has helped to implement coaching as part of supervision and management for both the public and private child welfare sectors, having worked with at least 3,500 supervisors and managers who have gone through the coaching learning program. In this way, a series of "transfer of learning" strategies are implemented to support the use of coaching in a supervisor's role with their case

planner or case worker. In addition, Dr. DePanfilis works with coaches in the Division of Child Protection in each of the five boroughs in New York City. These coaches work to support supervisors' and managers' ongoing use of coaching in the provision of their staff's development, particularly surrounding risk and safety decision making and the use of strength-based intervention strategies (e.g., motivational interviewing). Through Dr. DePanfilis' contract with the city, the 28-person team includes coaches and practice instructors, supervisors, and members of an evaluation team. In addition, Dr. DePanfilis currently works with ten Family Connections programs in New York City, including in the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn. Her primary roles include assessing fidelity and helping support the preventative service directors.

Involvement and Leadership with APSAC

Dr. DePanfilis became involved in APSAC in the first several years of its formation through her connection with Charles Wilson, MSSW, who was Director of Child Welfare for the state of Tennessee. Together, they were involved in creating workshops for APSAC. She described how the interdisciplinary nature of the organization was a draw to become involved. APSAC's interest in producing the best possible research on child abuse and neglect also drew her in, with Mark Chaffin, PhD, being a particular influence.

Charles Wilson encouraged her to consider running for the APSAC Board of Directors because, until that time, the Board primarily consisted of medical and legal professionals. Although the medical and legal fields are critical in the area of child abuse and neglect, there was a lack of representation in social work in the early years of the organization. In addition, up until that time, APSAC had been focused primarily on child sexual abuse. Dr. DePanfilis was able to help expand APSAC through her involvement, given her expertise in child physical abuse and neglect as well as prevention. She helped fill some of the knowledge and practice

gaps at the foundational level of the group. She became a Board member in 1995 and served as Vice President of APSAC 1996–1997; as President-elect, 1997–1998; and as President, 1998–1999. She served as Past President, 1999–2000, and was on the Advisory Board, 2000–2003.

While in leadership with APSAC, Dr. DePanfilis made countless contributions to the Practice Guidelines. Along with Dr. Chaffin, she paved the way for how the research track at the APSAC Colloquium could be supported, especially given the practice focus of APSAC in its early days. She helped support state chapters, including the creation of the Maryland chapter, to bring the organization to the state and local levels. She also continued the growth of the *Advisor*. Notably, alongside Dr. Chaffin, Dr. DePanfilis was involved in deciding to create and launch the journal, *Child Maltreatment*, and was on the first Editorial Board. Further, she worked to increase the interest and engagement of child protection professionals in APSAC but noted the difficulties of long-term engagement in the organization given high rates of turnover in the social work field. Dr. DePanfilis openly shared about the challenges she faced while on the Board, including helping to keep APSAC going through difficult times. Yet, these growing pains allowed the organization to identify their needs at the foundational level.

Insights About APSAC's Accomplishments

Dr. DePanfilis shared her praise for the ongoing strengths of APSAC's journal, *Child Maltreatment*. She noted that when Dr. Chaffin stepped down as the journal editor, she felt others really stepped up. She commended the strong base of scholars who have served the journal over the years through their involvement on the editorial board and as ad hoc reviewers. It has shown continuous strength as the premier journal in the area of child abuse and neglect, she shared, maintaining high rankings through its many years in publication. She feels that from the beginning to now, the journal has had

great empirical value as well as immense value for practitioners. She highlighted the importance of publishing research for both scientists and practitioners, ensuring rigorous peer review to maintain high-quality research.

Dr. DePanfilis further described the continued success of APSAC's annual conference, noting the high re-attendance rate (i.e., individuals attend year after year for the first-rate colloquium). She highlighted that those attending fully participate in the conference sessions as they offer meaningful training and information to the interdisciplinary attendees. Dr. DePanfilis shared that APSAC's partnership with the San Diego Children's Hospital conference has also been highly successful and garnered continuous engagement. She touted that APSAC continues to be one of the best sources for science-based knowledge and practice training in the field of child maltreatment, with multiple methods of delivery through their various journals and training opportunities.

Insights About the Future of APSAC

Dr. DePanfilis shared that she has not played an active role in APSAC's leadership in recent years; therefore, she was hesitant to pinpoint a specific direction for APSAC's future. Thinking through previous instances in which APSAC wrote amicus briefs when a large or highly publicized criminal case was occurring, she identified areas of possible expansion to advocacy and policy development. She promoted APSAC's continued and strengthened presence with moving legislation and policy forward to best support the implementation of evidence-based and promising practices. An increased focus on systemic change, she commented, in addition to the focus on practice at the individual and family level, could help change the face of the system and positively impact many children and families.

She noted the challenges with funding and support to ensure individuals have dedicated time to gather together and think through implementation efforts and policy changes. For example, she highlighted the fact that scholars in the field often

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share recommendations for best practices and policy change in *Child Maltreatment*—thus, she thoughtfully questioned, “What would it take to have more opportunities for spreading, disseminating, or replicating what we believe works?” She noted the particular needs of the child welfare system in this area, including that the system has not always kept up with current recommendations for best responding to child abuse reports or for providing opportunities for true success for families. Dr. DePanfilis shared that policy change and widescale implementation efforts could help close the “revolving door” of the current child welfare system. Specifically, she envisions policies and efforts for which the appropriate support is identified and implemented with families upfront at first involvement, aiming to decrease future child maltreatment and ongoing child welfare involvement. Dr. DePanfilis highlighted the complexities of legislation development and sustained policy change given that policy makers come and go and the political system frequently shifts at both the local and national level.

Further, Dr. DePanfilis identified issues surrounding racial equity as a critical piece of APSAC’s current and future work. She promoted the significant importance, yet challenges, of infusing a racial equity lens into real-world practices. Thus, she shared that active efforts must be taken to make changes, given the clear disproportionate representation of children and families of color in the child welfare system, particularly children of color living in poverty. In fact, Dr. DePanfilis stated that one of the reasons she agreed to bring Family Connections to New York City (as she was not initially looking to promote its replication) was due to the city’s diversity. Moreover, in her reflections, she feels the New York City child welfare system has done well with hiring practitioners and staff of color with lived-experience and credibility in their community. She highlighted the importance of training and ensuring representation of individuals of color in the workforce across the country and noted that this was a draw to become involved with Hunter College.

Dr. DePanfilis identified that it is essential that APSAC and the field of child maltreatment continue to make explicit efforts to acknowledge and target implicit bias, dedicate research and practice efforts to authentically and empathetically serve families of color, and ensure representation in the workforce. She encouraged the continued focus on providing opportunities for support for families engaged in the child welfare system without the use of labels or criminalizing responses. Further, Dr. DePanfilis highlighted current community and systems intervention efforts that intend to combat bias and its influence on decision making, including mandating the use of motivational interviewing as part of the engagement process for child protection specialists who complete child abuse investigations. This approach promotes families’ strengths and can reduce preconceived judgements and implicit biases. Additional future efforts could also include aid for the creation of more family resource centers and increased access to support services for parents and youth. She concluded that a multipronged approach with an emphasis on strong, reflective supervision practices could support the advancement of these goals for the field, both at the individual/family level as well as the systems level.

Author Reflections

It was a privilege speaking with Dr. DePanfilis for this interview and hearing her perspective on the history, challenges, and future of APSAC and the field as a whole. It feels great to know that this article plays a small role in helping further circulate her voice and insights, given her expertise and substantial contributions to the field over the last five decades as clearly evidenced above. Her involvement and leadership at the foundational level of APSAC paved the way for growing the interdisciplinary organization in many ways—from increasing interest in the social work field to further expanding efforts to focus on neglect and physical abuse. Throughout the interview, Dr. DePanfilis’ remarks were perfectly in line with APSAC’s overarching approach (and website tagline), “Strengthening Practice Through Knowledge.” In

all that she does, she promotes the integration of research and practice to best serve families through prevention and intervention services and support the workforce through education and coaching programs.

A particular reflection from my discussion with Dr. DePanfilis was her openness, approachability, and thoughtfulness, particularly related to complex issues. At one point in the interview, I asked about her perspective on working in New York City, as I was personally curious how aspects related to diversity (e.g., racial and ethnic diversity, geographic and population factors, disparity in socioeconomic status, high cost of living and housing) influenced the system's overarching response to child abuse and neglect as well as her approach. This conversation wavered from discussions of APSAC's history and future, but I found myself truly interested in her perspective and hoped to learn from her as a respected leader and pioneer. She humbly spoke about the disparity she sees on a daily basis and its effects on families and the child welfare system. She encouraged the implementation of evidence-based programming to best identify and serve families.

Dr. DePanfilis also advocated for representation in the workforce and the promotion of quality training opportunities, yet identified the difficulties of inadequate pay for high-stress social work positions in a city with astronomical housing prices. She was open in sharing that it is easy to get overwhelmed by the vastness of chronic problems in the world, such as intergenerational poverty and discrimination, or the challenges of high turnover and insufficient pay in the workforce. However, in spite of all that, there is still so much good happening. She emphasized that this balanced reflection is integral for all those who work in the field of child maltreatment to hear and internalize. If not, it would be easy to get bogged down by the countless challenges families, workers, and leaders face, potentially leading to burnout and a loss of hope. Alternatively, leading from the opposite end of the spectrum

(not acknowledging the difficulties) would act to minimize and invalidate the real challenges present in the field. Just as Dr. DePanfilis shared in our discussions, both perspectives can co-exist to form a balanced narrative: There are countless injustices and challenges encountered by families, workers, and leaders, *and* the work we do plays an active role in serving children and families to prevent and reduce child maltreatment. It is a message I believe will truly pave the way for increased advocacy, innovation, equity, and justice. It is a message that will keep families and the workforce hopeful, encouraged, and energized. Thank you, Dr. DePanfilis, for your time, thoughtful and authentic remarks, and numerous contributions to the field.

About the Author

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