



Sandra Alexander

Celebrating 35 Years of Improving Society's Response to Abuse and Neglect of Children: An Interview with Sandra Alexander, a "Pioneer in Child Maltreatment Prevention"

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It has taken many years for the field of child maltreatment to focus on prevention and resilience. While child maltreatment has always been present in societies, its recognition as a social ill has not. In fact, child abuse has only been considered to be such for a little over 60 years. The "discovery" of battered child syndrome in the early 1960s (Kempe et al., 1962), made possible partly by advances in radiology, marked a new era in public responses to physical and sexual abuse and child neglect (Pfohl, 1977). No longer a "private trouble" (Mills, 2000), child maltreatment became identified as a social problem requiring state intervention (Pfohl, 1977).

Shifting public perception about the need to intervene in what previously had been considered a private family matter required defining the prevalence of the problem. In the late sixties and early seventies, child maltreatment professionals worked diligently to document the scope and devastating impact of child maltreatment. The success of this effort can be seen in governments' swift public policy response to it: Between 1963 and 1967, every state in the United States passed mandated child abuse reporting (Jenny, 2008). However, it would be another 30 years before the field began to give major attention to preventing child maltreatment.

Sandra Alexander is one of the people responsible for highlighting this need to extend the field's focus from intervention to prevention. A prevention pioneer, Sandra Alexander had an early appreciation for the incompleteness of public policy and clinical

practice that only worked to stop or heal the effects of child maltreatment once it occurred. Identifying prevention efforts as another critical piece of the puzzle, she helped develop some of the first child maltreatment prevention programs in the United States. She has also been instrumental in bringing together the diverse field of child maltreatment professionals together through the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC). To celebrate the 35th anniversary of APSAC, she recently spoke about her experiences as a leader in child maltreatment prevention and as a past president and influential member of APSAC.

Early Career and Current Work

Sandra Alexander began her career earning a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Furman University. After graduating from college, she started out on the frontlines, working as a caseworker before quickly advancing to a supervisor role at the Department of Children and Families in South Carolina. She noted that much of her later work was shaped by her experiences at the Department of Children and Families, where she resolved to develop programs to support families so that they would not need to become involved with protective services. She went on to earn a Master's in Education in Guidance and Counseling from the University of South Carolina. The lack of flexible or part-time social worker programs shaped her decision to pursue her degrees in education but did not shift her focus: programs that improved the

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lives of vulnerable children and families. Sandra worked with the Junior League of Columbia, South Carolina and a local pediatrician to start the Council on Child Abuse, which later became one of the first Prevent Child Abuse America chapters, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina. She then continued her work in this area at Prevent Child Abuse Georgia in a variety of roles, including the role of Executive Director. For the past 18 years, Sandra Alexander has worked in multiple capacities in the Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), spearheading child abuse prevention initiatives, working to highlight the importance of prevention in the field of child maltreatment, and bringing together multi-disciplinary groups of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to create the conditions in which families can thrive.

Developing a Framework for Maltreatment Preventions and Prevention Programs

Sandra Alexander initiated some of the first prevention programs in the United States. For example, Welcome Baby was a forerunner to postnatal home visiting programs begun in the mid-1980s. This model utilized volunteers to visit with first-time moms in the hospital and then provide follow-up phone support to help ease the transition to parenthood. Welcome Baby also worked to connect first-time mothers with services that could meet their needs. This intervention led to development of the First Steps Program in Georgia, and later the Healthy Families Georgia Home Visiting Program. Sandra also created sexual abuse prevention programs for schools and provided consultation to support the Project Healthy Grandparents program at Georgia State University, which provides physical, emotional, and social support to grandparents and great-grandparents raising their grandchildren. At the core of each of these programs is a recognition that caring for caregivers is key for supporting the healthy development of children.

Not only has Sandra been a leader in developing prevention programs, she also has been a key actor in defining a framework for prevention. Being successful in these efforts meant bringing all stakeholders to the table, including those traditionally at the table (e.g., professionals in research, policy, medicine, and clinical practitioners) as well as those not typically considered to be part of this work (e.g., representatives from the business sector and the media) to identify the core components of child maltreatment prevention. The resulting effort, The Knowledge to Action Child Maltreatment Prevention Consortium, identified high-level sectors for involvement and community and societal level actions for prevention. Sandra was part of the team that developed the Essentials for Childhood framework, which highlights the foundational components necessary for assuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, as well as the Essentials for Childhood initiative to support states implementing the framework. The Essentials for Childhood framework is currently being implemented formally in seven states, supported by two rounds of five-year funding from the CDC. The power of this work is reflected in its dissemination outside formal funding mechanisms or other institutional supports. Sandra noted that over the years, she has worked with somewhere between 30 to 40 self-supported states or organizational partners to help them adopt the Essentials for Childhood framework. Doing this meant getting creative, conducting phone trainings and webinars, and allowing people to attend Essentials meetings at the CDC. This “can-do” and improvisational spirit has pervaded much of Sandra’s work as she noticed and then worked to fill gaps in approaches to maltreatment.

Challenges Working in Prevention of Child Maltreatment

While Sandra has been incredibly successful in creating a space for prevention within the field of child abuse and neglect, working in this area is not without challenges. Reflecting on the importance of prevention, she asserted that it can still be hard

for prevention work to capture the same attention as other areas in the field: “I think everyone feels that prevention is important. However, it sometimes gets lost. Even though I think people care about prevention and want to prevent [maltreatment], when they start to work on it, there is a tendency to go more toward intervention and treatment or secondary and tertiary prevention.” Sandra witnessed this trend firsthand through her experience as the prevention advocate on the Atlanta Child Fatality Review Committee. Even though she had chaired the committee in the past, and even though the group’s stated purpose is to identify strategies that would prevent future fatalities, she has at times found it challenging to center the prevention component.

Further, Sandra emphasized the need to continue to have a more expansive view of the role of prevention in child maltreatment. That is, maltreatment prevention should be just as focused on communal and social interventions, such as providing economic supports for families and accessible and affordable childcare, as it is on individual prevention efforts. Sandra also described a need for a more expansive view of who should be partners in child maltreatment prevention work. In addition to the usual players, she emphasized that the field needs to partner with faith leaders, business leaders, schools, and the media to create the conditions to prevent child maltreatment.

APSAC Then and Now

Sandra remembered the year she was President of APSAC as one of the most difficult years in the history of the organization. APSAC was in financial jeopardy, unable to pay its rent and in danger of collapsing. As President-elect and President, she worked with the Board to make difficult decisions to lay off staff and close the Chicago office to keep the organization going. Board members carted boxes of APSAC documents to their homes and offices, running APSAC in their spare time. Sandra credited passion, determination, and shared commitment to advancing the field of child maltreatment for APSAC’s ability to pull through this challenging time.

In terms of the present and future, while APSAC has incorporated prevention more over the years by establishing a prevention committee, offering sessions on prevention at the Colloquium, and offering a prevention award, there is still work to be done. Sandra said that she would like to see the mission statement of APSAC revised to reflect the importance of prevention work. In addition, she discussed the importance of APSAC centering communal and societal prevention work, as APSAC is an organization that has an essential role to play in helping people make the connection between early adversity, protective factors, and community-level interventions that can reduce the likelihood that children experience early adversity at all. Overall, Sandra reflected on how important APSAC has been in her career, offering a wealth of opportunities to make lasting connections and gain knowledge across a group of multidisciplinary professionals.

Advice to Future Child Maltreatment Professionals

Sandra shared plenty of helpful advice for both graduate students and early career professionals who are interested in working in the field of child maltreatment and prevention. She heavily encouraged participation in organizations like APSAC that connect people at multiple stages of their career and allow for networking and mentorship opportunities for those who are just starting out. In addition, she suggested volunteering and getting involved in committees within APSAC, taking advantage of the various opportunities to learn from others in the field, and to getting involved in prevention efforts. She stressed the importance of networking and being an active participant in APSAC, even as an early-career scholar. According to Sandra, APSAC is a wonderful way for new professionals to interact with and learn from “old professionals.” So, take note, if you are someone who feels you need an official invitation to get involved or to have a seat at the table, this is it!

*Interview with Sandra Alexander***Reflections from A. Lilyan Falcon,
an Aspiring Child Maltreatment
Researcher**

Hearing Sandra Alexander talking about her work and her passion for the field and for helping children was inspiring to say the least. As a first-year doctoral student, I am so glad and honored to have had the opportunity to hear from someone who has accomplished so much in the field. Two of my most significant takeaways from my conversation with Sandra regarded the importance of prevention in this field and of the necessity of making connections with others who share the same goals for child welfare at all points in one's career.

Sandra has spent most of her career working to develop programs and highlighting the importance of preventative efforts. While much of research is geared towards responding to instances of maltreatment and addressing various issues after the fact, she stressed the importance of not forgetting about prevention efforts. Many of the projects that she has had a hand in developing seem geared toward strengthening family bonds or equipping families with resources. In addition, she shared how many of these influential projects involved a multidisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners. To me, and I am sure to other graduate students and early career professionals who take the time to learn from her, it is clear future work in this field can and should be collaborative and multidisciplinary. As Sandra recommended, taking part in an organization like APSAC that brings together researchers and practitioners from all stages in their careers allows for these networking and collaboration opportunities.

Something that really stood out from this conversation with Sandra was the importance of community involvement in our efforts to prevent and address child abuse and maltreatment. Sandra stressed the importance of prevention efforts, especially those at the community level. For instance, she talked about the need to partner with community organizations like businesses, the media,

and faith communities. In particular, she highlighted that this level of community focus on prevention can enable communities to provide economic support for families, to offer services like equitable childcare, and to generally allow for everyone in a community to succeed.

Sandra also shared some of the most difficult moments from her time in APSAC, describing the difficulties that she faced during her year as president. Her presidency was a stressful time in APSAC history due to financial struggles, but its survival is a testament to the passion and dedication of people like Sandra who worked together to keep the organization alive and functional. Bringing together people who are passionate about helping children by preventing and addressing maltreatment may not be an easy task, as Sandra made clear, but it is an important one. Those just beginning to enter this field, myself included, may be intimidated and therefore hesitant to involve ourselves in organizations like APSAC, but as Sandra told me, us early career scholars and professionals are the future leaders of the field. It is therefore imperative for us to learn from, and potentially collaborate with, those with more experience in the field. The ability of APSAC to bring together people from different backgrounds, of different ages and different interests, but who share the goal of preventing and addressing childhood maltreatment makes this a particularly special and noteworthy organization. Sandra appeared to be very content with her time in APSAC, the work that she has done, and the legacy she has helped create within the organization. For those of us who are just getting started, I urge us to heed her advice: Don't forget about prevention.

This does, however, come with a warning: despite it being evident that there must be a seat at the table for prevention, obstacles to this may arise, and persistence is very much necessary. For instance, Sandra shared fears that current colloquiums are lacking in a prevention-focused context, which may dissuade some prevention-focused scholars from getting involved. However, she made clear that the future of this field must have a place for prevention-

focused scholars and for those in the treatment area to communicate and learn from one another. In addition, in sharing the difficulties that have arisen in APSAC's history, she shared potential challenges that the field may face in future. Among these were challenges in obtaining and retaining membership, potential competition from other organizations, and communication between members and those on the board. Generally, though, the takeaway message that Sandra stressed to me was how important it is to persevere, even in the face of difficulties. There is a lot of work to be done in the field, and APSAC provides a way for those who are passionate about making strides in the field to interact, collaborate and move forward in their work toward the mutual goals of helping children.

We would like to thank Sandra Alexander for her work and commitment to this field, her dedication to APSAC and to helping children, and for sharing her time, wisdom, and experiences with us.

About the Authors

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