



Frank Vandevort

## 35th Anniversary of APSAC Special Issue of the Advisor: An Interview with Frank Vandevort, Past President of APSAC

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### Frank Vandevort: A Passionate Advocate for Children

In April 2022, I had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Frank Vandevort for this special issue of the *Advisor*, which is dedicated to celebrating the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of APSAC. Professor Vandevort's service to APSAC has spanned close to 30 years, and his term as President was from 2014 to 2015. From the moment our interview started, it was clear that Professor Vandevort not only has a passion for his work in a broad sense, but also has been able to bring his extensive professional experience and expertise to his work with APSAC in enthusiastic and creative ways. The organization has no doubt benefitted greatly from his leadership, and his contributions will continue to serve the organization for years to come. My conversation with Professor Vandevort, held via Zoom, covered topics ranging from his broad interests related to child advocacy to his specific involvement with APSAC in many endeavors over the years. Specifically, he was able to spend considerable time reflecting on what APSAC has achieved as an organization with assisting professionals in their work with children, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on his recommendations for current and future APSAC leaders. Throughout our discussion, it was clear that his vast knowledge, consistent energy, and motivation to assist children in need as well as the professionals that serve them has been and continues to be invaluable to APSAC; as such, I have no doubt that the organization is successful in achieving many of their objectives because in part of Professor Vandevort's contributions.

### Early Career: Tireless Work for Children in Need

A native of Michigan, Professor Vandevort started his college education by attending a community college in northern Michigan for two years. He then completed his bachelor's degree at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. Upon graduation, he worked in a residential psychiatric facility for youth ages 12-17 in Detroit, Michigan. This work led him to enroll in law school, with the goal of working with delinquent, abused, and neglected children. He attended Wayne State University School of Law in Detroit and was able to continue his employment at the residential psychiatric facility during this time. Upon graduation from law school, he worked for six years in the public defender's office in Detroit, achieving his goal of serving children involved in delinquency, abuse, and neglect cases. His next professional position was with a nonprofit organization that provided legal services to children. After six years of working with the public defender's office in Detroit, two years with a nonprofit in Grand Rapids, and five years in a grant-funded position at the University of Michigan Law School, he felt deenergized by a system that was less than optimal in how it could serve youth in need, as it was disorganized and under-resourced. Thus, on the brink of burnout, he enrolled in a journalism graduate program with the intent of making a career change. However, instead embarking on a journalism career, he took a position providing continuing legal education specific to child protection cases as he felt his work with children in need was not yet finished.

In the early 2000s, Professor Vandevort taught courses at both the University of Michigan Law School and the University of Detroit Mercy Law School. In 2005, he was appointed to a tenure-track position at the University of Michigan School of Law. He received tenure, and still holds this position at the university today. While a large portion of his work and expertise is related to the well-being of children, his other interests include mediation, workers' rights, and interdisciplinary practice, the last of which serves as a blueprint guide and approach for all of his work. He did make a special note that his younger, law-student self would be surprised that he is a law professor, as he did not particularly enjoy law school. However, his position is a clinical faculty line, which allows him to blend his teaching with practice to provide law students courses in case-based processes. Undoubtedly, Professor Vandevort's students have benefitted immensely from his extensive experience and knowledge of legal issues surrounding children and the best practices in how best to serve children in need.

### Professor Vandevort's Involvement With APSAC

In the late 1980s, Professor Vandevort was fresh out of law school and employed as a public defender in Detroit. This early career experience led him to the realization that his work needed, as he put it, more "grounding in interdisciplinary practice." He was careful to note that while he didn't necessarily need the professional training of a medical doctor or a psychiatrist, he needed to be familiar with the empirical work and practice of such professionals in his efforts to best assist the delinquent, abused, and neglected youth he was serving. This motivated him to attend his first APSAC colloquium in the summer of 1993 in Chicago, Illinois. The program of the 1993 colloquium was appealing to Professor Vandevort as it was clearly interdisciplinary in nature and provided much of what he was looking for in terms of professional development and networking with colleagues—not only with those from law backgrounds, but also with professionals from backgrounds in all fields necessary to help

abused and neglected children in a holistic fashion. From the time that Professor Vandevort first joined APSAC in 1993, he has not hesitated to contact psychologists or social workers who he has met through the organization to ask for their perspectives on a case or issue. Further, in the past 10 to 15 years as pediatricians with expertise in child abuse have brought their skills to APSAC, Professor Vandevort has not hesitated in networking with these professionals in an effort to bring an interdisciplinary approach to his work that is more inclusive of the disciplines necessary to understand and treat issues of child welfare.

In 1995, Professor Vandevort met Dr. Vincent Palusci, a pediatrician who was working in Grand Rapids, Michigan at the time. Dr. Palusci encouraged him to become involved with the state chapter of APSAC in Michigan. In the late 1990s, Professor Vandevort maintained his membership in the state chapter and the national organization. His primary goals at this time were to expand the influence of APSAC with lawyers engaging in civil child protection work as well as to energize the Amicus program within the organization. His motivation for the latter came from both his personal experience writing Amicus briefs and his desire to see this as more beneficial in efforts to assist children in need. Because of his work and passion in this area, Professor Vandevort has served on the Amicus and Public Policy Committee, and has even chaired this committee. In 2012 and 2013, he served as the President-elect of APSAC, and his term as President spanned from 2014 through 2015.

### Professor Vandevort's Legacy

I asked Professor Vandevort to reflect on his professional legacy, both in the service of children in the child welfare system in a general, broad sense, as well as to APSAC more specifically. Like many young, early career professionals, during Professor Vandevort's early experiences working on his law degree and at the residential psychiatric facility for youth, he thought could completely change the world for youth in need. Of course, he noted

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that he became much more realistic as he learned the intricacies of the incredibly overwhelmed child welfare system in Detroit, which led him to change his overall approach to his work. Instead of attempting to make broad, sweeping, system-level changes or changes that would drastically alter the course for any one child, he embraced serving as a voice for appropriate care for troubled youth. More specifically, Professor Vandevort wanted to address aspects of the system—specifically where treating “children as human beings” was not the driving ideology in juvenile court processes or in the child welfare system. Historically, these systems have roots in the paternalistic ideology that children are the property of their fathers, and thus that the needs of the child are not placed at the forefront. With this “child needs”-focused approach, Professor Vandevort realized that while he couldn’t change everything, he could make a difference in developing policies informed by the best practices in providing appropriate care for delinquent, abused, and neglected children. Undoubtedly, this perspective also allowed him to continue in the field when he was on the cusp of burnout in the late 1980s.

When asked to note any particular success with specific youth, it was no surprise given his overall approach to his work that Professor Vandevort chose not to discuss any particular one case. He noted that while successes with particular youth were undoubtedly quite numerous, just as some cases were not successful, he wasn’t able to know how a vast majority of children’s cases played out in the long term. His approach to his work allowed him to focus on the youth in front of him at any particular time and serve them in the best way possible with his knowledge and experience. On a larger scale, he preferred to engage in writing projects in which the information would be disseminated to scholars and practitioners, to take part in child advocacy activities, and to work to develop policy that would influence the field of child welfare in a broad fashion. For example, for close to 13 years, he sat on the State of Michigan’s Child Death Advisory Board. This group reviews all cases resulting in the death of a child, synthesizes findings, and presents them to the

governor for policy changes. Similarly, Professor Vandevort was part of a subcommittee that worked with Michigan’s Citizens Review Panel on Child Death for close to 12 years. This group is a bit more specific in its focus in that the deaths examined resulted from child abuse. Professor Vandevort noted that this work was professionally fulfilling, as he was able to feel that he could make an impact on many children and participate in shaping child welfare policy.

Unsurprisingly, Professor Vandevort’s reflection on his legacy in APSAC followed the same ideology and mode of professional engagement he has utilized throughout his career in a broad professional sense. For example, his work serving on and chairing APSAC’s Amicus and Public Policy Committee was especially meaningful to him in its impacts. In one case, the United States Supreme Court cited an Amicus brief written by the committee in the case of *Ohio v. Clark* (2015), which addressed what statements made by teachers and/or youth are permissible in a court of law. This committee played a part in setting policy for professionals working with youth; their work was a clear example of how APSAC is able to provide critical information to professionals working with youth or working to set policy that will impact youth. In recent years, Professor Vandevort stepped down from the Amicus and Public Policy Committee, and he noted that in his view, the work of the Amicus and Public Policy Committee is even more robust today. I have no doubt that his many years of enthusiastic work with this committee paved the way for the committee to remain active, grow, and be successful in their work today and in the future.

In discussing his time serving as President of APSAC from 2014-2015, one common theme that was threaded throughout Professor Vandevort’s discussion was his consistent commitment to leaving APSAC a better organization in all facets—including financially and in methods of information dissemination to members—upon the conclusion of his term in 2015. The New York Foundling became partner with APSAC during his presidency,

and the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio redoubled its commitment to APSAC through both increased financial support and by assuming responsibility for the organization's day-to-day operations. These initiatives assisted the organization in growing financially and also in the ways it was able to serve professionals working with youth via trainings.

Since he has completed his term as President, Professor Vandevort has remained active in APSAC. In recent years, he has served on the editorial board of the organization's empirical journal, *Child Maltreatment*. This peer-reviewed journal embraces interdisciplinary approaches to understanding child abuse and neglect; it showcases best practices in working with youth in these situations, and, in turn, it serves to advise the professionals who work with these children. Professor Vandevort is currently serving as the editor for a special issue of *Child Maltreatment* that will focus on a collection of interdisciplinary, empirical studies on the legal issues currently prescient to serving delinquent, abused, and neglected children.

### Professor Vandevort's Recommendations to the Child Welfare Field and to APSAC

While Professor Vandevort praised what APSAC has done well during his time on the board, he also noted where the organization specifically, as well as the academic and practical disciplines informing its work more broadly, could do more to assist a child welfare system that is, in many ways, failing children. As an example, he cited the increase in child deaths in recent years, from roughly 1200 to 1750 annually. In examining these deaths, Professor Vandevort noted that many of the cases have involved children whose families saw previous involvement with Child Protective Services. In concert with his perspective that the system and the law consider children to be the property of their parents, Professor Vandevort feels that an inability to see a child's needs and interests as separate from their parents has led to an increase in such cases. Efforts to preserve the family

should not occur at the expense of the child, and he feels that, in some of the most egregious cases, we are losing more children in this fashion. Similarly, our focus on the most serious cases allows us to focus too few resources and not enough attention on cases in which serious injury or death is not the result. The worst cases clearly come to the attention of professionals because a child death is the result, but what about other children in need of services? Thus, Professor Vandevort noted that the system needs to do more to "measure the layers" of child harm. On a positive note, he highlighted evidence that the child tax credits issued during the COVID-19 pandemic have been extremely impactful, serving to reduce the stress that financial issues often bring to families, especially those living in poverty. After all, as Professor Vandevort noted, "If we are able to support families, we will need foster care less." He was very quick to add that APSAC should illuminate the COVID-19 child credits and other potential programs to assist families financially in training/programming for APSAC member professionals in the near future.

As Professor Vandevort takes an interdisciplinary approach to his work, it is his strong feeling that we should handle children as individual, dynamic people and not as their families' property. Thus, interdisciplinary tools should aim to gather as much information as possible from the child—and not only the child's parent(s) or guardian(s)—in order for interdisciplinary teams of professionals to recommend the most appropriate, intensive services early in the intervention process. Professor Vandevort feels that too many decisions have been made by professionals with inadequate information when working with children in need. Additionally, he added, "boilerplate assessment and programming does not and will not work," with children bearing the brunt of this misinformed approach. He astutely used the medical metaphor of treating cancer patients, where professionals consider all modalities of treatment (i.e., chemotherapy, surgery, and/or radiation treatment) with the patient as soon as possible after diagnosis; Professor Vandevort questioned why we were not taking the same

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approach with the children in need of our assistance and services. He feels that the system should shift from the historic and current approach to one that considers children as individuals with their own voices and thus their own abilities to answer practitioners' questions about their experiences. Professor Vandevort did note that many professionals working in child welfare capacities today do not have appropriate training in forensic investigations of child maltreatment. He feels that APSAC can be a leader in this area by providing training that many professionals need in order to collaborate effectively and corroborate findings in the cases on which they work.

Professor Vandevort also said that he wants to see the value of APSAC membership further marketed to attorneys engaged in civil work with children. Such an initiative would not only serve to increase the membership of APSAC, but also to help existing members benefit from the expertise of these civil child attorneys—a professional area that Professor Vandevort feels can strongly inform the work of all APSAC members. This latter benefit is especially salient to consider, as the organization highlights an interdisciplinary approach to child welfare. Professor Vandevort noted that there are close to 50,000 attorneys engaged in child welfare work. Further, he surmised that there are undoubtedly countless other professionals, such as social workers, pediatricians, and sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs), who would find APSAC membership a valuable professional resource. Thus, he noted that increasing the perceived value of membership among all child welfare professionals should be a top priority.

Increased APSAC membership would not only increase the range of interdisciplinary professional networking opportunities for members, but would also serve to augment the organization's finances, as this will undoubtedly continue to be a challenge in the coming years. With The New York Foundling's financial commitment tapering off in the future, Professor Vandevort noted that fundraising should continue to be at the forefront of the organization's plans; he would be glad to be involved in these

fundraising efforts. He was also quick to point out that the need for additional monetary resources is not surprising considering the health of financial resources available to professionals and organizations in the field of child welfare has historically been quite challenged. Present day financial concerns will be complicated further by the depletion of COVID-19-related resources and uncertainty regarding the status of the Affordable Care Act. Professor Vandevort noted that the APSAC Presidents who followed him have devoted considerable effort to fundraising and developing ways to attract young professionals to the organization, the primary way being providing training that has relevancy to their work. Professor Vandevort added that he is continually impressed with the organization's training and publications. Specifically, he gave special praise to the *Alert* publications, as APSAC has done a tremendous job in distilling complex empirical findings for practitioners who do not have graduate-level methodological training. In fact, he noted that APSAC is the only organization of its kind to engage in this type of research dissemination activity. Due to the value of these publications and the networking APSAC provides, he's seen the organization enable practical, direct-service experience to inform ideas for empirical research, and empirical research to inform the day-to-day practices of direct-service providers.

### Professor Vandevort's Advice to Early-Career Professionals and the Future Leaders of APSAC

When I asked Professor Vandevort to share the advice he would give to early-career professionals, it was no surprise that he immediately stressed that these individuals should make interdisciplinary connections, as these relationships can serve to fill in gaps in knowledge as well as provide missing links in cases and in programs. "Interdisciplinary pieces will move and educate the field," he said. In addition, he feels strongly that professionals cannot work alone or in a vacuum; they need other professionals that they consider their allies. He noted that not only can allies

serve as wonderful collaborators, but also as both informal and formal support to any professional in this field.

Several times at this juncture of the interview, Professor Vandevort stressed that this profession is “hard work” in that it not only is emotionally tiring, but it also requires long hours and much patience. While interdisciplinary networks via membership in APSAC can assist professionals, it is imperative that these individuals engage in regular self-care as well as mental health checks. He noted that while these avenues for professionals working in child welfare are more robust than they were 30 years ago, much more is needed to ensure that professionals have the tools to take care of themselves, reset, and perform tasks in a healthy manner. He added that the future leaders of APSAC should realize that work on the board is tireless, and it may be easy to get discouraged. However, small setbacks such as a poorly attended conference or training or the challenges the organization may face in terms of funding will not define the leadership of a particular group in board positions at any particular time. He advised that the key to navigating and overcoming those challenges lies in the President and President-elect working closely with other APSAC leaders and other professionals with whom they work well .

### Reflections From a Criminologist

It was an absolute delight to interview Professor Vandevort, from both a personal and professional standpoint. Our discussion was relaxed and engaging, and I found him to be open, honest, and extremely easy to talk to. He didn't shy away from difficult topics, and he was also very open, in a self-deprecating fashion, about some of his early experiences in the field. It was clear to me that he is an extremely humble professional who easily communicates his knowledge and experience to those who seek him out as a mentor. I have no doubt

that many professionals in the child welfare field, including Professor Vandevort's colleagues and the students he teaches, have successfully sought his advice on specific cases, policies, and practices. Similarly, I have full confidence that Professor Vandevort will continue to inspire his colleagues and students for years to come. With his continued involvement in APSAC and his ongoing desire to write for the organization's publication outlets, I have no doubt that the information that Professor Vandevort shares in the future will reach even more professionals in the myriad disciplines that inform APSAC's mission and goals. He is a tireless advocate for interdisciplinary approaches within his own work and within APSAC.

I am a criminologist, and while my field draws heavily upon sociological work, fields such as social work, psychology, history, and political science have given my field an interdisciplinary perspective; for this reason, Professor Vandevort's assertion that such an approach is critical to best practices resonated with me very much. In addition, his tireless passion, positive attitude, and unequivocal support for early career colleagues was impressive, and, I would surmise, matched by few. I have no doubt that he was an excellent President of APSAC, and his impact will continue to be felt for years to come. In light of my work as the newly appointed chair of the Department of Criminal Justice at Auburn University at Montgomery, I found our conversation to be incredibly valuable, as it served to remind me that the most effective leaders will always lead by example, no matter their leadership philosophy and management style is. It also reminded me that in order to make progress in our goals of educating individuals with bright futures in the child welfare field, we must not be siloed in our academic disciplines, as it is imperative that we communicate with other leaders in efforts to grow in an interdisciplinary manner.

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**About the Author**

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