



**Barbara Bonner,
PhD, MSW**

Celebrating 35 Years of Improving Society's Response to Abuse and Neglect of Children: An Interview with Barbara Bonner, PhD, MSW, Past President and Lifetime Member of APSAC

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In the 1980s, there was limited research and practice guidance to support professionals working with child victims of sexual abuse. In the legal field, many interviews were conducted in a forensic fashion with limited consideration of the clinical care needed when helping children who had experienced maltreatment. Although there was the International Society of Child Abuse Prevention, professionals in law enforcement and the care of child victims did not have a national or local agency that could provide current research and practice guidance. As researchers, practitioners, and leaders noticed this gap, a group of experts came together to form a professional society to support practitioners working assisting with maltreated children. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) was formed to provide practice guidance from the best and most current research available on child maltreatment. The goal was to make research accessible for professionals working with child victims of maltreatment.

Barbara Bonner, PhD, MSW, was an important leader in the early development of APSAC. She ran for the board early in the organization's development and helped to shape the direction and vision of the organization. She remembers the very first meeting in Chicago and early conversations about hosting a national conference and is amazed by where the

organization is today. Shortly after, she became president of APSAC and provided seminal support in how research and evidence were to be used in the field of child abuse treatment and prevention.

Early Career and Current Work

Early in her career, Dr. Bonner majored in special education and taught at school. She attributes this background as foundational to becoming a child psychologist and experiencing the range of normal child behavior. She went on to get her master's degree in educational assessment at Oklahoma State University, which was followed by a professional position conducting student assessments in schools. She obtained a doctorate in clinical psychology at Oklahoma State University in her 40s and later in her career. Oklahoma had only one clinical psychology doctoral program in the state, which took only seven students a year. Following the doctoral program, Dr. Bonner was accepted into a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Oklahoma's Health Science Center in adolescent medicine and pediatric psychology. There, she attended a meeting with her mentor, C. Eugene Walker, and the district attorney, who was interested in implementing a child sexual abuse prevention program. While there, Dr. Bonner developed the Adolescent With Illegal Sexual

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Behavior Treatment Program, which is a cognitive behavioral-based intervention that works with parents and children in developmentally appropriate ways.

Dr. Bonner joined the faculty of the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in 1987, and in coordination with a federal focus and funding opportunity to strengthen services for maltreated children, she established the Interdisciplinary Training Program in Child Abuse and Neglect. In addition to the focus on fields such as social work, medicine, and psychology, this program also included the legal profession and law enforcement because sexual abuse goes to court in a different way than other forms of maltreatment. This is the only training program out of ten initially funded that is still providing training and professional support to practitioners working with child victims of abuse.

One important contribution mentioned by Dr. Bonner was the way she sought to change the nomenclature in the field related to how children who abused other children are viewed and referred to. Previously, children and adolescents with problematic sexual behavior were referred to as offenders. She worked to stop the connotation of sexual offender because research supports that children stop such behaviors with the use of effective interventions. Another outstanding contribution of Dr. Bonner was working successfully at the state level to limit the registry of juvenile sex offenders, for example, how juveniles may be attributed and for how long.

APSAC Then and Now

One of the key reflections of Dr. Bonner was how responsive and open all professionals she has interacted with in the field of child maltreatment have been, particularly in the early years when APSAC was forming and there were limited opportunities for colleagues in the field to connect. She remarked how quickly APSAC became a highly professional organization and leader in using research and best methods to inform the field and

develop guidelines for working with maltreated children. This group brought together the best research available and made it quickly accessible for both professionals and practitioners. She also noted APSAC's contribution of establishing a highly recognized journal, *Child Maltreatment*. The organization took on the tasks early in its development to make APSAC viable, respected, and sustainable by providing immediate education, a national conference for professionals, and a journal. Dr. Bonner attributed a lot of the early success to leaders such as Jon Conte and Theresa Reid, who led the vision of APSAC within a social context and environment that was highly sensitive to sexual abuse and frequent negative media attention.

Early on, Dr. Bonner realized the importance of examining the research methods used in the field and making efforts to improve and strengthen methods to ensure timely and effective practices for working with children and supporting the professional development of practitioners. APSAC qualified experts to testify in cases of abuse and became a place for professionals to receive support and validation during abuse cases. She emphasized how in this critical field, it can be difficult to maintain perspective and optimism, and how APSAC has had a supportive role in connecting professionals in helpful ways.

Dr. Bonner acknowledged that, in the early days, it was inappropriate to use both a clinical and forensic approach to interview child victims of sexual abuse. APSAC assisted in developing the research and best practices related to how to appropriately interview with children. She reiterated how interviewing has become more of a science than a clinical approach. Now, APSAC has an frontline role in developing research uptake in child maltreatment prevention and supporting professionals or influencing organizational and policy efforts in the field. The organization is expanding its frame beyond child sexual abuse, which is necessary for the successful impact and future of APSAC.

The Future of APSAC

Dr. Bonner applauded APSAC's focus on neglect of children, a timely consideration for the future. She acknowledged that neglect of children is a systemic problem and challenging to respond to or intervene with because it can be perpetual. If she were on the board of APSAC, she would be urging the members to highlight the fact of neglect in our world. She believes this is where the next 20 years need to be as physical and sexual abuse have decreased, yet neglect statistics continue to rise nationally. She suggested including board members who have experience in community interventions and neglect.

APSAC partnering with New York Foundling is important, according to Dr. Bonner, for long-term sustainability. Further, the journal continues to play a vital role in connecting research and practice. She suggested that APSAC consider changing the name of its colloquium to *conference*, a word that seems more welcoming. She clarified, however, that APSAC continued success is in connecting professionals with current research evidence. She suggested that APSAC find ways to continue to involve young professionals from a range of graduate and undergraduate programs, including law, psychology, social work, education, dentistry, sociology, and human relations to support an interdisciplinary focus.

Advice for Future Leaders

Dr. Bonner sees an opportunity for APSAC to continue to support research and practice related to neglect and drug abuse and their co-occurrence. She noted that many funding opportunities exist related to drug abuse from drug companies. Dr. Bonner continues to see the value and contribution of education programs and interdisciplinary training opportunities. She also suggested developing relationships with other major organizations in the field, such as Prevent Child Abuse America or Child Abuse Division of American Psychological Association, a division of the Bar Association. She acknowledged that these types of relationships foster interdisciplinary work.

Reflections From an Aspiring Child Welfare Researcher

One of the most interesting aspects of the interview with Dr. Bonner was her reflections on how challenging it is to move research into practice. She acknowledged that this applies to one of the major goals in the field, which is teaching interventions to professionals, particularly in undergraduate and graduate programs. She has experienced challenges in having doctoral courses that introduce evidence-based learning, such as cognitive behavioral programs for working with maltreatment victims. She stressed the importance of basic education and the ongoing supports required to understand and use evidence-based programs. Dr. Bonner suggested that providing more opportunities at the undergraduate and graduate levels to acquire evidence-based protocols will support professionals to carry out effective programs in practice. Not only is it necessary to work with professionals and practitioners when implementing a treatment intervention, but also programs need a community-based approach in which key partners such as legal or court representatives work with educational officials to be part of the effort. She sees that this approach is a vital aspect of the referral process, in terms of connecting with community partners.

Another understanding from my interview with Dr. Bonner is how significant APSAC has been in connecting professionals in the field of child maltreatment. She has found these alliances such a source of support and comradery throughout her career. It can be challenging and strenuous to continue to work in the field of child maltreatment and sexual abuse. Organizations such as APSAC have an important role in aiding professionals to align with others for collegial support and connection.

It was an honor to interview Dr. Bonner. She was very down-to-earth and humble about her impressive and influential career. Thank you, Dr. Bonner, for the opportunity to share insights about yourself with me on this 35th anniversary of the *Advisor*. Your legacy

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and impact on child abuse treatment and prevention are achievements to be recognized and will continue to inspire practitioners working with vulnerable children, as well as victims of abuse, for many years to come.

About the Author

Leah Bartley, MSW, PhD, is Senior Implementation Specialist at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Social Work. Dr. Bartley is passionate about using relational strategies in implementation to change practice and organizations for the benefit of children and families.

