



Child Chat



"Dedicated to children and those dedicated to serving them"

Steven Wayne Dolliver, Editor

Child Chat is a quarterly newsletter of Lake Sumter Children's Advocacy Center designed to acquaint the Lake and Sumter County communities with our professional staff and their trauma-focused services to children, as well as to highlight topical children's issues.

Forensic Interviewing: The Artful Search for Truth

Note: The following is a "Q & A" session with Holly Sharlow, Child Protection Team Coordinator and an accomplished Forensic Interviewer (FI). Forensic interviewing with child survivors of abuse is a veritable art form. It requires the astuteness of a detective, the compassion of a saint, the empathy of a best friend and the uncompromising objectivity of an accountant. Interviews are conducted when children are emotionally most vulnerable—often in the immediate aftermath of traumatizing abuse. Still, in spite of all obstacles, the interviewer's mission remains the same: to find the truth, no matter how elusive that truth might be. We sincerely hope that you will enjoy this glimpse into the world of Forensic Interviews and those who so adroitly conduct them.



Q1. Holly, you've been working with children for a considerable period of time. So, let's start with the most basic question: What was it that prompted your decision to work with children in the first place – most particularly, abused children?

"I began my career working with the 55+ population in an 'older worker' employment program. I began noticing trends in this group, which led to discussions regarding their childhood hardships, in terms of why they did not feel success in certain areas of their lives in that later stage of life. This piqued my interest regarding where/how people start out in this world. Naturally this brought me to working with children, and particularly those with challenges. I began to believe if you can address adverse experiences early enough in life, perhaps some of the later struggles can be avoided."

Q2. I know you are extremely accomplished in forensic interviewing. Would you please give our readers some insight into forensic interviews. Who receives them? What are they designed to do? Who gets to hear and view the Interviews?

"Forensic Interviews are utilized for children (prior to the age of eighteen years old) who are developmentally appropriate. A chronological age does not necessarily match a child's developmental age, and this needs to be assessed prior to attempting a Forensic Interview. A child must be able to meet specific qualifying criteria, such as the capacity to distinguish truth from fabrication, to preserve the legal validity of the interview. The Forensic Interview is used to elicit factual information in an objective way and to determine if abuse/neglect has occurred. Law Enforcement and DCF are invited to observe the Forensic Interview from our conference viewing area via 'feeds' from the interview room." (continued on p. 3)

INSIDE THIS EDITION

FEATURE: "Forensic Interviewing: The Artful Search for Truth".....Page 1

From the Editor: A Poem "On Becoming".....Page 1

"Reminders on Keeping Kids Safe".....Page 3

Child Quote: "We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today." - Stacia Tauscher, dancer & artist

A Poem "On Becoming"

Editor's Note: From time-to-time my "creativity gene" gets inspired by something I've seen, something I've read, or something that someone else has said or done. Occasionally, it is but one simple line with a powerful message that stimulates my need to create. Accordingly, the **Child Quote** that appears in the lower left-hand corner of this page evoked a desire to dip my toes into poetic waters. I would ask you to forgive the manifest deficits in formal structure as you read my piece, as a poet I shall never be. At the same time, perhaps you will relate to the sentiments and recall your own erstwhile struggles in defining your identity in those fragile formative years. I thank you in advance for your forbearance (and forgiveness!). :)

On Becoming

From the moment of conception,
we are born to be,
though we at first know not our fate,
too young to plainly see;

But as we grow our dreams burst forth
with earnestness and hope,
no limits to their promise
in the broadness of their scope;

And In their birth an innocence,
untarnished, chaste and pure,
replete with possibilities,
their path as yet obscure;

Shall I be a doctor
with a sure and steady hand,
to tend to vague infirmities,
with lives at my command;

Shall I be a lawyer,
defending small and meek,
to fan the flames of righteousness,
their justice for to seek;

Shall I be a preacher,
to sermonize my flock
and tender God's forgiveness
when they with the devil walk;

Shall I be an architect,
to build my homes secure,
to keep my clients safe and warm
and storms to thus endure;

(continued on page 2)

Child Chat

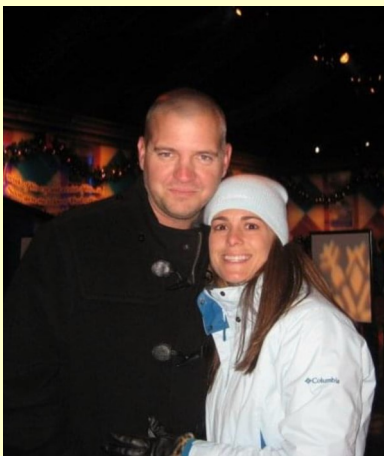


Welcome Aboard!

The entire staff of our Center wishes to extend a warm welcome to **Ryan Parent**, the newest member of our Board of Directors. Ryan, a native of Eustis, Florida, graduated from the University of Central Florida in 1998 with a degree in Health Information Management. Subsequently, he earned his license in Healthcare Risk Management. An eminently successful entrepreneur, Ryan founded and developed Overlook Technologies, a software development company, and ADS, a national leader in high volume medical record imaging. Notably, when Ryan sold his companies to a private equity group in 2010, ADS boasted more than 500 employees.

Ryan is a committed and involved member of our Lake County community. Among the service initiatives he supports are the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF), the Lake Cares Food Pantry and Life's Choices Women's Clinic in Eustis. A dedicated husband and father, Ryan resides with his wife Elizabeth and their two teenaged children, Ryann and Gradey, in Mt. Dora.

We would be remiss were we not to thank Ryan for "hitting the bricks running" with his "Cruise for Kids" efforts during the 2020 holiday period. His selfless gesture raised money and collected toys and gifts for the benefit of the children our Center serves. We appreciate Ryan's passion for children and look forward to working with him throughout his tenure with our Board.



Ryan & Elizabeth Parent

Bids4Kids: A "Virtual" Success

In our January 2021 installment of "Child Chat", we noted that there would be substantial modifications to our annual fundraiser called Bids4Kids. Traditionally, the event was a by-invitation-only, face-to-face soiree where our valued guests mixed and mingled, consumed scrumptious barbecue and bid vigorously on much-coveted auction prizes. However, in 2020 we were stopped in our tracks by the insidious COVID menace and forced to cancel our March event. No food. No festivities. No fun. Hiss! Boo! :(

Fast forward to March 2021. My, what a difference a year makes! Bids4Kids became living testimony to the old adage, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Our Center pivoted from its conventional in-person auction format to a safer, health-conscious virtual auction. Working hand-in-hand with Qtego, a virtual fundraising facilitator for nonprofit organizations, we fashioned a bidding platform that permitted participants to view auctioned items on their respective digital devices and bid competitively any time, any day, from anywhere during the three-day bidding window. Oh, the wonders of technology!

Still, we recognized that there were pros and cons to "going virtual". On the plus side, we were unconstrained by physical limitations. In past years we were essentially forced to hold a by-invitation-only event to ensure we would not overrun our venue's capacity. This year, by virtue of digital access, we opened the bidding up to the public. All that was required was website registration and an assigned PIN. In past years we made arrangements for meals and drinks at the venue. Obviously, with no venue this year, that was not necessary (We leave it to previous guests to render their own judgements as to whether that was a positive or a negative!). In years prior Bids4Kids necessitated an "all hands on deck" approach with all Center staff needed to assist with planning, coordination and implementation of the gala event. This year a select few staff, working with our Board and Qtego, made it all happen! And, of course, data tracking of number of items donated, number of participants, number of bids and total value of bids using an electronic medium was so simple! For the many pros, there were some inevitable losses. We lost the



A Poem "On Becoming" (continued)

Shall I be an artist
with a keen, untrammelled eye,
to render from a vision
all the colors of the sky;

My queries left unanswered,
I hence resolved a plan
to bring my case to closure
and make my final stand;

So, I asked my mother
what it is that I should be,
and waited on her judgment,
the truth that I should see;

"Why, you should be a teacher,
a teacher just like me,
Yes, you should be a teacher,
for it's in your pedigree";

Uncertain of her answer,
I to my father turned,
It should have come as no surprise
my fate for which he yearned;

"Come on and fight the fires,
I'll show you how it's done,
And though it is hard work at times,
we brothers fight as one";

I pondered on their wisdom,
my mother dear and Dad,
Clearly, they found happiness
in the simple life they had;

Still, I could not help but wonder,
as I assessed the scene,
Perhaps they'd struggled just as much
when they were young and green;

I might become many things,
for surely life is long,
But they will all be **my** things
and I'll march to my own song;

No longer in a hurry,
I just take life as I see,
forsaking all my worries,
content to just be **me!**

opportunity to be "live" and to socialize actively with our many friends. We lost the chance to ogle and touch the items being auctioned. We lost the excitement of the spirited "bidding wars" of a live auction.

In the end though, Bids4Kids 2021 was an unqualified success. Over **400** participants generated **1718** bids across **178** donated items. We at the Center thank everyone Involved most sincerely for their generosity—and our kids thank you even more!

Child Chat



Forensic Interviewing (continued from p. 1)

Q3: Holly, I would guess that you received a lot of training before you were permitted to conduct your first forensic interview with a child. How does that training process work and what kinds of things did you learn?

“Prior to interviewing a child, a CPT Case Coordinator must successfully complete prerequisite coursework, which includes reading materials pertaining to the field, watching numerous interviews, and taking a pre-test. The candidate attends a 40-hour Forensic Interviewing training, hosted by the Department of Health. The training is a blended approach, which is heavily influenced by APSAC (American Professional Society for the Abuse of Children) and Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers. The Case Coordinator is then observed for a significant period of time post-training and provided feedback regarding technique and demonstration of learned skills. During FI training, one learns the three main components to the interview, which include Rapport, Addressing the Allegations, and Closure. A person also learns the methods to reduce suggestibility, assessing the child's development, different question typologies, and how to elicit information from reluctant children.”

Q4: If you don't mind I'd like to transport you back in time to the very first forensic interview you ever conducted. Would you please share that experience with us? What were you happy about, and what would you have done differently knowing what you know now?

“The first FI I conducted certainly felt like a disaster (we are our own worst critics!), but in reality, it was not too terrible. I felt very unsure of myself, not confident, and felt like I spent too much time trying to ‘get it right.’ I am happy that I was in fact able to remember all the proper ‘do's and don'ts’, and I seemed to have a good rapport with that child. In retrospect I would tell my former self to relax and remind myself that I was just having a conversation with a child.”

Q5: Ok, Holly, let's say you are sitting with a child who just hours before may have been sexually abused, and it is obvious that the child is emotionally distressed. What do you do to calm the child down?

“To calm a child who seems to be at an extreme point of anxiety, I role model how I would like the child to feel. For example, I lower the tone of my voice, slow the tempo of my speech, and maintain open body language. I present as a supportive person who is trying to understand what the child has experienced. I use reassuring language, such as ‘take your time’ and offer alternative suggestions such as writing things down.” (continued on p. 4)



“I lower the tone of my voice, slow the tempo of my speech and maintain open body language....”

Reminders on Keeping Kids Safe

As we all know, **April is Child Abuse Prevention Month**. Each year we re-double our efforts to keep children safe by raising awareness concerning the devastating impact of abuse to the minds, bodies and spirits of victimized youth. Such efforts remind us of the constant vigilance we must exercise to protect our children from those who would rob them of their childhoods and strip them of their innocence. While we may never altogether eradicate child abuse and the conditions that precipitate it, it is always worthwhile to issue routine cautionary reminders to parents and caregivers in their earnest quest to keep their children safe. Accordingly, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services offers the following instructive pointers to combat abuse:

- **Take an active role in your children's lives. Learn about their activities and people with whom they are involved. Stay alert for possible problems.**
- **Watch for “grooming” behaviors in adults who spend time with your child. Warning signs may include frequently finding ways to be alone with your child, ignoring your child's need for privacy (e.g., in the bathroom) or giving gifts or money for no particular occasion.**
- **Ensure that organizations, groups and teams that your children are involved with minimize one-on-one time between children and adults. Ask how staff and volunteers are screened and supervised.**
- **Make sure your children know that they can talk to you about anything that bothers or confuses them.**
- **Teach children accurate names of private body parts and the difference between touches that are “OK” and “not OK.”**
- **Empower children to make decisions about their bodies by allowing them age-appropriate privacy and encouraging them to say “no” when they do not want to touch or be touched by others, even in non-sexual ways.**
- **Teach children to take care of their own bodies (e.g., bathing or using the bathroom) so they do not have to rely on adults or older children for help.**
- **Educate children about the difference between good secrets (such as birthday surprises) and bad secrets (those that make the child feel unsafe or uncomfortable).**

(continued on p. 4)

Child Chat



Forensic Interviewing (continued from p. 3)

Q6: Holly, I know that it is crucial in your forensic interviews to get as much information as possible as quickly as possible from each child potentially to verify an allegation. What techniques do you use with a child who refuses to talk?

“As there are many reasons children may not want to talk to me, and I need to be very careful to not assume anything, I begin in a similar way as with a child who experienced a recent trauma. If the calm approach is not working, I will then encourage the child to ‘educate’ me as he/she is the ‘expert’ of his/her own life. When using this tactic, for example, I will appear to demonstrate a lack of common uses of technology (such as specific applications), so the child will ‘school’ me regarding how he/she uses it (Sometimes, this is helpful in having a child reveal a username and password). Often, a child demonstrates resistance in speaking to a person whom he/she perceives to be an authority figure. Usually, the child uses words or phrases such as ‘you guys’ or ‘I don’t trust them’ to create separation. When that occurs I incline toward directness with the child. I will ‘give it to the child straight’, as children who present in this manner seem to prefer directness and can often detect flowery attempts to induce talking. This is particularly the case with victims of Human Trafficking. Regardless of a child’s initial presentation, I try to convey that I do not judge them and am open to receive whatever they want to share.”

Q7. With your experience in forensic interviewing, I would guess that you get almost a “sixth sense” about a child who may be lying to you about alleged abuse. How do you deal with a situation like that when you encounter it? To ask the question another way, how do you “know” when a child is lying?

“Sometimes during an interview, ‘red flags’ will ‘appear’. These are moments when discrepancies are noted and conflicting information is presented. When I sense a child is not telling the truth, I gently confront him/her. The last thing I want to do is make a child feel uncomfortable or to insinuate I do not believe him/her. However, it is critical that I receive an accurate picture of the allegations as possible to determine findings. Therefore, I will use information previously provided by the child during the interview to ‘clarify’ what is being said. I take notes during the interview, which I explain to the child at the beginning, and will refer back to my notes to repeat the child’s direct quote back to him/her. At that time, after a strategic pause, I will say something like, ‘Help me understand’ to amplify that there is a discrepancy which needs to be cleared up. I usually pause again for the child to consider the answer. Although I may have some sense of a mistruth, I must be VERY CAREFUL never to assume anything during an interview. Sometimes, what I initially perceive as a mistruth is really my lack of understanding of what the child is actually trying to tell me. A Forensic Interviewer must always have an open mind. At the end of the day, when I provide my findings from an interview, I must feel that I have obtained multiple consistent statements, accompanied by congruent sensory expression, to support a positive finding of abuse or neglect.”

(continued on p. 5)

“I must be VERY CAREFUL never to assume anything during an interview. Sometimes what I initially perceive as a mistruth is really my lack of understanding of what the child is actually trying to tell me.”

Keeping Kids Safe (continued from p. 3)

- **If your child tells you that he or she has been abused, stay calm, listen carefully and never blame the child. Thank your child for telling you. Report the abuse right away.**
- **Monitor children’s use of technology, including cell phones, social networking sites and messaging. Review contact lists regularly and ask about any people you don’t recognize.**
- **Trust your instincts. If you feel uneasy about leaving your child with someone, don’t do it. If you are concerned about possible sexual abuse, ask questions.**

Let us commit ourselves to making our children safe every minute of every day. Our children are counting on us....

Seven Fun Facts about Child Development....

1. At 2 years of age, a child has more than 100 trillion new brain connections, or synapses. However, when a child finally becomes an adult, more than 50% of these acquired synapses disappear. **Where, oh where, did my synapses go??**
2. If a baby’s body was able to grow at the same rate as its brain, the average child would weigh as much as 170 pounds at 1 month old. **OMG!**
3. By the age of 6, the average child has a vocabulary of about 13,000 words. An average adult has a vocabulary of about 60,000 words. **Catching up fast!**
4. Babies and kids can laugh up to 300 times a day. Adults typically laugh, at most, about 20 times a day. **Time to find my “inner child”!**
5. Babies and young kids both have a hard time figuring out and separating background noises from voices speaking. So sometimes, a toddler isn’t ignoring being called. He/she is just dealing with the challenge of lacking response skills. **Ok, so how do we explain teenagers?!**
6. Babies to whom their parents speak often typically know 300 more words than their peers by the age of 2 years old. **May the grooming for the next spelling bee champion begin!**
7. A child’s brain may be at it’s full physical size by the time he/she reaches kindergarten, but brain development doesn’t slow down until his/her twenties. **(There’s my explanation for teenagers!)**

Child Chat



Forensic Interviewing (continued from p. 4)

- Q8. Holly, from all that I have read on the subject, my impression is that human trafficking cases are perhaps the most challenging. From a Forensic Interviewer's perspective, what makes these cases so tough?

“Human Trafficking cases are very tough because the victims seem to have been very well-briefed and often threatened, coerced, bribed and/or bullied to ensure that they do not talk about what is really happening to them. Unfortunately, they have every reason not to tell someone like me about what is going on. These victims may have been beaten, cut, raped, drugged, burned, threatened with death, or stuffed into the back of a car. Their families may have been threatened. They may be given what they feel they were never provided at home: basic protection, a system of people who ‘have their backs’ and people who ‘respect’ them. They may feel proud of making money, or be given ‘nice things’, such as getting their nails and hair done or new outfits or new shoes. Furthermore, they may receive other ‘compensations’, such as elevated status in their group’s hierarchy, drugs, alcohol, and/or money. Beyond that, someone in authority may have convinced the child he/she is running his/her own business and ‘living his/her best life.’ There are so many reasons why victims of Human Trafficking would not choose to talk about their abuse. Chances are that a given child would construe me as just another of the many people who has failed him/her when it is all said and done.”

- Q9. Is there a difference in the manner with which you interview a child when the alleged sexual abuse perpetrator is a parent versus when the alleged sexual abuse perpetrator is a stranger?

“When the alleged perpetrator of sexual abuse is a parent, the child will likely feel a few different things. The child will likely still love and care for the parent despite what he/she did. The child will likely be concerned for that parent. The child will not want that parent to be incarcerated. The child will worry about the parent. The child will have good memories from this parent—memories that run counter to the abusive act. Sadly, it is quite likely that the offending parent has ‘groomed’ the child and, thus, convinced him/her that the sexual acts are ‘normal’. As a Forensic Interviewer, I must be careful not to judge the alleged perpetrator, especially when he/she is a parent. After all, in doing so I would run the risk of shutting a child down. Any statements I would make back to a child must be neutral. In fact, interviewers need to approach all interviews in this way. A child would likely have no emotional bond with a stranger. Conversely, the inherent emotional bond between parent and child provides ample opportunity for the parent to sexually exploit the trusting child. Another thing one may encounter when interviewing the child of an alleged parent perpetrator, as opposed to a perpetrating stranger, may be the stigma that people have with incest. I have seen many children who appear ashamed that the person who sexually abused them is a relative.”

(continued to the right)

Forensic Interviewing (continued from left)

- Q10: Without violating the child's confidentiality, of course, would you generally describe the case with which you were involved that made you the most proud?

“This is a tough question—impossible to choose only one. I am proud of my work in a few different instances. I am proud when my work helps bring about some sort of positive change in any child's life—when he/she becomes truly safe because the perpetrator is incarcerated, or the child is sheltered in a protective home, or when a more caring relative steps up to establish custody. I am proud when a child chooses to trust me enough to confide in me about a heinous event in his/her life that he/she would much rather forget. I am proud when I attend court years after I have met with a child, and justice finally prevails. I am proud when I see the once-terrified child I met with long ago stride into the building, blossoming from all the counseling he/she has received. It is wonderful to see children who once physically hid themselves from the world, begin to pull their hair back from their faces, wear different clothing, present with cleaner hygiene, and carry their heads high in the air to ‘let this world know they are making it through their days with confidence and vigor! I am proud that despite their torment, these children are able to get out of bed every day and not only function, but excel and dream!”

“It is wonderful to see children who once physically hid themselves from the world...pull their hair back and carry their heads high....”

- Q11. I have no doubt that working with traumatized children can at times be both upsetting and stressful for the forensic interviewer. In fact, we hear about vicarious trauma or “secondary trauma” among first responders quite frequently. What do you do when you are feeling overwhelmed with a case or with the burden of several trauma-inducing cases involving the children you serve?

“It's funny how the universe works. When I am feeling the effects of vicarious trauma, it is not uncommon for a child (such as those described in the previous answer) to walk through our lobby at exactly that moment. It is then that I think to myself, ‘Ah, yes. That is why I do what I do!’ When you are in need and require some inspiration, it is all around you all the time. You just have to pay attention.” :)

HOLLY SHARLOW earned her Bachelor's Degree in the field of Human Services from Saint Leo University in San Antonio, Florida in 2002. She commenced employment with our Lake Sumter Children's Advocacy Center in September of 2010 and has served as the Team Coordinator for our Child Protection Team (CPT) since the end of 2017. Holly is a steadfast advocate and dedicated champion for children. She has indicated that what she enjoys most about her position is “doing anything and everything possible to help keep children and the community safe.” We kindly thank Holly for enlightening us on the intriguing nuances of Forensic Interviewing and for all of her great work with our Center!

