

# More young victims find a sympathetic ear

**Child Protection Center's expert interviewers are taking on a broader range of cases.**

By MARK MORRIS  
The Kansas City Star

The idea came to the prosecutor as she watched a video of police interviewing a 9-year-old boy in the summer of 2011.

Sitting in a police interrogation room, the boy described how he snatched up his 2-year-old sister and fled after watching his mom shot to death by her boyfriend.

Police did well enough with the interview, but Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker wondered why officers were conducting the interview

in the first place. After all, the Child Protection Center, a Kansas City nonprofit that specialized in interviewing children, had spent more than a decade developing, and occasionally debunking, child sexual abuse cases for law enforcement.

Why not for other crimes as well, Baker asked.

"Give it to the CPC," she counseled. "That's why they're there."

Since then the center, which has provided critical evidence in thousands of child sexual abuse investigations since 1996, has seen a sharp uptick in referrals for physical child abuse cases and criminal cases in

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At the Child Protection Center at 31st Street and Broadway Boulevard, the decor is intended to be calming for children who are being interviewed about cases of physical or sexual abuse or other crimes they may have witnessed.

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which children are witnesses.

The first six months of 2013 saw a 78 percent increase over the same period a year earlier in referrals from law enforcement for physical child abuse interviews and a 59 percent increase in referrals to interview children who have witnessed child abuse, according to agency statistics.

And the center recently added a new tracking category to its doleful spreadsheets: the number of children interviewed who have witnessed a homicide, eight between January and June 2013.

Beth Banker, clinical director at the center, said the additional interviews do not reflect an increase in physically abused children. Rather, the additional cases stem from a policy decision by prosecutors to dig deeper into existing cases.

"The current prosecutor has made it clear she takes physical abuse in Jackson County seriously, and, if warranted, she wants to see prosecutions," Banker said.

Baker, the prosecutor, whose husband serves on the center's board, said the idea is to intervene earlier in the lives of some troubled children, hoping they won't return to the system later as victims of aggravated assault or homicide.

"If cases are out there with children with broken bones, burns, bites or discipline that went too far, they should be here," Baker said. "I should have a crack at them."

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Housed on the seventh floor of a midtown office tower, the center has a cheery treehouse theme that masks a serious purpose. In two interview rooms just down a sunlit hallway, victims of some of this area's worst child abuse cases have told horrific stories to forensic interviewers.

About 800 children each year are interviewed at the center. And how interviewers get them to talk is critical, experts said.

After the disastrous collapse of the late 1980s McMartin preschool investigation in California, researchers concluded that too many police officers and child protection workers asked leading and suggestive questions when talking with children about their experiences. In the McMartin case, members of a family who ran a preschool were charged with numerous counts of sexual abuse, but after years of investigations and criminal trials, no convictions were obtained.

A new model eventually emerged that allowed trained people to neutrally interview a young child about his or her experiences



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And the model dictates that the child must tell the story only once, unless he or she must testify at trial. Previously, a child might have to repeat the story before trial to parents, teachers, state social welfare workers, police officers, prosecutors and defense lawyers.

Under those conditions, the cost to the child was shame and renewed trauma from reliving the abuse, experts said.

"If you keep asking the kids over and over again, they'll think you don't believe them," said Brandy Hodgkin, a forensic interviewer at the center.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Dan Nelson, who helped write the federal plan to prosecute child abuse crimes in western Missouri, agreed.

"The legal system is designed for adults and not for

kids," Nelson said.

The varying details of an accuser's story, which only accumulate on each retelling, have provided criminal defense lawyers with ammunition to assault credibility on the witness stand. But at least one local criminal defense lawyer said he's happy to give up that tool.

Lance Sandage, who resigned from the center's board when he accepted a case on which it had conducted interviews, said he views the information coming out of the center as almost as reliable as that from DNA testing. Such certainty can just as easily exonerate a suspect as it can convict a defendant, Sandage said.

"It's almost like a crime lab," Sandage said. "It's the best way to extract the information from a child to make a decision about whether to prosecute."

The interviews involving witnesses and cases of physical abuse use the same kind of neutral, non-leading questions that are the hallmark of sexual abuse interviews. But the object is slightly different, experts said.

Rather than focusing on individual sex crimes, interviewers must tease out patterns of physical abuse that, through repetition, may appear normal to the child.

"Physical abuse is trickier because it's something that's been more or less ongoing in a child's life," Hodgkin said. "It's more a part of their everyday life."

Work at the center is difficult, and all the interviewers say they have outside interests and good coping mechanisms for dealing with the daily horrors.

There is some hope, Banker said.

"I've been doing this general kind of work so long that I've seen second generations of families come through this system," she said. "But there are more parents who are paying attention and are willing to take steps to protect their kids than 30 years ago."

That's comforting on the hard days, Banker added.

And then she prepares to see another child.

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