

Finding Words

of Kansas

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On average, a child victim of sexual abuse has to tell his or her story more than a dozen times in legal proceedings. Even though the police officers, social workers, prosecutors and other strangers are trying to help, each time is traumatic.

A program called Finding Words of Kansas is driving that number down by training investigators to team up and get the evidence they need for court without prolonging an already painful process.

David Fyler, M'02, helps run the program out of the Western Kansas Children's Advocacy Center in Scott City, which he co-founded with Kelly Robbins, a retired agent with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (and childhood friend). Fyler is also a forensic interviewer and therapist who works with children who have been sexually abused.

"A big component of what I do is educate people on the realities of child sexual abuse," Fyler said. "It kind of messes with our worldview. People don't really want to talk about this or acknowledge it."

The Western Kansas Children's Advocacy Center is one of about a dozen statewide that helps child victims of abuse. More than 200 children have been interviewed since it opened in January 2004, most of them due to sexual abuse. The center serves 26 counties that make up one-third of the state's area but only six percent of its population, Fyler said.

Finding Words is a forensic interviewing course for law enforcement officers, child protection caseworkers and prosecutors. The week-long training teaches them how to interview children and prepare them for court by working as a multidisciplinary team. It was developed by the American Prosecutors Research Institute and CornerHouse, an interagency child abuse evaluation and training center in Minnesota.

In preparation for the center's opening, Fyler and Robbins attended a Finding Words training in Indianapolis. Fyler said they quickly decided they needed to bring the course to Kansas.

To become Finding Words trainers, Fyler, Robbins and their team members needed to be trained themselves, and they needed a place to do it. Fyler thought of Friends University and contacted Dr. Dan Lord, director of the Master of Science in Family Therapy program.

"He was very enthusiastic and invited us to use facility for three weeks in 2005," Fyler said. "We used the interview and therapy rooms and classrooms. They were just wonderful."

The team learned to teach on topics such as the multidisciplinary approach to interviews, age-appropriate questioning and helping to prepare children for court. The course concludes with a test and a mock interview with an adult actor portraying an abused child.

Now the group teaches three Finding Words courses a year across the state. Classes are limited to 40 students and there is always a waiting list. So far, 240 people have been trained from more than 30 Kansas counties. Each team is required to include a representative from law enforcement, the county attorney's office and the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, but they can bring anyone involved in such cases, from mental health workers to school counselors.

Most participants say they wish child sexual abuse was not in the purview of their jobs, but they want to handle it as best they can. "People will say, 'I don't like working these cases, but they end up on my desk.' I've had cops say they would rather handle a murder case than this," Fyler said. "But by the end of the week, we see this turnaround: they'll be enthusiastic and they'll say, 'I never had the skills to work this case before, but now I feel like I can go back and do this.'"

For his part, Fyler teaches a segment on child sexual abuse dynamics to help the investigators know what to expect. "We



imagine this real traumatized child and most of the time they talk very matter-of-factly."

The Children's Advocacy Center also fights other misconceptions that persist about abuse, Fyler said.

One western Kansas family had recently moved from a large city in a neighboring state to a town of 800 to offer their children a safer environment, but a neighbor abused one of their children. Fyler said high-profile abductions reinforce a fear of children being attacked by strangers, but that is an extremely rare event.

"When there's an Amber Alert, the whole community rallies around them, and the child is really supported," Fyler said. "The truth is, out of the 200-plus children we've interviewed at our CAC, only two of the alleged perpetrators were unknown to the family. A lot of times that child isn't as supported."

The center's goal is to build that base of support from the moment the abuse is reported. That includes giving children a safe and friendly environment to talk. Some children have even asked if they can come back after their interviews are done, Fyler said.

"When we hear that, we know we've done something right."

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