

January 1997

**Protocols and Training Standards:
*Investigating Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 1996 budget proviso to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy allocated \$35,000 to "collect data and information from jurisdictions within the state of Washington and outside the state of Washington, including other nations, that have experience with developing protocols and training standards for investigating child sexual abuse."

After a competitive bid process, the Institute selected the project team of Lucy Berliner, Research Director of Harborview Medical Center's Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress, and Patricia Toth, former Director of the National Center for the Prosecution of Child Abuse.

This project incorporated a review of the scientific literature, model protocols and standards from other states and jurisdictions, and legislation in other states. In addition, a panel of state experts visited four counties in the state to observe their practices.

Interview Guidelines

- Interviewing children about possible abuse experiences or criminal victimization is an important task and the stakes are high. Interview approaches that increase the probability of eliciting complete and accurate information have been developed and tested by researchers.
- Experts recommend establishing ground rules for interviews and emphasize using open-ended questions and prompts and proceeding to more specific questions only when necessary.

Investigation Skills and Training

- Child sexual abuse cases are complex and resolved most efficiently and effectively by well-trained investigators. The key to good investigations is a concentrated effort to find accurate information.
- Ongoing training in forensic interviewing is essential to a quality system, and needs to be available to every investigator. Training needs to include: didactic information regarding memory and suggestibility; interviewing techniques; and opportunities for practice and feedback.
- The state could assist local jurisdictions by encouraging advanced training and multidisciplinary cooperation in investigations. An incentive approach, used in Oregon, is one model. The federal Children's Justice Act offers one source for training funds.

Protocols for Coordinated Responses

- Communities in the state have selected several approaches to the investigation of suspected child sexual abuse cases. A single protocol is not recommended as preferable. The key ingredient is establishment of good working relationships among the professionals in law enforcement, Child Protective Services (CPS), and the prosecutor's office.

Videotaping Investigative Interviews

- Compelling arguments regarding videotaping of investigative interviews of suspected child sexual abuse victims are found on both sides of the issue. Videotaping is mandated in a few states and common practice in many jurisdictions and other countries.
- A research proposal is suggested to investigate the outcomes of a pilot project using videotaping in Washington State.