

A Look Inside:

# FORENSIC INTERVIEWING

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River Bridge  
Regional Center Inc.

# CHILD ABUSE

is a local and national tragedy, a horrifying epidemic that does not discriminate based on gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, or religion. Consequences to child abuse and neglect extend beyond the victims to impact their families, future relationships, communities, and society at large. When one experiences trauma, the action can affect their brain and bodies, developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in some abuse cases. The Child Welfare Information Gateway, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, describes the long-term impacts of child abuse: physical, psychological, behavioral, and societal consequences. These impacts include problems with **fear, anxiety, depression, anger and hostility, self-destructive behavior, feelings of isolation, poor self-esteem, and difficulty trusting others**. If these abuse symptoms are not addressed, the negative effects of abuse can lead to juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and homelessness. Victims of abuse also more likely targeted and coerced into human trafficking situations. RBRC exists to ensure expedient services are provided for child abuse victims.

The effectiveness of the child advocacy model to address this crisis is well documented. Its success is attributed to the unique multi-disciplinary community response system. RBRC first earned accreditation by the National Children's Alliance (NCA) in 2010,



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ALLIANCE®

again in 2015, and most recently in October of 2020. Child Advocacy Center's (CAC) like River Bridge adopt the vigorous standards set by NCA to ensure that the child is protected, provided support and services that lead them on the path towards healing. We also work closely with investigators and prosecutors to help those agencies hold offenders accountable

**"Forensic interviews are coordinated to avoid duplicative interviewing and are conducted in a manner that is legally sound and of a neutral, fact finding nature."**

*NCA Standards for Accredited Members 2017*

*The following information was taken from the National Children's Alliance Standards for Accredited Information, 2017 edition "Forensic Interviews (pg. 20).*

**The purpose of a CAC forensic interview** is to obtain information from a child about abuse allegations or witnessing a crime that will support accurate and fair decision making by the Multidisciplinary Team within the criminal justice, child protection, and service delivery systems. Forensic interviews are conducted in a manner that is developmentally and culturally sensitive, unbiased, fact-finding, and legally sound. When a child is unable or unwilling to provide information regarding any concern about abuse, other interventions to assess the child's experience and safety are performed.

The CAC/MDT must adhere to research-based forensic interview guidelines that create an interview environment that enhances free recall, minimizes interviewer influence, and gathers information



needed by all the MDT members in order to avoid duplication of the interview process.

Forensic interviews are the foundation for multiple CAC/MDT functions including child abuse investigations, prosecution, child protection, and implementation of appropriate services. The forensic interview may also be the beginning of the road toward healing for many children and families. Quality interviewing involves an appropriate, neutral setting, effective communication among MDT members, and employment of legally sound interviewing techniques.

**The manner in which a child is treated during the initial forensic interview may significantly impact the child's understanding of, and ability to respond to, the intervention process and/or criminal justice system.**

*NCA Standards for Accredited Members 2017*

## WHO CONDUCTS THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW?

CACs vary with regard to who conducts the forensic interview, but the role must be fulfilled by a selected, supervised, and appropriately trained professional. In addition, every attempt must be made to provide a child the opportunity to speak about what may have happened to them in the language they are most comfortable. River Bridge's Program Director, Kat Stenquist leads our team of Forensic Interviewers including Tina Thompson, a part-time employee of River Bridge, Dina Prieto with Basalt Police Department (bilingual/Spanish interviewer), Anna Ramirez with Carobdale PD (bilingual/Spanish interviewer), Linda Consuegra of Aspen PD (bilingual/Spanish interviewer), Sandy Soltzfus of Glenwood Springs PD, and Megan Alstatt with Colorado Bureau of Investigations. We are very appreciative of our partner agencies for providing these services in-kind to River Bridge. Our forensic interviewers have initial and ongoing formal forensic interviewer training and attend regular Peer Reviews to continue their education and better their skills.



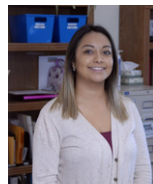
Kat Stenquist, MSW, LSW  
Program Director



Tina Thompson  
River Bridge Regional Center



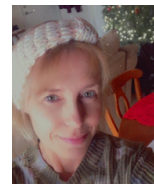
Dina Prieto  
Basalt Police Department



Anna Ramirez  
Carbondale Police  
Department



Linda Consuegra  
Aspen Police Department



Sandy Soltzfus  
Glenwood Springs Police  
Department



Megan Alstatt  
Colorado Bureau of  
Investigations



## IS THERE A STRUCTURE TO THE INTERVIEW PROCESS, OR DOES THE CHILD JUST TALK?

Without going into great detail, the interview process is highly structured and requires considerable skill on the interviewers part. The objective of the interview is to maximize the child's abilities to communicate his/her/they experiences or "allow the competence of the child" to elicit factual information regarding the child's experiences. The process gently establishes the child's rational, emotional and communicative skills, so that the interview is conducted at a level consistent



with his or her developmental abilities. The result is information that is reliable, specific and difficult to challenge.

It's widely known and understood that children and adults think and act differently. Although, not all children, even when they are the same age, can be expected to have the same physical, intellectual, emotional, or social maturity. Our forensic interviewers have knowledge of child development and this knowledge guides appropriate methods of gathering information and assessing the child's response. For example, interviews on children four and young can present some difficulties, including limited communication skills, short attention spans, and they easily distracted. In addition, sometimes the child may have difficulty telling what happened from beginning, middle, to end. Other young children, ages 5-8, may try and deflect focus and ask questions to the interviewer such as, "How come you are wondering about that?" or "Has someone ever done that to you?" They could also interpret questions like "where did he touch you" quite literally, and respond with a place or a body part. Therefore, it's important that our forensic interviewer asks questions keeping in mind the who the child is in front of them and not just the child's mental and physical age.

## WHO ELSE KNOWS WHAT IS SAID IN THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW?

The child and parent/caregiver are made aware beforehand that the interview is recorded and that there is a team of multi-disciplinary members watching in a separate room. While the parent/caregiver is introduced to the team, the child does not typically meet these people.



After the forensic interview, the recording will go to law enforcement and human services and any drawings go to law enforcement as evidence, where prosecutors and district attorneys will have access if a court case and trial results from the investigation.

## THE SCIENCE AND ART OF FORENSIC INTERVIEWING BY KAT STENQUIST

*Forensic interviewing is a unique blend of science and art. The science is understanding the research behind how a forensic interview is conducted and being able to legally defend how you conducted the interview. The art is crafting all of the science into a conversation with a child or youth that is inviting and allows them the space to open up and talk about what has happened to them. It's such an amazing experience to have a child open up to me and tell me what has happened to them. Often times the forensic interview is the first time that a child has openly talked about what has happened to them. Their first disclosure puts them on the path to healing. It's such a powerful experience that I am immensely grateful to be a part of.*

To learn more about River Bridge's programs and other services, please visit our website:

[WWW.RIVERBRIDGERC.ORG](http://WWW.RIVERBRIDGERC.ORG)