

Half A Nation

The Newsletter of the State & National Finding Words Courses



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The American Prosecutors Research Institute (APRI) provides research, training and technical assistance to the National Child Protection Training Center (NCPTC) at Winona State University (WSU). APRI is the non-profit affiliate of the National District Attorneys Association (NDAAs). This publication was prepared under cooperative agreement No. 2003-JN-FX-K009 from the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice, NDAAs, APRI or WSU.

Indicators of a Healthy Multidisciplinary Team

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Multidisciplinary teams (MDT) have dramatically increased in number over the past five decades, from a known three in 1958 to more than 1000 in 1985.² In 1997, 33 states indicated that they had "statewide participation" in the multidisciplinary approach to child abuse cases and 11 other states enacted statutes allowing or encouraging multidisciplinary teams.³ The longevity of multidisciplinary teams speaks to their accepted importance. The benefits of the multidisciplinary approach include reducing trauma to children, increasing the effectiveness of interventions, reducing the duplication of services, improving the quality of evidence, and clarifying roles among the various disciplines involved in investigating, prosecuting, and treating child abuse cases.⁴

Communities invested in the team approach to handling child abuse cases know that supporting a healthy, functional, multidisciplinary team is no easy task. The truly complex and challenging nature of forming and maintaining teams becomes apparent from the outset. Soliciting and maintaining the participation of diverse disciplines is an intricate process requiring dedication and hard work. The first step to building a

successful MDT is acknowledging this complex and intricate process.

In the state of Georgia, a Multidisciplinary Review Team & Facilitator Project was undertaken in 2002.⁵ The project's objective was to investigate the nature of MDT's to learn the elements necessary to make them excel. The project began with site visits to fifteen MDT's across the state. Each team held open discussions about its functioning, dynamics, and processes. Team members shared ideas regarding their success, overcoming roadblocks, and future aspirations. Strategies for handling team issues, celebrations, and evaluation were also assessed. Pre- and post-surveys were collected from team members and a general survey was collected from the 15 team facilitators as part of this project.⁶

Through these site visits and surveys, themes for healthy team functioning began to appear. After extensive analysis of the ideas collected, sixteen themes were identified as essential to the functioning of a healthy MDT. These themes became the basis for this article and the Multidisciplinary Review Team and Facilitator Handbook.⁷ These indicators, while not necessarily present in every team, represent the most significant elements of functioning teams as identified by these front line professionals. Consider each indicator and challenge yourself and your MDT to incorporate it, as your team deems appropriate.

1) *Accountability for the Team*

MDT's must have a plan to ensure they are functioning within their purpose and accomplishing their goals. By holding themselves accountable, MDT's can increase their credibility and demonstrate their abilities. Whether teams need minor tweaking or major overhauling, there are always ways to excel beyond current functioning. By seeking out new ideas and soliciting feedback, MDT's can work toward necessary changes and improvements. Furthermore, some MDT's may have a responsibility to uphold the standards set forth by the National Children's Alliance,⁸ state statutes, state membership coalitions, and/or local child abuse protocols. Accountability to these and other standards can be crucial to maintain funding streams and achieve the collective missions of the partner agencies.

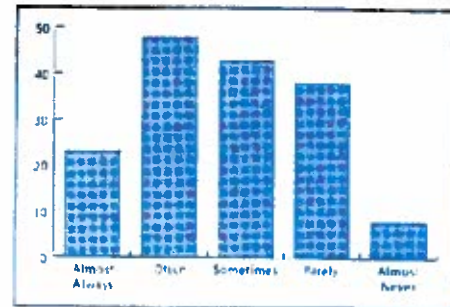
2) *Accountability for Team Members*

Being a member of a multidisciplinary team means one has certain responsibilities to the team. These can be as simple as attending, being prepared, completing follow-up tasks, and advancing knowledge and skills for the betterment of the MDT. As such, members are expected to uphold their duties and roles. While

individuals are responsible for themselves, unprepared or unreliable members can weaken the power of the MDT. Therefore, it becomes each member's responsibility to hold others accountable. Members must be willing to assist, teach, or even confront weak team members for the wellbeing of the MDT and for what it can accomplish for children. Significantly, almost all of this project's pre-survey respondents reported that attending team meetings is a priority and that their team members actively participate.⁹

3) *Burnout Prevention*

Working in the field of child abuse is stressful and overwhelming. Being a member of an MDT can seem, in itself, even more overwhelming. MDT's can recognize the stress of this work and attempt to create an atmosphere that helps members feel connected while educating members about burnout and its prevention. MDT members can serve as supports for each other as each tries to handle the frustrations and demands of this work. While the importance of burnout prevention was noted by each team involved in this project, survey results indicate that perhaps teams should spend more time focusing on how to help team members handle this issue.



Our team serves as a source of support and/or burnout prevention (167 respondents).¹⁰

4) *Celebration*

With busy schedules, deadlines, meetings, and endless appointments it may seem impossible to even think about finding time to squeeze in celebration. However, celebrating accomplishments in the field of child abuse is imperative. How often have your MDT members heard "I don't know how you do it" when addressed by lay people. These people know what they are talking about - this is hard work! It is work only tackled by those strong enough and brave enough to believe they can make a difference in the life of an abused child. Celebrate this work - for each member, for the MDT, and for the children! The teams who participated in this project listed the following ideas as ways they celebrate their teams: award "Community Partner of the Month"

