

Linda Cordisco Steele: The adage that practice makes perfect. And in actuality, practice makes permanent. But unless we're practicing perfect use of skills, we're not moving toward perfection.

Christina Rouse: We are so excited to talk to you all and have a conversation with you about continuing to develop your forensic interviewers, and I have the most prestigious person joining me to talk about this. Linda, please introduce yourself.

Linda Cordisco Steele: I'm Linda Steele and I am the director of forensic interview training and services at the National Children's Advocacy Center, and I'm very happy to be here to talk about one of my very favorite topics in the whole world.

Christina Rouse: I think it's fair to say that when interviewers get together, we could talk for days and days and days about forensic interviewing because it's such a passion for those. The interview on a regular long-term basis. So we had folks submit questions to us and these are not softball questions.

We kind of reviewed them ahead of time and Linda and I were joking that we wish we had the answers for everything, but unfortunately sometimes it's not a one size fits all situation with these questions. So the first question that was submitted was, I sent my interviewer to basic training. They just got back what should their next steps be for growing and developing them beyond that

Linda Cordisco Steele: first course?

And that is a great question because, we know that new interviewers who come with no previous experience of interviewing, go through a one week training. They learn lots of new information. They get exposed to lots of new techniques and strategies. They often look a bit like. Deer in the headlight when they leave at the end of the week.

Their brain is trying to process a lot of information and we know that when we learn new information and we try to develop a new skill, it's not a one time through and you've got it. So what interviewers most need when they go back to their child advocacy center, they need some kind of a routine or practice for integrating that information.

Hearing the information more than one time, breaking down some of the really different skills in how we talk with kids when we're doing interviews and practicing those. Adults don't always love role play, but role play is a better

place to learn what you got and what you didn't get, what you understand and what you don't understand than practicing on a child.

Christina Rouse: Yeah, and I think what we're hopeful that the field can start adopting is trying really hard to refrain putting that new interviewer that just came back from basic training right into the interview room. Without that kind of development of what they learned it can be a scary place to have that pressure as a new interviewer knowing that you have to go back to the office on Monday and interview.

It's we're hopeful that you can set something up that, that supports the interviewer rather than puts them in those

Linda Cordisco Steele: situations. Yes, and I think one of the things the other trainers and myself worry about is when we hear that. Person in the training say, well, I've got four interviews on Monday.

And that's not a route that's going to likely be successful in terms of that person. Feeling good about what they're doing, the team feeling confident in their work. really not a good plan.

Christina Rouse: so with that, Thinking about how you're assigning cases to your new interviewers is something that you can consider.

One of the follow up questions around that basic training is should you do anything with your interviewer before sending them to basic training? Are there things that you can start developing before they even go to

Linda Cordisco Steele: core training? Well, I know that we all don't have complete control of how we would like to prepare and train our interviewers.

I do appreciate that. I think, and we don't have a lot of literature on training interviewers other than inside of the training to kind of go back to. But what we've learned from practice I think it's most helpful if interviewers have had the opportunity to observe some interviews prior to going to the training so that they just get a few of what it's gonna look like.

They kind of get the field of the overall picture, and I think that can really help them to really make the most productive use of the training. And then when they return from training, set up that plan for how that interviewer is going to get to practice some of the new skills.

Christina Rouse: Yeah, I think that's great advice from a lot of diverse CACs. So that is one thing to consider What is the structure of my organization and what do I have the capability of doing versus not having the capability of doing? With this idea of once they're back from basic training, how often should development happen for interviewers?

You know, should it be a, one time, a year development? Should it be an ongoing development? What kind of structure can centers put into place for that? Upkeep of best practices and current trends that

Linda Cordisco Steele: are happening? Well, I'm gonna speak from sort of ideal wishes and Please know that I appreciate some of the challenges we may have in terms of being able to reach our ideal approach.

But I think initially, lots of practice, lots of feedback, but practice in small segments. So if you look at the literature on deliberate practice or deep practice, Because it takes so much focus to the particular thing that you're practicing. It's best to do it in short burst. And that can be accomplished through role play or practice recording themselves, going back and watching it together.

without ever having the child in the room, but practicing those skills in a lot of short burst. And then once interviewers begin to be in the interview room, I think they are best assisted by having someone backing them and experienced interviewer in the observation room. They have the partners.

Mm-hmm. But they have a different role than that experienced interviewer.

Christina Rouse: Yeah, and I think that raises one of the questions that not only did we get when we started submitting things for this q and a, but that we hear all the time in the field. I'm going back to my center, but I'm the only one there. So I'm going back to my center knowing that I need to make a priority to develop my skills and to have back and forth supervision, mentorship.

Observation, but how do I do that if I'm all alone?

Linda Cordisco Steele: Right. So difficult. Mm-hmm. And such a lonely place for an interviewer to be the only person doing this particular task, you don't have the ability for that to be set up within your center. Then I'm going to suggest that you look for outside resources that may be able to support that interviewer.

I know some states have gone with developing sort of a mentoring process where another child advocacy center that has a more experienced interviewer mm-hmm. Can provide some of that role. Now that we have all of this technology stuff with which to practice, we don't have to be in person. Sometimes state networks, state chapters.

Can set up a mechanism for helping those centers with limited staff and resource develop other options than just that in-house interviewer. Mm-hmm. So we may have to be really creative and really supportive of each other to make this happen.

Christina Rouse: I love that you kind of highlighted that.

forensic interviewing is difficult already. If you're alone in that journey of being an interviewer, it is very easy to become isolated or feeling like you're operating on an island. Mm-hmm. And so if you know that that's the structure of your center, connecting a networking and finding other interviewers, Is really important because you can't do this alone.

so there's that bucket of folks that might be going back to their center and they're the only one there. Then there's also the bucket of interviewers that go back to their center and their direct supervisor or leader. Is not a forensic interviewer. Right. And so what are some strategies or suggestions to help develop those interviewers when the folks that tend to provide supervision might not be fully educated and aware of the skill developments that interviewers

Linda Cordisco Steele: need?

Yeah, I think it's important in those particular scenarios that we distinguish between an administrative supervisor and a skills-based supervisor, sort of like we did with therapy with a clinical supervisor as opposed to an administrative supervisor. So I think the role that that administrative supervisor can play.

Is working to help develop those options or resources for their forensic interviewer to get them the support they need. we talk a lot about resilience and trying to retain people in this role, and I think part of, What can be beneficial is to provide adequate support as interviewers start out, help them begin to build their skills, feel some confidence, feel like they have someone to go to with their challenges as opposed to, just that feeling of helplessness.

Mm-hmm. And being alone. As you mentioned, Christina, not having anyone to go to or turn to. And I think to the point you made, Linda, about that resiliency factor, I think supervisors and directors that may not necessarily be forensic interviewers can still provide that reflective supervision.

Christina Rouse: So talk a little bit about maybe their ability to beef up the reflective supervision skills to support

Linda Cordisco Steele: interviewers. Yeah, I think the reflective supervision certainly is helpful and beneficial. being able to provide an arena, a safe place mm-hmm. Where interviewers can talk about some of their challenges, talk about some of the things that they are struggling with, that they're not certain about, where they think they need help.

So I think all of that is, beneficial in terms of. The interviewer feeling more connected and more supportive, and then the information that, reflective supervisor. is learning or hearing may help them sort of craft some other options that might be helpful with that coaching piece.

Mm-hmm. Or that direct skills space piece. Mm-hmm. So both of those are important. You're absolutely right about that, Christina. Mm-hmm.

Christina Rouse: Based off of experience and also hearing what other interviewers in the field have talked a lot about is that sometimes they focus so strongly on advanced skill development or special populations or really kind of looking at those, how can I broaden my case criteria to do more interviews, which is great.

We need to hone those skills, but there's this other bucket of supervision around. Just being an interviewer that needs to be supported as

Linda Cordisco Steele: well. Learning to work with the multidisciplinary partners is also a whole growth trajectory there of, it's not your case, it's their case. They certainly have input, they have opinions.

Mm-hmm. Things they hope to get from the interview. so the interviewer can carry the burden of that too, and that support can go a long way with that, I think. So let's talk about peer review just a little bit and how that can grow and develop interviewers.

Yeah, I certainly think it's one option.

I get concerned when we, sort of seem to put everything in that bucket of, if we've got peer review a couple of times a year that's gonna take care of interviewer skills. And we know that's, not enough. I do think it does provide that support. Like you said at the beginning, interviewers can get together and talk forever.

Mm-hmm. About this, that, and the other, about interviewing. But I think the best peer review is probably includes some kind of facilitation. Mm-hmm. Someone that's responsible for keeping the conversation going, for making sure that people are feeling safe and protected. But it can certainly be very supportive.

But it also can not go as well. Mm-hmm. if a new interviewer is not feeling sort of, it's vulnerable to show your interviews to a group of people that you don't yet know. so taking care of them in that process, I think is important.

Christina Rouse: Yeah. I think what we're hopeful for, and I'm using we as the collective we of advancing the field, but you all over at N C A C are especially really looking at how to change and shift.

The mindset of peer review is not the only development that needs to happen for interviewers. There's almost the spectrum of other buckets that need to encompass. Developing interviewers and peer review is just one part of that development, so what I would like to kind of hopefully have people take away and feel encouraged to do is to think outside of just peer review.

On ways to grow your interviewers because like you mentioned, Linda, peer review is so different and can look different depending on your region and your state. The structures are different and it really has to be this almost magical recipe order for it to be beneficial. And we know that that's not necessarily happening for everyone.

So let's talk about what you guys are doing at N C A C. I think it's really fascinating the pathways approach that you guys are working with to growing and developing interviewers. Share a little bit about the pathways just innovative stuff

Linda Cordisco Steele: you guys are doing.

Okay. I'd be happy to do that because we're very excited about developing this model and how we might fit in with what CACs or states are already doing at the local level. So the three of us that are the trainers have all been. Forensic

interviewers for a very long time, and actually instructors for a very long time, and have interacted with interviewers in a variety of ways through mentoring groups or supporting supervisors of forensic interviewers.

we've become aware that. you mentioned earlier, Christina, about the trainings that really focused on specialized population or specialized cases, that's kind of been our bread and butter for what you do after that initial forensic interviewing, training. Mm-hmm. really interviewing kids, complicated kids or kids in complicated cases.

It's really just a more nuanced version of the basic skills. Mm-hmm. So what we've realized is what interviewers need help and support with is past that initial training. What can we provide to help them really internalize what they've learned? It's sort of like rewiring your brain so that the way you phrase questions becomes a natural thing that you do rather than something you have to work really hard at thinking about how you follow your interview protocol understanding.

Things like narrative practice that may seem initially like, what why are we doing this? This doesn't make sense. Serves a really important purpose. So helping interviewers really internalize that basic skill set. And so we're looking for not only trainings. But ways that we can interact with states or child advocacy centers or chapters or whoever to help communicate practices.

Information. in addition to having interviewers come to us and spend, three days with a smaller group really working on these basic skills so that hopefully they go home. Really armed with toolbox, let's say, that they can use in their interviews. Yeah. I think it's such a great way to change the way we've been thinking about training our interviewers.

Christina Rouse: But what I think is gonna be so, changing for interviewers is that that basic course a week is not long enough to allow those.

Linda Cordisco Steele: Skills, just

Christina Rouse: right question typology to be solidified in what we're doing. And so instead of jumping from basic training where we are hoping that those skills are solidified, To an advanced course.

It's almost like we might be transferring bad practice if we didn't really work on those skills. To an advanced case, let's say a child sex trafficking case, which is a whole other set of variables and we're, doing skills that haven't really been

fully developed. So I love that you guys are creating that support around skills that we know can't happen in

Linda Cordisco Steele: a weak course.

Right. We're trying to really chunk out what are the basic skill sets. really framing those questions. How do you provide social support in an appropriate, non-leading, non suggestive kind of way for those reluctant kids? Another important area is, Sort of critical thinking through the forensic interview.

So how do you make decisions? Mm-hmm. either in the pre-interview planning or inside of the interview itself about which direction you're gonna go, when you're gonna back up, when you're gonna follow up. All of those kinds of more nuanced aspects of interviewing. Yeah, I'm excited about it.

Christina Rouse: I think it'll have a huge response. So let's say you're a director and directors and leaders of CACs who have, low staff, high demand of cases are put in these really tricky places of making decisions about. Do I develop my interviewers, which might pull them away from serving kids, or should we just focus them on serving kids and use that experience of interviewing over and over and over again as pro part of their development.

So can you talk a little bit about making development a priority and how can a director

Linda Cordisco Steele: do that? I think that we all. Probably grew up with the adage that practice makes perfect. Mm-hmm. And in actuality, practice makes permanent. but unless we're practicing perfect use of skills, we're not moving toward perfection.

So the best growth trajectory. I do agree that experience is important. Mm-hmm. But experience needs to be balanced with, good and regular, consistent opportunities to get feedback. in my experience, brand new interviewers are highly motivated to wanna do a good job. Nobody says, well, this doesn't matter.

I don't care what happens. They really wanna do well. They often are truly so hard on themselves. They don't see what they do well. They see what they struggle with. So that development piece, in addition to being in the room that allows them to be receiving feedback that is really targeted to what they are doing at this moment in the interview room, is where you get that real growth trajectory.

Christina Rouse: So it almost is a leader making the decision, the purposeful, intentional decision that. Maybe this interviewer serves less kids right now to develop skills so that in the long run their skills and their service delivery, which is the FI, is best practice, is the best that it can

Linda Cordisco Steele: be. Yeah, we're wanting quality and not just quantity.

Mm-hmm. I know we all wanna help every kid out there that needs help, but there's gonna be limits to how much we can, actually serve kids. unless we've developed those skills that really allow us to do our best work. I always. Talk about what we do in the beginning matters in the end.

Christina Rouse: And if we're not focusing on developing our interviewers before maybe they even go to basic training and after, what is that outcome in the long run gonna be? Not just for us or our team members, but really for the kids and the families that we're serving. Exactly. I empathize.

I'm the program director. It is a hard. Thing to decide to do because we do wanna serve everybody, but we wanna serve them in the best way that we can. So if you have the ability to carve space and, direct service people are being inundated with crises all the time. And so it's very easy to keep our heads down in doing the work.

But if, we're not lifting our heads up and carving space to develop our interviewers, it might not be fruitful service at the end of the day. So this is a really tough question, Linda, and I don't think there's a right answer, but This person said that their resources, and I imagine their fiscal and financial resources are really tight, if they had to choose one thing to develop their interviewer skills out of all of the buckets that we mentioned could be helpful for development.

they had to pick one thing, what should that one thing be that could help develop their interviewer?

Linda Cordisco Steele: Well, as much as I love having people come to N C A C and go to our trainings, I would say if you have limited resources and if you have a fairly inexperienced interviewer or an interviewer, you wanna keep growing, I would really look into really being creative and exploring how you might get support for that interviewer.

whether it's, A neighbor sister, c a c, that has more experienced interviewers that one of those people could do some work with your interviewer. I would look at

having a conversation with your interviewer. About what he or she thinks they feel good about in their interviews and where they think they need to grow or want to develop and look for avenues that might support that growth.

I just wanna encourage people to really be mindful and thoughtful and not just kind of random. Send somebody here, send somebody there. If you have limited resources, we wanna spend those resources well. And I would also add to that, when we think about the development of interviewers, we're talking about an ongoing ever learning process, right?

Christina Rouse: We're still learning about interviewing clearly. Cause we're absolutely, we're making changes on how we're, training our interviewers. So, not to get locked into. Because I see this happen a lot, that people use accreditation as like, this is what will develop my interviewers. Eight hours every two years attending peer review, twice a year like that will develop.

And it is a starting place and it is a foundation. But NCA says all the time, these are minimal standards that you can meet, best practice. So grow beyond that, grow outside of those minimal standards. So that you can create strong staff. And what I'll say is if you develop your interviewers, they will stay, they'll be motivated, they'll want to continue learning.

And so it's not just spending money for training. You're really investing.

Linda Cordisco Steele: Yes, you are. And if you have more than one interviewer, if you have some more experienced interviewers or a more experienced interviewer, And you've hired a new person to kind of up your numbers or take some of the burden off there can be an opportunity for that more experienced person to have the opportunity to mentor or coach that junior interviewer.

Mm-hmm. There's nothing like teaching and giving feedback and explaining that really helps you begin to understand. And deepen your knowledge of what you already know. Being able to put that into words and being able to observe and give feedback can be a growth process for both interviewers.

Mm-hmm.

Christina Rouse: And I also think it, it gives that new mentoring interviewer more passion and, motivation to wanna keep doing the work. It's almost like you're giving them a new. Breath of life, a little bit of them enhancing their own skills. That's not just interviewing.

Linda Cordisco Steele: So one of the things in our supervision groups that people will also talk about, exactly this topic we're talking about today, which is developing those new interviewers, but also how do I keep my more experienced interviewers growing?

Mm-hmm. So that they feel like they're developing new skills, learning new things, they're getting re-energized about how they do the work. so that really can be, an opportunity, for both, interviewers, to Expand their skills.

Christina Rouse: And so, super beneficial. On the flip side, giving interviewers who are still actively interviewing.

A new task of mentoring and supervising. How do you balance that without exhausting that senior interviewer?

Linda Cordisco Steele: Well, I think pay attention to the workload. Again, I don't think we necessarily are. Talking about on any given day, this really expansive. It's not like a training, like you're going to spend all day or half a day or two hours focused on any of these tasks, but really these sort of short burst of review and feedback and observation and thinking together.

I think will really be beneficial in the long run. and I think for the more senior interviewer involving them in the process, what would they need some relief from, perhaps? Mm-hmm. If they were gonna take on this responsibility. we have here, we're blessed at N C A C in that we have five interviewers.

but I would say when we're training a new interviewer, it takes some real self-discipline for any of us to. Put ourself in the observation rooms supporting that new interviewer as opposed to getting in the room and doing it ourself. We all wanna be in there doing the work. but it's important, it's really important for the center as a whole and for the children that we serve.

Christina Rouse: Talking about how you assign cases, thinking about your new interviewers back from basic training. What cases do I give them that make them feel confident to be able to do the skills that they just learned without, them up to fail almost. So, I know we've had this conversation, there's no magic bullet but what are your thoughts around assigning cases?

Linda Cordisco Steele: So if I've got my druthers I would assign that new interviewer, cases that where there was an outcry, and particularly if there was an outcry and it was a recent outcry rather than something delayed where there'd

been abuse that went on for years and years and years before they come to the fi.

So there's a disclosure there to be made. I will hear some people say, well, they want new interviewers to start out with just the fishing expedition interviews. But that doesn't give them any chance for success because there are fishing expeditions. So I think a case where there's an outcry gives them some possibility.

Of some success. Typically try to get those latency aged kids, not the preschoolers, not the kid with a lot of challenges or differing abilities we have to work around, not the angry adolescent. Mm-hmm. That kind of a case. So that would be a couple of the things that I would suggest.

as a place to start them and then add in those other pieces as they get some experience. And get a little more comfortable. Yeah. With implementing the different skills. I

Christina Rouse: love that people are having these questions and asking, because to me, that's showing that they're critically thinking about.

Not just throwing their interviewer out to the wild, they're really asking themselves, what do I need to do as a program to set up success for my interviewers and the kids that are coming in to get that interview? I think that's the other thing we need to think about is it's not just can this interviewer.

given provide space for a good interview, what's that experience gonna be for the child if I, you give them an interviewer that's not prepared or developed or ready to go? If you are a leader or you have the authority to put policies in place around case assignments or case selection for your interviewers, Think about it and is there a way that you can support that process outside of training?

and I think this last couple of minutes, Linda, we had some questions that were submitted around. Not just training. We've talked a lot about training and developing skills, but let's kind of shift to those other soft skills for interviewers particularly as it relates to interacting with their M D t.

One of the questions that was submitted was that, how can their MDT play a role in developing And growing the skills of their interviewers if those MDT members aren't trained to conduct interviews themselves? This particular person who submitted the question said that at times when they take their break, they

feel that like they're all alone in what to do next because their team sees them as knowing they should do next cuz they're the interviewer versus.

Neil mean what the team needs maybe to move forward. So any strategies or resources around how the team can help develop the

Linda Cordisco Steele: interviewer? Well, I think it can be it is a challenge Jean thing. I'm glad we're bringing this up. I appreciate that question. Because I think sometimes the interaction with the team has, such a big impact on.

The interviewer, how they feel about the work they're doing, how confident they feel, whether they feel supported. partners sometimes don't like new interviewers. Mm-hmm. They want their real interviewers, so, Back in that, new interviewer up in the observation room, I think can go a long way with the team.

understanding that we're not minimizing quality. We're gonna stay true to our quality in the interview. this kind of comes back to the critical thinking conversation, I think Christina helping interviewers learn how to engage in that pre-interview planning conversation. helping partners understand they're responsible for bringing what case information they have to the conversation, whether it's just their report or the contact they had with the caregiver.

Thinking through with the partners, engaging them about what are their critical questions in this interview, what information would be helpful? I know that feeling of when you come back in and people don't have questions or suggestions or supportive comments or recommendations.

one of my questions is always, what are the partners doing in the observation room while the interview is happening? Mm-hmm. Are they paying attention? Are they listening? Are they watching, are they taking notes or do they have something that they're working on? Or sometimes, unfortunately, people are checked out on their cell phone.

Mm-hmm. Or doing other things, talking with each other. So maybe some education with the partners about their role. Mm-hmm. in the interview, I talk with our partners about, They're part of my brain when I'm in the interview room. I really need their expertise and their input, their understanding about what it takes to make a particular charge or what needs clarified.

So maybe some education pieces that can be part of that team education mm-hmm. Or something like that might be helpful. I always said that forensic interviewing isn't a spectator sport, and I think mm-hmm. People think if they're

in the observa, I mean, just the name of what we call that room, the observation room.

Christina Rouse: That they feel like they're just going to spectate, and it's like, no you actively have to be involved in this process. It's a dance between the interviewers and the investigators, and I feel like the onboarding process with new team members and new interviewers, that education piece around expectations and roles during the observing of your fi.

Can go so far as it relates to how people interact with one another. Because unless you're telling people they don't know, you know, we don't know what we don't know. and we have to help do that. So there is a dance and there is back and forth. So I think for whoever asked that question, strategies around what other conversations can you have during onboarding?

Or pre-interview discussion to help your team feel like they have a, really strong Part to play, even though you are doing the interview. You need your team just as much as they need you. Mm-hmm.

Linda Cordisco Steele: And modeling. I think this is where, and it doesn't have to be, this is where perhaps someone that's not an interviewer but understands the M D T process could also be part of that group in the observation room that helped to model for the partners how we interact with each other.

You're right, there's no reason that they are going to intuitively know. What good teamwork looks like. I love it. What would be your big takeaway out of this conversation?

I think my takeaway is every time I have a conversation like this, it leads me to appreciate how complex the work we do is.

And how many factors go into making this interviewing process successful? and that's where, as much as, people like Christina and myself would love to have some clear cut, easy answers, it's just really not possible. it's such an interactive process. Yeah. I would say that as we have further conversations and we keep talking about. Where we're hopeful for the field to go is just this idea that there needs to be some tructure in place at your program. And I would really love for the field to move away from this one and done one off check the box mentality for forensic interviewers and really have strong policies in place that you're programmed to support your interviewers from the day they're hired to the day they leave.

Christina Rouse: And if you're at a center, I think this is another big takeaway is if you're at a center where you're the only one or maybe, on an island, maybe a super rural center, you're really not alone. We're very supportive of one another. Interviewers love supporting and mentoring other interviewers, and so don't feel like you can't ask for help.

There's a lot of support structures for folks.

Linda Cordisco Steele: I agree.

Christina Rouse: so we're hopeful that the conversation today led you some new ideas. And then I would say if you're still really struggling with a situation or something that's going on at your center, reach out to your network, whether that's your network that you've found through peer review or your neighboring CACs.

But more importantly, your state chapters. I think a lot of local centers forget that their state has a whole chapter of resources that you can use and really start asking questions in building network to have these further conversations. I think Linda, we're gonna wrap it up.

Thanks for joining me for another talk.