Kids can make blunt observations
That's part of making a difficult job fun

BY RALPH SCHAEFER
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Kids can be blunt. Rose Turner knows because they can and do make unusual observations during and following their meeting.

It's part of what makes fun out of an otherwise difficult job.

Turner, Child Abuse Network managing director, often conducts forensic interviews with children where she tries to learn if they suffered physical or sexual abuse.

These incidents, and others resulted in the youth being brought to the CAN facility at 2829 S. Sheridan.

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Child abuse happens to ‘those people’ can

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Child abuse is something that happens to someone else — to “those people.”

A close look at Tulsa County in 2013 showed that one child in 17 was abused, according to 2013 Department of Human Services records.

It is a community problem that Child Abuse Network (CAN) and other Tulsa agencies want to reverse.

“It is our role to protect children,” said Rose Turner, CAN managing director. It is a role that places agencies, partners, under one roof that helps reduce stress levels children have experienced as they tell their stories.

A child can be brought to CAN as an initial stopping point if there is an open investigation with either DHS or law enforcement. Children between birth and 17 years old may be taken to the CAN facility at 2829 South Sheridan Road when the possibility of abuse is reported.

Not all children brought to CAN have been abused. Sometimes there is an allegation that someone misinterpreted.

“We are co-located with several partners under one roof,” Turner said. That includes the Tulsa Police Department child crisis unit and any law enforcement agency that deals with abuse and neglect. There is a DHS investigative unit house here and staff from another 13 agencies available with a variety of services nearby in the old Social Security building on Skelly Drive.

In addition, CAN has a contract with the University of Oklahoma Medical Center – Tulsa. CAN provide medical care. Two staff physicians out of three in Oklahoma have a sub-specialty dealing with child sexual abuse.

A mental health component provides neutral non-leading forensic interviews with children.

“We don’t want to suggest anything to a child,” Turner continued. “We want to give the child the opportunity to tell about what happened to them in their own words.”

Before CAN was started, DHS investigators would go to a victim’s home who would tell their story. Later the police would arrive seeking an interview and would be told they had already talked to someone.

Turner, who worked for DHS before joining CAN, said she often had the experience of being rebuffed when she went to a home for an interview and police already had been there.

The investigative situations were made more difficult when the victims had to be taken to a medical facility to be examined for sexual or physical abuse. When sexual abuse was involved, a long lapse of time would allow the body to begin the healing process making the investigation even more difficult.

Families often require therapeutic crisis stabilization and are referred to other community-based services such as Family & Children’s Services and the Parent Child Center.

“We don’t want to duplicate services,” Turner said. “There are many Tulsa agencies that can provide this assistance.”

Families can come to the center with abuse and neglect issues while encountering other difficulties.

They may not have food, school uniforms and they may be about to lose their apartment or house, she said. Those basic needs must be addressed by other agencies before other issues can be considered.

First on the list is to provide a safe environment for the child that allows them to talk about anything that has happened to them that in turn will make it possible to take the path towards healing.

During the initial two hours after they have been brought to CAN, they find they are in a friendly environment, completed their interviews, receive free medical examinations and treatment.

It is a time to answer the victim’s questions.

Young girls are fearful that everyone is “looking at them. They wonder if they ever could have a baby in the future.”

Doctors can assure these girls they will be OK, but if something is wrong, then the medical issue can be addressed.

Just forgetting about an incident doesn’t help,” Turner said. “You might push a traumatic experience to the back of your mind, but it still comes forth in traumatic behaviors. That is why we try to address basic needs before they can get to the emotional healing.”

“We want to give the child the opportunity to tell about what, if anything happened to them in their own words.”

ROSE TURNER
CAN Managing Director

People try to insulate themselves and their families, thinking they are protecting their children as a result, Turner said. Children talk. They know about these incidents. They probably have school friends who are suffering or have suffered in abusive incidents.

It is the community that needs to be aware of these situations and people must realize that if they suspect these incidents they are to contact the OKDHS hotline. They don’t have to investigate the probable abuse. That is up to DHS, but if the abuse is happening right before them, the person must call 911.

Children often know their abuser and may not like what that individual is doing to them, she said. But they have some very caring feelings for that person.

Those feelings bring in the element of secrecy that protects perpetrators.

Breaking that secrecy is part of the forensic interview process used by trained CAN staff members.

“There are a lot of reasons that parents should talk with their children,” said Brandy Moore, CAN communications relations manager. Children need to understand they can be comfortable in talking to mom and dad when they encounter problems.

“Remember, these kids are the ones who will be running our country in the future,” Turner said. «
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"CAN's first responsibility is to protect children," she said. "Part of that means conducting forensic interviews with children ranging between three and 17-years-old." It means sitting on the floor with the young children, to be at their level. Chairs are used when older children are interviewed.

Forensic interviews are neutral and non-leading, she said. They are designed to interface with the child to learn about anything that might have happened to them, especially if the incidents were not OK.

That information is shared with other team members charged with investigating the case.

It includes the medical component and investigators, so the child doesn't have to repeat the story over many times.

Young children, those below three, aren't interviewed even if the parent says the child "speaks great."

"I had one little kid about five that I was interviewing say 'this is just like CSI isn't it? I watch that every week,'" Turner said. "I told him that I still had more questions."

It is during this process that it is learned about the possibilities of sexual abuse. These incidents are much more difficult to trace because the body quickly heals. Physical abuse is easily documented because wounds and scars remain much longer.

Questions about whether or not a child has had an accident also are addressed.

Do children have accidents? Yes. The question is how plausible the incident might have been or if there is no explanation except abuse.

Many people think that CAN is a sad, sad place to work, Turner said. "We see sad things, but kids are fun and make me laugh every day."

One boy was very confident in himself. He hadn't disclosed anything and was very verbal.

"I can tell my mom, I can tell my teacher and I can call the President," the youth told Turner.

"That's right, I thought," she continued. "Perpetrators want to silence children. Abuse is a secret that must be maintained so it can be continued, whether it is sexual or physical abuse. Children often know their abuser and may not like what they are doing. But they have some very caring feelings for that person. That is why such an element of secrecy is involved.

Sitting on the floor during interviews with children has both the plus and minus sides.

Turner recalled when she talked with a five-year-old girl.

Investigators watched the interview through a one-way mirror and Turner was wearing a microphone in her ear so they could have her ask questions if necessary. Everything is video taped because it becomes part of the case.

Five-year olds have a very short attention span, and after a few questions the child informed Turner with the statement "I am done with your questions."

It was possible to complete the interview, Turner said, "but my knees cracked when I started to stand."

"The little girl turned to me and said, 'You are too old to be sitting on the floor.'"

"I said you are right and this is on DVD."

Turner continued, "now when I sit on the floor and get up I hear my knees cracking. I am much more ware of it now. I sit in the chair while interview with the older kids. It's just more friendly to sit on the floor with smaller kids."

Kids are safe and want to be kids.

They get excited when they get to see fish to play in the teddy bear room and then talk about something that happened to them.

They respond enthusiastically as their visit ends with the opportunity to go to the "comfort wall" and select an item they can take home, whether it is a teddy bear, blanket, baseball cap or another item donated by the community.

These items are donated by the individuals, groups or the larger Tulsa community, said Brandi Moore, communication relations' manager. A young girl recently celebrated her birthday and asked those attending to bring items so children brought to CAN would have something to take home.

Nurses at a Tulsa hospital recently had a drive where they asked everyone to bring school supplies, backpacks and other school items.

Another woman who went through the CAN program as a girl, now returns annually with her daughter to donate items.

"That's how special the experience was to that woman," she said.

A group of women makes quilts and the kids just love them, Turner said. "The kids wrap themselves in the quilts even in the dead heat of summer. They just love them."

There was a question at one time as to whether or not the blankets should be given out during the summer, but the kids' reactions to the items ended that discussion.

Initially, the focus was on teddy bears and toy animals, but baseball caps and journals were added for the older kids.

"We can see a difference in the faces of the kids of all ages from when they arrive to when they leave just a few hours later," Moore said. «