



# Code of Ethics

## I. PREAMBLE

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) is an interdisciplinary professional organization whose mission is to support professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment and violence. APSAC's members fill a wide range of professional roles dedicated to preventing or responding to child maltreatment.

APSAC carries out its mission by providing professional education which promotes effective, culturally sensitive, and interdisciplinary approaches to the identification, intervention, treatment, and prevention of child abuse and neglect; by promoting research and guidelines to inform professional practice; by educating the public about child abuse and neglect; and by ensuring that America's public policy concerning child maltreatment is well-informed and constructive.

The APSAC Code of Ethics outlines principles and standards of conduct which APSAC members expect of themselves and of each other. A member of APSAC seeks to embody these principles and standards in all professional conduct and to act at all times in compliance with the highest standard of ethical practice. This Code of Ethics seeks to articulate standards of professional conduct which flow from APSAC's mission, our understanding of the nature of child maltreatment, and the interdisciplinary response which APSAC prescribes for dealing with child maltreatment.

APSAC's Code of Ethics is not intended to establish a legally binding standard of conduct. Violation of the Code of Ethics does not itself determine whether an APSAC member is legally liable in a court action. Such outcomes are based on legal rather than ethical rules. Further, the Code of Ethics applies only to APSAC members' work-related activities.

APSAC's Code of Ethics is intended to be consistent with those of members' other professional organizations. Some professional roles or duties may appropriately be in conflict with some provisions of this Code of Ethics. For example, professional practice in rural communities may involve the professional and clients in multiple relationships. In another situation, some attorneys might have an ethical duty to individual clients which places them in apparent conflict with the obligation to pursue the best interests of the child. When certain professional roles or duties create a conflict or apparent conflict with this Code of Ethics and the ethical codes of other professional organizations, it is expected that the professional will resolve such conflict in such a way as to maintain the highest level of professional practice.

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Children are the underlying focus and concern of all of APSAC's activities. Among the APSAC member's highest priorities are to nurture and support the development of children.

Child maltreatment takes many forms, has many contributing etiological factors and conditions, and affects children, families, and society in many and diverse ways. A complex phenomenon such as child maltreatment cannot be reduced to simplistic ideas. Nonetheless, we recognize that child maltreatment inherently involves the misuse of the power differential between children and those who abuse or neglect them. Acknowledgment of the inherent vulnerability of children and their associated powerlessness drives our professional conduct.

We dedicate our professional lives to ending all forms of child maltreatment. Six principles shape our overall approach to this task.

## II. MAJOR PRINCIPLES

### A. BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

We conduct ourselves at all times in a manner consistent with the best interests of the child, and hold this principle above all others. We recognize that determining what constitutes the best interests of a child can be a complex undertaking, requiring

analysis of varying values, interests, cultural differences, and childhood needs and capabilities.

When certain objectives or purposes compete, the APSAC member makes the best interests of the child the priority in evaluating alternatives.

### B. DIGNITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In all of our actions, we affirm the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. Even when our professional role places us in a potentially adversarial position with an individual, we treat that individual with respect, seek to affirm the personhood of the individual, and separate the "human being" from any hurtful or wrongful acts which he or she may have committed.

### C. INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The social contract which makes civilized life possible demands that every individual be accountable for his or her actions. We expect and act so as to hold individuals accountable for their actions.

While we seek to empower the person to exercise self-control, we recognize that external controls are sometimes necessary as a temporary or permanent condition when individual self-control falters or fails. We recognize that special needs, developmental capabilities, or life circumstances may affect an individual's capacity to do what is proper in certain situations. We believe that society has a responsibility to provide the services and create the conditions under which individuals have the maximum opportunity to act in accountable, responsible, and healthy ways.

### D. REHABILITATION

We believe that rehabilitation for all conditions associated with child maltreatment is desirable for maltreated children, adults who affect their lives, and society. While control of the more powerful who use superior strength, resources, or position to cause child maltreatment may be necessary, we deem rehabilitation to be of equal importance with control.

Rehabilitation of those conditions which are associated with child maltreatment as causes, concomitant events, or outcomes is an essential objective of all professional actions in this field.

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APSAC notes that adults who harm children may require external control of their behavior through incarceration or socially sanctioned punishment, and that rehabilitation may take place at the same time.

## **E. LEAST RESTRICTIVE ALTERNATIVE**

In all of our actions, we seek the least restrictive or least intrusive intervention in the lives of human beings which will accomplish the goal of protecting children. At all times, we seek to empower individuals to make their own decisions, live their lives in concert with their values and traditions, and seek their own goals. We strive to actualize client self-determination in all professional actions. When professional intervention is required, we seek as minimal intervention for as brief a period of time as necessary. We also recognize that some human beings will require long-term control, support, or other more intrusive interventions to end maltreatment and to complete rehabilitation.

Protection of children and society through incarceration, monitoring, or other intrusive interventions is equally important and must be balanced with the commitment to the least restrictive alternative.

## **F. NON-DISCRIMINATION**

APSAC members are aware of cultural and individual differences, including those due to socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, language, religion, and disability. APSAC members strive to ensure that their work is free of biases based on those factors, and do not knowingly participate in or condone unfair discriminatory practices.

## **III. STANDARDS OF CONDUCT**

In pursuit of these principles, we establish the following standards of conduct.

### **A. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE**

At all times in all professional activities, the APSAC member will maintain the highest professional competence. This requires the following.

1. All actions should be based on current knowledge in the professional's field of practice.
2. Actions conform to the *APSAC Code of Ethics*, special standards or practice guidelines within the child protection field, and the state of knowledge and practice within the community.
3. APSAC members routinely receive supervision, consultation, or counsel with more experienced colleagues or peers, and their professional work is subjected to periodic review, evaluation, or consultation.
4. APSAC members employ intervention methods which are known to be effective, and approach untested or novel interventions with the care, caution, and attention to evaluation that any potentially powerful intervention demands. In determining what intervention is most effective, members rely first on the research generated in this field; second on commonly accepted practice; and finally on their own experience and expertise, and consultation with peers.
5. APSAC members do not in any forum represent themselves to hold expertise, knowledge, or qualifications which they do not in fact possess, including when providing expert testimony, writing, or providing education to professionals or lay persons alike.
6. APSAC members practice in compliance with applicable state and federal laws, regulations, and ethical standards of their specific academic or professional disciplines.

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7. APSAC members recognize that work in child maltreatment inherently carries the risk of occupational stress, and that personal issues or biases may be triggered, and that the appropriate interventions of regular, ongoing consultation, self-care, and periodic review are essential components of professional conduct.
8. APSAC members will participate at least annually in high quality continuing professional education. The APSAC Board of Directors will from time to time advise members on appropriate levels of continuing professional education.

### **B. CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY**

The right to privacy is central to a free society. It encompasses the freedom to determine the degree to which information about one's behavior, beliefs, history, and experience is shared with others; the conditions under which it is shared; and what specific information is shared. The right of clients to confidentiality, which is the assurance that nothing about an individual is revealed except under agreed-upon conditions, is fundamental to professional relationships with clients. Laws in all states define the rights of confidentiality and privacy. The rights of clients to privacy and confidentiality, except where limited by state and federal laws, are recognized and honored by APSAC members at all times.

1. The right to privacy ensures that information about the client's functioning, experiences, and history are revealed only with the expressed consent of the client or his or her legal guardian pursuant to court order, or as restricted or mandated by state and federal laws (e.g., in the case of mandated reporting of suspected child maltreatment).
2. Where state or federal law or professional occupation does not limit the exchange of client information, information is shared only on a need-to-know basis and only to the extent necessary for the completion of professional tasks.
3. APSAC members communicate information about clients at all times in ways which convey respect for the client's personhood and dignity.

### **C. MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS**

Clear definitions of professional roles, responsibilities, duties, and tasks and the limits of professional conduct provide clients with maximal information upon which to base their own decisions and actions. The nature of child maltreatment, in which boundaries are blurred or broken, relationships are disturbed, and social positions such as parent, caregiver, and helper are perverted, makes the maintenance of clear professional relationships with clients all the more critical for client protection and in creating the optimal conditions for growth and development.

Limitations on multiple relationships may vary with different professions (e.g., law); APSAC members should comply with the ethical guidelines applicable to their own profession.

1. Except as provided by ethical codes of individual professions, engaging or attempting to engage in dual, nonprofessional relationships with clients is forbidden. Such relationships include business, financial, social, or sexual relationships. Once a professional relationship has been established, engaging in dual, nonprofessional relationships with clients is never proper.

Some professional roles, practice settings (e.g., rural communities), or cultural contexts may place professionals and their clients in ongoing contact. It is the obligation of the APSAC member in these unique and selective situations to ensure that the relationship remains non-exploitive, equal, and mindful of the inherent power differential and other special characteristics of professional-client relationships.

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2. When a professional is called upon to engage in more than one professional role, such as therapist and advocate, investigator and therapist, assessor and healer, investigator and concerned citizen, the professional must be clear about the different responsibilities and tasks required of each role; take appropriate steps to guard against role conflict; and make sure that the client understands the nature and different responsibilities of each role. Assuming more than one professional role in a given case at a given time does not necessarily represent an unethical multiple-role relationship.

### **D. RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENTS**

In all relationships with clients, the APSAC member seeks to actualize the following principles of interaction, which create conditions for change, accountability, and maintenance of the social contract: honesty, integrity, respect for differences, a non-judgmental attitude, a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, and an expectation that individuals will behave responsibly, balanced with an understanding that from time to time external social controls are necessary to protect children and society.

APSAC members recognize their special responsibility to children, whose inherent vulnerability and powerlessness, combined with the betrayal, trauma, and developmental threat of abuse, make relationships between the child and professionals all the more critical. The APSAC member seeks to meet this special obligation, keeping in mind that professional judgment may sometimes be in error, and that the best interests of the child often demands balancing competing values; community, family, and child capabilities; and different traditions of culture, race, and family.

1. To the degree possible, clients should be given all relevant information upon which to base decisions about their own lives. The deliberate withholding of information must be based on specific conditions or circumstances which outweigh the client's right to all relevant information. These conditions include (but are not limited to): information protected under state or federal law, information about an ongoing investigation, and information which, although about a client, might if revealed place another person's safety in jeopardy.
2. When a professional, except the client's attorney, speaks or acts in the place of an adult client, such action should only be taken if the client is unable or unwilling to do so, or if not doing so would run counter to the client's best interests. The importance of the action for the client's welfare must be clear and specific; the client or guardian must have given informed consent for the action; and the professional should seek ways to empower the client to take such action in the future.
3. Except where prohibited by state law or the nature of the professional action (e.g., during an investigation), it is expected that a client will give informed consent prior to a professional action taken on his or her behalf. Informed consent requires that information be provided to the client regarding the nature of the proposed action, the potential positive and negative effects of the action, and the anticipated duration of the action, all in a language and manner understandable to the client.

### **E. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS**

By necessity, the modern societal response to child maltreatment involves a number of professionals from a range of disciplines. Each discipline has a different and important role, and may employ different methods and courses of action in accomplishing that role. Specific objectives, the timing of professional intervention, the methods employed, or the roles of the professionals may in some cases or situations, place professionals at odds with each other.

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1. The APSAC member approaches professional activity with an appreciation for the value, sanction, purpose, and rationale for the objectives, timing, methods, and roles of different disciplinary groups responding to various aspects of child maltreatment. The APSAC member treats other professionals with respect, dignity and collegiality at all times.
2. When conflicts arise in specific cases, the APSAC member seeks first to identify the specific source of the conflict; to determine if the conflict is based on different roles, objectives, methods, or timing of intervention, or on other factors; to consult with the other professional(s) about possible solutions; and to develop a plan of action which is consistent with the APSAC *Code of Ethics* and the requirements of the specific case.
3. APSAC members have a responsibility to communicate concerns about another professional's opinions, actions, or professional conduct directly to that professional. This responsibility may be mitigated by applicable state law, by the nature or timing of contact between the professionals (e.g., when appearing as opposing witnesses in a court case), or when the APSAC *Code of Ethics* prevents such communication.
4. Members of APSAC recognize that professional activity in child maltreatment can be extremely stressful and can occasionally trigger personal issues or reactions. Members recognize further that their personal lives can, from time to time, adversely affect their ability to perform professional activity effectively. Members recognize a special responsibility to offer support, counsel, or appropriate referral for assistance to colleagues and other professionals who might be so affected.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

APSACs *Code of Ethics* is the product of a task force chaired by Jon R. Conte, PhD. In the process of development, the *Code of Ethics* was submitted to review by the membership (at open meetings at national conferences and through the *APSAC Advisor*), reviewed by independent experts in ethics and law, and approved by APSACs Board of Directors. Appreciation goes to the many APSAC members who contributed their time and expertise to produce this *Code of Ethics*.

The *Code of Ethics* will be revised periodically. Any comments or suggestions about it should be directed to APSAC, 350 Poplar Avenue, Elmhurst, IL 60126.

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