



The CAST Program National Plan

Combating Child Maltreatment by
Advancing Postsecondary Education
for Child Protection Professionals

NOVEMBER 2023



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Table of Contents

A NATIONAL CRISIS

- The Child Maltreatment Crisis3
- Challenges to Preparing Child-Serving Professionals4
- Answering the Call: The Impact of CAST...9
- Conclusion..... 21

THE CAST NATIONAL PLAN

- Overview23
- CAST Pillars of Success24
- The National CAST Strategic Plan28
- Summary34

Abstract

Child maltreatment affects millions of children worldwide, causing long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological harm. The Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) Program at Zero Abuse Project (Zero Abuse) plays a vital role in equipping child-serving professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize and respond to child abuse effectively. This narrative explores the frequency and prevalence of child maltreatment, highlights the existing gap in child maltreatment coursework within higher education, and underscores the necessity and significance of the CAST program in addressing these critical issues. Furthermore, it proposes a National Plan for the dissemination of the CAST curriculum, outlining core components crucial for its implementation and success. The aim of this initiative is to improve the lives of children by protecting them from abuse and neglect.

A National Crisis

The Child Maltreatment Crisis

Overview of Child Maltreatment Prevalence

Child maltreatment is a pervasive and pressing problem with serious consequences for children's well-being and society as a whole.¹ As a complex social problem, it demands the collective attention of professionals across various fields, including education, healthcare, social work, and criminal justice. The term "child maltreatment" encompasses various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual), neglect (physical, emotional, educational), and exploitation (commercial, online). Each type of maltreatment leaves a profound and long-lasting impact on a child. Unfortunately, the frequency and prevalence of child maltreatment remain alarmingly high.

Numerous studies and reports consistently highlight the prevalence and urgency of this societal problem. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 billion children worldwide directly experience some form of child maltreatment every year. WHO further estimates that 1 in 4 adults suffered physical abuse as children, while 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men experienced sexual abuse during childhood.² A meta-analysis conducted by Stoltenborgh et al. (2013) involving 217 studies from 69 countries found that 36.3 percent of children experienced emotional abuse, 22.6 percent experienced physical abuse, and 16.3 percent experienced sexual abuse;³ neglect affected 16.3 percent of children across the world at the time of the analysis. According to the latest data in the United States, 76 percent of child victims suffer from neglect, 16 percent endure physical abuse, 10.1 percent are sexually abused, and 0.2 percent are trafficked for sex.⁴ While a recent domestic report found that child maltreatment figures have decreased to a five-year low, that still left more than 3 million children

1 Gilbert, R., Widom, C.S., Browne, K., Fergusson, D., Webb, E., & Janson, S. (2009). Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *The Lancet*, 373(9657), 68-81.

2 World Health Organization. (2016). Global status report on violence prevention 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564793>.

3 Stoltenborgh, M., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Alink, L. R. (2013). Cultural-geographical differences in the occurrence of child physical abuse? A meta-analysis of global prevalence. *International Journal of Psychology*, 48(2), 81-94.

4 Children's Bureau. (2023). Child Maltreatment 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2021>.

involved in a child maltreatment-related welfare response—with 600,000 of those children suffering substantiated abuse or neglect.⁵

Although child maltreatment prevalence rates vary across countries and regions, studies consistently highlight its significant impact on children's lives. These staggering figures underscore the urgent and widespread need for consistent, evidence-based prevention and intervention measures to combat child maltreatment. A crucial element to successful intervention is equipping child-serving professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively recognize and respond to child maltreatment. Without comprehensive interventions for children at risk for abuse or those suffering from one or more forms of maltreatment, we risk perpetuating a cycle of violence across generations, leaving countless individuals affected by trauma and its adverse effects on their lives.

Challenges to Preparing Child-Serving Professionals

Despite the global prevalence of child maltreatment, higher education programs often fall short of providing adequate coursework to comprehensively address this issue. Many professionals working directly with children graduate from their respective fields of study without acquiring a robust understanding of child maltreatment dynamics, recognition, and intervention strategies. This knowledge gap undermines the effectiveness of their response, contributing to a cycle of revictimization.

To explore this competency gap, Winona State University (WSU) conducted a study in 2006. WSU affiliates examined 1,416 universities and colleges that provided baccalaureate degrees in child protection-related fields, such as criminal justice/law enforcement, social work, human services, nursing, medicine, psychology, sociology, and education.⁶ The objective was to determine how many of these institutions included training on child maltreatment in their curricula. The professors at WSU meticulously searched the websites of these schools—for course catalogs, descriptions, syllabi, and the like—using specific keywords like “child maltreatment,” “child abuse and neglect,” “child protection,” “child welfare,” and “child advocacy.” Shockingly, only 29 percent (410) of these schools' websites offered any coursework addressing the important issue of child maltreatment.

5 Administration for Children and Families. (2023). New child maltreatment report finds child abuse and neglect decreased to a five-year low. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/media/press/2023/new-child-maltreatment-report-finds-child-abuse-and-neglect-decreased-five-year>.

6 Vieth, V.I., Goulet, B., Knox, M., Parker, J., Johnson, L.B., Tye, K.S., & Cross, T.P. (2019). Child advocacy studies (CAST): A national movement to improve the undergraduate and graduate training of child protection professionals. *Mitchell Hamline Law Review*, 45(4). <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/mhlr/vol45/iss4/5>.

Furthermore, the study highlighted a concerning finding that coursework on child maltreatment was predominantly concentrated in fields such as sociology or psychology, leaving a substantial majority of professionals in child protection across other disciplines without any significant undergraduate training in this crucial area. Even in cases where universities did offer some coursework on child maltreatment, the instruction provided was often brief and insufficient, failing to adequately equip professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills. Moreover, none of the 1,416 universities had a minor or concentration specifically focusing on child maltreatment. These findings align with the conclusions reached by other researchers and commentators in the field, as well as with Zero Abuse Project's recent findings when conducting a national review of postsecondary coursework in collaboration with the Florida Institute of Technology (FL Tech).⁷

In 2023, Zero Abuse and FL Tech conducted an extensive national review of course catalogs for public two- and four-year institutions to assess the prevalence of child maltreatment coursework and determine any changes in higher education since the WSU study. The review found that significant postsecondary gaps still exist in the topic of child abuse and neglect. A staggering 60 percent (1,305) of four-year programs in higher education do not offer any courses specifically focused on child protection, as evidenced by the absence of course titles or descriptions related to the subject.⁸ Among programs that do include coursework on child abuse, the majority limit the offerings to one or two courses.

Additionally, when examining academic programs that are traditionally associated with child maltreatment (such as social work, criminal justice, psychology, and law), only undergraduate and graduate social work programs, along with graduate law programs, typically provide a dedicated course on the topic.

In recent years, alternative and continuing education in the postsecondary world has attracted frontline workers and other personnel seeking to advance their skills and careers. However, child abuse education in alternative and continuing education faces similar issues to traditional postsecondary training regarding quality, prevalence, and depth.

Research has demonstrated that professional development on child maltreatment has been largely lackluster in its ability to foster competency. A Massachusetts study of social workers indicated that, despite the laudable diversity of available continuing education opportunities, the accessibility, cost, quality, and remaining content gaps diminished their overall continuing education experience.⁹ The impact of continuing education has also been studied in the field of psychology. One study—involving psychologists who engaged in continuing education coursework and professional readings as a part of their ongoing learning—found that, while the psychologists reported improved feelings of professional

7 Zero Abuse Project. (2023). Building the capacity of undergraduate & graduate programs to train child protection personnel project report.

8 Ibid.

9 Gianino, M., Ruth, B.J. & Geron, S.M. (2016). Social work continuing education: a statewide case study. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 36(4).

competence, they did not demonstrate increased performance after passive learning (lectures or slides) alone.¹⁰

This lack of adequate training and coursework in higher education results in many child protection professionals launching their careers with little-to-no education or training directly related to the child maltreatment identification and response work they will be doing. Take, for instance, law enforcement: only about one-third of law enforcement officers in the U.S. have some amount of college education; the majority of officers, then, receive at most the six hours of training on child maltreatment provided by their law enforcement academy.¹¹ Similarly, over half of America's judges do not obtain graduate-level training in child maltreatment before hearing related cases for the first time.¹² Without upfront training, modern-day child-serving and child protection professionals cannot knowledgeably prevent, detect, and respond to child maltreatment; the lack of standardized and comprehensive coursework in higher education hinders professionals' ability to protect vulnerable children.

Hiring agencies also fail to require relevant education or experience from potential new hires. Many agencies only specify the minimum educational level required for a job and do not explicitly state that child maltreatment prevention or intervention skills are essential for certain roles that would clearly require such competencies.

Several studies have explored this deficit in the preparation for today's child-serving workforce as it pertains to child maltreatment detection and response. A Minnesota survey of educators from 2014 found that over half of instructors possessed minimal or outright inadequate preparation for addressing child maltreatment and making a competent mandated report.¹³ A South Carolina study of 166 child protection employees determined that most in-state frontline professionals had little undergraduate or graduate training on the subject, with most participants indicating that their first instructional moments occurred in the field upon hire.¹⁴ One law enforcement officer even told researchers he had "no college

10 Bradley, S., Drapeau, M. & Destefano, J. (2012). The relationship between continuing education and perceived competence, professional support, and professional value among clinical psychologists. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 32, 31-8. 10.1002/chp.21120. https://www.academia.edu/13389102/The_relationship_between_continuing_education_and_perceived_competence_professional_support_and_professional_value_among_clinical_psychologists.

11 Reaves, B.A. (2013). State and local law enforcement training academies, 2013. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/slleta13.pdf>.

12 University of Illinois. (2004). Summary of key findings from a national survey of dependency court judges. https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/foster_care_reform/fosteringresults070104pdf.

13 Butts, A.N. (2014). Mandated reporting and child maltreatment: Training and experiences of minnesota teachers. *Sophia*, the St. Catherine University repository website, https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/299.

14 Vieth, V. (2013). The view from the trenches: Recommendations for improving South Carolina's response to child sexual abuse based on insight from frontline child protection professionals. Gundersen Health System, published as part of the "Silent Tears" assessment of the South Carolina child protection system and available online at: <https://silenteartssc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-View-from-the-Trenches.pdf> (last visited September 3, 2014). Many of the recommendations made in this report are based on the Gundersen Health System recommendations for improving the response to child abuse cases in South Carolina.

training on child sexual abuse cases" and no training at the police academy. Still more concerning, the officer stated, "The academy didn't really talk about children at all."¹⁵

This concerning finding of limited child abuse education correlates with more recent data on frontline, first responder preparedness for identifying and investigating child maltreatment. In 2017, a study in *Biomedical Research International* found that 43.9 percent of social workers lacked adequate support and training on child maltreatment.¹⁶ Research from the *North Carolina Medical Journal* found that the lack of training and support for new professionals has disastrous consequences for children being served: a review of over 400 first-responder responses from a survey on barriers to mandated reporting found critical gaps in fundamental child maltreatment comprehension. Specifically, the study found that 47.7 percent of first responders were unsure if they had witnessed signs of maltreatment, and another 41.4 percent were unsure what to report if they did observe undeniable evidence of abuse or neglect.¹⁷

Consequences of Limited Workforce Preparation

The consequences of limited preparation and educational opportunities for new frontline child maltreatment professionals are two-fold, affecting both workers and the children they are charged with protecting. First, the child protection workforce sees great challenges in retaining high-quality employees. Issues related to poor support and preparation have resulted in widespread burnout and national staffing turnover—anywhere from 20-40 percent (often higher) for social workers.¹⁸ Educator and educational administrator turnover has increased since pre-pandemic levels as well, with approximately 10 percent of the nation's teachers and 16 percent of principals leaving the workforce annually.¹⁹ A survey of roughly 13,000 law enforcement officers found that 19 percent struggled with emotional exhaustion and 13 percent felt disconnected from their work.²⁰

In addition to insufficient preparation for the realities of this work, other causes of this staffing crisis include high caseloads, enduring exposure to direct and indirect trauma, and little support for

15 Reaves, B.A. (2013). State and local law enforcement training academies, 2013. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/slleta13.pdf>.

16 Berlanda S., Pedrazza M., Trifiletti E., & Fraizzoli M. (2017). Dissatisfaction in child welfare and its role in predicting self-efficacy and satisfaction at work: a mixed-method research. *Biomed Res Int.* 2017;5249619. doi: 10.1155/2017/5249619. Epub 2017 Oct 24. PMID: 29204443; PMCID: PMC5674486.

17 Lynne, E.G., Gifford, E.J., Evans, K.E., & Rosch J.B. (2015). Barriers to reporting child maltreatment: Do emergency medical services professionals fully understand their role as mandatory reporters? *N C Med J. Jan-Feb;76(1):*13-8. PMID: 25621471.

18 Casey Family Programs. (2017). how does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention? <https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/>.

19 Rand Corporation. (2022). Educator turnover has markedly increased, but districts have taken actions to boost teacher ranks. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRa956-14.html.

20 McCarty, W.P., Aldirawi, H., Dewald, S., & Palacios, M. (2019). Burnout in blue: An analysis of the extent and primary predictors of burnout among law enforcement officers in the United States. *Police Q.* 22, 278–304. doi: 10.1177/1098611119828038.

professional development—even for on-the-job training for child abuse-related casework.²¹ This learn-as-you-go model does not only harm agency staffing and case response: in turn, those factors also have long-lasting effects on the youth involved.

Child maltreatment victims are at risk for continued exposure to abuse and neglect, too often escalating in severity, sometimes until death. The *Child Maltreatment 2021* report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau indicated that the mean response time for social worker case intervention was 83 hours, or 3.5 days.²² This average timeframe, however, is not representative of many counties whose child protection agencies struggle with turnover. For instance, a North Dakota audit of social work response time averaged 13 days and a statewide turnover rate of 37 percent according to the latest Health and Human Services data assessing the dire straits of child protection response in-state.²³

Turnover may lead to an average caseload of anywhere from 10-30 cases annually for remaining caseworkers.²⁴ This disproportionate caseload-to-caseworker ratio, which is not exclusive to social work agencies, "... dilutes the quality of services clients receive. Turnover may have lifelong implications for children in the child welfare system, such as delaying family reunifications, adoptions, or other permanency options."²⁵

Child abuse-related deaths are also increasing across the nation. Texas observed an increase in child fatality and near fatality investigations from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), where the cases investigated rose from 964 in FY21 to 997 in FY22.²⁶ Similarly, Indiana saw an approximate 20 percent increase in child abuse-related deaths.²⁷ It is not a leap to relate maltreatment-related deaths with the current challenges associated with retaining well-resourced and trained child protection professionals.

21 Azar, S.T. 2000. Preventing burnout in professionals who work with child abuse and neglect cases: A cognitive behavioral approach to supervision. <https://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Preventing-burnout-in-professionals-and-paraprofessionals-who-work-with-child-abuse-and-neglect-cases-A-cognitive-behavioral-approach-to-supervision.pdf>.

22 Children's Bureau. (2022). Child Maltreatment 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2021>.

23 Standaert, M. (2023). Burnout hits child protection and family services workers in North Dakota. *The Morton County & Mandan News*. https://bismarcktribune.com/community/mandannews/news/burnout-hits-child-protection-and-family-services-workers-in-north-dakota/article_f339b202-b6d7-11ed-b736-4fab0a193ddf.html.

24 Case Worthy. (2022). Trends and statistics in social work & case management 2021. https://caseworthy.com/blog/trends-and-statistics-in-social-work-case-management/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=trends-and-statistics-in-social-work-case-management.

25 Marsh, B.C. (2020). Caseworker turnover: Why do child welfare caseworkers want to leave their jobs and what makes them stay? *Social Work Doctoral Dissertations*, 13. <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/socialworkdissertations/13>.

26 Texas DFPS. (2023). Fiscal year 2022 child maltreatment fatalities and near fatalities annual report. https://www.dfps.texas.gov/About_DFPS/Reports_and_Presentations/PEI/documents/2023/2023-03-01_Child_Maltreatment_Fatalities_and_Near_Fatalities_Annual_Report.pdf.

27 Fradette, R. (2023). This is how many children died of abuse and neglect in Indiana in 2021.

Answering the Call: The Impact of CAST on Higher Education & Workforce Preparation

The History of CAST

Beginning in 2003, WSU received \$5.6 million over seven years from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the U.S. Department of Justice. The purpose of this funding was to collaborate with the National District Attorneys Association in creating a national model undergraduate curriculum, which would become the CAST curriculum. To ensure the effective implementation of this new academic program, the National Child Protection Training Center (NCPTC) was established under the guidance of the National District Attorneys Association. Following the conclusion of federal funding, NCPTC merged with Gundersen Health System and, more recently, became a part of Zero Abuse Project, which now facilitates the CAST program globally.

As stated, the CAST curriculum and course offerings originally were developed after the WSU landmark study on the lack of child maltreatment education across the nation, in conjunction with a widespread assessment of modern child maltreatment literature to determine the most appropriate concepts to include in the CAST coursework. To that end, WSU conducted an in-depth analysis of peer-reviewed literature on child protection that was published in the past five years (at the time of the study, approximately 2003). WSU carefully categorized and summarized 563 articles based on their respective concepts; these articles were then scrutinized by field experts, who also examined content from 56 child protection training programs to identify necessary skills and knowledge for workers in the field. The foundational undergraduate CAST courses were outlined and then reviewed by focus groups comprising frontline medical and mental health professionals, social workers, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and child protection attorneys. This comprehensive analysis and the subsequent findings were used in developing what would become the fundamental undergraduate courses of the CAST program, now commonly referred to as the CAST Certificate path optioned through Zero Abuse Project. The CAST Team at Zero Abuse has fostered the continued sustainability and growth of CAST, most recently regarding graduate coursework in faith, law, and medical programs.

Recent CAST Programming

The **Child Advocacy Clinical Studies/Medical School course** originated via a working group of six board-certified pediatric specialists in child abuse and was assembled at the Mayo Clinic by the National Child Protection Training Center (since absorbed by Zero Abuse Project). The working group's objective was to outline essential course content on child abuse that should be included in the education of

all physicians, regardless of their specialty, prior to graduation. The main challenge they faced was integrating this additional information into the existing medical school curriculum. To address this challenge, Dr. Michele Knox from the University of Toledo College of Medicine carefully reviewed the outline provided by the working group.²⁸ She then developed a flexible medical school course that would encompass the new material while seamlessly fitting into existing medical programs. The resulting CAST medical school course is an elective program spanning nine months.²⁹

CAST Law School programming was the result of a groundbreaking collaboration between NCPTC and numerous highly experienced child abuse prosecutors from every corner of the United States. Their goal was to craft an engaging semester elective CAST course on “Child Abuse and the Law.” During its tenure as a program of the National District Attorneys Association, NCPTC enlisted the expertise of the Hennepin County Attorney’s Office in Minnesota to transform this visionary course outline into a tangible model curriculum. Assistant Hennepin County Attorney Anne McKeig, who has since joined the Minnesota Supreme Court, was a driving force behind the initiative.³⁰ The resounding success of this endeavor has resulted in the implementation of the course in six prestigious law schools accredited by the American Bar Association.

Faith-based CAST content was developed in response to the insidious use of religious cover by clergy abusers that left a wake of damage to victims—mentally, physically, emotionally, and also spiritually.³¹ Compounded with the trauma commonly experienced by victims of maltreatment, the aftermath of child abuse in faith communities also results in a loss of trust in God, stagnation of a victim’s once-growing relationship with the divine, a decline in church attendance, and more. Spirituality and faith, however, can be highly powerful sources of resilience for survivors of child abuse.³² Even if their faith has been shattered by the abuse, those who decide and are able to maintain a connection to their spiritual beliefs often experience better mental health outcomes compared to those who sever ties with their faith altogether.

A notable study from 2017 shed light on how frequently child sexual abuse victims raised religious inquiries during forensic interviews, highlighting the crucial need for multidisciplinary teams to foster stronger relationships with faith communities.³³ In response, Zero Abuse Project conducted extensive

28 Pelletier, H.L., Knox, M. (2017). Incorporating child maltreatment training into medical school curricula. *J Child Adolesc Trauma*, 10(3):267-274. doi: 10.1007/s40653-016-0096-x. Epub 2016 May 12. PMID: 29026450; PMCID: PMC5610670.

29 Knox, M. & Stephens, M. (2019). Implementation of child advocacy studies training (CAST) in medical education. <https://www.utoledo.edu/med/depts/psych/pdf/Research-Poster-CAST-programs-AMA-2019-web.pdf>.

30 Mitchell Hamline School of Law. (2017). Anne McKeig ‘92: A fearless protector of children. <https://mitchellhamline.edu/news/2017/06/08/anne-mckeig-92-a-fearless-protector-of-children/>.

31 Saradjian A. & Nobus D. (2003). Cognitive distortions of religious professionals who sexually abuse children. *J Interpers Violence*, Aug, 18(8):905-23. doi: 10.1177/0886260503253881. PMID: 19768892.

32 Doxey, C., Jensen, L. & Jensen, J. (1997). The influence of religion on victims of childhood sexual abuse. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 7(3): 179-186, DOI: 10.1207/s15327582ijpr0703_6.

33 Tishelman, A.C. & Fontes, L.A. (2017). Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews. *Child Abuse Negl.*, 63:120-130. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.025. Epub 2016 Nov 30. PMID: 27914237.

surveys of accredited seminaries across the United States and Canada and discovered a startling absence of training on recognizing and responding to child abuse. To address this critical gap, Zero Abuse collaborated with two seminaries to implement coursework regarding child abuse and has helped develop a comprehensive, three-credit faith-based course dedicated to understanding and combating child abuse, “When Faith Hurts: Recognizing and Responding to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse.”

CAST has also expanded its curriculum to explore more in-depth how maltreatment in youth can affect one's adulthood and contribute to violence across the lifespan. **Child Advocacy & Adult Studies**, or CAAST, was originally designed by Dr. Pearl Berman of Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) to provide “...mandated reporters and first responders who work in criminology, education, family studies, medicine, nursing, psychology, public health, sociology, social work, and other disciplines with evidence-based, culturally relevant knowledge and skills to improve outcomes for victims and perpetrators of interpersonal violence across the lifespan.”³⁴ To date, there are two CAST institutions teaching this specific version of the curriculum on behalf of Zero Abuse: IUP and the University of South Dakota.³⁵ CAST is evolving to meet the needs of learners seeking unique knowledge, skills, and educational modes related to child maltreatment prevention and intervention education.

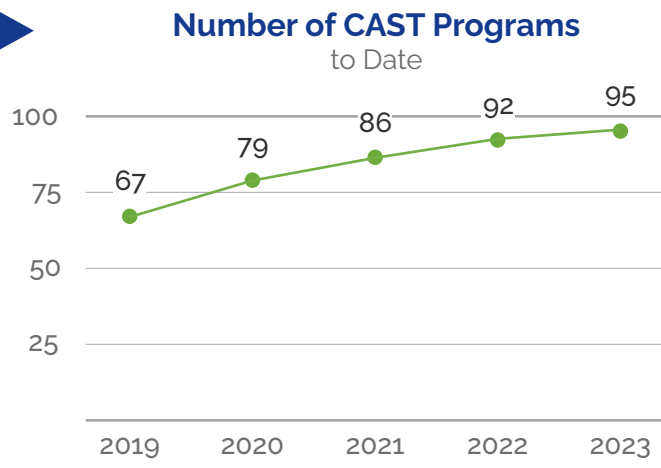
Specifically, Zero Abuse is developing tailored CAST programming and deployment for alternative and continuing education learners. **CAST-Learner Enhancement (CASTLE) Toolkits** will be available for postsecondary faculty who seek to launch alternative education programs. These CAST-focused learning materials will be incorporated into postsecondary microcredentials, badging, nanodegrees, or other forms of non-traditional programming offered by the CAST institution. Additionally, **CAST Responsive Education and Training Engagement (CREATE) Toolkits** will be available for CAST faculty seeking to offer continuing education coursework to current child protection professionals. These professionals may need the competencies offered by CAST programming but be unable to access these competencies via traditional learning pathways.

34 Indiana University of Pennsylvania. (2023). Child advocacy & adult studies minor and certificate. <https://www.iup.edu/academics/find-your-degree/programs/hh/ug/child-and-adult-advocacy-studies-minor-certificate.html>

35 University of South Dakota. (2023). Child advocacy & adult studies. <https://www.usd.edu/Academics/Graduate-Programs/Child-and-Adult-Advocacy-Studies>

CAST at a Glance: National Prevalence

Under Zero Abuse Project's Center for Child Advocacy Studies (C-CAST), the CAST program has flourished. With dedicated staff and new federal funding to foster growth and sustain current CAST programming, CAST has consistently grown in recent years:



Where is CAST?



31 States



2 Medical Schools



4 Seminaries



6 Law Schools

The **#1 state** for CAST is **Mississippi**, with **28** CAST programs.

Overview of Zero Abuse's National CAST Program

VISION

To ensure every child-serving professional has the necessary expertise to combat child maltreatment in all its forms through timely and effective prevention and intervention.

MISSION

To harness the power of education to protect children from abuse and neglect by developing and enhancing CAST content, resources, training, technical assistance, deployment, and accreditation measures to ensure all child-serving and child protection professionals are appropriately equipped to detect, prevent, and effectively respond to child maltreatment.

To fulfill this mission, Zero Abuse Project:

- Provides CAST learners with evidence-based, relevant materials for optimal child maltreatment education;
- Facilitates standardized, sustainable CAST program deployment in traditional and non-traditional learning environments for any interested college or university seeking to graduate professionals into fields serving children at risk for or suffering from maltreatment;
- Explores current trends, research, and best practices to update and enhance the CAST curriculum, ensuring continual improvement to child maltreatment prevention and intervention; and
- Empowers CAST instructors with materials, training, and technical assistance to foster long-term CAST program viability and growth.

CAST COURSEWORK

Three courses make up the CAST undergraduate "CAST Certificate" path popularly offered by colleges and universities. These courses are as follows:

- **Perspectives on Child Maltreatment & Advocacy** (*Perspectives* course): This course covers the cultural history of child maltreatment, comparative perspectives, legal framework, recognition of and responses to child maltreatment, skills necessary to do the work, other pertinent issues pertaining to child maltreatment and child advocacy, and the future of the field. The course incorporates a variety of professional perspectives.
- **Professional & System Responses to Child Maltreatment** (*Professional Response* course): This course focuses on the responses of professionals to allegations of child maltreatment—to expand the student's knowledge and skills in identifying, investigating, and prosecuting child maltreatment.
- **Responding to the Survivor of Child Abuse** (*Responding* course): The purpose of this course is to prepare students to recognize the effects of child maltreatment and apply intervention strategies for children and their families. Multidisciplinary approaches to prevention, advocacy, and treatment of child maltreatment survivors are discussed.³⁶

³⁶ Note: Based on institutional programmatic needs, the "Responding to the Survivor of Child Abuse" course may be interchanged with the "Global Child Advocacy Studies" course, which equips students to address global child advocacy issues by exploring diverse approaches, fostering cultural awareness, and developing practical advocacy skills. Students will gain a nuanced understanding of children's lives in varied contexts, enabling them to champion their well-being and contribute to positive global change. For more information on this course and how to incorporate it into CAST programming, please contact CAST Director Tyler Council (tyler@zeroabuseproject.org).

Three CAST courses have been developed specifically for child-serving graduate school populations and can be implemented by postsecondary institutions as appropriate:

- **Child Advocacy Clinical Studies** (*Medical* course): Designed to help medical professionals better understand clinical responses to child maltreatment and child advocacy, this course also explores the consequences of abuse and neglect and interagency responses to child maltreatment.
- **Child Abuse & the Law** (*Law* course): This course is designed for students interested in public service and civil/criminal litigation of child maltreatment casework. Learners are presented with information and skills to better understand and navigate the criminal and civil child protection processes. Other concepts covered include grounds for charging or petitioning, identifying witnesses and evidence pertinent to successful prosecution, and witness preparation for testimony in court.
- **When Faith Hurts: Recognizing & Responding to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse** (*Faith* course): This course empowers faith communities to recognize and respond to cases of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Included are discussions detailing the impact of child abuse on a victim's sense of spirituality and offering concrete suggestions for working with medical and mental health professionals to assist a child in coping with maltreatment. The course also discusses ideal child protection policies for a faith-based institution, including handling a situation in which a convicted sex offender seeks to join a congregation.

CAST Implementation: Ensuring Quality & Consistency in CAST Education

To aid institutions in efficiently and successfully setting up CAST programming, Zero Abuse Project has developed and launched a CAST Implementation Process for new colleges and universities seeking to deploy the curriculum—either in a given program of study or across programs in a multidisciplinary fashion. The Implementation Process entails the following progress steps:

- **Implementation evaluation:** A contractual agreement to partner with Zero Abuse in evaluating the CAST launch and implementation;
- **Curriculum mapping and syllabus alignment:** A detailed examination of institutional syllabi and course content to ensure alignment with a given undergraduate or graduate CAST course;
- **Qualification assessment:** In-depth assessment of faculty expertise, qualification, and teaching experience; and
- **Learning assessment:** Detailed course content and experiential learning assessment.

Each progress step cumulatively builds toward a comprehensive audit of a prospective CAST program resulting in Full Approval, Conditional Approval, or Non-Approval status based on the overall quality and viability of the program under review. Unsuccessful implementation efforts can be corrected and resubmitted to the CAST Team for further consideration.

CAST Credentialing: National Recognition for CAST Instruction

Fully implemented CAST programs may seek additional recognition for their CAST instructional efforts at the national level. CAST Credentialing is granted by Zero Abuse Project to institutions that successfully navigate the following credentialing process:

- Submit the "Application for Credentialing" containing basic programmatic details and demographic information;
- Respond to a questionnaire covering major performance metrics tied to CAST instruction and a general strength/weakness/opportunity/threat (SWOT) assessment of the program;
- Host a comprehensive site visit entailing:
 - A course instruction evaluation
 - A faculty interview to gauge individual and program insights and challenges
 - A student panel evaluation of the CAST program
 - An administrator interview and programmatic review
- Undergo an analysis of the information provided above to determine final credentialing status.

Once granted, CAST Credentialing remains in place for five years before renewal is required. Learners successfully completing CAST programming from credentialed CAST institutions are awarded a national certificate of recognition in addition to their own institutional accolades. Currently, the following institutions are recognized for their credentialed CAST programs:

- [Northwest Arkansas Community College](#) (NWACC)
- [University of Illinois Springfield](#) (UIS)
- [University of Missouri-St. Louis](#) (UMSL)
- [University of South Carolina Upstate](#) (USC Upstate)
- [University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire](#)

Benefits of CAST Education

IMPROVED COMPETENCIES, RETENTION, & RECRUITMENT

CAST programming offers numerous benefits to professionals working with children and to society as a whole. By providing comprehensive education and training, CAST enhances professionals' abilities to recognize the signs of child maltreatment, respond appropriately, and intervene effectively to ensure the safety and well-being of children. This newfound competence empowers professionals to become agents of change and advocates for child protection within their respective fields.

Research supports the effectiveness of CAST in improving professionals' knowledge and skills in recognizing and responding to child maltreatment. A study by Cross and Chiu (2021) investigating the impact of CAST in the state of Mississippi examined the impact of the curriculum on student knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy regarding child abuse and neglect.³⁷ The findings indicated significant improvements in CAST participants' knowledge and confidence in recognizing and responding to child maltreatment. CAST's ability both to imbue a greater sense of responsibility to combat child maltreatment and to improve recognition of and intervention in abuse and neglect has been consistently demonstrated in additional CAST studies conducted by practitioners.

An undergraduate evaluation of CAST's impact on learners who completed the coursework at WSU found that CAST graduates felt they were child advocates, even when working in non-child protection careers.³⁸ In short, the CAST graduates saw that child abuse was *everybody's* responsibility to prevent and negate. The study also found that CAST students greatly valued and appreciated the realistic and comprehensive training provided by CAST coursework, a sentiment echoed by the students of the Mississippi evaluation conducted by Cross and Chiu.

CAST medical school expert Dr. Michele Knox has extensively studied and contributed to the CAST curriculum. Her evaluations have primarily focused on changes in student knowledge, skills, and perceptions of responsibility in situations where abuse may be occurring. She has evaluated both pre- and post-CAST student populations as well as CAST versus non-CAST learning populations. One study found significant increases in student perceptions regarding their responsibility to report child maltreatment and provide resources for successful intervention, along with improved preparedness to recognize and respond to maltreatment.³⁹ Another study by Knox et al. revealed similar findings when exploring pre- and post-changes in CAST student knowledge in comparison to CAST and non-CAST

37 Cross, T.P. & Chiu, Y.L. (2021). *Final report: program evaluation of Mississippi's CAST initiative*. University of Illinois Children and Family Research Center. https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20211119_ProgramEvaluationOfMississippisCASTInitiativeFinalReport.pdf.

38 Osgood, A.K. 2017. Lessons learned from students surveys in a child advocacy studies (CAST) Program. *Journ Child Adol Trauma*, 10, 261–266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-016-0087-y>.

39 Knox, M.S., Pelletier, H., & Vieth, V. (2014). Effects of medical student training in child advocacy and child abuse prevention and intervention. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(2), 129–133. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031743>.

learner cohorts. The CAST students consistently demonstrated better preparation and responsiveness in scenarios where child abuse may be occurring compared to their non-CAST counterparts; moreover, the students who underwent CAST training demonstrated significant retention of skills and information in a six-month post-test, indicating that CAST education has the potential to impact long-term mastery of child maltreatment identification and mitigation.⁴⁰

A large part of CAST's success is due to the problem-based, experiential lessons that simulate complicated, real-world child maltreatment problems.⁴¹ Lisa Johnson, a pioneering CAST faculty member and current professor at Florida State University's College of Social Work, authored a paper outlining how the CAST curriculum mirrors real-life multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) by bringing together students from across disciplines into the classroom. This format allows instructors to model future MDT collaboration and prevent the silos that can occur across investigative agencies in the field.⁴² The multidisciplinary teaching environment also fosters cross-collaboration skills and an improved understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of each student-turn-professional as it pertains to ensuring they remain within the boundaries of their scope of work as a professional working for a child-serving organization.

The CAST curriculum has also been proven to better prepare students for the realities of child maltreatment detection and casework than conventional frontline experience and training. In a landmark study conducted by University of South Carolina Upstate researchers, CAST students' ability to detect abuse and recognize the response systems necessary for intervention were compared to those same skills in a subset of experienced frontline professionals from the Department of Social Services (DSS).⁴³ Both populations equally detected and suggested adequate intervention resources when provided with a vignette depicting a single type of maltreatment (child sexual abuse). However, the CAST students excelled when presented with a second vignette illustrating polyvictimization—specifically, involving emotional and psychological abuse. In this second scenario, the CAST learners outpaced the DSS workers in successfully identifying the types of abuse present and recommending accurate intervention resources and next steps.

The extensive research demonstrating a high degree of positive competency change alongside improved preparation for identifying and investigating child abuse has resulted in the CAST curriculum being recognized as the only nationally facilitated, evidence-based child maltreatment curriculum to date. The Chadwick Center for Children and Families in Rady Children's Hospital–San Diego was tasked

40 Pelletier, H.L. & Knox, M. (2017). Incorporating child maltreatment training into medical school curricula. *J Child Adolesc Trauma*, 10(3):267-274. doi: 10.1007/s40653-016-0096-x. Epub 2016 May 12. PMID: 29026450; PMCID: PMC5610670.

41 University of Illinois Springfield. (2023). Residential simulation lab. <https://www.uis.edu/cast/residential-simulation-lab>.

42 Johnson, L. (2015). An innovative approach to providing collaborative education to undergraduate students in the area of child maltreatment. *J Interprof Care*, 29(3):271-2. doi: 10.3109/13561820.2014.947361. Epub 2014 Aug 12. PMID: 25112832.

43 Parker, J., McMillan, L., Olson, S., Ruppel, S. & Vieth, V. (2019). Responding to basic and complex cases of child abuse: A comparison study of recent and current child advocacy studies (CAST) students with DSS workers in the field. *J Child Adolesc Trauma*, 13(4):357-364. doi: 10.1007/s40653-019-00297-7. PMID: 33269036; PMCID: PMC7683666.

by the California Department of Social Services to create the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC). The CEBC is a "...critical tool for identifying, selecting, and implementing evidence-based child welfare practices that will improve child safety, increase permanency, increase family and community stability, and promote child and family well-being."⁴⁴ The CEBC has evaluated all peer-reviewed publications on CAST efficacy to date and has rated the CAST program at a score of three (out of five) under their scientific rating system, indicating promising, evidence-based research.⁴⁵ CAST has also been identified as a necessary component in the fight to end child sexual abuse by the Keep Kids Safe [*U.S. National Blueprint to End Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents*](#), which outlines key programs and interventions necessary to both end child abuse altogether and provide appropriate aid to those impacted by this form of maltreatment.⁴⁶

In addition to the research showing the merits of CAST education on professional preparation, the benefits of the CAST program extend beyond individual professionals. By equipping professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills, the program helps build a network of informed individuals who can advocate for children while also fostering systemic changes in policies and practices related to child maltreatment.⁴⁷ In doing so, the CAST program contributes to a society that prioritizes the safety, well-being, and rights of children—leading to stronger child protection systems and better outcomes for children who have experienced maltreatment.

COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CAST fosters collaboration and community engagement by bringing together professionals from various disciplines, including education, healthcare, law enforcement, social work, and law. By promoting interdisciplinary cooperation and sharing knowledge and expertise, the CAST program encourages a holistic approach to combating child maltreatment, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Community engagement is a crucial component of the CAST program. By working closely with local communities, organizations, and agencies, the program ensures that the training provided aligns with the unique needs and challenges of specific regions and state policies. Community partnerships enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the program, as professionals gain insights into local resources, cultural considerations, and best practices for supporting children and families affected by maltreatment.

44 California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse. (2023). Overview. <https://www.cebc4cw.org/leadership/overview/>.

45 California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse. (2023). Child Advocacy Studies. <https://www.cebc4cw.org/program/child-advocacy-studies/>.

46 Keep Kids Safe. (2021). U.S. National Blueprint to End Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents. <https://www.keepkidssafe.us/the-blueprint>.

47 Morris, S. (2020). Northwest Arkansas community college: Child advocacy studies program sends students into the workforce as seasoned professionals. <https://www.league.org/member-spotlight/northwest-arkansas-community-college-child-advocacy-studies-program-sends-students>.

At the national level, the CAST Team at Zero Abuse Project finds great strength in collaborating with state, local, and federal agencies to raise awareness about the curriculum and to connect on important issues and projects related to child maltreatment education and training. The following organizations are currently working with Zero Abuse to increase awareness of the curriculum, assist local CAST programs with resources and support for enhancing content and overall sustainability, and foster further networking and connectivity to higher education affiliates across the country:

- [Academy on Violence and Abuse](#)
- [American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children](#)
- [Center for Innovation and Resources, Inc.](#)
- [Children's Advocacy Centers of Arkansas](#)
- [Children's Advocacy Services of Greater St. Louis](#)
- [Children's Advocacy Centers of Mississippi](#)
- [Children's Advocacy Centers of Wisconsin](#)
- [Daviess County Department of Health \(Indiana\)](#)
- [Embrace Families](#)
- [Florida Network of Children's Advocacy Centers](#)
- [National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan](#)
- [Keep Kids Safe](#)
- [National Children's Alliance](#)
- [National Youth Advocacy & Resiliency Research Center](#)
- [New York Foundling Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection](#)
- [Oswego County Child Advocacy Center](#)
- [PACEs Connection](#)
- [REAL Academy](#)
- [Stigma Stoppers](#)
- [Southwestern Indiana Child Advocacy Center Coalition](#)
- [Tennessee Department of Children's Services](#)
- [University of Illinois Children and Family Research Center](#)
- [West Virginia Child Advocacy Network](#)
- [Wisconsin Department of Justice](#)

Many of these partners have engaged in quarterly roundtable discussions about the importance and utility of the CAST curriculum, and several of these collaborative entities have assisted in sharing Zero Abuse's "CASTing Calls" video series (available on the [CAST website](#) and [Zero Abuse YouTube](#)

[channel](#)) and social media campaign. These entities also advocate for the curriculum through their own ongoing efforts, such as Keep Kids Safe advocating for nationwide adoption of the curriculum in their [U.S. National Blueprint to End Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents](#) or East Tennessee State University unveiling a [professional journal](#) for CAST publications and research to foster continued evaluation of the program.

The CAST program also benefits from the expertise of CAST academic champions from across the country who make up the Zero Abuse CAST Working Group. This consortium of CAST instructors originates from a diverse array of academic, frontline, and clinical backgrounds, and has been instrumental in the ongoing evaluation of the CAST program, vetting all applicable materials, processes, and best practices necessary to foster continued excellence in the deployment, training, and teaching of the curriculum. The CAST Working Group consists of instructors and administrative leaders from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, the University of Illinois–Springfield, the University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire, Northwest Arkansas Community College, William Carey University College of Osteopathic Medicine, University of Toledo College of Medicine and Life Sciences, Wartburg Theological Seminary, SUNY Buffalo State University, SUNY Fredonia, USC Upstate, Delta State University, and the Florida Institute of Technology. The CAST Working Group holds virtual Think Tank meetings for ongoing feedback on improving the CAST curriculum and maximizing dissemination. It also helps Zero Abuse establish connections with community affiliates to raise awareness of the curriculum.

Financial support from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has been instrumental in allowing Zero Abuse to better understand and respond to the needs of educational institutions, frontline agencies, and child protection professionals. OJJDP funding is making it possible for Zero Abuse to: identify by geographic region where postsecondary child maltreatment coursework is lacking; develop a series of CAST Toolkits to fill those gaps with ready-to-use, targeted, content and instructional resources; develop additional Toolkits for continuing education and alternative CAST instruction; and establish a novel Simulation Hub for Experiential Learning (SHEL), which will house simulated, problem-based learning materials and technology for use by the CAST community-at-large to ensure that each CAST student has an opportunity to hone their skills through active, experientially driven learning encounters.

CAST National Impact

Annually, Zero Abuse Project calls upon the CAST community to submit data on their college or university CAST programs. This data is pivotal to helping the CAST Team better understand the unique successes and challenges around implementation and sustainability in higher education and allows Zero Abuse to better understand major trends and patterns in CAST programming with regards to enrollment, program study integration, and other factors. Zero Abuse analyzes and compiles this data into an annual CAST Impact report, available at [Zero Abuse Project's website](#).

Trends from the most recent national survey of CAST programs indicate that:

- Overall, 65% of CAST programs in the U.S. are taught in-person. However, those institutions offering online CAST coursework do so with more frequency in order to meet the shifting needs of CAST students, resulting in 71% of total CAST coursework being delivered online.
- While institutions have great flexibility over how to implement CAST, most (64%) choose to offer the three-course undergraduate CAST Certificate program.
- CAST learners tend to be junior- and senior-level students, meaning CAST knowledge and competency development occurs just before graduation for effective transition to a frontline child-serving career path.
- CAST is integrated into programs of study with *direct* ties to child protection and child-serving career paths:
 - Significant deployment has been observed in social work (35.3%), psychology (17.6%), family studies or criminal justice (8.8%), and sociology or theology (5.9%) programming.
- Conservatively, more than 50,000 children have been impacted by a recent CAST graduate in the course of child maltreatment casework and investigation.

The impact of the CAST program extends beyond individual professionals and the classrooms in which the curriculum is taught. By equipping professionals with necessary knowledge and skills, the program helps build a network of informed individuals who can advocate for systemic changes in policies and practices related to child maltreatment. In doing so, the CAST program contributes to a society that prioritizes the safety, well-being, and rights of children. By equipping professionals with the knowledge and skills to effectively address child maltreatment, the program contributes to timely identification, appropriate intervention, and improved support for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. In turn, this can lead to better long-term outcomes for youth, such as reduced revictimization, improved mental health, and increased resilience among survivors, creating a systemic impact that curbs child abuse and its related societal effects.

Conclusion

Child maltreatment is a significant societal issue with far-reaching consequences for the well-being and development of children. The frequency and prevalence of child maltreatment underscore the urgent

need for comprehensive educational programs, such as the Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) program offered by Zero Abuse Project.

The CAST program fills a critical gap in child maltreatment coursework within higher education. It equips professionals from various disciplines with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively recognize, respond to, and prevent child maltreatment. And it focuses on evidence-based practices, trauma-informed care, legal and ethical considerations, and multidisciplinary collaboration. The CAST program recognizes the interconnected nature of child maltreatment and the need for professionals from various fields to work together. By bringing together educators, healthcare providers, social workers, law enforcement officers, and legal professionals, the program creates a collaborative network that can effectively address the complex challenges associated with child maltreatment.

The CAST curriculum covers a wide range of topics essential for professionals in child-serving roles. It includes courses on recognizing the signs of abuse and neglect, understanding the impact of trauma on children's development, conducting thorough investigations, providing appropriate support and intervention, and navigating legal processes related to child maltreatment cases. By offering a comprehensive and standardized curriculum, the CAST program ensures that professionals receive the necessary training to protect and advocate for children effectively.

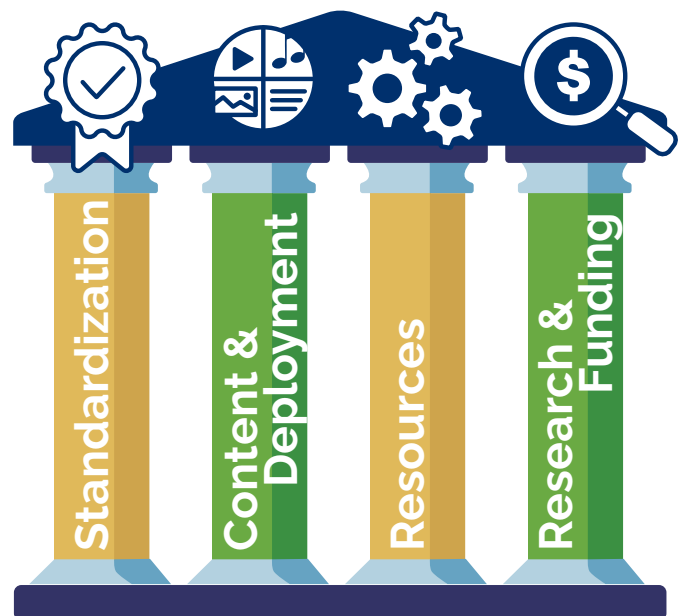
By investing in the Child Advocacy Studies program, academic institutions and communities can create a future where child maltreatment is recognized and addressed promptly, ultimately fostering a safer and healthier environment for all children.

The CAST National Plan

Overview

For nearly two decades, CAST has been empowering postsecondary learners through high-quality content founded on research and feedback from the frontlines of child protection. Zero Abuse Project is committed to ensuring that every child-serving professional is better equipped with the necessary skills and understanding of child abuse to prevent, detect, and nullify child maltreatment of all forms. Every child deserves a life free from abuse. As the national facilitator of the CAST program, Zero Abuse and the CAST Team remain dedicated to the long-term viability and success of this groundbreaking program and, as a result, have developed a National Plan—a 10-year strategic approach to expanding, sustaining, and strengthening child protection education and training. The plan is built around several core tenets designed to ensure the CAST curriculum can: adapt to the short- and long-term needs of learners across the spectrum of education pathways, be successfully disseminated nationwide, and evolve based on professional trends and evidence-based best practices in child abuse prevention and intervention.

These tenets, or CAST Pillars, described below, are the critical components necessary to ensure that CAST remains a viable, relevant, and effective curriculum. Each Pillar represents a core driver of CAST—related to its implementation, sustainability, or evolution—and correlates to a series of recommendations based on CAST Working Group feedback and OJJDP-funded research on child maltreatment education. The CAST Pillars are followed by a comprehensive breakdown of the National Plan with targeted goals and outcomes to ensure the strategic success of the CAST program at the national level.



CAST PILLARS

CAST Pillars of Success

Standardization: Standardization refers to the process of establishing and implementing a set of consistent guidelines, specifications, or protocols that ensure uniformity, reliability, and quality in a particular context. It involves creating a framework that defines the acceptable practices, requirements, or benchmarks that need to be followed to achieve desired outcomes.

In the context of the CAST program and coursework, standardization goes beyond mere consistency and quality. It encompasses a broader set of objectives aimed at enhancing educational effectiveness, improving comparability, and facilitating meaningful evaluation, including:

- **Enhancing Educational Effectiveness:** Standardization helps develop a cohesive and well-structured curriculum to guarantee students receive a comprehensive and balanced education. It promotes alignment between different courses, ensuring that the content, learning objectives, and assessment methods are coherent and progressive. This consistency facilitates student understanding, retention, and application of knowledge, leading to better educational outcomes.
- **Facilitating Comparability:** Standardized coursework and programs enable easier comparison and evaluation across different institutions, programs of study, regions, or even countries. When educational practices are aligned, assessing the knowledge and skills acquired by students from various educational backgrounds becomes more streamlined. Standardization can help establish common benchmarks and criteria for evaluating student performance, allowing for fair and meaningful comparisons.
- **Improving Collaboration and Mobility:** Standardization encourages collaboration and exchange of ideas among educators and institutions. When there is a shared understanding of expectations and approaches, it becomes easier for educators across the CAST community to collaborate on research projects, curriculum development, and instructional methods. Furthermore, standardized programs can facilitate student mobility, as their coursework is more likely to be recognized and transferable across institutions or geographic locations.
- **Ensuring Accountability:** Standardization promotes accountability and quality assurance in education. By setting clear standards and guidelines, it becomes easier to monitor and evaluate the performance of CAST programs and institutions. Standardized assessments and evaluations can provide valuable data for identifying areas of improvement, implementing evidence-based practices, and ensuring that educational outcomes meet the expected standards. Likewise, standardized implementation and accreditation policies contribute to smoother, more consistent program deployment and evaluation.

Content & Deployment: Content and deployment refer to the strategic planning, creation, and dissemination of educational materials, resources, and learning experiences across relevant fields of education, including computer science, the arts, science, and technology. They involve exploring innovative approaches to reach diverse learner populations, designing engaging instructional resources, and introducing new content topics and themes to enhance the educational experience. The following components support this CAST Pillar:

- **Accessibility & Inclusivity:** Content and deployment strategies aim to ensure that CAST education is accessible to all learner populations, irrespective of their backgrounds or abilities. This involves considering diverse learning needs, incorporating inclusive design principles, and providing multiple modes of engagement. By leveraging technology, such as adaptive learning platforms or assistive technologies, content can be customized to accommodate different learning styles or needs and enable equitable access to educational resources.
- **Pedagogical Innovation:** Content and deployment strategies explore novel ways to engage learners and foster a deeper understanding of CAST concepts. They involve employing innovative instructional strategies, such as project-based learning, gamification, collaborative problem-solving, or experiential learning. By integrating real-world applications, interdisciplinary connections, and hands-on experiences, educators can create immersive learning environments that inspire curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking.
- **Multimodal Learning Resources:** Content and deployment strategies involve the development and curation of a diverse range of learning resources that cater to different learner preferences and needs. These resources can include interactive digital content, multimedia presentations, online simulations, virtual laboratories, educational games, or tangible manipulatives. By providing varied and engaging resources, learners can explore CAST concepts through multiple modalities, fostering deeper comprehension and retention.
- **Emerging Topics & Themes:** Content and deployment efforts strive to stay abreast of advancements in CAST fields of study and incorporate emerging topics and themes into the educational experience. This includes introducing into the curriculum cutting-edge tools and technology, current research findings, industry trends, and societal implications of CAST. By addressing relevant and timely subjects, while also embracing cultural humility and equity, educators can prepare learners to adapt to evolving policies and tools used in the field and encourage them to innovate and maximize the broader, positive impact of CAST on society.
- **Scalability & Dissemination:** Content and deployment strategies aim to ensure the scalability and widespread dissemination of educational resources. This involves leveraging technology platforms, online learning management systems, open educational resources, or partnerships with educational organizations to reach a broader audience. By utilizing digital platforms and networks, educational content can be shared, adapted, and localized to suit different contexts, enabling greater access to quality CAST education.

Resources: Resources encompass a wide range of materials, tools, and support systems that contribute to the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of CAST implementation, instruction, and overall academic endeavors. The following components support this CAST Pillar:

- **Instructional Materials:** Resources encompass various forms of instructional materials, such as textbooks, workbooks, e-books, handouts, lesson plans, and teaching guides. These materials provide educators with structured content, activities, and assessments that support the delivery of CAST instruction. Well-designed instructional materials cater to different learning styles, incorporate diverse perspectives, and align with learning objectives, ensuring comprehensive and engaging instruction.
- **Technological Tools & Resource Access:** Resources also include technological tools and access that enhance the CAST learning experience. These can range from providing CAST community members with guidance on or access to hardware devices (such as computers, tablets, or programmable devices, e.g., anatomical simulation dolls) to software applications, simulation materials, tech-driven augmented reality experiences, and more. These tools can enable hands-on exploration, experimentation, and application of CAST concepts, fostering active learning and critical thinking skills.
- **Training & Technical Assistance (TTA):** Resources encompass professional development opportunities, workshops, seminars, conferences, and online courses that empower educators to enhance their knowledge, skills, and instructional practices in CAST. Access to TTA resources can also encourage under-resourced or hesitant institutions to adopt CAST programming by mitigating potential barriers to deployment. These offerings provide educators with the necessary training, mentoring, and collaboration platforms to keep current with pedagogical approaches, emerging technologies, and major frontline challenges to child maltreatment intervention and prevention. By investing in continuous TTA, the CAST Team at Zero Abuse Project will ensure that CAST educators can deliver high-quality CAST instruction and sustain innovation in their teaching practices.
- **Community & Networking:** The CAST Team will seek opportunities to launch, nurture, and grow new and ongoing CAST communities and networks to facilitate collaboration, idea sharing, and support among educators, students, and other stakeholders in the CAST community. Opportunities may include online forums, social media groups, professional associations, or partnerships between educational institutions and industry professionals. The CAST Team will also continually improve and enhance networking and collaboration opportunities (e.g., Think Tanks, conferences, roundtables) for cross-pollination of ideas, materials, and resources. Engaging with these communities allows educators to access a wealth of knowledge, gain insights from experienced practitioners, exchange best practices, and foster a sense of shared purpose in advancing CAST education.

- **Evaluation & Assessment Tools:** Resources encompass tools and frameworks for evaluating and assessing the effectiveness and impact of CAST implementation and instruction. These resources can include formative and summative assessment strategies, pre/post-evaluations, rubrics, checklists, or standardized tests tailored to evaluate CAST competencies. These evaluation tools provide valuable feedback for educators to gauge student progress, identify areas of improvement, and make data-informed instructional decisions.

Research & Funding: Research and funding are critical to developing, improving, and sustaining CAST programming at both the national and institutional levels. In the context of CAST, research and funding involve systematic inquiry, program evaluation, innovation, securing financial resources, grant writing, partnerships, advocacy, and policy influence. Through research, evidence is generated to inform and improve the effectiveness of CAST programs, while funding supports the necessary resources and initiatives to sustain and scale CAST education at the national level.

The following components outline ways to support this CAST Pillar:

- **Research:** Systematically evaluating the efficacy and impact of the CAST curriculum is imperative to ensure and grow its evidence base for best practices. Research encompasses both theoretical and empirical studies conducted by researchers, educators, and practitioners. Research in CAST explores various aspects, including teaching and learning strategies, curriculum design, assessment methods, equity and inclusion, interdisciplinary connections, learner performance, knowledge mastery, and the integration of emerging technologies. Through rigorous research, insights and evidence are generated to inform academic recommendations, policy decisions, instructional practices, and the overall design of CAST programs.
- **Program Evaluation:** CAST research often involves program evaluation, which focuses on assessing the effectiveness and outcomes of CAST initiatives. Program evaluation is offered through the CAST Credentialing process at the national level, but CAST institutions should likewise conduct their own programmatic assessments. Evaluations can measure student learning outcomes, engagement levels, enrollment and retention rates, and the overall impact of CAST education on learners. By conducting systematic evaluations, researchers can identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in CAST programs, leading to evidence-based recommendations for program enhancement.
- **Innovation & Development:** CAST research also drives innovation and the development of new approaches, methodologies, and resources for effective instruction. This research includes exploring emerging technologies, pedagogical strategies, interdisciplinary connections, and emerging trends in CAST fields. Research can help identify gaps in current practices and inspire innovative solutions to enhance the educational experience for students. By pushing the boundaries of knowledge and exploring new frontiers, research contributes to the continuous improvement and evolution of CAST education.

- **Funding:** Funding plays a crucial role in supporting the growth, sustainability, and expansion of CAST programs. It involves securing financial resources from various sources, such as government agencies, foundations, corporations, charitable donors, or educational institutions. Adequate funding enables the development of high-quality instructional materials, the integration of technology, the implementation of training and technical assistance programs, the establishment of research initiatives, and the scaling of CAST programs to reach a wider audience. Funding must be acquired from a variety of sources across dynamic lines of interest to support the necessary infrastructure, resources, and personnel required to deliver impactful CAST education and ensure that nationally facilitated CAST materials, training, and provisioning are available at little-to-no cost to the CAST community.
- **Grant Writing & Partnerships:** Securing funding often involves grant writing and establishing partnerships with funding organizations or other stakeholders (e.g., professional agencies, CAST institutions). Researchers and educators may collaborate with Zero Abuse Project and, of their own accord, develop grant proposals that align with the goals and priorities of funding agencies. These proposals should articulate the intended research, innovation, or programmatic outcomes and demonstrate how the funding will advance the CAST curriculum at their institution or contribute to its growth nationwide. Establishing partnerships with funding organizations, industry partners, or educational institutions can thus provide additional support, resources, and expertise to sustain and grow CAST programs.
- **Advocacy & Policy Influence:** Research findings and deliverables that demonstrate the efficacy and impact of CAST can be used to advocate for increased support and recognition of CAST education at the national level. Researchers, educators, and stakeholders can leverage research outcomes to influence policy decisions, occupational and educational standards, and resource allocation. By highlighting the benefits, impact, and value of CAST education, the research contributes to shaping educational policies, securing funding commitments, and promoting the long-term sustainability of CAST programs on a national scale.

The National CAST Strategic Plan

Stemming from the broader CAST Pillars and ongoing CAST Working Group collaborations, the following section details Zero Abuse Project's key goals and objectives for the national CAST program. These goals were strategically selected to optimize program success and viability, and reflect Zero Abuse's overarching commitment to combating child maltreatment. The objectives for each goal outline a supporting action step, and outcomes provide a glimpse into how success may be measured.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁸ Rand Corporation. 2023. Step 02. Goals and Desired Outcomes. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL259/step-02.html>.

outcomes posited for each goal are the specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based (SMART) objectives that Zero Abuse seeks to achieve or exceed as it continues to promote CAST learning across the U.S.⁴⁹

GOAL 1

Improve postsecondary child maltreatment education prevalence in the United States.

CAST Pillar: Content & Deployment

- **Objective 1.1:** Expand CAST nationally at the postsecondary undergraduate level.

Outcome:

- 122 undergraduate programs (30 new programs) with CAST deployed by 2033.

- **Objective 1.2:** Expand CAST nationally at the graduate school level.

Outcomes:

- 5 new CAST Law Programs by 2033.
- 5 new CAST Faith Programs by 2033.
- 2 new CAST Medical Programs by 2033.
- CASTLE Modules/CREATE Workshops deployed for CAST Law/Faith/Medical Programs or frontline agencies.

- **Objective 1.3:** Expand CAST nationally for alternative and continuing education programs.

Outcomes:

- CASTLE
 - Foster growth of 10 schools actively using CASTLE Toolkits for modular, alternative CAST education.
 - Host 4 CASTLE alternative education meetings annually for CASTLE users to provide technical assistance and troubleshooting.
 - Create 4 additional CASTLE Toolkits focused on emerging topics and competencies in child maltreatment intervention and prevention.
 - Conduct annual evaluation of CASTLE alternative education Toolkits through submission of CASTLE-user pre/post evaluation data.

⁴⁹ Minnesota Department of Health. (2023). Objectives and goals: Writing meaningful goals and SMART objectives. <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/practice/resources/phqitoolbox/objectives.html>

— CREATE

- Foster growth of 10 schools actively using CREATE Toolkits for CAST continuing education.
 - Host 4 CREATE continuing education meetings annually for CREATE users to provide technical assistance and troubleshooting.
 - Create 4 additional CREATE Toolkits focused on emerging topics and trends in child maltreatment intervention and prevention.
 - Conduct annual evaluation of CREATE alternative education Toolkits through submission of CREATE training materials and pre/post evaluation data.
- **Objective 1.4:** Enhance awareness of CAST, available resources, and programming types among stakeholders.

Outcomes:

- Host "CAST 101" informational sessions with 20 new prospective institutions by 2033.
- Create 6 new resources and materials to help prospective schools or existing CAST faculty who are mentoring new faculty understand the importance of and how to implement CAST.

GOAL 2

Foster greater sustainability for the current CAST community.

CAST Pillars: Content and Deployment; Research

- **Objective 2.1:** Conduct annual impact evaluation.
Outcome:
 - 50% CAST community submission each year on annual impact report.
- **Objective 2.2:** Conduct roundtable conversational events for prospective and current CAST faculty.
Outcome:
 - 4 CAST roundtables per year on topics pertaining to CAST, including implementation, course deployment, and instructional strategies.

- **Objective 2.3:** Conduct CAST community needs assessment.

Outcomes:

- Annual needs assessment survey deployed starting in 2025.
- Conduct bi-annual seminar for CAST community to discuss current needs starting in 2025.
- Host Think Tank for SWOT analysis in the CAST community twice annually starting in 2025.

GOAL 3

Ensure high-quality CAST programmatic deployment and improve evidence-based strength of the curriculum.

CAST Pillar: Standardization

- **Objective 3.1:** Conduct strategic review of CAST Implementation Plan.

Outcome:

- Enlist 10% of CAST Working Group to assist in review of Implementation Plan and associated contract and evaluation rubrics every 5 years.

- **Objective 3.2:** Re-envision the CAST Approval (accreditation) process.

Outcome:

- Issue guidance for schools interested in accreditation by May 2024.

- **Objective 3.3:** Implement regular review of CAST coursework.

Outcome:

- With engagement of 10% of the CAST Working Group, review CAST course learning outcomes, syllabi, and Toolkit content for major CAST deployment pathways every 5 years to ensure accuracy and relevancy.

- **Objective 3.4:** Expand CAST-based research and peer-reviewed recognition.

Outcome:

- Submit 4 peer-reviewed CAST publications for CAST CEBC listing by 2033 for consideration in improving the evidence-based scoring of the CAST curriculum.

GOAL 4

Explore new resource and research opportunities for CAST growth and evolution.

CAST Pillars: Resources; Research and Funding

- **Objective 4.1:** Acquire federal/state/local funding for new CAST resources and materials for classroom integration.

Outcome:

- 2 funding sources by 2026 to create 5 new deliverables including but not limited to webinars, CAST Toolkit additions, SHEL expansions, technological enhancements, resources, and tools.

- **Objective 4.2:** Expand CAST-based training for current CAST faculty.

Outcomes:

- Host 10 webinars on current trends, topics, evolving/emerging challenges in child maltreatment response, and pedagogical best practices by 2033.
- Develop and disseminate 2 fact sheets on emerging trends or topics in higher education or child maltreatment prevention and intervention per year.
- Post 4 news articles per year on the CAST website from CAST collaborators, internal staff, or field experts on an emerging topic in higher education or child maltreatment investigation and mitigation.
- Host 1 annual Seminar or virtual conference to showcase resources, information, and topics pertinent to best practices in CAST instruction.

GOAL 5

Expand the CAST collaboration network for increased CAST awareness, growth, and sustainability.

CAST Pillars: Content and Deployment; Research and Funding

- **Objective 5.1:** Explore new opportunities for parallel child protection and child maltreatment agency partnerships.

Outcome:

- Engage in 5 new partnerships by 2033.

- **Objective 5.2:** Foster continued partnership opportunities for new research, materials, and training for CAST faculty and students.

Outcome:

- Develop 5 new CAST learning components or CAST-related deliverables with CAST collaboration network by 2033.

- **Objective 5.3:** Establish enhanced CAST visibility and awareness through collaborative events and engagements.

Outcome:

- Present or host materials at 5 conferences by 2033.

GOAL 6

Enhance CAST programmatic offerings and opportunities for CAST faculty, students, and frontline professionals.

CAST Pillars: Standardization; Content and Deployment; Resources and Funding

- **Objective 6.1:** Implement CAST training projects through Zero Abuse leadership and dissemination.

Outcomes:

- Teach 3 "Masterclass" CAST courses or modules by 2033.
- Review potential for CAST-centric train-the-trainer models for specific child-serving and child-protection populations by 2026.

- **Objective 6.2:** Expand CAST opportunities for traditional and non-traditional coursework and programmatic offerings.

Outcomes:

- Develop a national plan for non-traditional CAST implementation and accreditation by 2027 (e.g., micro-credential, badging, or similar paths of recognition).
- Examine the potential to expand CAST topics and nationally approved courses through collaboration—specifically, explore 3 new courses or Toolkits on new topics by 2027 (such as environmental safety, death investigation, cultural competency and humility, working with special populations, online exploitation, trafficking in persons, or prevention-centric content).

- **Objective 6.3:** Explore CAST student involvement in CAST national growth and evolution.

Outcomes:

- Conduct a national review of student-perceived CAST needs, program/course improvements, and contributions they can provide to the CAST community by 2028.
- Develop a student-centric CAST Seminar video conference segment by 2030 for student presentations, networking, and professional development.

GOAL 7

Establish a national hub for comprehensive CAST resource development and training.

CAST Pillars: Standardization; Content and Deployment; Resources

- **Objective 7.1:** Launch CAST Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC) to provide comprehensive CAST training and provisioning at the national level.

Outcomes:

- Develop a strategic plan for CAST TTAC at Zero Abuse by 2025.
- Procure funding for CAST TTAC at Zero Abuse by 2030.
- Launch CAST TTAC at Zero Abuse by 2033.

Summary

Zero Abuse Project's Child Advocacy Studies program is a vital initiative to improve the undergraduate and graduate training of child protection professionals. Its multidisciplinary design, evidence-based curriculum, and emphasis on best practices in collaboration to address and end child abuse have transformed the way professionals approach child maltreatment education. The CAST program's impact on the field of child protection continues to grow and is expanding into alternative and continuing education to address all aspects of child maltreatment and ultimately improve the safety and well-being of children.



Zero Abuse Project works to eliminate child abuse in all of its forms. A 501(c)(3) organization, we are committed to transforming institutions to more effectively prevent, recognize, and respond to child sexual abuse. Our efforts focus on cross-disciplinary education and training, advocacy for systemic legal change, guidance for survivor support, and leadership on emerging technologies. We also recognize and address the intersection of child maltreatment and child sexual abuse.

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