



# TOGETHER IN TRUTH

JUSTICE DOING THROUGH TRUTH TELLING

## **The Kempe Center Truth-Telling Circle**

The origin story of the Kempe Center can be traced back to the influential 1962 paper “The Battered-Child Syndrome,” coauthored by C. Henry Kempe, Fred Silverman, Brandt Steele, William Droegemueller, and Henry Silver and published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The paper defined battered-child syndrome as a clinical condition in young children who received serious physical abuse, frequently causing permanent injury or death. The paper also encouraged clinicians and others to consider children who exhibited evidence of possible trauma or neglect as being “battered children.”

Dr. Kempe is credited with many contributions from 1962 to 1984 that brought awareness to child maltreatment. These include but are not limited to advancing mandatory reporting laws at the state level; contributing to the framework for the 1974 federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA); building awareness of severe abuse or physical violence against children; developing the multidisciplinary child protection team; advancing legal representation for children who are maltreated; promoting health visitors and other strategies to prevent child maltreatment; calling attention to the emerging issue of child sexual abuse; and illustrating the “importance of cultural and international perspectives in understanding and responding to child maltreatment” (Krugman & Korbin, 2013, pp. 2–3; Bross & Mathews, 2013). In 1972, under the leadership of Dr. Kempe, the University of Colorado established the National Center for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, which was renamed in 1984 to the C. Henry Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Fifty years after the founding of the center, legal scholars, advocates, and child protection system abolitionists are calling for the repeal of CAPTA, the federal law that ushered in mandatory reporting, nonuniversal definitions of child abuse and neglect, investigation requirements, prosecution, and treatment. This growing cohort suggests CAPTA’s orientation is to save children and youth from their parents, ignore poverty as a social determinant of health, and place sole responsibility for child well-being on caregivers and extended family systems. Some advocates conclude that this legislation: 1) resulted in disproportionate and targeted surveillance and policing of Black, Brown and Indigenous families, resulting in their overrepresentation in the child welfare system across the decades; and 2) catalyzed the preferred solution to child abuse and neglect as separating children and youth from their parents and families and placing them in foster care (Burton & Montauban, 2021).

Other scholars and advocates question yet more facets of today’s child protection system, such as the overmedicalization of child maltreatment, the conflation of poverty with neglect, the termination of parental rights, and the legal representation of children in family court proceedings—some of which are closely connected to the foundational and ongoing work of the Kempe Center. For decades the child welfare landscape has been grounded in the values of safety and protection. But a myth of benevolence permeates the lexicon of most child welfare organizations and stakeholders, resulting in perpetuating

deeply rooted child-saving ideologies. Its purported intention of partnership, engagement, and family strengthening was not the felt experience for many families who came to the attention of child welfare. As with many structures and institutions in the United States, practices, policies, and laws were initially designed and regulated over time without the critical interrogation and reflection from those most impacted—children and youth, parents, families, and communities.

Much of the child welfare workforce and many thought leaders are welcoming the critique and changes that are allowing for reimagining and revising approaches and tactics built for children, families, and the communities in which we live. The possibility of reconciliation and reparation within a child welfare context starts with truth telling, where harms are named and acknowledged alongside a commitment to doing differently. Truth telling and bearing witness to truths are necessary ingredients for activating transformational change, healing, and ultimately justice.

In partnership with Pale Blue., an organization led by family seeing experts Kevin Campbell and Elizabeth Wendel ([www.familyseeing.org](http://www.familyseeing.org)), the Kempe Center is launching the Together in Truth initiative to catalyze truth telling in multiple child welfare spaces around the nation. This includes truth-telling circles for impacted persons, service providers, organizations, and collective communities. Examples of child welfare truth and reconciliation efforts undertaken by governments (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada), national nonprofits (e.g., American Bar Association), and tribes, First Nations peoples, and Aboriginal groups (e.g., Yoorrook Justice Commission) inspired us to look inward. There is tension between our history and the current-day public reckoning of how various stakeholders, scholars, and practitioners view the contributions of the Kempe Center. We are both lauded and scorned as the birthplace of the modern-day child protection movement. Such competing narratives are not unique to the Kempe Center and can be found in every organizational piece of the child welfare industry. Similarly, these narratives are deeply engrained in the multidisciplinary professional community, where competing interests and values seem to impede the degree of progress desired by all.

For Kempe to be a relevant part of this future, we too must engage in our collective truth telling. We have relationships to build and trust to repair. Therefore, in 2023 we are establishing a Kempe Center Truth-Telling Circle (KCTTC) to center the voices of those directly and indirectly impacted by our actions and to scrutinize our unique role and historic, current, and generation-spanning impacts. It is our deepest desire that by creating the KCTTC, we will: 1) bear witness to, be influenced by, and absorb the testimony of parents, youth, families, advocates, scholars, colleagues, and other partners; 2) reduce our footprint of oppression by holding ourselves accountable to new ways of being and doing; 3) acknowledge the Kempe Center's contributions, complicity, and missteps that have caused harm; and 4) repair the harms through actionable, measurable responses. We see this as an opportunity to learn and grow, to be in better service to children, youth, parents, families, and communities, and to hold us in integrity with our center's vision and mission.

*“If we find the courage to engage in truth-telling, something good will happen. There is something waiting for us that feels more like freedom or equality or justice—but to get there, we have to do the hard work.”—Bryan Stevenson, Equal Justice Initiative*