# Preventing Child Maltreatment With Kate Guastaferro

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Aaron Wagner:

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Aaron Wagner:

Hello and welcome to Methodology Minutes. I'm Aaron Wagner. With me today is Dr. Kate Guastaferro. Kate is assistant research professor at the Methodology Center and a former postdoctoral fellow in the Prevention and Methodology Training or PAMT Program. She earned her PhD in public health from Georgia State University in 2016, and she's been with us since then.

Aaron Wagner:

Her research is dedicated to preventing child maltreatment and to improving the effectiveness of behavioral interventions. Kate, thank you very much for being here and welcome.

Kate Guastaferro:

Thank you for having me.

Aaron Wagner:

To get things started, can you introduce yourself to our listeners by explaining your background?

Kate Guastaferro:

Sure. I grew up in Chicago and went to college in Boston, probably my favorite city in the world. Go Red Sox. But in undergrad, I studied medical anthropology and had the opportunity to study abroad in China. And that really launched my interest in public health, led me to grad school eventually at Georgia State University, and I started grad school wanting to be an infectious disease epidemiologist. Very different from where I ended up.

Kate Guastaferro:

But I had an experience, an opportunity to work as a graduate research assistant with someone who designed behavioral interventions and everything clicked for me. After my masters, I worked as a study coordinator for a while and then eventually returned back to get my PhD in public health, and my expertise is in health promotion and behavior change.

Aaron Wagner:

Thank you very much. None of that sounds very much like the Methodology Center. What brought you here?

Kate Guastaferro:

It doesn't, but I came here for PAMT, the Prevention and Methodology Training Program. It was the perfect fit for me. I view myself as a prevention scientist and wanted to strengthen my methodological background. So the postdoc gave me opportunity to strengthen both aspects. In my prevention side, I got the specific mentorship on that and then I got the methods at the Methodology Center to really refine those skills.

Aaron Wagner:

You've been working with Linda since joining PAMT in 2016. What types of projects have you been involved in at the Methodology Center since that time?

Kate Guastaferro:

Yes, so I've had the privilege of working with Linda on the Multi-Phase Optimization Strategy. That's really what brought me to PAMT in the first place.

Aaron Wagner:

And so, what is the Multi-phase Optimization Strategy or MOST?

Kate Guastaferro:

MOST is an engineering inspired framework for developing, optimizing, and evaluating multi-component behavioral interventions.

Aaron Wagner:

That's a mouthful. Could you break that down a little bit more?

Kate Guastaferro:

Yeah. In layman's terms, it's a way to empirically arrive at the most effective intervention, targeting your desired outcome given constraints. And those constraints are real world things like money to deliver an intervention, time to deliver an intervention or how you might actually train people to do it.

Aaron Wagner:

So yeah, basically taking into account the barriers that will be faced during intervention implementation and building them into the design process.

Kate Guastaferro:

Right. Those are all things interventions normally come across but the difference is in MOST, we take into account those things from the outset.

Aaron Wagner:

All right. Well, for the rest of this podcast, we are going to be focusing more on the prevention side of your work simply because we have several podcasts about MOST. If you are new to the Multi-Phase Optimization Strategy, I recommend starting with podcast 32, Linda reading the preface to her book on MOST, and it is a great audio introduction to the topic. As we were saying, the prevention side of your research is a huge part of your identity, as well, academically. Tell us about that work.

Kate Guastaferro:

The prevention side of my work is the prevention of child maltreatment. And I'm very committed to this and passionate about it as a topic. My graduate training focused on the prevention of neglect in a very specific parenting program. And when I came to Penn State as a PAMT postdoc, I wanted a broader spectrum of expertise when it came to maltreatment. And so, in my postdoc and since then, I've really tried to extend my expertise into different forms of maltreatment.

Aaron Wagner:

And who have you been working with and what sort of maltreatment have you been looking at?

Kate Guastaferro:

Sure. Beginning with PAMT, I started a collaboration with Dr. Jenny Newell, who is the director of the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network and have had the opportunity to continue working with her and Linda since my postdoc. But working with Jenny, my focus is on the prevention of sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

In terms of sexual abuse prevention, what are you working on right now?

Kate Guastaferro:

For the past two years, I've been working with Jenny on a statewide sexual abuse prevention initiative. The unique aspect of this prevention work is that it's comprehensive. And so, what we mean by comprehensive is that it's targeting multiple components of the population to prevent sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

What components?

Kate Guastaferro:

The intervention targets adults in the community, general community members, children specifically, and then also, at-risk parents. And what we think is together, those three populations provide a truly comprehensive prevention framework for sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

Okay. Help me think through why those three populations are significant. Children is somewhat self evident. They are the potential victims.

Kate Guastaferro:

Right. There's a long history of teaching children to "harden the target", make it more difficult for perpetrators to access kids. And that's important, right? We do want to teach kids skills to protect themselves, but it can't be the only way that we attempt to prevent sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

What other skills do kids need?

Kate Guastaferro:

Kids also need a parent or adults in their lives who have the skills to create a protective environment for them. And so, our strategy includes adults in the community, whether you have a child or not, you still have a role in protecting children from sexual abuse. And then the third piece are at-risk parents. And there is a wealth of research that shows children and families who are at risk for other types of maltreatment have an increased risk for sexual abuse.

Kate Guastaferro:

And that's not to say that that parent is sexually abusing their child at all. That's actually quite unlikely. But instead, it's about the environment that the child lives in, where their access is made available to other adults.

Aaron Wagner:

Right, right. I would imagine an unstable home situation as one example of something that would make a kid more vulnerable to sexual abuse, just because they're not around the same people all the time. And so, being exposed to more adults means greater risk.

Kate Guastaferro:

Right. And who are those adults or are there any adults even around who are looking out for the kid? And so, there's probably a number of ways we could go about preventing this, but we selected community focused intervention, school focus, meaning child focused intervention and then this at-risk parent intervention because they're three well-defined populations and together we thought that they had the best evidence and the most rigorous interventions already in place to target the prevention of sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

As you targeted those three, what did you find and what have you been doing?

Kate Guastaferro:

We, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, have rolled out these interventions targeting these three different populations across five counties all over the state. And so, we in a staggered implementation design, rolled out these different interventions.

Kate Guastaferro:

First we rolled out the community intervention targeting any adult in the community. Next, we rolled out the school piece where we're focusing only on second graders, and it could be so much more, but that was the constraint of our project as it is.

Aaron Wagner:

Sure, sure. Such as the nature of research.

Kate Guastaferro:

Yes. And then, we're just about to launch the third piece, which is that at-risk parent component. And so, I spend a lot of time going out and training people to deliver these interventions and also conducting research on those interventions.

Aaron Wagner:

When you say conducting research on those interventions, what does that entail?

Kate Guastaferro:

I am looking at the effect of those interventions on changing, particularly knowledge and attitudes, and also, behaviors on how to prevent sexual abuse. The interventions that we're implementing are already evidence-based, but what we're interested in is if it's effective in this setting. And then also, are those gains in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors maintained over time? So I'm looking at the direct effect of each one of the components.

Kate Guastaferro:

And then on the back end, we will look at the effect of all of those different components, how they play out together. So as we add them in, what does that affect?

Aaron Wagner:

Right. Is it additive?

Kate Guastaferro:

Yeah. And the way that we'll look at that, is not only through individual components, that's what we call each one of the interventions. But also, looking at substantiation rates of administrative data, so calls into child line in Pennsylvania that are allegations or reports of sexual abuse. So how does the implementation of these different interventions affect the rates as well?

Aaron Wagner:

Yeah, that's really exciting. I mean, the idea of being able to reduce child sexual abuse, what could be more vital?

Kate Guastaferro:

I couldn't agree more and just because numbers excite me, and also probably most of our listeners-

Aaron Wagner:

I think that's a fair guess.

Kate Guastaferro:

In 2017, there were about 60,000 kids across the United States that were victims of sexual abuse. And that's, in my opinion and many other researchers, a gross underestimate of the issue. And while we have seen significant declines in sexual abuse over the past almost 30 years, the fact that 60,000 kids are experiencing this at all, breaks my heart and motivates me. And there's no reason that this number can't be zero, in my opinion.

Aaron Wagner:

That's a day I think we all look forward to. So shifting gears a bit, as I heard you describe your work, I didn't hear MOST. How has your training at the Methodology Center influenced your methodological approach to this research?

Kate Guastaferro:

That's a good question. And no, it doesn't include MOST, but I think that's what I learned. I learned how to conduct the Multi-phase Optimization Strategy and I learned about my population and how what was required of MOST, specifically randomization, was not going to be possible. And so, my time in the Methodology Center and my training here has really led me to matching the right experimental design with my research question and also, the setting. And so, yes, MOST is not a part of my project right now, but it could be in the future and that's my hope.

Aaron Wagner:

Briefly, why isn't randomization possible in your project?

Kate Guastaferro:

If we were to randomize, we wouldn't need a huge sample of different counties. So that's the level our unit of analysis and resource wise and also my sanity wise, that wasn't going to be possible. Also, I think in this line of research you get into a little bit of an ethical debate. This is my opinion, but if I know this intervention works, why am I going to randomize someone to not get it? So I think that's an important nuance of experimental design and something I learned since being at the Methodology Center.

Aaron Wagner:

Sexual abuse is an extremely difficult topic to broach. Do you run into any resistance to this work and if so, why do you think that is?

Kate Guastaferro:

I think you're right. It is a sensitive topic. I do run into resistance regularly. On one hand, it's because people don't want to talk about it. There's shame around it, there's stigma, and so they're not even willing to entertain it. That's probably more on the individual level of things.

Kate Guastaferro:

Where I work primarily, is getting organizations to implement these interventions, right? And at the organizational level, having them commit to preventing sexual abuse in their mind seems like they're acknowledging that it's a problem in their organization. And it could be, but it might not be. And whether it is or isn't, I personally don't think is the point. It's about creating this protective environment and supporting kids, making it healthy for them.

Aaron Wagner:

It's a shame when people's egos and fears get in the way of doing the right thing.

Kate Guastaferro:

Right. And so, I think part of my job is educating anyone and everyone about the prevalence and the reach of sexual abuse and maltreatment, in general. There's likely someone you know who's either experienced sexual abuse or maltreatment or knows someone. And so, we're all connected to it and that's why I think it's really important to have this comprehensive all hands on deck strategy to the prevention of sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

Well, while we're on that topic, are there a few basic concepts that people should know about sexual abuse and sexual abuse prevention?

Kate Guastaferro:

Yes. I think there are a few basic things everyone can learn and understand. First of all, sexual abuse is non-discriminatory. It affects all ages, all genders, all races, all socioeconomic status. It's a truly significant problem that affects anyone. It's pervasive.

Kate Guastaferro:

Second thing that I would say is really important to understand. To prevent sexual abuse, we need a comprehensive effort. As I said, it can't just be the child's responsibility to protect themselves. We're talking about kids. It's not just mom and dad's job to protect their child. And it's really about creating this protective environment in the community.

Aaron Wagner:

What... oh, sorry to interrupt. What does the community piece look like when you go out there and work on that?

Kate Guastaferro:

It's interesting. I think that there is a cultural shift happening. We're working in Pennsylvania, so it's just a small snapshot. I can't speak for the whole country, but I think across the board, the more stories that come out in the media about sexual abuse, as horrific as they are, it creates an opportunity for me to challenge people and to think about what they can do to make a step towards protecting children.

Aaron Wagner:

What do you see for this research moving forward?

Kate Guastaferro:

In the future, what I would like to do is incorporate MOST in a more direct way with my sexual abuse prevention efforts. And so, what that means is thinking about our interventions that are targeting sexual abuse prevention and how we can make them the most effective, the most efficient, scalable, economical, that they can be so that we're maximizing our impact and our reach of those programs.

Kate Guastaferro:

And so longterm, what I hope for my career and for the problem as it is, is to integrate MOST with the prevention of sexual abuse.

Aaron Wagner:

And get those numbers down to zero.

Kate Guastaferro:

That's right.

Aaron Wagner:

Thank you, Kate, very much.

Kate Guastaferro:

Thank you.

Aaron Wagner:

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