

## Assessing Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse

By

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A widely reported finding in mental health journals and other media sources is that allegations of child sexual abuse are increasing. Due to their nature, these allegations require investigation in order to distinguish bona fide accusations from those that are false. In many cases definitive physical evidence does not exist and other means of establishing the veracity of a child's allegations are sought. Psychologists with expertise in forensic interviewing of children are often called upon to investigate child sexual abuse allegations and to offer opinions regarding their reliability and credibility. It is important that psychologists, as well as other forensic interviewers, utilize research-based interview procedures in order to maximize the trustworthiness of their findings. The purpose of this article is to discuss a few relevant issues in regards to assessing child abuse allegations, as well as related research findings.

It is important for examiners to begin inquiries without preconceived beliefs regarding the validity of the child sexual abuse allegations and to carefully consider a number of different issues. A primary consideration involves the style, manner and explicitness of a child's report of the alleged acts (Risin and McNamara, 1989). For example, when children have not been exposed to pre-interview suggestive influences, graphic, credibly detailed reports tend to be more indicative that abuse has occurred in comparison to vague and implausible reports. It is also necessary to elicit abuse-relevant details about the context in which the alleged behavior occurred. Child abuse allegations are liable to be more credible when the child can identify: who perpetrated the alleged abuse; where the alleged abuse occurred; what acts were done to the child or what acts the child was made to perform; what happened to any clothing that the child and alleged offender were wearing, and whether the alleged offender said anything about telling or not telling another adult about what occurred.

### **Child Abuse Allegations: Common Misconceptions**

A common belief in cases of alleged child sexual abuse is that if a child has advanced sexual knowledge for his/her age, it could only have been gained from direct sexual contact with the accused adult. Although this is one possibility, children also gain sexual knowledge from other sources. For example, some children learn about sex by witnessing parents during sexual activity, from looking through magazines or by watching sex acts portrayed on movies or television. Other children may have been exposed to peers who inform them about sex. One study (Gordon, Schroeder, Abrams, 1990) found that sexually abused and non-abused children did not differ significantly with respect to their knowledge about sexual behavior.

A controversial issue related to child abuse allegations involves whether children make

false allegations. One situation where this is alleged to occur is in highly contested divorce disputes. These allegations can be an effective means for the alleging parent to gain control of a situation, particularly because the accusation is likely to bring legal proceedings to an immediate halt and to result in the accused parent having restrictions imposed on his/her contact with the child.

Research (Doris, 1991) has found that younger children are susceptible to inaccurately report events, albeit not maliciously or intentionally. These errors in reporting are due to the fact that younger children do not always completely encode events into memory and can be misled by post-event information that distorts memory and recall. Thus, repeatedly asking (mis)leading questions about an event can shape children's memories and can affect the reliability and validity of their accounts.

As an aid in investigating child abuse allegations, some examiners utilize anatomically correct dolls and consider this procedure a "test" for sexual abuse. This conceptualization is misleading, however, and the use of anatomical dolls is more accurately viewed as a non-verbal means of expression through physical demonstration. Reliance on these dolls is controversial because of the mixed findings in the research literature. For example, one study (Melton and Limber, 1989) found that most children will visually explore and physically manipulate the dolls' genitalia, regardless of whether or not the children are known to have been abused. Another limitation involves the lack of established norms for interpreting results, particularly when used with children who are unfamiliar with anatomically correct dolls and who manipulate them in unusual ways.

In investigations utilizing dolls, it is important to take the precaution of ensuring that the child understands that the dolls are being used for representational purposes; that one doll represents the child and the other doll represents someone else (i.e., the alleged abuser). Failure to properly educate the child regarding this issue and verifying that the child comprehends this explanation is a serious oversight that can undermine the validity of an examiner's conclusions.

Recanting allegations also occurs in some cases of alleged child sexual abuse and, invariably, adds uncertainty to the situation. While perpetrators are eager to characterize recantations as evidence confirming that the allegation is false, there may be other reasons that a child takes back an accusation (Gordon, Schroeder and Abrams, 1990). For example, some children may not understand the consequences of these allegations, including that a parent would be removed from the home or jailed. Other children may encounter a withdrawal of emotional support from the non-accused parent and may recant an allegation as a means of getting back into that parent's good grace or as a means of restoring the family to its pre-accusation state. Recantations can be motivated by different factors and must be carefully assessed prior to determining their veracity and relevance to the allegation itself.

## References

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