

RESEARCH

BELIEVING CHILDREN VS. BEING NEUTRAL: WHAT YOU THINK CAN INFLUENCE YOUR JUDGMENTS ABOUT SUSPECTED VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

—by Kathleen Kendall-Tackett

Over the last few years, professionals have heard two contradictory messages about children's truthfulness regarding sexual abuse. Some writers have encouraged professionals to believe that children rarely lie about sexual abuse, while others emphasize the importance of maintaining a neutral stance when approaching suspected child victims. People who argue for believing children state that children are more likely to open up to someone who approaches them with an attitude of belief rather than skepticism. On the other hand, others point out that interviewers need to be neutral because the possibility of false allegations looms large, especially in cases involving custody or a preschool-age child.

Does it make a difference whether interviewers tend to believe children or interview them neutrally? A recent survey indicates that it does (Kendall-Tackett and Watson, in press). The authors asked 201 Boston-area professionals to describe how they interviewed suspected victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, subjects were asked to describe their initial expectation when approaching children by asking them to answer the following question: "When you talk to children about sexual abuse, do you tend to believe the child unless there is evidence to the contrary, doubt the child unless there is evidence to the contrary, or start with no opinion one way or another?"

One hundred-thirty (65%) professionals indicated that they tend to believe the child, and 70 (35%) indicated that they are neutral (one person did not answer the question). Table 1 shows how subjects of all different professions answered this question.

Interestingly, the two different expectations cross all professional boundaries. We expected that law enforcement professionals would tend to be more neutral in their approach and that mental health workers would tend to believe children. By and large this is true; however, in many instances it is not. These differences would only be academically interesting if they had not been shown to influence perceptions of behavioral indicators of sexual abuse.

The most striking example of the influence of expectation was seen in perceptions of children's behavior with anatomical dolls without verbal description of abuse. Subjects were asked to rate various behaviors as to whether they were convincing that abuse had occurred. (Subjects answered questions and did not view actual children.) Not sur-

Table 1
Professionals' Expectations about Children's Truthfulness about Being Sexually Abused

PROFESSION	EXPECTATION			
	Believe #	Believe %	Neutral #	Neutral %
Mental Health Professionals				
Psychologist	26	74	9	26
Psychiatrist	3	75	1	25
Therapist	4	44	5	56
Social Worker	51	78	15	22
Intern	1	50	1	50
Nurse Clinical Specialist	5	71	2	29
Other Mental Health Professions	3	75	1	25
Law Enforcement Professionals				
Asst. District Attorney	4	40	6	60
Law Enforcement Officer	22	44	28	56
Victim/Witness Advocate	5	83	1	17
Other DA Employee	6	86	1	14
Total	130	(65%)	70	(35%)

prisingly, people who believe children tended to rate these indicators as more convincing than those who started from a neutral position. The effect of expectation appeared even after gender and profession of the interviewer, and purpose of the interview (investigative vs. therapeutic) were statistically controlled for.

One caution is in order for interpreting these findings, however. Some people assume that professionals who believe children are misleadingly biased. Unfortunately, the data available from this study cannot tell us whether professionals who believe children or those who are neutral are inaccurate in their judgments: we can't tell which expectation leads to misleading bias. Indeed, future research might reveal that people who are neutral are misleadingly biased against children, because the neutral position mistakenly assumes that there is only a 50-50 chance that the child is telling the truth.

Interestingly, in another analysis of this data, professionals' expectations were not related to the number of false reports that they reported in their total caseloads. Both subjects who believe children and those who are neutral reported that a very small percentage (approximately 5%) of children they worked with had said they were abused when they were not. Expectations about children's truthfulness appear only to influence perceptions of behavioral indicators.

These findings suggest that we should be aware that expectations can influence our perceptions of symptoms of abuse. Perhaps more important, persons who train inter-

viewers should be aware that if they encourage either believing children or being neutral, they are influencing the future perceptions of their trainees. We currently act as if differing expectations do not matter, but the present research indicates that they do. Finally, these findings indicate a need for more detailed research on interviewers' expectations. We need to know whether believing or being neutral leads to the most accurate information, and which has the least damaging effect on suspected victims.

References

Kendall-Tackett, K. A., and Watson, M.W. (in press). Factors that influence professionals' perceptions of behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*

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CALL FOR RESEARCH PAPERS

The San Diego Conference on Responding to Child Maltreatment, to be held January 22-25, 1992, is seeking papers pertaining to child abuse. One of four research sessions will be devoted to foster care issues; the other three will be open. Papers should present original research, not previously published. Research may be from any discipline, and previous presentation will not be disqualifying. Graduate students are encouraged to submit. Four-hundred word abstracts should be mailed to John Landsverk, PhD, Center for Child Protection, Children's Hospital of San Diego, 8001 Frost St., San Diego CA 92123. **Deadline for submission is November 1, 1991.** Presentations will be chosen by November 15, 1991.