

EVALUATION AND TREATMENT

Can We Believe What Children Say About Sexual Abuse?

-by John E. B. Myers

Child sexual abuse is tragic and common (Finkelhor, 1994). In most cases there is no medical evidence of abuse, and the child is the only eyewitness (Bays & Chadwick, 1993). It often happens, therefore, that the child's word is the only proof. But is the word of a young child--perhaps only three or four years old--worthy of belief? Increasingly, the print and broadcast media raise doubts about young children's memory, suggestibility, and truthfulness, and about the questioning techniques used by professionals who interview children about suspected sexual abuse (Myers, 1994).

At the outset it is worth asking whether children deliberately lie about sexual abuse. By age three, children learn to bend the truth. There is no evidence, however, that children are any more or less prone to lie than adults (Berliner, 1988; Melton, 1981). Although children sometimes deliberately fabricate allegations of sexual abuse, research reveals that fabrication is uncommon, particularly among young children (Myers, 1992, § 4.4). Moreover, young children are not adept at maintaining a lie (Yates & Musty, 1988).

No, it is not the deliberate lie that is worrisome. Rather, concern focuses on the possibility that young children who are *not* abused may be coached or led into believing that they are! Is this possible? If it is, who would do such a thing? Some harsh and unbalanced critics envision an army of corrupt and malevolent professionals on a witch hunt of false allegations (Eberle & Eberle, 1993). There is no proof of a witch hunt. There is anecdotal evidence,

however, that a few well-intentioned but misguided interviewers use questioning techniques that could distort or contaminate children's memories (State v. Michaels, 1993). In rare cases, improper interviewing may actually create a "memory" of abuse that never happened, or distort recollection of events that did occur (Loftus, 1993). In such cases children describe nonexistent abuse, all the while believing what they say. Although wholesale creation of abuse "memories" appears to be rare, the possibility cannot be ignored.

Primary concern about interviewing young children focuses on their suggestibility and memory. Although memory skills increase with age, young children, including preschoolers, have good memories (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Fivush & Hudson, 1990; Steward, Bussey, Goodman & Saywitz, 1993). Robyn Fivush of Emory University observes that research on children's memory has shown that their recall can be quite accurate (Fivush, 1993). Moreover, preschoolers are often as accurate as older children. Some research indicates that young children's recall for some events may not be as strong as the recall of adults, and that young children's recall may fade more quickly than adults' (Warren & Hagood, in

press). Nevertheless, the developmental literature clearly demonstrates that young children have the memory capacity to recall events. Lynne Baker-Ward of North Carolina State University, and her colleagues, write that "Recent investigations of preschoolers' long-term retention of selected personal experiences have successfully challenged earlier views of young children's recall abilities as being quite restricted . . . Young children's reports of personally experienced events can be extensive and accurate" (Baker-Ward, Ornstein, Larus & Clubb, 1993, pp. 1519, 1530). Concern about interviews should not focus on children's memory ability, which is good. Rather, the focus should be on suggestibility.

By age ten or eleven, children appear to be no more suggestible than adults (Saywitz & Snyder, 1993). This is not to say, of course, that children approaching adolescence are not suggestible. Psychologists have long documented suggestibility in adults (Loftus, 1979). The important point is that concern about suggestibility does not have to be greater in older children than in adults. Turning to young children, most studies find that young children, particularly preschoolers, can be more suggestible than older children and adults (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Ceci & Bruck, 1993a; Doris, 1991; Lepore & Sescio, in press). Research also discloses, however, that young children are better at resisting suggestive and misleading questions than many adults believe (Goodman & Bottoms, 1993). Thus, concern about young children's suggestibility is well-founded, but should not be exaggerated.

Psychologists continue their research on young children's suggestibility. All the researchers share the goal of greater understanding, although they approach children's suggestibility from differing perspectives. One group of researchers emphasizes children's suggestibility (See Ceci & Bruck, 1993). Stephen Ceci of Cornell University typifies this approach. Ceci structures some of his experiments to highlight children's suggestibility. Not surprisingly, experiments designed to demonstrate suggestibility do just that. Given the right circumstances, young children can be quite suggestible. Thus, when preschoolers are interviewed over and over again with highly misleading questions, many children eventually make inaccurate statements.

A second group of researchers take a different approach (Goodman & Bottoms, 1993). Although they fully appreciate the suggestibility of young children, researchers in this second group design experiments that highlight children's strengths as well as their weaknesses. Gail Goodman of the University of California at Davis and Karen Saywitz of UCLA are prominent in the second group. Research by Goodman, Saywitz and others discloses that young children often are able to resist misleading questions (Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas & Moan, 1991).

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The two approaches described above are not at loggerheads. Researchers like Ceci, who concentrate on children's suggestibility, remind us of the critical need to improve the skills of the police officers, social workers, and other professionals interviewing children. At the same time, researchers like Goodman and Saywitz highlight children's strengths, and give us confidence that when children are interviewed by competent professionals, it is appropriate to have reasonable confidence in what children say.

Research psychologists like Ceci, Goodman, and Saywitz play a decisive role in the debate over children's suggestibility. Judges, legislators, policy makers, mental health professionals, attorneys, and the media, pay close attention to the research findings and public pronouncements of academic psychologists. Because their statements have direct implications for policy and practice, prominent researchers have an obligation to present a balanced picture of children's suggestibility. Society is predisposed to discount children's statements about sexual abuse. With this predisposition in mind, researchers whose work emphasizes children's greater suggestibility have a special duty to remind listeners that children do not have a monopoly on suggestibility, and that adults are suggestible as well. Too often in public discourse about children's suggestibility, influential professionals leave the impression that the "suggestibility problem" is unique to children. This inaccurate impression does a disservice to children and to the truth.

How then should interviews of young children proceed? Most experts agree that suggestive questions should be avoided when possible (APSAC, 1990; Faller, 1990). But here's the rub! With young children it is often impossible to avoid suggestive questions, and it is the need for suggestive questions with young children that raises the central dilemma facing interviewers. Although young children are most at risk of suggestibility, young children often *require* suggestive questions to trigger memory (Fivush, 1993; Pipe, Gee & Wilson, 1993). This is so for two reasons, one having to do with the psychological dynamics of sexual abuse, the other with normal child development.

The first reason for suggestive questions during interviews of young children relates to the nature of child sexual abuse. Many sexually abused children hesitate to disclose their abuse (Summit, 1983). Abused children often are threatened into silence, many are ambivalent about disclosing, and some are embarrassed. Teena Sorensen and Barbara Snow examined interviews of 116 sexually abused children and found that nearly 80% of the children initially denied their abuse or hesitated to

disclose (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Thus, the very nature of child sexual abuse inhibits disclosure, and professionals sometimes have little choice but to help children along by asking suggestive questions.

The second reason suggestive questions may be necessary is youth itself. Although preschoolers have excellent memories, young children often need very specific questions to trigger their memories. Young children usually do not provide much information in response to non-specific, open-ended questions like, "Do you know why I'm asking these questions?" or, "Why are we talking today?" To add an illustration that parents can relate to, ask your four- or five-year-old, "What happened at preschool today?" and the answer is predictable, "Nothing" or, "I played." It is not that the child cannot remember. Rather, the youngster needs specific questions to facilitate memory and encourage descriptive communication. Thus, during interviews of young children who may be sexually abused, it is often necessary *for developmental reasons* to ask specific questions, some of which are suggestive.

When suggestive questions are postponed until less worrisome techniques prove unsuccessful, interviewers are often justified in asking such questions. Of course, as the number of suggestive questions goes up, confidence in the child's statements goes down. It must be remembered, however, that answers to suggestive questions are often *true*! The challenge is to reduce the dependence on such questions while, at the same time, respecting the need for them. Fortunately, Gail Goodman, Karen Saywitz, Amye Warren, and others are producing valuable research on techniques to lower children's suggestibility (Batterman-Faunce & Goodman, 1993; Saywitz & Snyder, 1993; Warren, Hulse-Trotter & Tubbs, 1991).

In the final analysis there is no single "correct" way to interview young children, although professionals increasingly agree on basic "dos" and "don'ts." Interviewers usually begin by making children feel comfortable. Young children are better at resisting misleading questions when they are put at ease (Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney & Rudy, 1991). Children should be told in language they understand that it is "okay" to say, "I don't know" or "I don't remember," and that they should feel free to correct and disagree with the interviewer (Geiselman, Saywitz & Bornstein, 1993). Initial questioning should be as open-ended and non-specific as possible. If the child does not respond to such questions--and many young children do not--then the interviewer asks specific questions that focus the child's attention on particular topics. When specific questions are asked, the interviewer proceeds along a continuum, usually beginning with questions that focus the child's attention on a particular subject, and, when necessary, moving gradually to more specific questions, some of which are suggestive (Myers, 1992a).

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Interviewing young children is a delicate and difficult task. Done poorly, interviews undermine the ability to protect children and raise the specter of false allegations. Done well, interviews help children reveal their memories

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John E. B. Myers, JD, is Professor of Law at McGeorge School of Law, University of the Pacific. Professor Myers is also a member of APSAC's Advisory Board

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