

Measurement in child abuse research

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ment as they pertain to child maltreatment. The review monograph and computer database are currently under development and should be available in several months. We hope that these products will significantly advance the effort to define constructs and develop measures so critical to the child abuse field at this time.

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PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE:

The Role of Child Interview Specialists

—by Paul Stern, and
Bill Walsh

In the following exchange, two experienced professionals take opposing views on the role of child interview specialists in sexual abuse investigations.

USING THE CHILD INTERVIEW SPECIALIST TO ACHIEVE THE MOST PROFESSIONAL INTERVIEW

—by Paul Stern

Effectively interviewing a child suspected of being a victim of sexual abuse is a difficult task that requires special skills and sensitivity. This author believes that in criminal investigations the primary investigative interview should be conducted by a specially trained Child Interview Specialist (CIS).

Purpose of the interview

The purpose of the investigative interview is to gather as much reliable and accurate information as possible from a child about an allegation of sexual abuse (Toth, Whalen, and Dinsmore, 1987). It is the first opportunity law enforcement has to obtain the specifics of the abuse allegations firsthand. The interviewer must simultaneously make introductions, build rapport and trust, be supportive, ascertain the language skills of the child, and empower the child to say "I don't know," "That's wrong," or "I don't want to talk."

The interviewer must solicit detailed information about the abuse, obtain specific facts to satisfy statutory requirements, and fully document all that is said. To accomplish all this, an interviewer must be familiar with such issues as the dynamics of child abuse (Conte and Schuerman, 1987), children's developmental skills (Saywitz, 1990) and linguistic capabilities (Richardson, 1990), and the importance of avoiding unnecessarily leading or sug-

gestive questions (Goodman and Clarke-Stewart, 1991). The interviewer should be prepared for dealing with unresponsive children (MacFarlane and Krebs, 1986), recantation (Summit, 1983), avoidant children (Davies and Montegna, 1990), and the potential need for interview aids such as anatomical dolls (Everson and Boat, 1990). The interviewer must stay current with the research regarding children's disclosures of abuse and interview processes.

The Child Interview Specialist (CIS) combines the best of both disciplines: an interviewer trained in the best techniques for talking with child victims and a professional familiar with the needs of law enforcement.

Who should perform the interview?

Traditionally, police officers have been responsible for conducting child interviews. Police officers who possess the knowledge and skills outlined above can do an outstanding job in obtaining reliable disclosures (Spaulding, 1987). However, line officers often lack the specialized training, skills, or focus to conduct the most proficient interview possible. As the investigation of child sexual abuse becomes more specialized, so should the professionalism of those responsible for each of the investigative steps. Some have argued that rather than shift the burden of interviewing away from law enforcement, we should "be upgrading these investigatory systems so that investigators can do their job in the most skilled and professional manner possible" (Saunders, 1993). While that might be true, the reality of police agency budgetary constraints and competing criminal justice priorities makes such upgrading and ongoing training for multiple police officers unlikely.

Some have suggested that children suspected of being victims of child sexual abuse should be interviewed by mental health professionals (e.g., Lippmann, 1993). However, many mental health professionals lack expertise in the needs of the law enforcement community, a requirement for anyone conducting investigative interviews.

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One example of the CIS system

In 1987, Snohomish County, Washington, began to use CISs to conduct primary investigative interviews with children suspected of being victims of sexual abuse. These specialists are employees of the local hospital-based sexual assault center, which provides training, supervision, and funding, and handles all administrative responsibilities. In 1993, the two full-time and three part-time CISs performed over 700 interviews with children. The most experienced of our CIS's has conducted more than 2,500 interviews.

Allegations of sexual abuse are first routinely investigated by a patrol officer. He or she will take a minimal amount of information from the child, to

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ascertain the nature of the allegation, whether specific witnesses should be contacted or a medical exam scheduled, and whether an immediate arrest is warranted. Thereafter, unless the child is eager to disclose, the child's guardian is asked to contact a sex crimes detective to arrange a formal interview with the child.

CISs do not perform "assessments" or "evaluations" of the child, draw no conclusion as to whether the allegations are truthful, and will not be used as experts on the issue of whether abuse occurred.

Because prosecutors and detectives work with only a few interviewers, interviewers can fine-tune their skills through the immediate feedback of other professionals. With experience, they come to learn more precisely what information prosecutors and detectives must have in assessing the legal sufficiency of a case (e.g., dates, places, the child's ability to distinguish between separate instances). This precision decreases the need for multiple interviews, making the process that much easier for the child. Interviews are not electronically recorded, an informed decision made after a thorough review of advantages and disadvantages of videotaping (see Stern and Stephenson, 1992). Instead, interviewers make a verbatim transcript, noting every question, every answer, and every significant gesture. This transcript, forwarded immediately to the detective and to the prosecutor, allows those reviewing the interview to be confident of its integrity, as there will be no muffled voices lost, no misunderstanding of words spoken softly, no child walking out of camera vision, and no equipment malfunction.

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CISs make excellent witnesses in court. When a child's statement is to be introduced into evidence under a child hearsay statute (at least 28 states have such statutes: Whitcomb, 1992; see, e.g., RCW 9A.44.120), the CIS is called upon to testify. Having garnered so much experience in this arena, these professionals have become seasoned and respected witnesses. Their expertise, both as interviewers and as witnesses, supports the credibility of the disclosures and enhances the integrity of the entire process. Additionally, over time, the competence and integrity of the CISs have become known to local lawyers and judges. As a result, the interviewers are increasingly less subject to aggressive cross-examination. This can be especially helpful in a time when the prevailing defense strategy is to attack the interviewer (Myers, 1991).

Advantages for law enforcement

CISs free the police officer to do what he or she is best trained to do: investigate the allegations. The police officer can use his or her time to seek corroborative evidence, contact witnesses, and develop the best strategy to use in interrogating the

suspect. When interviewing the suspected offender, the officer is also able to do so in a slightly more detached manner, having not personally encountered the emotions of the child. This has been cited as a significant factor in obtaining an increased number of confessions from offenders by Snohomish County Sheriff's detectives since the CIS program was introduced (Howard, 1992). Child abuse detectives have also reported a much lower "burnout" rate since they have been freed of the burdensome task of interviewing children. As a result, the detective's tenure in the child abuse unit has become longer, resulting in a more experienced investigative force (Howard, 1992).

Conclusion

I do not contend that the use of CISs is the only way of investigating child abuse allegations, or that police officers are by definition inappropriate interviewers of children. I do contend, however, that using trained professional Child Interview Specialists has substantial advantages. For these professionals, staying current with the latest research and practice innovations relevant to child interviewing is not haphazard or catch-as-catch-can, but a systematic part of their workday. Given that the goal of the investigation should be to obtain the most thorough, reliable, and non-traumatic interview with the child as possible, having a rigorously-trained, experienced specialist conduct the interview is essential. CISs are in the best position to provide the greatest integrity and competence to that critical step in the process, the interview.

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LAW ENFORCEMENT SHOULD CONTROL THE INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWS

—by Bill Walsh

I agree with most of Paul Stern's statements about the purpose, importance, and difficulty of investigative interviews in child sexual abuse cases. But when he advocates the use of interview specialists in place of police officers and suggests that they will "bring greater skills and knowledge to this task," I must disagree.

Replication

I am not suggesting that Snohomish County, Washington, abandon its use of Child Interview Specialists. Because they have been using this practice since 1987, it has apparently proven effective in that community. Stern's mistake is assuming that this program will enjoy the same success in other jurisdictions.

One reason it will not work in the majority of other communities is purely economic. In this era when public agencies, including police departments, CPS agencies, and district attorneys' offices are faced with shrinking budgets, few jurisdictions can afford to add an interview specialist to their staff. Snohomish County has apparently not had to address this fiscal obstacle since the sexual assault center is assuming all the costs of the CIS program, but most jurisdictions are not so fortunate.

Although it might be possible to overcome the financial obstacle related to using an interview specialist by having several agencies or jurisdictions share the cost, this arrangement would lead to problems of location and logistics. If the interview site was not conveniently located, lengthy travel times for victims, parents, police, and CPS workers would be a problem.

Law enforcement role

Stern states several times that police officers are capable of conducting competent interviews of children. Then why introduce a CIS into the criminal investigation process? One reason presented is that using professional interviewers "frees the police officer to do what he or she is best trained to do:

investigate allegations." However, the criminal investigation starts with hearing the victim's account. In the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases, data obtained from the investigative interview is the foundation of the investigation. The following is a partial list of issues that the investigator must evaluate based on information obtained in the interview:

1. extent and frequency of the abuse, and proper charges to be filed.
2. possibility of additional victims and/or offenders.
3. possibility of the existence of physical, medical, or testimonial evidence.
4. utility of search warrants, surveillance, or other investigative techniques such as one-party consent telephone calls, or photo lineups.
5. issues of venue and statute of limitations.
6. proper timing of the arrest and the filing of charges.
7. interrogation strategy to be used on the suspect.

To properly make these decisions, it is best for the investigator to conduct the interview or, at least, observe it first hand. One of the biggest mistakes currently being made by law enforcement officers in child abuse cases is failing to assume the lead role in the criminal investigation. I think law enforcement officers should do more investigative interviews, not fewer.

Trained investigators should be brought in as soon as possible, just as law enforcement responds to other types of crime. An initial report is taken by a patrol officer, as Stern indicates, and then assigned to an investigator for a more thorough follow-up investigation. If personnel permits, it is best to have a "call back" system whereby detectives are available for the follow-up interview regardless of the hour of the day or the day of the week. In our agency, patrol officers will often contact the on-call detective when they first learn of the allegation. In some cases, detectives conduct the investigative interview immediately, thereby eliminating the need for a patrol officer to conduct even a preliminary interview.

When investigators are personally involved in

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It is critical for the investigator to convey to the suspect that the investigator has interviewed the child and is confident of the suspect's guilt. If the suspect asks the interrogator, "Have you talked to my daughter?" the interrogator must be able to answer that he or she has done so, and knows what has happened.

the investigative interview, they can become involved in the case soon after the initial disclosure. In addition to increasing the possibility of recovering physical and medical evidence, an early entry into the case provides the detective with an opportunity to investigate suspects before they are aware that they are under scrutiny, thus greatly improving the chance for a successful interrogation.

Stern states that by not interviewing the child, the investigator is able to interview the suspect "in a slightly more detached manner, having not personally encountered the emotions of the child." But

this is not necessarily an advantage. It is critical for the investigator to convey to the suspect that the investigator has interviewed the child and is confident of the suspect's guilt. If the suspect asks the interrogator, "Have you talked to my daughter?" the interrogator must be able to answer that he or she has done so, and knows what has happened. An investigator who has to interrogate a suspected offender in any child sexual abuse case without having conducted or observed the child's interview is at a distinct disadvantage.

False allegations

Stern contends the CIS will "draw no conclusion as to whether the allegations are truthful." This is contrary to what a law enforcement investigator must do in these cases. Police officers should approach these cases with a fair amount of skepticism. It is not the investigator's

role to blindly accept any victim's account. When evidence or other facts suggest that the child is not being truthful, it is the investigator's responsibility to resolve those discrepancies. After interviewing witnesses or interrogating offenders, investigators usually form an opinion about that person's credibility. They should do the same when interviewing crime victims. By conducting the interview, investigators have a better sense of the child's credibility.

Burnout

Stern claims lower "burnout" rate among police as a benefit of freeing detectives from "the unpleasant task of interviewing children." I have informally polled detectives under my command and have not found this to be the case. Most detectives who investigate child abuse cases have a desire to help children. Hearing about abuse the child suffered is not the reason most often stated as causing burnout; rather, the reasons cited most frequently were frustration with the courts and other professionals.

Flexibility

Reliance on one or two interview specialists would result in a serious lack of flexibility in many areas, for instance in selecting the most appropriate match of interviewer and child. If a child was

sexually assaulted by a white male with a mustache, it might not be appropriate to use the interview specialist if he matches that description. Sole reliance on interview specialists causes problems as well if they are unavailable due to court appearances, illness, or vacations. The best time for interviews is always sooner, rather than later, and it's a problem if the only people qualified to interview are unavailable. In addition, multi-victim cases can present a problem for jurisdictions that rely solely on a few interview specialists. In order to avoid allegations of contamination, it is suggested that different interviewers be used in multi-victim cases and that they do not discuss the results of their respective interviews with one another (Pence and Wilson, 1994). When a large number of children need to be interviewed, there might not be enough interview specialists to conduct the interviews in a timely manner.

Conclusion

I am not so much opposed to Stern's suggested use of child interview specialists as I am in favor of law enforcement assuming more of a lead role in criminal investigation of child abuse. I believe that assuming this lead role means personally conducting the interview or observing it while it is being done. Within the parameters of forensically defensible investigative interviewing, there is plenty of room for diversity. Some jurisdictions use videotape, others do not; some have advocacy centers and use team interviews involving both police and child protective services. There is no single correct system for interviewing children.

The Dallas Children's Advocacy Center, where I do much of my work, does have an interview specialist. While in some situations, this may be the most appropriate person to conduct interviews, in others, either a detective or a CPS worker is more appropriate. The decision on who conducts the interview is made on a case-by-case basis, with consideration given to the child's age, gender, race, developmental level, and the nature of the abuse and the description of the offender. But in all cases, the interview is either conducted or observed by an investigator.

In closing, I will comment on one area in which I am in complete agreement with Paul Stern. Regardless of what procedure a jurisdiction elects to use for conducting investigative interviews, it is imperative that the individuals who interview children are current with the accepted practices in the field. Attendance at training conferences, membership in professional organizations, reading research, following court decisions, and watching other experts are just some of the ways to stay informed.

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