

APSAC ADVISOR

AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY ON THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN



EVALUATION AND TREATMENT Fantastic Elements in Child Disclosure of Abuse

—Constance J.
Dalenberg

The problem

To most forensic evaluators in the field of child abuse treatment and assessment, the issues raised by fantastic elements in disclosure are wrenching ones. Implausible details raise the possibility that an entire abuse disclosure is (or can be attributed to) fantasy. Further, many would question the appropriateness of the message being conveyed by an interviewer who nods and smiles approvingly while rampaging elephants stampede through the midst of a child's account of abuse. Critics of child abuse evaluators uniformly state that fantastic detail should *decrease* or even completely destroy a listener's general belief in the allegation, and that this skepticism should be conveyed to the child.

A number of testable hypotheses are raised by statements such as these that unfortunately tend to be conflated:

- A fantastic (low base rate) detail should be judged less credible than a nonfantastic (higher base rate) detail.
- A fantastic element in a child abuse account should decrease a listener's confidence in the *nonfantastic* aspects of the child's abuse allegation.
- A child who makes an abuse allegation and discloses fantastic details about nonabuse-related topics should be judged less credible overall than a child who has not made such fantastic disclosures.

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NEWS APSAC Building the groundwork for 10,000 members by 2000; Board election results; Member participation at all-time high

—Theresa Reid

10,000 by 2000: Under construction — with your help!

How do you run a successful membership recruitment campaign? If you're APSAC, you start with a key principle: base your actions on solid research. Our first step in launching 10,000 by 2000 is to learn from members and prospective members the answers to a few key questions: What aspects of your work are most difficult for you—both practically and emotionally? What services or products could a professional society offer that would help the most? How much is such support worth to you?

With the answers to these questions, we can start to build a campaign that is not a "hard sell," but is truly responsive to the needs of the interdisciplinary professionals APSAC was founded to unify, inform, and support.

We need your help in conducting this research. "Market research" firms charge thousands of dollars to conduct such research

for other organizations. But we're asking members to do it instead, for two reasons: First, we think members can do a better job. You know who your colleagues are, you know how to talk to them, and you know how to listen. No market research firm could do as well as you can. Second, we are committed to using members' dues to provide member benefits — the *APSAC Advisor*, *Child Maltreatment*, the Legislative Network, state chapter support, media relations. We won't spend your money doing something called "market research."

So we are asking you to join us on the ground floor to make 10,000 by 2000 a reality. Of course, the stronger APSAC is, the stronger the national voice for interdisciplinary professionals responding to child maltreatment — the stronger *your* voice. Please become a partner in APSAC's effort to strengthen our voices for children by using the enclosed survey forms to ask just two colleagues these questions (again): What

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The third position is clearly the most extreme. However, each of the positions could be supported by logical or empirical argument.

Base rate effects

These positions may appear plausible. Yet on closer examination, although, often presented as mathematical facts, they are not as obviously true as they may seem. One could argue, for instance, that although a low base rate event is by definition less likely to occur, it does not follow that an account of a low base rate event is less likely to be true, if verbalized.

Setting aside the child development issues for the moment, and focusing on the mathematical argument, suppose we evaluate the hypothetical accounts of three adults—Susan, Ann, and Lynn—all of whom are consciously trying to truthfully answer our question: What was your lunch like yesterday? Susan recalls making a salad at home, an event that occurs two or three times a week, alternating with other home-based meals. Ann recalls lunch being interrupted by her husband's phone call, notifying her that they had won the state lottery. Lynn recalls trying to make crepes suzette for her visiting mother, and setting fire to the kitchen.

With these examples in mind, one might argue that the accounts of the low base rate events—the fire and the lottery—are more likely to have been salient to Lynn and Ann, and perhaps therefore more memorable and less likely to be confused or combined with other events. Further, individuals use reality-monitoring screens to analyze and verify their memories of experiences (Johnson & Foley, 1984). Thus low base rate occurrences are more likely to be *recognized* as potential fantasies by the individuals themselves and may not be spoken about at all. Therefore, it is not mathematically true, and may not be empirically true, that if a child states that some low base rate variety of abuse has occurred, "the probability of the abuse being true is reduced."

Role of fantasy elements in proposed frameworks

The belief that fantastic elements correlate with false accounts of abuse thus should be taken as opinion rather than as a mathematical or logical certainty. Yet fantastic elements are given a central place in frameworks that attempt to differentiate between true and false allegations. Gardner's method, which he suggests that we use in court in the absence of scientifically valid alternatives, gives heavy weight to the presence of fantastic features, strongly arguing that a child's allegations should be taken less seriously in all respects if fantastic claims are present. Other frameworks, such as that used by Raskin and Esplin (1991), appear to view fantastic elements negatively by judging a child's account to be less coherent and thus less credible when fantastic elements are present.

However, the hypothesis that the presence of an unrelated fantasy element should lead us to be skeptical of a child's account of abuse, while it seems to be reasonable, remains a hypothesis. The picture is complicated by the results of investigations that show that violent and abusive fantasy is more frequently present in adults with abusive

histories (Briere, Smiljanich, & Henshel, 1994). This suggests that abusive fantasy may be a *positive* indicator of abusive reality (abusive history). The degree to which abusive fantasy is characteristic of abused children is as yet unknown. Other possible mechanisms for the existence of fantasy or implausible elements in

true abuse accounts have been outlined in some detail by Mark Everson (1995). Everson posits that fantastic elements could reflect memory distortion due to psychological trauma, the use of fantasy in the service of mastery over anxiety, the use of exaggeration to gain attention or sympathy, and misperception or miscommunication due to developmental limitations. Empirically testing these competing hypotheses is critical for the protection of children and of accused adults. If fantastic elements in children's

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accounts of abuse are not accurately assessed and adequately understood, erroneous conclusions about the plausibility of these accounts may be drawn.

Methods

Sample

The purpose of the study reported in this article is to examine the relationship between fantastic elements in accounts of abuse and certainty of abuse history. The vast library of videotaped interviews available at the San Diego Center for Child Protection (CCP) at Children's Hospital provided the database for this investigation. More than 6,000 interviews have been videotaped at the CCP, and random samples can be chosen stratified by age, race, sex, type of abuse, and relationship between abused and abuser.

The entire sample is 60% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic, 13% Black, and 9% other. (This is based on an n of 5,701 whose records have thus far been accessed.) The age range is 3 to 17. Eighteen percent of the children in the full sample are male, and 82% female. Six hundred interviews, randomly selecting within Black and Caucasian boys and girls, have been at least partially coded thus far.

By cross-referencing this data bank to medical records and to criminal outcomes in San Diego County, a "gold standard" group of children was identified who met the highest criteria for certainty of abuse history. In these cases, perpetrators confessed to the crime, medical evidence was consistent with the alleged details of the crime, and, in more than 80% of the cases, at least one piece of persuasive external evidence was present (e.g., an eyewitness, a sibling telling a similar story). In the matched "questionable" sample, data of successful prosecution or confession were not located, and neither supportive medical evidence nor external physical evidence was offered at the time of the child's disclosure.

A smaller sample of children was available through other research and forensic sources (studies at CCP's Trauma Research Institute [TRI] and forensic evaluations by the author). Again, these children had been

videotaped while they talked with interviewers about abuse, and their accounts had been validated through medical evaluation and perpetrator confession.

The sample was further divided into "severe" and "nonsevere" categories. Severe groups experienced one or more of the following:

- The perpetrator was a family member with frequent access to the child.
- Force or the threat of force was present.
- The molestation was repeated.
- Intercourse or oral-genital contact occurred.

In the nonsevere group, none of these features was present; thus, the nonsevere group consisted of children reporting single nonviolent incidents of molestation by someone who was not likely to be an attachment figure.

Coding

The tapes went through six codings, in addition to a three-stage accuracy check. The complex coding allowed a more sophisticated definition of a "leading" exchange. Leading exchanges included not only verbal statements in which the experimenter stated or implied a fact not yet stated by the child, but also exchanges in which the interviewer nonverbally communicated a possible answer to the question. Both categories were reliably codable with virtually no disagreements among raters. (The lengthy categorization scheme for leading questions is available through the TRI by request.)

Raters tracked gaze pattern of interviewer and child in codings 1 and 2, nonverbal communications between interviewer and child (e.g., pointing, nodding, facial grimaces)

in codings 3 and 4, behavioral manifestations of anxiety in coding 5, and emotional behaviors of interviewer and child in coding 6. Reliabilities of the codings ranged from .81 to .92. For rating forms with individual items, such as behavioral anxiety, no single item reliability fell below .81. (In most cases,

Two classes of fantastic elements were examined—highly implausible or impossible events, and gross exaggeration of a plausible event.

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reliabilities could be computed using Pearson statistics; at times, when low base rates were examined, nonparametric alternatives were used.)

Fantastic elements

Two classes of fantastic elements were examined—highly implausible or impossible events (class 1), and gross exaggeration of a plausible event (class 2). Examples in class 1 were reports that the perpetrator had injected his penis with poison before penetration, that the accused had used a green marking pen to rape the child (who happened to be drawing with a green pen during the narrative), or that monsters or dinosaurs were involved in the abuse. Examples in class 2 included reports that the perpetrator, in a drug-induced tirade, had destroyed every toy in the house, or had left a black and blue mark that covered the subject's entire leg.

It should be mentioned that while the distinction between elements that did or did not fall in the fantastic category could be made with 100% reliability, the distinction between class 1 and class 2 mentioned here was less clear to raters. One rater might have viewed an instance (e.g., Then he injected drugs into his penis) as a probable distortion or exaggeration of a plausible event, while another might have viewed it as highly implausible or impossible. For the purposes of these analyses, the two event classifications were combined.

Results

Frequency of fantastic elements

Single instances of implausible, exaggerated, or impossible features within the abuse disclosure were not rare events for certain age groups. The base rate across all age, sex, and race groups was about 2% for the 644 interviews thus far coded for this feature. Within the severe gold standard group, 4.8% (8 of 188), of the accounts contained fantastic elements. By comparison, 1% of the accounts of the nonsevere gold standard group (2 of 134), 1% of the accounts of the severe questionable group (2 of 188), and none of the nonsevere questionable group's accounts ($n = 134$) contained fantastic allegations.

Since 10 of the 12 fantastic stories were told by children in the 3- to 9-year-old group, an additional sample of this younger age was collected (Table 1). Within the smaller group of children aged 3 to 9 who met the criteria for the gold standard ($n = 142$) or comparison group conditions (a sample of 142 matched on age, sex, and race), the differences between groups were even greater, and reached significance despite the lower n . As Table 1 illustrates, subjects were more likely to disclose fantastic elements within their accounts of abuse if they were in the gold standard group (z for proportions = 2.38, $p < .05$); most important, they also were more likely to produce fantastic elements if abuse was severe (z for proportions = 3.46, $p < .01$).

Role of interviewer reaction

Fantastic elements were not related to leading questions by interviewers. In light of the current climate pushing therapists to distrust allegations with fantastic features, the interviewer's reactions to such elements were important to evaluate. The probability figures in Table 2 refer only to transcripts that contained at least one fantastic element, and compare the responses of the interviewers to the first introduction of each fantastic element with their responses to the first introduction of each nonfantastic abuse element in the same interview. A statistical caveat on the data as presented here is that differing children presented different numbers of fantastic and nonfantastic elements. Thus the data points are nonindependent, and direct tests of the proportions are compromised.

The data appear to illustrate, however, that interviewers are not typically accepting of these comments. Fantastic statements were less likely to be met in a neutral way (e.g., Tell me more about that) or an accepting way (e.g., That must have been scary), and more likely to be challenged (e.g., That didn't happen, did it?), ignored (e.g., What else happened?), or skeptically addressed (e.g., But how could he touch your pee-pee or your skin when you had your clothes on?). These

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Table 1

Fantastic Allegation Rates: Three- to Nine-Year-Olds

Severe Gold Standard	Severe Questionable
<i>n</i> = 52	<i>n</i> = 52
Accounts containing fantasy	Accounts containing fantasy
<i>n</i> = 8 (15.38%)	<i>n</i> = 2 (3.85%)
5 boys/3 girls	2 boys
Nonsevere Gold Standard	Nonsevere Questionable
<i>n</i> = 90	<i>n</i> = 90
Accounts containing fantasy	Accounts containing fantasy
<i>n</i> = 2 (2.22%)	<i>n</i> = 0
1 boy/1 girl	

NOTE: Mean age = 6.08, SD = 1.73

hypotheses might be tested in a larger sample by comparing an interviewer's response to a single fantastic and nonfantastic allegation within each interview, or by testing average proportion of differing interviewer responses within each child's protocol.

Discussion

Interviewers of children alleging fantastic details often react strongly to a child's first unlikely disclosure. Whether or not an interviewer conveys his or her opinion to the child, the internal experience of the evaluator is likely to be conflictual. Seasoned interviewers realize that the fantastic elements may be the death knell for legal cases, and struggle with the correct response: Do I pursue this further, and risk undue emphasis on the fantastic, as opposed to the believable, portions of the child's story? Do I ignore it, and risk the accusation of credulity? Do I respond skeptically, and risk the child feeling punished and closing down? The flicker of

pain that crossed the faces of many of the interviewers when the first fantastic allegation emerged probably reflected this confusion in part, as well as a struggle to place the sharp-edged, incredible allegation into a smooth narration of the child's likely abuse experience.

The findings of this study provide some important guidance for resolving the interviewer's dilemma. The most compelling result of this investigation is that fantastic elements occurred most frequently in the accounts of children known to have been abused, and indeed were most common among children *known* to have suffered severe abuse. These findings directly counter the hypothesis that fantastic elements in children's accounts of abuse give reason to discredit the entire account.

Rather than state that this research shows unequivocally that the presence of fantasy elements increases the likelihood that the

Table 2

Interviewer Responses to Fantastic Material: Comments Directly Following the Abuse Allegations

	Fantastic	Comparison
Challenges statement	9%	2%
Ignores statement	24%	16%
General positive statement	3%	8%
Neutral or positive request for detail	35%	70%
Skeptical request for detail	29%	4%

NOTE: Percentages are based on the reliably coded categories representing at least 5% of the total interviewer responses.

NOTE: Challenging statements directly accuse the child of being inaccurate. Ignoring was coded when the interviewer's responses did not refer to the content of the child's allegation. General positive statements were supportive nonabuse-related comments to the child. Requests for detail were judged skeptical if they conveyed lack of understanding or doubt of the child's original statement.

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overall allegation is true, however, it is more correct to state that this research fails to support the common assumption that the presence of fantasy elements should lead evaluators to suspect the entire allegation. Since the number of false allegations in the "questionable" group is unknown, the percentage of fantastic allegations in the false group is also unknown.

These data do indicate that interviewers should not allow their skepticism about the literal truth of fantastic elements to discredit the child's entire account. These data suggest that automatically discrediting such accounts could allow the most severely abusive adults to continue their abuse, since their victims will be disbelieved. This finding will be clarified as we gather more data on the sources of the fantasy material, and the role of severity in its production.

The finding that the interviewers were not facilitating the fantastic claims is encouraging; however, many possible results of skeptical or open responses to fantastic claims must be considered. As Everson (1995) points out in his own seminal work, extraordinary claims may turn out to be reflections of the extraordinary variety of the perverse worlds that some of these children encounter. As the number of interviews containing fantastic elements increases in the continuing investigation, we could test a child's response in the second half of an interview as it is affected by the interviewer's response to fantastic claims in the first half of the discussion. This comparison would not be reliable given current *n*'s, but the pattern appears to be that children react with sadness and discomfort when the interviewer expresses skepticism, but do not typically retract the claim.

Related work

Some intriguing possibilities are emerging in these data as well as in other related projects at the CCP. In a project completed in April 1996, Kathleen Strauss showed that

adult victims of battering had experienced a time-limited reality distortion after severe physical trauma, measurable both with the Rorschach and by the Delusional Disorder, Schizotypal, and Thought Disorder scales of the Millon. The fate of material gathered during severe physical trauma and accessed after reality-testing abilities have been regained is an open but intriguing question.

Similarly, we have noted in the tape-centered research reviewed here that children interviewed soon after severe trauma spontaneously mention nightmares more often than do less severely traumatized or questionable groups (although more sophisticated analysis of this finding must await a larger sample, since severely abused children were also more likely to be asked sleep-related questions). Could the nightmare content, experienced perhaps in a time-limited period of weakened reality testing, also produce the phenomena of later fantastic allegations?

An additional comparison from archival data at TRI sheds some light on the issue of the rate of fantasy elements in false accounts of abuse. In the O'Neel and Dalenberg (1992) work, 46 children falsely reported an allegation of physical abuse to a blind interviewer (with the consent and help of their parents). These reports are known to be false, since the parent and child invented the story in a recorded session. The comparison group consists of children reporting an allegedly true incident of physical abuse (*n* = 51), although this time it is the allegedly true allegation group that contains an unknown number of false allegations. Children in this group discussed their true experiences in a recorded session with parents before the interviews. It is significant that the comparison between groups again shows that the "true" group contains more fantastic detail than the "false" group, and that the base rate of fantastic allegations within the false group was comparable to the initial videotape study,

Rather than state that this research shows unequivocally that the presence of fantasy elements increases the likelihood that the overall allegation is true, however, it is more correct to state that this research fails to support the common assumption that the presence of fantasy elements should lead evaluators to suspect the entire allegation.

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although the mean age was several years older (mean = 9.89, *SD* = .93).

The demographic pattern of the fantastic allegations in this sample is similar to the O'Neel and Dalenberg sample, although confirmation should await larger samples. The children whose allegations were more likely to contain fantastic allegations were disproportionately male, 3 to 9 years old (modal age 5 to 6), and alleged severe abuse that was confirmed by the evidence.

Again, although the statement that children whose allegations contain fantastic allegations were more likely to be judged accurate is statistically correct (on nontestimony-related grounds) it should not yet be argued that fantasy elements should make an interviewer more likely to believe abuse allegations. Instead, readers are reminded by the evidence here that aspects of a child's testimony that undermine credibility perhaps should not undermine credibility might do so for reasons more related to our prejudices and assumptions regarding fantastic material than to the results of evidentiary research.

Summary

It is premature, then, to make strong recommendations about the reasonable reaction of an interviewer to a child's fantastic statements during an evaluation. Some critics maintain that child abuse interviewers typically believe — like Alice in Wonderland — ten impossible things before breakfast. Without crediting that characterization, these data make it possible more fairly and strongly to represent in the academic and legal arenas that a fantastic detail should not automatically create an unbelievable child. The bias that can be produced by hearing such details from a child must be counteracted by scientific information about the source and meaning of fantastic detail. Clinicians are urged to embrace the true meaning of "skepticism" for scientists and clinical investigators. That is, we should reaffirm our commitment to approaching questions of interest with utter honesty, and with the willingness to entertain and critically evaluate multiple hypotheses, rather than reserving

critical skills for those hypotheses, researchers, clinicians, or children whom we already disbelieve.

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These data make it possible more fairly and strongly to represent in the academic and legal arenas that a fantastic detail should not automatically create an unbelievable child.

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