

## Suggestions for Sexual History Taking with Adults Suspected of Sexual Abuse

by Kathleen Coulborn Faller ACSW, PhD with Jane Mildred, Carol Plummer, Ellen DeVoe, Sallie Churchill, Laura Sanders, Melnee MacPherson, William Almy, & Katherine Doyle

*This is an abbreviated version of Suggestions for Sexual History Taking, an article which was developed by the staff of the University of Michigan Civil Child and Family Programs and the Family Assessment Clinic, a multidisciplinary team that conducts assessments of cases of possible child maltreatment. This article presents a composite of approaches we have found useful for gathering sexual history information during assessment of persons accused of but denying or minimizing sexual abuse.*

### Introduction

These guidelines are for evaluators gathering information, within the context of an overall assessment, about the sexual history of accused offenders. Therefore, they represent a small part of the evaluation process. They are designed primarily for evaluators who are assessing for sexual history in situations in which the alleged offender is challenging the allegation. He/she may be actively denying, merely not admitting, partially admitting, or admitting but denying sexual intent.

Although a history of individual sexual deviancy and/or unusual family or environmental sexual patterns do not prove sexual abuse, they are very relevant to assessment of sexual abuse. Clinicians and researchers have noted that sexual abuse of children may be part of an individual's pattern of deviant sexual arousal and acts (e.g. Abel, Becker, Murphy, & Flanagan, 1981; Salter, 1988). In addition, sexual arousal to children is considered a precondition to sexual abuse of children (Araji & Finkelhor, 1986; Faller, 1990; Finkelhor, 1986). Moreover, clinicians and researchers have also noted some sexual abusers choose children as objects for sexual gratification in the absence of other sexual outlets or because they lack the ability to negotiate peer sexual relationships (Araji & Finkelhor, 1986; Faller, 1990; Finkelhor, 1986). Therefore, because of the possible relationship between sexual functioning and child sexual abuse, taking a careful sexual history of alleged offenders is important.

There is no single empirically demonstrated right or wrong method for gathering data on a client's sexual history. However, to date most protocols have been designed for persons who admit, at least at some level, to their sexual problems. It is especially difficult to gather accurate and complete information about sexual history when individuals have been accused of sexually inappropriate behavior they do not admit. Regardless of their guilt or innocence, they are likely to be frightened and wary of disclosure of information related to sexual activity. They are also likely to be uncomfortable discussing activities that are so private

and sometimes socially unacceptable. Finally, they may even become irate and challenge the interviewer for being too intrusive.

Interviewers also experience discomfort. A good interviewer is aware of how difficult this exploration is for the interviewee, may be uncomfortable discussing sexual matters him/herself, especially the more deviant sexual acts, and may lack sexual knowledge and experience. The general strategies and specific questions in these guidelines are proposed to encourage the interviewer to thoroughly investigate the client's sexual history. They are also meant to be advisory, that is, they are to give the interviewer ideas about general approaches and the kinds of questions to ask. In a given interview, not all of the questions will be necessary, nor are the suggested strategies and questions complete.

### General strategies

In this section, we describe a number of strategies that we have found to be useful in enhancing candor and mediating distressed and negative responses from interviewees.

It is usually appropriate to delay asking questions about sexual history until well into the assessment. Nevertheless, in the introductory part of the interview, it may be advisable to prepare the client for these questions by telling him/her that you will be asking lots of questions about different aspects of his/her life, including questions about sexual matters.

Evaluators may find it useful to begin by trying to elicit a narrative about aspects of sexual history and related topics, by asking open-ended questions. This approach may elicit spontaneous accounts of relevant information. However, such an approach may also result in vague or sparse answers or social desirability responses (responding with what the client thinks is socially appropriate behavior). For example, the interviewer asks, "What was your sexual relationship like with your first wife?" and the client might reply "Fine." In this instance, the interviewer will resort to more specific questions in attempt to get a more complete picture of that sexual relationship.

Because of the reticence people in general and clients involved in cases of sexual abuse in particular have about discussing their sex lives, the evaluator should expect at some point to have to use numerous, specific questions. It is often helpful to normalize this process by explaining that all clients are asked these sorts of questions, perhaps by showing the client the list of questions. Even using many and specific questions does not guarantee an accurate and detailed sexual history. It just increases the likelihood of obtaining a better history.

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A strategy that may mediate the impact of having to ask many questions is to ask two or three questions at a time at various points throughout the interview in conjunction with questions about other aspects of the topic being discussed. For example, when talking about childhood, partner relationships, or the child, the evaluator might also cover related sexual material. When the sexual history is gathered in this fashion, questions about sex typically follow more neutral questions about the topic. For example, after asking the interviewee "What is your partner like? What do you like about her/him? Are there any things that you don't like about her/him?", the interviewer can ask, "Can you tell me about your sexual relationship with her/him?" This question may need to be followed by specific probes about frequency of sexual activity, types of sexual acts, foreplay, and satisfaction, as needed. Other questions that might be asked about sexual activity in the context of the relationship are "How are things going for the two of you sexually?" and "Is there anything in the relationship that you are not comfortable with?" followed by "Is there anything in the sexual relationship that you are not comfortable with?"

A related strategy is to try to elicit sexual history material indirectly in response to questions about other activities. For example, the interviewer might ask a question about substance use, such as "Was there ever a time that drugs made you do something you wouldn't otherwise have done?" or "Have you ever gotten involved in things under the influence of alcohol, you don't think you would have gotten involved in if not using alcohol?" And then perhaps ask more specifically "Any sexual activities?"

Case material, records, sexual history information from partners and other intimates, and additional accounts from other sources should be sought, and the information from these sources compared to information elicited in client interviews. For example, a client may deny sexual abuse of a child, but have a past history of arrest for a sexual offense against a child. Lack of candor in response to sexual history questions does not prove sexual abuse, but should be interpreted in the context of the overall evaluation.

On the following page is a partial list of specific questions which may be used to guide interviewers in taking a client's sexual history. These questions are clustered by topic. They are not exhaustive, but rather suggestive. The interviewer should base the order of topics covered on the specifics of the case. Topics covered include:

- The child's sexual history — Although these questions are outside the bound of the interviewee's sexual history, they are included, not only because they are necessary to exploring possible sexual abuse, but also because they may form a useful transition to a discussion of the adult's sexual history.
- The interviewee's childhood sexual history
- Masturbation and sexual fantasies
- Adolescent sexuality
- Pattern of intimate relationships — The client's sexual relationships may have started in adolescence or adulthood. The interviewer is advised to begin gathering information chronologically, that is the first person, second, etc. until the interviewer understands the pattern of sexual relationships.
- Current partner relationship
- Sexual deviancy — In asking these questions, it may be useful to ask about current partner before asking about the interviewee. The interviewer can preface the inquiry by stating "Now I'm going to ask you about lots of different kinds of sexual activity. Some of them are common and others are not so common." The interviewer may be selective regarding the activities he/she asks about.

The purpose of this summarized article is to offer clinicians and interviewers a basic outline for conducting a sexual history assessment of individuals charged or suspected of sexual abuse. These questions may serve as a guide, highlighting the areas which must be covered in order to provide a complete picture. The authors invite feedback in the form of additional suggestions and other comments from Advisor readers. Copies of the complete article can be obtained by contacting:

Joanne Hartmeyer, Coordinator  
University of Michigan Civitas  
Child and Family Programs  
1015 E. Huron Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-1689  
ph 313-763-3785; e-mail joannejh@umich.edu

***Because of the reticence people in general and clients involved in cases of sexual abuse in particular have about discussing their sex lives, the evaluator should expect at some point to have to use numerous, specific questions.***

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## Interview Questions

### Child's Sexual History

1. What does your child know about sex?
2. Has your child been involved in any sexual exploration with children his/her own age?
3. What sexual experiences has your child had?
4. Do you think your child has been sexually abused?

### The interviewee's childhood sexual history

1. Do you remember what you were taught about sex as a child?
2. Many people have sexual experiences as children. Did you? Can you tell me about them?
3. Were you aware of your parents having a sexual relationship as a child?
4. Did you ever play doctor or any other sexual games?
5. As a child, did you have any sexual experiences with:
  - A. Sisters or brothers?
  - B. Parents, stepparents, foster parents, or parents partners?
  - C. Other people?
6. Do you think you were sexually abused as a child? Can you tell me about it?
  - A. Did anyone help you with this? Who? How?
  - B. Do you actually remember this, or has someone told you about it?
  - C. Was there a time you didn't remember or had a less complete memory of this?

### Masturbation and sexual fantasies

1. Most people masturbate (touch their private parts) at least sometimes. How old you were when you first masturbated? How often did you masturbate?
2. What were you taught about masturbation as a child?
3. Do you recall you sexual fantasies as a child?
4. Do you have sexual fantasies now? Please describe them.
5. What situations cause you to fantasize? How often do you masturbate?

### Adolescent sexuality

1. Most people's sex life really begins in their teens. Do you remember how old you were when you became really interested in sex?
2. Did you date as a teenager? Can you tell me about dating?
3. What kinds of sexual activity were you involved in as a teenager?
4. Many people experiment sexually during their teens. Were you involved in any experimentation?

### Pattern of intimate relationships

1. Generally how would you characterize your feelings/attitude about sex?
2. Tell me about the first person you had a sexual experience with. (Add probes to gather information about details of the relationship and the sexual activities.)
3. Tell me about the next person you had a sexual relationship with.
4. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

5. Have you ever had any problems with sexual performance?
6. Have you ever contracted a sexually transmitted disease?
7. Have you ever been worried you might have a sexually transmitted disease?

### Current partner relationship

1. Tell me about your current partner.
  - A. What do you like about him/her?
  - B. Are there any things that you don't like?
2. How would you compare this relationship to past ones?
3. What sort of sexual relationship do you have?
4. Have there been times when the sex was better or worse?
5. How satisfying has this relationship been? How frequently do you have sex?
6. What sorts of sexual activities does your partner enjoy?
7. What sorts of sexual activities do you enjoy?
8. Have you noted that your partner has any unusual sexual interests?

### Sexual deviancy

1. Extramarital sex
2. Mate swapping
3. Group sex
4. Use of pornography
5. Sado-masochistic sex
6. Bondage
7. Spanking/discipline
8. Sexual activity involving animals
9. Exposing him/herself or peeping
10. Sex for money
11. Any activities involving urination (golden showers) or defecation
12. Any other sexual activity that is somewhat unusual?

### Additional questions regarding possible sexual deviancy

1. Has anyone made a referral to protective services about you in the past? What for?
2. Have you ever been accused of inappropriate sexual activity?
3. Have you ever been reported to the police for inappropriate sexual activity?
4. Have you ever been falsely accused of sexual abuse of a child or of any other sexual offense, such as rape?
5. Do you have any criminal or misdemeanor charges pending right now? What for?
6. How old was the oldest person you have had sex with? How old were you?
7. How old was the youngest person you have had sex with? How old were you?

### Concluding question

1. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your sex life?