Criteria for Judging the Credibility of Children's Statements about Their Sexual Abuse

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One hundred and three cases of child sexual maltreatment, where offenders confessed to some level of their abuse, were examined to determine the extent to which the children's statements about their victimization contained three widely accepted clinical criteria of a true sexual abuse allegation. The results support clinical assumptions that the criteria in question were valid ones for determining the truth of a sexual abuse allegation in cases involving confessions of abusers.

A question of concern to both professionals and the public is how to determine whether children's assertions that they have been sexually abused are true [Benedek and Schetky 1984; Berliner 1987; de Young 1986; Faller 1984; Goodman 1986; Goodman et al. 1987a; Goodman et al. 1984; Goodman et al. 1987b; Green 1986; Jones and McGraw 1987; McCarty 1981; Schuman 1986; Sink 1987; Weiss 1983]. In large part, the preoccupation with this issue has its origin in the difficulty many people continue to experience in believing that adults can choose to be sexual with children. Although most people now believe sexual abuse does happen, they nevertheless balk at accepting that a particular individual is a sexual abuser, particularly if the person is prominent, highly regarded, or convincing in his or her denial. This doubt has been fueled by a cadre of persons who assert they have been wrongly accused of sexual

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abuse, as well as by defense attorneys and expert witnesses who act in their behalf [Blush and Ross 1986; Coleman 1986; Gordon 1985; Hollingsworth 1986; McIver 1986; Spiegel 1986; Underwager 1985].

During the past ten years, clinicians have begun to describe criteria that can be used as indicators that children are telling the truth when they assert they have been sexually abused [de Young 1986; Faller 1984; Faller 1988; Jones 1985; Jones and McQuiston 1986; McCarty 1981; Sgroi 1982]. Furthermore, there is a fair amount of consensus among professionals about what these criteria are. However, efforts to identify characteristics of a true allegation of sexual abuse have been criticized because the criteria have not been validated by an independent measure of sexual abuse [Centers 1985; Melton 1986]. That is, clinicians are in the position of asserting that certain characteristics of the child's statement indicate that it is true "because I said so."

Although the obvious remedy is to test these criteria against some independent measure indicating that sexual abuse has taken place, finding one is no easy task. Possible measures are physical evidence, corroborating witnesses, and admissions by perpetrators. The technology for detecting physical evidence of sexual abuse has improved [Durfee et al. 1986; Emans et al. 1987; McCauley et al. 1986; Seidel et al. 1986; Steinberg 1986; Steinberg and Westhoff 1988; Woodling 1985, 1986], but physical evidence is found in only a small percentage of cases. Furthermore, the evidence does not establish the identity of the sexual abuser.

Because sexual abuse usually takes place in secrecy, there rarely are corroborating witnesses. When there are, frequently they are other children whose reliability may be regarded by some as suspect.

Therefore, perpetrator admission would seem to have the greatest potential as an independent measure of sexual abuse. Not only does it represent a level of consensus between offender and victim about what happened, but confessions might be found in sufficient numbers of cases to allow for a systematic examination of the characteristics of the victims' reports assumed to be associated with a true allegation.

This article presents the clinical characteristics of a true allegation used in this study; a description of the levels of admission found in the perpetrator sample; and data on the relationship between perpetrator admission and characteristics of victims' reports.

Characteristics of the Child's Statement Associated with True Allegations

Three aspects of the victim's statements and behavior during the diagnostic interview are explored by the author for indications that an allegation of sexual

abuse is true: information about the context of the sexual abuse; the description or demonstration of the sexual victimization; and the victim's emotional state.[1]

The context of the sexual abuse includes when and where it happened; what the victim and offender were wearing; what clothing was removed and by whom; where other members of the family were; how the perpetrator induced the child to become involved; and whether the offender admonished the victim not to tell, or said anything else in the course of the abuse. Sometimes the child will relate an idiosyncratic event that occurred during the course of the abuse that enhances her or his credibility. The interviewer does not expect findings in all areas mentioned but asks open-ended questions about them. It is good practice to request such detail about the last incident of sexual abuse, if there have been many incidents, because the child's recall is likely to be more complete. The case example that follows is illustrative.

> Peggy, age 10, alleged sexual abuse by her father. When asked about the last incident, she said it happened about two weeks before Christmas, while her mother was either Christmas shopping or at a meeting.
>
> Peggy was asked where she and her father were, and she responded that they were sitting on the couch watching TV. The evaluator then queried what she was wearing, and she replied, her nightclothes. As to whether these were pajamas or a nightgown, she said a nightgown. It was neither long nor short, coming to her knees.
>
> Peggy was then asked to describe what her father had done. She replied "He pulled down my pants and started to do it to me, but I tricked him and told him that I had to go to the bathroom and he let me go." Asked whether she locked the bathroom door, she told the evaluator that the door had a lock on the outside, but not on the inside. As to what happened next, Peggy said that after a little while she went into her bedroom and got into bed. However, her father heard her and came into the bedroom, pulled down the blankets, unzipped his pants, pulled down her panties, and got on top of her and started doing it again. Then Peggy said she heard a car drive up, and her father quickly got off, zipped up his pants, and went downstairs as if nothing was going on. When asked what she did, she said, "I stayed upstairs under the covers." When questioned about what "it" was, she said, "What mommies and daddies do when they get married; no, I mean what they do to have a baby," and went on to describe genital intercourse.

Peggy could provide greater detail than most children about the context of the abuse, and her assertion that she had tricked her father by telling him that

she had to go to the bathroom is an illustration of an idiosyncratic event. In this study, a child was judged to have described the context of the sexual abuse if she or he could give at least three pieces of information about the context.

Characteristics of the sexual victimization itself that indicate the allegation is true are the child's ability to describe specific sexual acts, an account of sexual behavior that is told from a child's viewpoint, and sexual knowledge in the child's statements or behavior that is beyond that expected for the child's developmental stage. For example, a four-year-old boy described being fellated as, "He [the perpetrator] tried to suck pee out of my weiner. It felt good but funny." The victim is quite graphic and explicit in his description of the offender sucking his penis. It is also very much a four-year-old's perception in that he sees the functions of the penis to be urination and not to serve as a vehicle for sexual gratification. He may also have experience with sucking of a baby bottle and therefore regards fellatio as having a similar purpose. Knowledge about fellatio and what it feels like are examples of information most four-year-olds do not have.

The child's emotional state refers to both the child's state of mind when recounting the sexual abuse and the child's recollection of her or his feelings at the time of the abuse. Common emotional reactions to telling about such experiences are embarrassment, disgust, anger, anxiety, and fear. Embarrassment tends to be characteristic of victims who do not fully appreciate the meaning of the abuse, for example, young or psychologically damaged children. Disgust is often a reaction to oral sex. Anxiety is a common response from adolescent victims. A few children, usually young or psychologically damaged, will experience sexual arousal while describing the abuse. Children most typically recall being scared, confused, revolted, and angry at the time of the sexual abuse.

Although the evalulator will be seeking information in all three areas described, positive findings in all three are not found in every case of sexual abuse.

Perpetrator Admission

Three levels of perpetator admission—full, partial, and indirect—were differentiated, based upon an examination of clinical interviews with the offenders and information about the offenders from other sources (e.g., the police). A case was classified as a full admission if the perpetrator confessed to all of the sexual acts alleged by the victim.[2]

Partial admission was used to describe situations where the offender con-

fessed to some but not all of the victim's allegations, for instance, sexual contact but not penetration. In Michigan, penetration carries a mandatory prison sentence. Partial admissions were sometimes made in the course of plea bargaining. An example of partial admission is one father's statement that he "did the part with the finger but not the part with the dick."

Indirect admission is a term used for situations where the offender gives a message that the sexual abuse did occur but does not actually confess. These vary in their content and are best understood by examples. One man did not confess, but said his stepdaughter would not lie about something like that. One father admitted that on three occasions his fingers went inside his three-year-old daughter's vagina, but claimed this happened accidentally when she slipped as he was giving her a bath. Another man acknowledged that he slept in the bed with his seven-year-old daughter and became sexually aroused while showering with her; in addition, he said that he had no control over what he did in his sleep. In a comparable case, a stepfather admitted to fondling his stepdaughter, age six, while she slept with him, but said he had mistaken her for his wife; he also indicated this had happened on several different occasions.

The Sample

The 103 cases in this study were seen by the staff of the University of Michigan Interdisciplinary Project on Child Abuse and Neglect (IPCAN) between the years 1978 and 1987. IPCAN is a university-based program that, among other functions, accepts referrals of difficult sexual abuse cases. Ninety-seven were residents of Michigan and six of Ontario. Almost two-thirds (68 cases, 66%) were referred by child protective services; 15 cases (14.6%) by the courts; 11 (10.7%) by victims' parents; eight (7.8%) by other mental health agencies; and one by law enforcement. Although the primary purpose of the contact was diagnosis and/or treatment, data were systematically collected for research purposes.

The unit of analysis for this study was a perpetrator-victim dyad. The reason it was employed is because 60% of the perpetrators sexually abused more than one child, and 24.7% of the children were sexually abused by more than one person. There were 258 perpetrators in the total sample, 293 victims, and 405 perpetrator-victim dyads. Of the latter, there were 103 perpetrator-victim dyads where the perpetrator confessed at some level to the sexual abuse, and victim interviews focused on the criteria for validating an allegation of sexual abuse.

TABLE 1 Relationship Between Perpetrator and Victim

Type	*Number*	*Percent*
Biological father	34	33
Stepfather	18	17
Mother's boyfriend	5	4.9
Adoptive father	6	5.8
Other relative	4	3.9
Neighbor	5	4.9
Nonrelative	13	12.6
Mother	12	11.7
Father's girlfriend	3	2.9
Brother	3	2.9

Demographically, 17 (16.5%) of the victims were nonwhite and 86 (83%) white; 21 (20.4%) were male; and 82 (79.6%) were female. The victim's mean age at the time assessed for sexual abuse by the offender in question was 9 years (S.D. = 4.6): 10.7 years for the boys and 8.6 years for the girls ($T = 93$; $p = .06$).[3] Relationships between offenders and victims appear in table 1.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed and two-way analyses (chi-squares, analyses of variance, and T-tests) were computed when they were indicated. Although statistical tests were employed, they are primarily of heuristic value because the sample is not random.

Results

The findings are presented in the following sequence: first, the number and percent of offenders giving the three levels of confession, followed by the number and percent of victims providing the three clinical criteria for a true allegation; then the relationship between the level of confession and the clinical criteria; and finally, the association of victim age and sex with the presence or absence of the clinical criteria for a true allegation.

Perpetrator Confession

The distribution for the three levels of perpetrator admission appear in table

TABLE 2 Distribution for Levels of Perpetrator Confession

Type	*Number*	*Percent*
Full confession	62	60.2
Partial confession	23	22.3
Indirect admission	18	17.5

2. More than 60% of the confessions were complete, in that the offender admitted to all the sexual acts the victim described; partial admissions made up slightly less than a quarter of the confessions; and the remainder were indirect admissions.

Characteristics of Victims' Statements

Findings regarding the extent to which victims' allegations about the sexual abuse contained the characteristics clinically attributed to a true allegation appear in table 3. Both a description of the sexual behavior of the sort found in a true allegation, and an emotional reaction to the sexual abuse or describing it, which is characteristic of a true allegation, were found in over four-fifths of the accounts. Details of the context of the sexual abuse were found slightly less frequently, but nevertheless in over three-fourths of the cases. Seventy of the victims' descriptions (68%) contained all three of these characteristics; 16 (15.5%) contained two; 11 (10.7%) contained one; and six (5.8%) contained none.[4]

The Relationship Between Victims' Statements and Perpetrators' Confessions

Table 4 shows how differences in the number of characteristics of a true allegation (0-3) are related to whether the offender gave a full, partial, or indirect confession to the sexual abuse.

The largest number of cases (41) fall into the full confession-three characteristics category. There are no cases in which the offender gave an indirect admission and the child's statement did not contain any of the characteristics of a true allegation, and only one indirect admission case where the victim's story contained only one characteristic. The largest proportion of the few cases where the child's statement did not have the attributes of a true description of sexual abuse were those where the offender made a full confession.[5] In addition, cases where offenders gave indirect or partial admission were predominantly those where the victims' statements contained all of the characteristics of a true allegation.

TABLE 3 Characteristics of True Allegations Found in Victims' Statements

Type	*Number*	*Percent*
Context description	81	78.6
Sexual description	84	81.6
Emotional response	84	81.6

Differences in the Characteristics of a True Allegation Found in Victims' Statements by Age and Gender

To understand more about situations where children's statements did not contain the characteristics of a true allegation, some analyses by age and gender were undertaken. Descriptions by boys were less likely to contain all three characteristics of a true allegation (47.6%) than those by girls (73.2%), and the difference approaches statistical significance (chi-square = 6.8; p = .08). When the three characteristics are examined separately for their presence or absence by gender, there was no difference in the extent to which boys and girls described the context of the sexual abuse, but there were differences in the presence of the other two attributes. Boys were less likely to give a description of the sexual acts consistent with that expected for a true allegation than girls (57.1% of the time versus 87.8% of the time; chi-square = 8.5; p = .004). Similarly, boys were less likely to display an emotional reaction to the abuse than girls (61.9% of the time versus 86.6%; chi-square = 5.2; p = .02).

Age also appears to have an effect on the extent to which the child's statement possesses the attributes of a true allegation of sexual abuse. Younger children make less complete statements. The mean age of children whose reports have all three characteristics of a true allegation is 10.1, while the mean age of children whose statements do not is a little more than six (zero characteristics = 6.7 years; one characteristic = 6.5; two characteristics = 6.9; F = 4.27; p = .007). Children who cannot describe the context of the sexual abuse are significantly younger (5.8 years) than those who can (9.9 years; T = 8.87; p = .0002). In addition, victims who could give a description of the sexual abuse (9.3 years versus 7.5), and whose emotional response was consistent with a true allegation (9.1 years versus 8.2), were older, but these differences were less dramatic and not statistically significant.[6]

Discussion

The findings suggest that clinical criteria employed by evaluators of sexually

TABLE 4 Relationship of Number of Characteristics in Victims' Statements to Level of Perpetrator Confession

	None		*One*		*Two*		*Three*		*Total*	
	*No.**	*R %***	*No.*	*R %*	*No.*	*R %*	*No.*	*R%*	*No.*	*%*
Full confession	4	6.5	7	11.3	10	16.1	41	66.1	62	60.2
Partial admission	2	8.7	3	13.0	4	17.4	14	60.9	23	22.3
Indirect admission	0	0	1	5.6	2	11.1	15	83.3	18	17.5
Total	*6*	*5.8*	*11*	*10.7*	*16*	*15.5*	*70*	*68.0*	*103*	*100.0*

** = number of cases; ** = row percent*

abused children are indeed valid predictors of whether children have been sexually abused and should continue to be used. Most children who have been sexually abused will be able to provide details about the context of the abusive situation; will describe sexual behavior, which is explicit, from a child's viewpoint and/or will display sexual knowledge beyond that expected for the victim's age; and will have an emotional reaction to the maltreatment and/or having to recount it.

There are some exceptions, however. These criteria seem to be less reliably found in boys' statements than in girls' statements. There may be sound clinical reasons for this finding. Boys often struggle with the dual stigma of having been sexually abused and having been involved in a same-sex encounter, since most of the offenders are male. Therefore, boys might be more reluctant than girls to describe the sexual behavior. The smaller percentage of boys evidencing an emotional reaction to the sexual abuse may be a consequence of differential socialization of males and females. Boys often assimilate the belief that it is unmanly to display emotions indicating weakness or distress, which could affect the extent to which they admit to distress about being sexually abused and the way they recount an instance of sexual victimization.

Similarly, it is not surprising that the young age of victims affects their ability to describe sexual experiences. After all, for younger children, language that would be used to communicate what happened is less well developed. This might particularly affect the child's ability to describe the context of the victimization. The child would probably be assisted in communicating aspects of the sexual abuse with anatomically explicit dolls but would be asked to describe verbally the context of the victimization. These findings are consistent with those of Goodman and colleagues [Goodman 1986; Goodman et al. 1987a; Goodman et al. 1987b], who found that young

children recall fewer details of past experiences and may have less recollection of peripheral detail (i.e., the context of the sexual abuse).

Finally, the findings suggest that it is appropriate to regard partial and indirect admissions by alleged offenders as confessions. These responses are about as likely, and in the case of indirect admissions, more so, to be associated with children's statements that have the characteristics of true allegations.

The results of this study are promising but also warrant a cautionary note. Although the sample is not small, the actual number of cases where the perpetrator gave what was defined as a full confession is 62. Replications are necessary both to assure that the findings are consistent across studies and to see whether they hold up with subpopulations. Our findings suggest that there are differences based on gender and age, but this needs to be further explored. The number of boys in the study is a good deal smaller than the number of girls, which argues for additional exploration of the characteristics of boys' statements in a larger number of cases. Similar undertakings are necessary to further explore the effects of victim age and the interaction of victim sex and age. In addition, other variables need to be explored, for example, race and factors related to family socialization about sex. This argues for additional studies using samples that reflect a range of victim characteristics. ♦

Notes

1. Characteristics of a true allegation have been grouped into three categories to facilitate explanations of findings and data analysis. Other writers employ a list of factors without grouping them. This may create problems in developing a model for testing the criteria against an independent measure of sexual abuse because, given the variability in cases of sexual abuse, one does not expect to find every factor in every case. For example, often the offender will admonish the victim not to tell, but not every perpetrator so instructs the child. It seemed a better strategy to include this factor as one possible contextual finding, and then to look at the relationship of contextual findings in general to admission.
2. There were three cases of offenders who were caught in the act by other adults, whose statements were corroborated by the victim and not denied by the perpetrator. These cases were included in the full confession category.
3. The youngest victim was eleven months and the oldest 18 years. It should be pointed out that interview data supportive of sexual abuse is rarely elicited from a child under two. However, since a few very young children were, in fact, interviewed for the purpose of seeking information from them about alleged victimization, they were included in the sample.
4. When the 103 cases where offenders gave some level of admission are compared with the 302 cases where they did not, there are statistically significant differences in the proportions having none, one, two, or three of the characteristics of a true allegation, the last being

more likely to have more of the characteristics. The findings for the no confession group are as follows: three characteristics, 228 cases (75.5%); two characteristics, 57 cases (18.9%); one characteristic, 8 cases (2.6%); and none, 9 cases (3%) (chi-square = 13.3; p = .004). Cases with no characteristics had medical evidence or a credible child witness other than the victim.

5. Two were cases where the offenders confessed to sexual abuse but the victims denied it. In both cases, there were other victims of the offender who had described their sexual maltreatment, and in one the victim who spoke of his abuse had observed the other child being molested.
6. An examination of the effect of age for boy and girl victims separately reveals an association between the number of criteria of a true allegation in victims' statements and differences in mean age for girls, but comparable trends are not noted for boys. The mean ages of female victims by number of characteristics of a true allegation are as follows: zero characteristics = 1.5 years (N = 3); one characteristic = 4.1 years (N = 7); two characteristics = 6 years (N = 12); and three characteristics = 10 years (N = 60) (F = 10.1; p < .0000). Findings for male victims are as follows: zero characteristics = 12.3 years (N = 3); one characteristic = 10.8 years (N = 4); two characteristics = 9.8 years (N = 4); and three characteristics = 10.6 years (N = 10) (N.S.). However, the number of cases in the study, particularly the number of boys, is too small to form any conclusions about the interaction between sex and age of victims and disclosure of sexual abuse.

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