

# False Allegations of Sexual Abuse

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# Studies of Sexual Abuse Case Dispositions

- Jones and Mc-Graw (1987) studied the proportion of cases founded (substantiated) and reasons for failure to substantiate in a sample of 576 sexual abuse reports made to the Denver County Department of Social Services during 1983.
- In this sample, 53% of cases were founded, and the remaining 47% were not.
- The largest proportion were not founded because of insufficient information (24%).
- The next largest category of cases was unsubstantiated suspicion (17%). In the latter category, usually an adult reported suspicion of sexual abuse and accepted the disposition of unfounded when it was rendered.
- Only 6% of cases were classified as fictitious (false).

# Studies of Sexual Abuse Case Dispositions

- A decade later, Oates et al. (2000) replicated this study, using 551 sexual abuse reports (year 1993) to Denver County Department of Social Services. Although the classification system is somewhat different in the replication, the findings reflect the national trend of decreased rates of substantiation:
  - 43% of cases were substantiated,
  - 21% were inconclusive,
  - 34% were classified as “not sexual abuse,”
  - and 2.5% “erroneous accounts by children.”

# Studies of Sexual Abuse Case Dispositions

- In the United States, there are laws that mandate the reporting of suspected cases of child maltreatment, including suspected sexual abuse.
- State statutes require professionals (usually all persons in educational settings with children, all health care professionals, and all mental health personnel, and in some states everyone regardless of their roles) to report suspected abuse.
- Moreover, there are civil and criminal penalties for failure to report and protections from lawsuits for reporters (Myers, 1998; National Center for the Prosecution of Child Abuse, 1997).

# Studies of Sexual Abuse Case Dispositions

- From the time mandated reporting first became a federal statutory requirement in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) to the present, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of reports, from 670,000 in 1976 to more than 3 million cases involving 5.5 million children in 2003 (American Association for Protecting Children, 1988; National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2005a&b).
- At the same time, the proportion of unsubstantiated cases has risen. In the mid-1970s, approximately 60% of cases were substantiated.

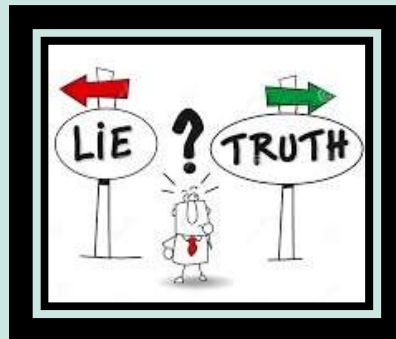
## Large-Sample Studies

- Several large-sample studies have addressed the issue of false allegations of sexual abuse, using varying criteria.
- Kempe Center studies described above used criteria agreed upon by a group of sexual abuse experts to classify sexual abuse allegations.
- If there was a question about how to categorize the case, it was reviewed by the researchers and classified.
- However, Jones and McGraw also reviewed randomly selected cases from each of the categories: (1) reliable accounts, (2) insufficient evidence, and (3) unsubstantiated suspicion.
- In their study, Jones and McGraw classified 6% as fictitious allegations.

## Large-Sample Studies

- In the second Kempe Center study (Oates et al., 2000), the researchers relied primarily on the disposition of the protective services record.
- The exception was 2% of cases in which the researchers could not discern the disposition from reading the case record.
- As noted above, there were four general categories in the coding system: (1) sexual abuse, (2) not sexual abuse, (3) inconclusive cases (where there could be sexual abuse), and (4) erroneous allegations by children (14 cases, 2.5%).
- These include three allegations (0.5%) made in collusion with parents, three (0.5%) misinterpretations, and eight (1.5%) false reports by children.

# Differential Diagnosis of Abuse Allegations





## *The Allegation Is True*

The child and the parent may be accurate and truthful.  
This is usually the case, perhaps 90% of the time (Cantwell, 1981).

## *Parental Misinterpretation and Suggestion*

- The parent may be anxious, fearful , and histrionic.
- The parent has taken an innocent remark or neutral piece of behavior, inflated it into something worse, and inadvertently induced the child to endorse his or her interpretation.

## *Misinterpreted Physical Condition*

A parent who is vindictive or overly anxious or a mental health professional who is misinformed may jump to the conclusion that a child's injury or illness was caused by sexual abuse rather than accepting a more benign explanation.

## *Parental Delusion*

- The parent is a severely disturbed , paranoid person.
- He or she has actively shared a distorted world view with the child who now shares the same delusion.
- The parent and child may share *afo lie adeux* or the child may simply give in and agree with the delusional parent who persistently insists that abuse occurred.

## *Parental Indoctrination*

The parent fabricated the allegation and instructed the child in what to say.

## *Interviewer Suggestion*

Previous interviewers may have inadvertently contaminated the evidence by asking leading or suggestive questions.

## *Fantasy*

- The child may have confused fantasy with reality.
- This is more likely to occur with younger children.
- For instance, a child in a day care center may be told that another child has been sexually abused. At that point , the child may confuse what happened to the other child with what happened to himself or herself.
- Oedipal fantasies as an explanation for reports of incest were suggested by Rosenfeld.

## *Delusion*

Although rare, delusions about sexual activities may occur in older children and adolescents in the context of a psychotic illness.



## *Misinterpretation*

- A misinterpretation may also cause a false belief, but it is derived from something that actually happened in the first place.
- An early adolescent boy with a heightened concern about sexuality may misinterpret a pat on the back as a sexual caress.

## *Miscommunication*

- A false allegation of abuse may arise out of a simple verbal misunderstanding.
- The child may misunderstand an adult's question ;
- the adult may misinterpret or take the child's statement out of context.

## *Confabulation*

- This term has been defined as " the act of replacing memory loss by fantasy or by reality that is not true for the occasion."
- The child tries to fill the gaps in their memories by confabulating.
- This may occur when the interviewer repeatedly reinforces the child to give more information than the child actually remembers.
- Younger children can incorporate the suggestions of parents or peers in their memories.

## *Confabulation*

- Saywitz et al. have conducted research on the suggestibility of children.
- In their study, 36 healthy young girls, age 5 to 7, were given a standard medical checkup that did
- not include any genital or anal examination. At least 1 week later, the girls were asked to describe what happened during the examination.
- During free recall, none of the 36 girls described any genital or anal touching.
- When specifically asked about genital or anal touching, three of the girls said that it had occurred.

## *Pseudologia Phantastica*

- Called fantasy lying and pathological lying, pseudologia phantastica has been defined as "telling stories without discernible or adequate motive and with such zeal that the subject may become convinced of their truth."
- In some cases, however, closer investigation may reveal the underlying motive for the pseudologia.

## *Pseudologia Phantastica*

- Pseudologia has been described in adults who were sociopathic, who had Munchausen syndrome, and who had an organic mental disorder.
- Kohut (1966) explained pseudologia in terms of narcissism, in that it involves the pathological, overexpansiveness of the grandiose self.
- One of the first issues of *The Nervous Child* was devoted to pathological lying in children.
- In that issue, Selling (1942) said that the pathological liar has " a very definite tendency to tell untruths about matters which perhaps could be easily verified and which untruths may serve no obvious purpose either in the personality of the individual or in the situation which he finds himself."

## *Pseudologia Phantastica*

Charlie, a 5-year-old, was brought for psychiatric evaluation because he repeatedly had initiated sexual activities with boys in his neighborhood and at his kindergarten .

He told his mother that he had learned these "weewee games" at his previous day care center. After some initial hesitation, Charlie became very enthusiastic about telling the interviewer the details of many different weewee games. He said he knew a hundred of them.

Charlie's discourse, over several interviews, was an exuberant, expansive, elaborate account of life at the day care center.

He said that he had attended 10 different schools; that he had lived in Mexico; that his teacher was up in an airplane.

The impression was that Charlie had been sexually stimulated in some way, but most of what he said was a fantasy lie.

## *Innocent Lying*

- Young children, especially around the age of 4 to 5 years, frequently make false statements because that seems to be the best way to handle the situation they are in.
- In the future, there will probably be more examples of innocent lying as the basis for an allegation of abuse. The reason is that children are taught about sexual abuse ("good touching" and "bad touching"), and parents are aware of the possibility of sexual abuse and are likely to ask children about their experiences.
- In some cases, a non abused child will report that he or she had been abused without realizing the importance of the deception.



## *Deliberate Lying*

- This refers to the self-serving, intentional fabrications that are common among children and adolescents.
- Older children may fully understand the moral issues involved but choose to avoid or distort the truth for revenge or personal advantage.
- Wanda, a 14 year-old girl, became pregnant and was very much afraid of the repercussions from her parents. Aiming to shield her relationship with her 18-year-old
- boyfriend, she accused her stepfather of molesting her. Her accusation served the double purpose of protecting her boyfriend and embarrassing the stepfather.

## *Overstimulation*

Schetky and Green have eloquently described how some parenting practices, such as genital touching and nudity, can result in chronic sexual overstimulation.

## *Group Contagion*

The parent and child may be victims of epidemic hysteria, in which rumors take on a life of their own, and frightened people modify what they have heard in a way consistent with their own emotional needs.

## *Perpetrator Substitution*

- One of the vexing aspects of these evaluations is that the child actually may have been sexually abused (so is manifesting symptoms consistent with abuse) but is identifying the wrong person as the perpetrator (making a false allegation).
- This is not a simple problem, in that the substitution may be the result of several of the mechanisms already described.
- It could be based on fantasy, since the abused child may confuse an abusive uncle for the father because of Oedipal wishes and the father's flirtations.

## *Perpetrator Substitution*

- Reports indicate that false accusations are more likely to be made by older children, usually adolescents.
- Faller identified adolescents as making the majority of false allegations.
- These children had histories of prior sexual abuse but appeared to make the allegations for instrumental reasons, for example, to cover up their consensual sexual activity or to effect removal from the home.
- Similarly, Graham and Watkeys found that some children making false allegations did so to extricate themselves from unsatisfactory living situations.

## *False Allegations*

- Risk situations noted in the literature for adults making false allegations include divorce/custody disputes and adults with mental health problems.
- In the very small number of cases in which children make false allegations, they are likely to be adolescents, children with mental health problems, and children making false allegations to get themselves out of difficult situations.
- Very young children may also be the source of fictitious reports, but these usually derive from inappropriate questioning techniques.

## *False Allegations*

- The majority of the false reports in Horowitz et al. sample were from adolescents.
- Reasons Horowitz and colleagues noted were anger at the accused, an attempt to influence the living situation, and emotional disturbance.

# Criteria for Deciding About the Likelihood of Sexual Abuse

