



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 29 (2005) 1333–1345

Child Abuse  
& Neglect

## False allegations of abuse and neglect when parents separate

Nico Trocmé<sup>a,\*</sup>, Nicholas Bala<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work, 246 Bloor Street, West, Toronto, Ont., Canada M5S 1A1*

<sup>b</sup> *Queen's University, Faculty of Law, Kingston, Ont., Canada*

Received 2 July 2003; received in revised form 13 June 2004; accepted 20 June 2004

---

### Abstract

**Objective:** The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-98) is the first national study to document the rate of intentionally false allegations of abuse and neglect investigated by child welfare services in Canada. This paper provides a detailed summary of the characteristics associated with intentionally false reports of child abuse and neglect within the context of parental separation.

**Method:** A multistage sampling design was used, first to select a representative sample of 51 child welfare service areas across Canada. Child maltreatment investigations conducted in the selected sites during the months of October–December 1998 were tracked, yielding a final sample of 7,672 child maltreatment investigations reported to child welfare authorities because of suspected child abuse or neglect.

**Results:** Consistent with other national studies of reported child maltreatment, CIS-98 data indicate that more than one-third of maltreatment investigations are unsubstantiated, but only 4% of all cases are considered to be intentionally fabricated. Within the subsample of cases wherein a custody or access dispute has occurred, the rate of intentionally false allegations is higher: 12%. Results of this analysis show that neglect is the most common form of intentionally fabricated maltreatment, while anonymous reporters and noncustodial parents (usually fathers) most frequently make intentionally false reports. Of the intentionally false allegations of maltreatment tracked by the CIS-98, custodial parents (usually mothers) and children were least likely to fabricate reports of abuse or neglect.

**Conclusions:** While the CIS-98 documents that the rate of intentionally false allegations is relatively low, these results raise important clinical and legal issues, which require further consideration.

© 2005 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse; Custody and access; False abuse allegations

---

\* Corresponding author.

## Introduction

There is a widespread misperception that there is a high incidence of intentionally false allegations of child abuse made by mothers in the context of parental separation and divorce in order to gain a tactical advantage or to seek revenge from their estranged partners.

Coining the term “Parental Alienation Syndrome” (Gardner, 1999), Columbia University psychiatrist Dr. Richard Gardner blames vindictive mothers for pressuring children to make false claims of sexual abuse in divorce custody disputes. While Gardner’s work is largely discredited by clinical studies (Faller, 1998), and large-scale studies of custody and access disputes have found that sexual abuse allegations in the context of parental separation are relatively rare (Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990), there continue to be misperceptions about the problem of false allegations of child abuse and neglect.

During its 1998 hearings, the Canadian Special Parliamentary Joint Committee on Child Custody and Access heard heated testimony from fathers, men’s groups, and professionals about the problem of false allegations of abuse in cases involving custody disputes. One witness was quoted as saying that false sexual abuse allegations were the “weapon of choice” of mothers in custody disputes. The Director of Legal Services for a local child welfare agency gave the Committee the “rough statistic” of “three of every five cases of alleged abuse . . . involve custody and access.” The director of another agency estimated that “only 15% of allegations made in divorce cases were likely true.”

This article challenges some of the misperceptions about the frequency and characteristics of intentionally false allegations in child welfare investigations and their relationship to custody and access disputes, based on a study of 7,600 child welfare investigations conducted across Canada. The rate of intentionally false allegations is relatively low, though it is somewhat higher in cases of parental separation than in other contexts. It is more likely that a noncustodial parent (usually the father) will deliberately fabricate an allegation of abuse than for custodial parents (usually mothers) to fabricate such an allegation.

One of the major limitations of research done to date is the lack of information about the context in which intentionally false allegations arise. Research based on files identified through custody and access disputes has generally paid little attention to the differences between cases where false allegations are made and cases where they are not made. Similarly, research based on child protection cases does not distinguish between cases involving custody disputes and cases where intentionally false allegations may arise for other reasons. Previous research has also been limited with respect to the extent to which intentionally false allegations are compared to other unsubstantiated allegations.

Improving on existing research, the CIS-98 examines rates of false allegations arising in the context of a custody and access dispute. While malicious referrals should clearly be an important area of research, the high rates of unintentionally false allegations reported in some jurisdictions are also cause for concern (Besharov, 1994; Besharov & Laumann, 1996). With an aim to fill the existing gap in false allegations research the CIS-98 distinguishes between unsuspected reports of child abuse and neglect, and allegations of maltreatment that remain suspected. The CIS-98 also distinguishes between maliciously made false allegations and other unsubstantiated allegations.

### *Unsubstantiated versus intentionally false allegations of abuse*

Definitional confusion is a common source of misunderstanding in the debate about the problem of false allegations of abuse. Rates on unsubstantiated abuse typically reported by child welfare services range from 30 to 70%. Sixty percent of investigations tracked in the United States reported by the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10310940>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10310940>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)