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The effect of drawing on children's experiences of investigations following alleged child abuse

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the study was to evaluate investigative interviews from the perspectives of the children, comparing children who drew with children who did not. One hundred twenty-five children, alleged victims of sexual abuse, were asked about their investigative experience. The uniqueness of the study is that all of the interviews were conducted according to the NICHD Protocol and that children were randomly assigned into one of the two research conditions (drawing vs. non-drawing). The results clearly demonstrate the advantage that drawing has on the children's experience of the investigation, with children in the drawing group more often reporting feelings of hope and success. This study provides practical guidelines for practitioners by emphasizing the beneficial effects that drawing can have. The study stresses the importance of integrating into forensic investigations interventions that enhance children's testimonies and ensure that the investigation is an empowering experience that generates feelings of trust, self-worth, and justice.

Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the most serious public health problems facing society and, more importantly, children and young people themselves (Putnam, 2003). Sexual abuse is defined as a behavior that includes: "any sexual interaction with person[s] of any age that is perpetrated (a) against the victim's will, (b) without consent, or (c) in an aggressive, exploitive, manipulative, or threatening manner" (Ryan, 2010, p. 3).

Data from published research illustrate that CSA is a historical constant that occurs in all cultures and societies and at any social level (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009). Pereda and colleagues (2009) performed a meta-analysis of the prevalence of CSA and reported that 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women had suffered some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18. Statistics from the United Kingdom suggest that 1.2% of children younger than 11 and 16.5% of 11- to 17-year-olds experienced sexual abuse, including non-contact offenses, by an adult or a peer at some point in childhood (Radford et al., 2011).

Statistics on CSA only exist for those cases that are reported to child protection agencies (CPS) or law enforcement offices, and it is therefore highly probable that official statistics underestimate the true extent of the problem. According to Finkelhor (1994) and based on a national survey conducted in the United States, the actual number of cases being reported is 2.4/1,000.

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Melton (2005) further stressed this notion by writing that child maltreatment is underreported to social services; therefore, basing conclusions on this number will essentially produce unreliable results.

CSA is an extremely difficult experience, and children are especially vulnerable when exposed to sexual abuse because child sexual abuse has harsh consequences, in both the short- and long-term (Van der Kolk, 2005; Van der Kolk & Courtois, 2005). CSA might determine the child's future perception of himself, how he relates to others, and how he understands the outside world (Browne & Finkelhor, 1987; Howe, 2005; Jonas et al., 2011). This is why, even though many factors affect the adjustment of children, abuse can profoundly affect their socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Corwin & Keeshin, 2011; Malloy, Lamb, & Katz, 2011; Swanston et al., 2002; Tyler, 2002).

The increase in awareness of child abuse in the 1970s was followed by an increased participation by children in the legal system in the 1980s (Malloy et al., 2011). Child maltreatment is a crime that is difficult to investigate because evidence is often absent, the perpetrators are often closely linked to the victim, and in most cases, the victims are the only sources of information (Malloy et al., 2011). These reasons particularly apply to cases of sexual abuse because the nature of the abuse does not lend itself to physical evidence (e.g., fondling), delayed reports are common, and physical evidence disappears (Malloy et al., 2011). Thus, investigative interviewers play a vital role in gathering accurate information and contending with this alarming phenomenon.

Investigative Interviews With Children

Investigative interviews with children need to integrate two parallel lines that some might view as contradictory. One line represents the formal aim of the investigative interview: obtaining clear and reliable testimonies rich in forensically relevant details to enhance the criminal investigation. The other line relates to the wellbeing of the child and the need to guard children, especially maltreated children, from a second traumatization following the interview (Katz, 2013). Thus, it is important to develop professional tools to help ensure that (a) the investigation is not a traumatic experience and that the investigation does not increase the child's feelings of anxiety, stress, guilt, and self-blame; and (b) the investigation provides the child with an empowering experience and enhanced feelings of trust, self-worth, and justice.

In recent years, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers from different disciplines have been dealing with the issue of investigative interviews with children and their legal context and consequences (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). The understanding that the children's testimonies are a crucial step that can profoundly affect any decision making with respect to the children, their families, and the alleged perpetrators have led to intensive efforts to investigate and disseminate the best practical guidelines for investigative interviewers (Lamb et al., 2011; Malloy et al., 2011). There is consensus on some aspects that their integration in investigations reflects best practice. For example, rapport building, practice with communication rules, training on episodic memory, and the use of open-ended questions were found to enhance the production of rich, detailed, coherent, and reliable testimonies from children (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Malloy et al., 2011). However, researchers have rarely examined the impact of investigative interviews on the child's perception of the CSA or interview experience.

The investigative interview demands a wide range of cognitive and communicative abilities from children for their narrative to be heard and understood in the legal context (Lamb et al., 2008; Lamb et al., 2011; Poole & Lamb, 1998). However, the emotional state of the child may present a significant barrier during the interview (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007). When children arrive at a forensic investigation, they are interviewed by a stranger about an alleged traumatic experience that they may not have disclosed previously (Pipe et al., 2007). Providing relevant forensic testimony on the alleged abuse may be experienced as a stressful event that may generate feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and uncertainty (Kuehnle & Connell, 2011).

Three qualitative studies have explored how children and young people under the age of 18 experienced investigative interviews (Roberts & Taylor, 1993; Wattam, 1992; Westcott & Davies, 1996). Children in all of the studies stressed the importance of feeling that the interviewer believed them and the importance of receiving support and active listening from the interviewer. The children found it more difficult if the interviewer started to question them immediately about the abuse with no rapport building; this situation made it harder to recall the details about the abusive event. In Wattam's (1992) study, the children felt isolated in the interview room and harassed by the interviewer. Conversely, Roberts and Taylor (1993) observed that the majority of the children were notably positive about talking openly about the abuse and would tell other sexually abused children to do the same.

One study that was conducted by Westcott and Davies (1996) aimed to assess children's perceptions of investigative interviews. Fourteen children and young people aged 6 to 18 years were questioned about all aspects of the investigative interview (i.e., location, duration, structure and content). Additionally, the children were asked about their feelings concerning the interview. The young people talked about what was happening and difficulties they experienced with some interviewers' language. The interviews were experienced as stressful by the majority of the children, who indicated that they were being rushed by the interviewers and were asked many demanding questions, which made them feel unimportant or bored.

Clearly, there is a deficiency with respect to the children's experiences in the context of investigative interviews, which requires further exploration. Most of the focus within the field of forensic investigations of children has focused on intensive efforts to achieve best practices within investigative interviews. Researchers have explored different practical guidelines and types of questions and techniques with the potential to help the children retrieve and report their traumatic experiences