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Brief Communication

Coaching children about sexual abuse: A pilot study of professionals' perceptions

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Introduction

High stakes are involved in believing or disbelieving children's assertions that they have been abused by adults. Consequently, children's statements about possible maltreatment have become an immensely contested issue (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Mansell, 1990; Mildred, 2003; Ney, 1995; Oates et al., 2000; Olafson, 2002; Rabinowitz, 1990). Although other types of cases are contested, sexual abuse cases are particularly controversial because evidence is often limited to the child's account. A hypothesis that might explain away a child's account of abuse is that the child has been coached. This explanation has been strongly endorsed by those accused (e.g., Butler, Fukurai, Dimitrius, & Krooth, 2001; Freyd, 1993; Goldstein, 1992; Wakefield & Underwager, 1988) and taken at face value by many professionals (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Ney, 1995; Poole & Lamb, 1998; White & Quinn, 1988). Despite declarations that coaching must be routinely considered when child abuse is alleged, there is scant research to support coaching as a viable explanation for children's accounts of abuse. Although relevant studies do not always address directly the coaching of children, they support a conclusion that coached statements and other types of false abuse allegations by children are uncommon.

For example, Jones and McGraw (1987) undertook a review of 579 sexual abuse reports made to child protective services in Denver County in 1983, using a team of child abuse experts. The researchers concluded that eight cases were "fictitious" allegations made by five children (three by the same child).

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Of interest is that the researchers concluded four of these five children were experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. All four had a prior sexual abuse history, and the researchers thought these children experienced flashbacks and reality distortions that made them believe they were current victims of sexual abuse. Jones and McGraw did not report adults coaching children to make false allegations, but did determine that custody dispute cases were overrepresented among fictitious allegations by adults.

A decade later, Oates et al. (2000) conducted a replication of the Jones and McGraw study, with minor methodological differences. They reviewed all sexual abuse cases reported to Denver County child protective services ($N = 551$) in 1995 and found only 2.5% involved "erroneous accounts by children." They further examined these erroneous accounts and found three cases (.5%) which involved adult-child collaborative false cases, which might entail coaching.

Relevant to the coaching issue is a recent analysis of the Canadian Incidence Study 98 Data (data collected periodically in Canada and used to project the rates, types, and risk factors for child maltreatment (Trocmé & Bala, 2005)). Trocmé and Bala explored the issue of intentional false allegations of all kinds of maltreatment (as opposed to unsubstantiated cases, which were 31% of the dispositions), who made the false reports, and on what types of cases. This study is a survey of 7,672 child protection workers and, therefore, represents their opinions regarding intentionality. Overall, the researchers found an intentional false allegation rate of 4%. The most frequent type of maltreatment to involve a false allegation was neglect, although slightly higher proportions of sexual abuse cases (6%) were deemed false than other types of child maltreatment (neglect = 4%, physical abuse = 4%, and emotional abuse = 2%). Non-custodial parents' (usually fathers) allegations of all types of maltreatment were more likely to be intentionally false (15%) than custodial parents' (2%) (usually mothers). Only 2% of false reports were made by children; none of children's false reports involved sexual abuse. On the other hand, the child protection workers involved in Trocmé and Bala's study report the frequency of false allegations in custody disputes as 12%, three times the overall rate of false allegations. They did not differentiate coaching from other types of false allegations.

There is other support for fathers being at greater risk of making false allegations than mothers. An earlier Canadian study of allegations of maltreatment in custody cases (1990–1998) examined 196 written Canadian Family Court opinions. The judges found 45 (23%) to be false reports; fathers were 16 times more likely to make false reports than mothers (Bala & Schuman, 2000). Mothers, however, were more likely than fathers to make reports of maltreatment to the Family Court; 9% of reports (true and false) emanated from children.

In addition, coaching children has been studied in analogue research (studies that stage events or take advantage of naturally occurring events with characteristics thought to be found in abuse cases). These studies involve 3- to 6-year-old children. Some analogue research has demonstrated that some children can be programmed (or coached) to affirm experiences they have not had, such as getting a finger caught in a mousetrap or observing a man ripping a book (Ceci & Leichtman, 1995; Ceci, Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994; Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994). These studies involve pre-school children who are programmed for over 8–11 sessions, for example, by being told to "make a picture in your head" about the false event (Ceci, Huffman et al., 1994). The researchers find a notable minority of children falsely endorse an event they have not experienced. Children are the least likely to affirm falsely a negative participatory event (falling off a tricycle and needing stitches) and most likely to affirm a neutral, non-participatory event (seeing someone standing at a bus stop) (Ceci, Huffman et al., 1994). None of the studies involve abuse-like events, such as touching of private parts.

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