



## Research article

# Impact of interviewers' supportive comments and children's reluctance to cooperate during sexual abuse disclosure<sup>☆</sup>



Jennifer Lewy<sup>a</sup>, Mireille Cyr<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jacinthe Dion<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Département de psychologie, Université de Montréal, Québec, Canada*

<sup>b</sup> *Département des sciences de la santé, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada*

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 December 2014

Received in revised form 27 February 2015

Accepted 3 March 2015

Available online 26 March 2015

### Keywords:

Child sexual abuse

Forensic interview

Children's reluctance

Interviewers' support

NICHD Protocol

## ABSTRACT

In the field of child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure, many studies have been conducted on the impact of interviewers' questioning style, but few have examined the impact of interviewers' supportive comments on children's cooperative and reluctant disclosure of substantive details. This field study used a sample of children ranging from 4 to 13 years of age who have all disclosed CSA. The first objective was to examine if the interviewer's and the child's comments during CSA interviews would vary as a function of the use of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol. The second objective was to identify the strongest correlates of the proportion of details disclosed by the children during forensic interviews. A total of 90 matched NICHD Protocol and non-Protocol interviews done by the same interviewers were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded using verbal subscales. The goal was to explore if differences exist between the interviewers' supportive and non-supportive comments as well as children's cooperative and reluctant statements during investigative interviews conducted prior to or after the NICHD Protocol training. Results of a MANCOVA showed that the use of the NICHD Protocol had no influence on interviewers' and children's demeanors. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis controlling for relevant variables (e.g., child's age and NICHD Protocol) showed that children's reluctance and interviewers' non-support were associated with a lesser proportion of details. Overall, these results indicate that in order to promote detailed disclosure of CSA, interviewers should decrease their non-supportive comments and learn to deal more effectively with children's reluctance during forensic interviews. As such, protocols and training should encourage investigative interviewers to devote more time identifying early signs of children's verbal reluctance and to understand the negative impact of non-supportive comments on the disclosure of substantive details.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Investigators have few tools to solve cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) outside of the testimony proffered from underage victims. Indeed, individuals who commit CSA often minimize or deny their crimes and witnesses or medical evidence are rarely available (Cyr, Dion, & Powell, 2014, chap. 3; Faller, 1996; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2007; Poole & Lindsay,

<sup>☆</sup> The research was supported by grants from the *Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture*, the *Chaire interuniversitaire Marie-Vincent sur les agressions sexuelles envers les enfants*, the *Équipe violence sexuelle et santé*, the *Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les problèmes conjugaux et les agressions sexuelles* and a doctoral fellowship from the *University of Montreal* awarded to the first author.

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Montreal, P.O. Box 6128, Downtown Station, Montreal, QC H3C 3J7, Canada.

1998). Hence, the more details that the child provides about the perpetrator and the sexual abuse (SA), the easier it will be to convict the alleged perpetrator and prevent a recurrence of abuse (Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, Abbott, & Stewart, 2013).

In the last three decades, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the impact of interviewing techniques and the accuracy of the details disclosed by presumed victims of CSA (Davies, Westcott, & Horan, 2000; Hershkowitz, 2001; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Sternberg, Lamb, Esplin, Orbach, & Hershkowitz, 2002; Sternberg et al., 1996). Details obtained from free-recall memory are considered more accurate and reliable, regardless of the child's age (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). Since it was difficult for interviewers to change their old habits, researchers in the forensic field decided to develop a standardized and structured protocol (Lamb et al., 1996; Orbach et al., 2000). With the objective of enhancing the length and the accuracy of children's testimony, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol offers guidelines to interviewers for employing "best practices" by using open-ended questions and invitations as much as possible when interviewing alleged victims (Orbach et al., 2000).

The pre-substantive phase of the forensic interview allows children to practice responding to open-ended questions by describing a recent pleasant event, which in turn prepares them to disclose more detailed information in response to open-ended prompts during the substantive (getting the allegation) phase of the interview (Lamb et al., 2008; Sternberg et al., 2002). We could expect that interviewers would be more reassuring and attentive to the child during the substantive part of the interview because the NICHD Protocol includes a pre-substantive phase in which one of the objectives is to establish rapport with the child.

As previously mentioned, the use of appropriate techniques (e.g., type of questions) is crucial for forensic investigators. However, the impact of interviewers' demeanors may also play a significant role in CSA disclosure. Among interviewers' demeanors, *social support* appears to be an important dimension. More specifically social support expressed by the interviewer was conceptualized as a form of *social interaction or communication that fosters a feeling of well-being in the interviewee* (Burlleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994). Non-verbal signs of an interviewers' social support (e.g., smiling, eye contact) were first explored in relation to children's suggestibility in laboratory settings. Results from these studies showed that interviewers' support had a positive effect on the amount and the accuracy of the information provided by the children (see Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney, & Rudy, 1991). Indeed, Davis and Bottoms (2002) demonstrated that support (e.g., smiling, sitting in proximity, and using a kind voice) given during mock interviews helped children resist misleading suggestions about past events, thereby increasing the quality of children's testimony.

Most of these analog studies measured non-verbal expressions of support (e.g., open body posture, smiling) and non-support (e.g., closed body posture, fidgeting) during mock interviews. However, in the context of a real forensic interview, it is not always possible to film interviewers' behavior as it is the children who are the focus of the interview. Moreover, younger children often move in and out of the camera range. Hence, more information on verbal expression of support vs. non-support (e.g., encouragement, intimidation) as well as children's cooperation during real forensic interviews seems necessary to better understand the impact of such demeanors on CSA disclosure.

In a real-life setting, Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, and Horowitz (2006) looked at the influence of interviewers' supportive and non-supportive comments on children who disclosed and those who did not disclose their SA. Supportive comments were intended to encourage children to be informative. They were classified using four exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories: (a) *non-suggestive positive reinforcement*, (b) *addressing the child in a personal way*, (c) *references to the child's emotions*, and (d) *facilitators*. In contrast, unsupportive comments were intended to exert pressure on children to respond by challenging the information they provided or criticizing their behavior. These comments were similarly categorized using four exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories: (a) *confrontations*; (b) *reference to positive outcomes*; (c) *warnings about negative outcomes*; and (d) *negative references to the child's behavior*. In both groups (disclosers and non-disclosers), higher levels of interviewer support were associated with more informative, and fewer uninformative responses, in the pre-substantive and substantive phases of the interview. As expected, disclosers provided more details than non-disclosers. Although non-disclosing children might have benefitted from getting more support, they obtained less support than the group of children who disclosed. The non-disclosers were also less informative and increasingly more resentful in their responses. More recently, using the same categories of support, Teoh and Lamb (2013) analyzed 75 CSA interviews of children aged between 5 and 15 years old. They observed that interviewers were more supportive with older (vs. younger) children and that these children were also more informative in their responses. Moreover, in a study with children aged from 4 to 9 years old, Hershkowitz (2009) showed that interviewers' support was not associated with the level of information provided in children's responses in general. Nevertheless, interviewers' support was effective for less talkative children and it also predicted the richness of the responses following open-ended questions for older children only. They concluded that older (vs. younger) children may need more support as they understand the ramifications and the shame of the SA.

The results from these field studies are consistent with those from analog studies, indicating the positive impact of support on the quantity and the quality of the details provided by children during forensic interviews. Supportive interviewers tend to give children the reassurance and the time needed to best respond to the questions. Indeed, more supportive comments in rapport-building were found in interviews with children who disclosed SA when compared to those who denied it. Hence, supportive interviewers may encourage children to disclose SA in formal investigations (Elliott & Briere, 1994; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6832634>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6832634>

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