

Sexual Abuse

Because a child can be sexually abused without leaving any physical evidence, much of the debate over such abuse has revolved around the credibility of accounts purportedly given by children. In the past, the child savers portrayed this as an issue of veracity, declaring "children never lie" -- and, when that proved to be preposterous, "children rarely lie." While that is not often heard now, it's still an article of faith in some child saver circles.

But framing the issue this way is misleading. It is highly unlikely that a very young child will spontaneously pick up the phone and call a child protective hotline. Allegations of sexual abuse of children typically are brought by and filtered through adults. And that's where the problems usually start.

False reports can result when:

- A child misunderstands a child abuse prevention presentation, as for example when a kindergarten child going to bed gets an affectionate pat on his bottom from his father and says: "Daddy, I'm sorry but my teacher says that's my private zone and you can't touch me there."^[1]
- An interviewer asks leading questions. In one study, for example, five- and six-year-olds gave an accurate account of an event staged before them when the questions put to them later were neutral. But when the interviewer told them a version of the incident that was false, 90 percent of the children eventually changed their "recollection" from what they had seen with their own eyes to what the questioner told them had happened.^[2]

• A child is lavishly praised for "disclosing" abuse, but berated and belittled for failing to tell a therapist what the therapist wants to hear. In the notorious McMartin Preschool case, for example, a child who insisted he did not see any abuse was told by a therapist, "you must be dumb!"^[3] In another alleged "mass molestation" case, in Jordan, Minnesota, some children taken away from accused parents were told they had a better chance of being returned to their parents if they accused them of sexual abuse.^[4]

In 1989, the American Psychological Association brought together the leading researchers in the field to address the question: Are children reliable witnesses? Their not-so-

startling conclusion: Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

According to one of the organizers of the conference, Prof. Stephen J. Ceci of Cornell University, "children are often able to provide courts with much that is forensically valuable, *provided* that adults who have access to them do not attempt to alter their reports through coaching, suggestions, rehearsal, bribes, or threats."^[5] [Emphasis in original.]

Unfortunately, all of these techniques have been used repeatedly by the child savers.

Among the most tragic examples is the case of an eight-year-old San Diego girl, Alicia W.

In May of 1989, Alicia was kidnapped by a man who came in through her bedroom window, brutally raped her, then returned her to her room. But that was only the beginning of her terror.

At a time when she most needed the love and support of her family, Alicia was completely isolated from them. Why? Because despite all the rhetoric about the need to "believe the children" San Diego's child savers refused to believe Alicia. They refused to believe her even though she gave a detailed description of her attacker, and even though they knew almost identical crimes had been committed in the same neighborhood.

Instead, Alicia was denied all contact with her family and confined to a world of social workers, therapists, and foster parents, all of whom pressured her to "admit" that she was "in denial" and she had really been raped by her father. Through it all, she begged to go home. After 13 months of this sort of twice-weekly "therapy" she changed her story and named her father as the attacker. (The father also was in therapy, forced to attend a "deniers group".)

For the child savers, it was a triumph. At last Alicia had "disclosed." Based on her new story, they brought criminal charges against the father and tried to take Alicia away from her parents forever so the foster parents could adopt her. They were within days of succeeding when a DNA test of semen stains on Alicia's clothes proved that her father could not have been the rapist. Among the five percent of men whom it could have been was the same man who by

then had been convicted of the other attacks in the neighborhood.

By the time all charges were dropped, the family had been bankrupted by legal bills, Alicia's mother had attempted suicide, and Alicia had been separated from her family for two-and-a-half years. The child savers did not so much as say they were sorry.[6]

The harm to innocent families is only half of the problem. The techniques of the child savers often make it impossible to determine innocence or guilt. The same techniques that may destroy an innocent family in one case may

backfire and let a real child abuser go free in another.

Child savers claim they've learned from their mistakes. They say they're very careful not to ask leading questions or otherwise taint their interviews. That would be a lot more reassuring if child savers also were willing to insist that all interviews with children – and everyone else in child abuse investigations – be videotaped. But there is enormous resistance to this at family policing agencies. So one has to wonder what it is they don't want the rest of us to see and hear.

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1. Sherrill Kerns Kraizer, "Rethinking Prevention," *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal*, Vol. 10, p.260, 1986.
2. Prof. K. Alison Clarke-Stewart, *Remarks*, American Psychological Association News Conference, July 25, 1991, p.8.
3. Tom Charlier and Shirley Downing, "Justice Abused: A 1980s Witch Hunt," *The (Memphis, Tenn.) Commercial Appeal*, Jan., 1988, Reprint, pp. A16, A17.
4. Office of the Attorney General, State of Minnesota, *Report on Scott County Investigations*, Feb. 12, 1985.
5. Prof. Stephen J. Ceci, *Remarks*, American Psychological Association news conference, July 25, 1991.
6. San Diego County Grand Jury, *The Case of Alicia W.*, Report No. 6, June 23, 1992 and *Child Sexual Abuse, Assault, and Molest Issues*, Report No. 8, June 29, 1992; Jim Okerblom and John Wilkens, "Tragedy, Errors Shatter a Family," *The San Diego Union*, Oct. 20, 1991, p.1
