

DO CHILDREN LIE ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE?

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With the recent events in Scott County, the question of whether or not children lie about sexual abuse has come to the fore and is most frequently asked of those of us who have spent time working with young victims of sexual abuse. This is how I respond to this question, stemming from my five years' experience working with young abused children.

1. Sexually abused children have been known to deny, minimize, “forget” and confuse, but rarely do they lie. Research by Lucy Becliner and colleagues in Seattle has matched children's statements and later admissions by sexual offenders and found that not only were the children's statements accurate, but often they were found to be understated accounts of the abuse suffered.
2. The reporting of sexual abuse is a developmental phenomenon. Children don't automatically report the way adults do. Their reports vary at different ages. For example, a very young child might not have the vocabulary or concepts to express an abusive act correctly. “He peed in my mouth” is technically incorrect, yet graphically descriptive. The manner in which children store and retrieve material also changes as they grow. For example, a child who is recalling details from incidents that occurred when he was four is attempting recall from a very different cognitive arrangement – and even more different from an adult's way of thinking! These differences and inconsistencies might initially appear as “lies” but they are not.
3. A well-documented phenomenon is the child's suppression of his or her story right after a child has reported it; this has been described and documented by Suzanne Sgori, M.D. This phenomenon of admission and then denial can make an adult wonder if the story is true; it is important to know and accept this aspect of a child's reporting.
4. Although with extensive prompting or interrogating children can be moved to recant or alter details about their stories, most often they re-work details they are least clear about, but usually remain adamant about central details.
5. Children who have suffered multiple abuse encounters often present conflicting data, sometimes combining information from years of abuse into one or two accounts with apparently inconsistent details. The more often a child has been abused, the more emotionally damaged he or she is. It often is precisely these children who are asked to give us clear, specific, consistent data that will stand up in court.

6. The criminal justice system has certain rules necessary for its functioning. Some of these rules don't fit a child very well, nor do they take into account the normal differences between a child's and adult's cognitive structure and memory function. Only when a child's statements can fit criteria of reliability and consistency can they be successful in criminal court. While a child's inconsistencies may on the surface seem like lying, they often are normal for his or her age and developmental stage.

7. The support of the child protection system, by believing the child and his or her attorney, is critical; to protect the child from the angry repercussions of accusers. If the system fails and the child no longer is protected, the best way for a victimized child to cope with life might be to deny one's allegations and go back to life the way it was. Sadly, along with the risk of further abuse comes the reality that the protection system no longer works either.

8. There is no way a child can depict explicitly the details of sexual acts performed on him or her unless the child has experienced it; his or her life does not typically involve exposure to such material. Out of the 200-300 sexually abused children I've been working with in the past five years, only four or five were falsely reporting; the false reports were for very clear reasons when the cases became understood.

Just because charges of alleged abuse have been dropped and children have recanted certain statements, does not indicate that children lie about sexual abuse. While controversy rages about whether to believe certain children, the children themselves continue to feel misunderstood and mistreated, heightening their sense of being victims.