

Abstract

Leander, L. (2007). *What sexually abused children remember and report: Minding the gap*. Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) investigations are often problematic, as there is rarely evidence available other than the child's and the alleged perpetrator's statements. Consequently, the outcome of CSA investigations frequently depends on the child's testimony. This thesis aimed at investigating how sexually abused children, in cases where the abuse has been documented, remember and report about the abuse during police interviews. A secondary aim was to examine how differences in interviewer style affected children's reports about a verbal sexual abuse. The thesis consists of four empirical studies. In **Study I**, police interviews with 64 children, who had been exposed to a verbal sexual abuse during a phone call, were matched against the perpetrator's detailed documentation of the phone call. The children were found to omit almost all of the sexual details from the phone call. However, they reported more (30%) of the neutral details. In **Study II**, we analysed eight children's reports about a physical sexual abuse (perpetrated by a stranger) regarding the amount and type of information reported. As we had access to documentation of the sexual abuse, we knew that the abuse actually had taken place. Results showed that the majority of children did not report any or only very few sexual details. In addition, the children, at a total of 97 occasions, denied or expressed reluctance to talk about the sexual acts. The background to **Study III** is that a man developed a false identity on the Internet and contacted a large number of girls, in order to lure them into conducting on- and off-line sexual activities. We had access to detailed documentation of the communications between each girl and the perpetrator. The purpose of the study was to investigate how the girls (N=68) reported about the sexual activities. The girls were found to omit and deny a large proportion of the on-line activities, especially the more severe sexual acts. In contrast, we found that there were few omissions and denials regarding the real-life meetings with the perpetrator. The aim of **Study IV** was to analyse how differences in interviewer style affected 61 children's reports about a verbal sexual abuse. Specifically, we examined how establishing rapport and different types of questions affected the richness and accuracy of the children's statements. Results revealed a positive relationship between rapport establishing utterances and the richness of the children's reports. However, when controlling for number of questions asked, the relationship was weakened. Interestingly, there was a positive relationship between establishing rapport and number of questions asked. The results reported in the present thesis revealed that children often produce fragmentary reports about sexual abuse, marked by a lack of details describing the course of the event. Furthermore, the results showed that these difficulties apply in cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by a stranger, and for different forms of sexual abuse (i.e., verbal, Internet-initiated and physical sexual abuse). Presumably, there is a gap between what children report about the abuse and what they actually remember (note that the gap is not between what children tell and what actually took place, where the accuracy is often high). Speculatively, the unwillingness to report about sexual abuse may be due to emotional factors (e.g., feelings of shame and guilt). In order to facilitate reporting and help the child overcome emotional barriers, considerable focus must be put on establishing rapport with the child during the investigative interview. Furthermore, the recommendation in the Swedish courts that CSA reports should be detailed in order to be considered credible (Gregow, 1996) may not apply in cases of CSA.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Children as witnesses, Child interviews, Verbal sexual abuse, Internet-initiated sexual abuse

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