

## Case Study: of Abuse Created in a Single Interview

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective.** To illustrate how young children can be induced to make false allegations of sexual abuse. **Method:** The author presents a case that is unusual because elaborate, detailed allegations of sexual abuse came about during a single interview, the interviewer was a baby-sitter rather than a mental health professional, and the interview was recorded on tape. **Results:** Children can be induced to make elaborate, detailed false statements after being subjected to repetitive, suggestive, and leading questions during a single interview. **Conclusions:** Child abuse investigators should determine the origin and evolution of allegations of abuse. Children should not be removed from their parents if it is likely that the allegations against the parents are false. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997, 36(7) 966-970.* **Key Words:** child abuse, sexual abuse, false allegation.

Several professional organizations and individuals have published guidelines or parameters for the forensic evaluation of children who may have been abused (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997; American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1995; Yuille et al., 1993). To optimize the opportunity for truthful statements and minimize the possibility of false allegations, these guidelines recommend encouraging spontaneous narrative, proceeding from general statements to specific questions, and avoiding repetitive questions, either/or questions, and leading and suggestive questions.

Children who were not abused may make false allegations through a number of different mental mechanisms (Bernet, 1993). In this case, an elaborate, detailed allegation was created through the use of repetitive, suggestive questioning. This case is unusual because a detailed "disclosure" came about in a single interview, the interviewer was a baby-sitter rather than a mental health professional, and the interview was recorded on tape. The child's statements were reported to Child Protective Services and the child was removed from the home for 18 months. Ultimately, after a hearing at which a child psychiatrist provided expert testimony, the court returned the child to the parents. The author of this case study was not the expert who testified; the expert is not identified here in order to protect the privacy of the family.

### Issues Raised by This Case

It is generally acknowledged that adults—such as overly anxious parents and inept interviewers—can indoctrinate children to hold false beliefs. Previous investigators state or imply that the indoctrination process takes place in serial conversations over an extended period of time. For example, Schetky and Green (1988) describe an ongoing process in which "the vindictive or delusional mother needs to have total control over the child" and during which "these women bombard their children with incessant interrogations" (p. 108). Clawar and Rivlin (1991) describe an indoctrination process that proceeds through a series of steps. They note that brainwashing "occurs over a period of time and usually involves the repetition of the programme until the subject responds with compliance" (p. 8). Gardner (1992) also describes programming as something that takes place over a period of time: the children "may have been subjected to many rehearsals by the programming parent ensure they have learned their lines well" (p.162). Ceci and Bruck (1995) illustrate how repeated questions across interviews as well as repeated questions within interviews can lead to false statements. They emphasize that children may retell their story to many people, including investigators, detectives, therapists, and parents.

This case study is unusual because the indoctrination took place one morning during the course of a single conversation. By the end of that discussion, the child was describing multiple forms of sexual abuse as well as animal killings and threats of retaliation. Although the child psychiatry literature does not describe this intensive, one-step indoctrination process, a similar technique has been advocated for many years in books that instruct police detectives how to interview criminal suspects (Inbau and Reid, 1962). Ofshe (1989) and Gudjonsson (1992) explain how false confessions come about through interrogatory suggestion. The features of police interviewing can be found in the case presented here.

Research in this area may underestimate the suggestibility of young children. Research protocols involve the rather gentle presentation of misleading information and suggestive questioning (Tobey and Goodman, 1992) or simply asking the children to think about events that have not actually happened (Ceci et al., 1994). The gentle suggestion of the laboratory is quite different from the brow beating that may occur in real life.

What should Protective Services do when they receive referrals such as this? Should the initial presumption of Protective Services be that the child has been abused (in which case they would immediately remove the child from the home) or that the child has not been abused (in which case they would conduct an investigation but leave the child at home)?

## CASE STUDY

Betsy, aged 5 years, spent weekdays at the home of Joyce, her baby-sitter. One morning, Joyce had a long conversation, or "interview," with Betsy. The very first part of the interview was not recorded, but most of it was. Joyce started to record the conversation because Betsy became very upset when she saw Joyce sweep the floor with a broom. Joyce thought that Betsy was afraid of the broom because her parents had played a game with her called "sweep the bootie."

### Repetitive and Incessant Questioning

During this discussion, Joyce incessantly asked Betsy hundreds of questions. In some instances, Joyce interrupted Betsy in order to pose the next question. Many of the questions were repeated several times until the child provided the "correct" answer. Throughout this transcript, the child's "uh-huh" means "yes"; "uh-uh" means "no."

*Joyce:* What did you call that game?

*Betsy:* Sweeping your bootie.

*Joyce:* Now tell me again. I couldn't understand you.

*Betsy:* Sweeping on your bootie.

*Joyce:* Sweeping in the bootie? Okay. Who thought of this game, Betsy? Who did you tell me earlier told you how to play this game? Who was it? Who taught you how to play this game?

*Betsy:* Mommy.

*Joyce:* What's your Mommy's name? Take your fingers out of your mouth and tell me what your Mommy's name is. What's her name? Say it real loud.

*Betsy:* Nancy.

*Joyce:* Nancy caught you to play this. Okay. Betsy, you told me somebody else a minute ago. Who else did you tell me?

*Betsy:* Daddy

*Joyce:* Okay. And what's your Daddy's name?

*Betsy:* Edward.

*Joyce:* And when was the last time they played this game with you?

*Betsy:* Yesterday.

*Joyce:* Yesterday. And your sure it was yesterday?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* How do you know it was yesterday? Huh? How do you know it was yesterday? Huh? Are you sure it was yesterday? Was it Monday? Tuesday? Wednesday?

*Betsy:* Wednesday.

*Joyce:* Okay. Yesterday was Thursday. Did it happen on the day he picked you up early or did it happen yesterday when he picked you up?

*Betsy:* Yesterday.

In forensic interviews the most credible statements come about when the child makes a spontaneous, narrative report. Joyce made no attempt to encourage Betsy to develop a narrative account of what happened. On the contrary, she asked repetitive questions and gradually shaped the child's responses into the allegations that the parents had molested Betsy vaginally and rectally with a broom handle. In pursuing her questioning, Joyce brought up many different topics, including discussions of male and female genitalia, penile erection, urination, and ejaculation.

### Contradicting the Child

On several occasions, Joyce flatly contradicted Betsy. Usually the child changed her statement to accommodate the adult's opinion. Joyce also made it clear that Betsy was expected to "tell the truth," i.e., to say what Joyce had in mind.

*Joyce:* Your living room has a carpet on it, doesn't it?

*Betsy:* They were in the kitchen.

*Joyce:* No, they were in the living room. You told me. Betsy, you're not telling me the truth again.

....

*Joyce:* Does he ever make you kiss his private part? Do you have to put your mouth anywhere on Daddy? Betsy, tell me.

*Betsy:* No

*Joyce:* Betsy, you can't keep this stuff a secret. You can't. I want to help you. I can't help if you don't tell me. Betsy.

*Betsy:* Yes.

*Joyce:* Tell me. What do you do, with it then?

*Betsy:* I don't know.

*Joyce:* Yes you do. It's not your fault. What does Daddy make you do? Tell me, Betsy. Huh? Does he touch your mouth?

*Betsy:* He touch my mouth.

*Joyce:* He touched your mouth with what?

*Betsy:* His private part.

### Suggestive and Forced-Choice Questions

Joyce asked many suggestive questions in an insistent manner. She also asked forced choice (yes/no, either/or) questions.

*Joyce:* Okay. So Daddy plays sweeping the bootie with his hand. How does he use his hand? What does he do with his hand?

*Betsy:* Touches.

*Joyce:* He touches you. Did he touch your pee-pee where you go number one or did he touch where you go number two?

*Betsy:* Number two.

*Joyce:* Okay. You're saying he touched you where you go do-do at or where you go pee-pee at?

*Betsy:* Do-do.

*Joyce:* Okay. Show me. Stand up and show me.

*Betsy:* Right here.

*Joyce:* Show me. Where? Back here?

*Betsy:* Yeah.

*Joyce:* He touched you on your bottom. Okay. Were you sitting down, standing up, or laying down at the time?

*Betsy:* Laying down.

Okay. You were laying down. So you didn't have any pants on or did you? Betsy, did you have your clothes on or off?

*Betsy:* On.

*Joyce:* Okay. And you told me he touched you where you do-do? Tell me yes or no.

*Betsy:* Yes.

### Insisting on More Information

Joyce would not take no for an answer. When Betsy did not give an adequate response, Joyce told her to think about it and come up with a better answer.

*Joyce:* What else did [Mommy and Daddy] say?

*Betsy:* They didn't say nothing else.

*Joyce:* Is that all they told you?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Then what else did they tell you?

*Betsy:* I don't know.

*Joyce:* Try and think back. What did they talk to you about while they were doing that?

*Betsy:* They were talking.

### Child Tries to Cooperate

In response to these incessant, repetitive, suggestive, forced-choice questions, Betsy sensed that she could satisfy the interviewer by agreeing with her. The child was pressured to come up with answers, so she started adding information:

*Joyce:* Why does he call the game sweeping the bootie?

Because he uses his broom in your bootie?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* What else did he put in your bootie?

*Betsy:* Uh. Toy.

*Joyce:* What kind of toy?

*Betsy:* Dolls.

*Joyce:* He put a doll in your bootie?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

### Outright Coercion

As the interview progressed, Joyce became frustrated and more insistent. She disregarded Betsy's denials and protestations until the child cried.

*Joyce:* What does he make you do with [his penis] when it's in your mouth? Huh?

*Betsy:* He don't make me do nothing.

*Joyce:* You hate it, don't you? Does it make you cry when he does that to you?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Do you want him to stop? Well, you've got to help somebody stop him. You can't do it by yourself. Does he make you do that a lot? How often? Every day?

*Joyce:* What does he tell he wants you to do with it when he puts it in your mouth?

*Betsy:* He don't wane me to do nothing.

*Joyce:* What does he say? He says something, Betsy. What does he say? Huh?

*Betsy:* He says . .

*Joyce:* What?

*Betsy:* He says...

*Joyce:* Says you what?

*Betsy:* He says ....

*Joyce:* What do you do with your tongue when you have it in your mouth?

*Betsy:* Nothing.

*Joyce:* What does he do with it when he puts it in your mouth and it's on top of your tongue?

*Betsy:* Nothing.

*Joyce:* Betsy, what does he do?

*Betsy:* [crying] I don't know.

At that point, the child was ready to agree with practically anything.

*Joyce:* Does something come out of it that tastes real bad?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Does it taste bad when it's in your mouth?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Does something wet come into your mouth?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Something wet comes from Daddy?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Do you feel like you're gonna choke?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* Does something come out of his private place when he's got it in your mouth?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

### Killing Animals

Toward the end of the interview, Joyce induced Betsy to say and believe that her father would kill her if she disclosed the "abuse." She elicited statements that the Father, as a threat, had killed a horse, a cow, a duck, a dog and a cat.

*Joyce:* Have you ever seen him kill anything before?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* With his gun? What has he killed with his gun before?

*Betsy:* A cow.

*Joyce:* He killed what?

*Betsy:* A cow.

*Joyce:* Did you see him shoot the cow?

*Betsy:* Him shot a horsey too.

*Joyce:* He shot a horse too?

*Betsy:* Uh-huh.

*Joyce:* What color was the horse he shot?

*Betsy:* He was pink.

*Joyce:* What color was the cow he shot?

*Betsy:* It was pink too.

After this long conversation, Joyce notified Protective Services. Betsy was interviewed several times by personnel from Protective Services, by the local police, and by clinicians. The child continued to allege that her parents penetrated her vaginally and rectally with a broom handle; that her father penetrated her vaginally, rectally, and orally with his penis; that Betsy's mother and father had sex in front of her; and that her father killed animals and threatened to kill Betsy if she told anyone.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of this naturalistic experiment indicate that it is possible to indoctrinate a young child to make elaborate, detailed false allegations of sexual abuse in a single interview. That conclusion does not mean that it is easy to lead young children into making such allegations. In fact, the interviewer questioned Betsy intensively and persistently for more than an hour.

I am not suggesting that Protective Services workers are apt to conduct this kind of destructive interview; however, the investigator should consider the possibility that the child was previously influenced by a parent or some other adult. Investigators should always determine, as accurately as possible, the origin of an allegation and how it evolved through subsequent conversations and interviews.

Most practitioners who work with abused children know that the child's statements should not be taken at face value and should not be considered in a vacuum, without understanding the history and the context of the allegations. However, some investigators and some judges still maintain the belief that "children don't lie about sex abuse." Without discussing the definition of "lying," we can conclude that children sometimes make such statements regarding abuse, both false denials and false allegations.

When referrals are made to Protective Services, the worker should consider the possibility of a false allegation. If it seems very likely, after initial investigation, that allegations against parents came about through indoctrination—as illustrated in the case of Betsy and Joyce—consideration should be given to leaving the child at home while the investigation continues.

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