**Do children tell lies about sexual abuse? And can we tell if they are lying?**

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Jenni Whitehead discusses the difficult issues in assessing truth and lies when listening to children talking about sexual abuse

I have wanted to write this article for some time because I am often challenged in the training room about whether children and young people make false claims of sexual abuse. Only yesterday I had a participant announce to the rest of the group that according to his union 90% of allegations made against members of staff are false and often malicious. I hasten to add that I do not know of any teacher’s union making such a claim! In fact all the national audits of allegations of abuse made against education staff have concluded that wholly false allegations are extremely rare.

However, the answer to the first question in the title of this article has to be, yes, some children have told lies about sexual abuse but they are in the minority. The answer to the second question is much more complex, subject to various professional opinions and has been subjected to a great deal of research and debate.

I am sometimes asked to act as an ‘expert witness’ in cases, on behalf of the council in disciplinary hearings following allegations of abuse. (Not an enviable task I assure you.) I am, in these proceedings, asked to give my professional opinion on whether the child or young person is likely to be giving a true account and whether or not the member of staff poses a significant risk. The burden of proof in [**disciplinary proceedings**](http://www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/handling-allegations-against-staff-2442) is different from that expected in a criminal court hearing. In criminal proceedings the burden of proof is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ whereas in disciplinary proceedings it is on the ‘balance of probabilities’. In effect those bringing the case are trying to demonstrate that ‘in all probability’ the allegation is true.

In listening to children and young people talking and reading their statements my role is to look at what has been said and form an opinion of whether or not there is anything that would suggest truthfulness and to compare what is alleged to have happened to known methods of working of sexual offenders. In other words, does it ring true and is it in line with what we know? This is obviously not an exact science! As an expert witness I am giving a professional opinion.

I am very well read on issues relating to sexual abuse; it is my specific interest within the field of child abuse work and I have a lot of experience of working with people, children and adults, who have been sexually abused. However, if I were to give a statement to a hearing based only on my own working knowledge and experience I would be likely to be heavily criticised for being self-opinionated and making claims that have not been tested by research. It is therefore necessary for me to work within a recognised theoretical model. The model I have used is called ‘statement validity analysis’. This model originated in Germany and Sweden over 40 years ago (Undeutsch, 1967; Arntzen, 1970; Trankell, 1972; Szewczyk, 1973).

My purpose in writing this article is to help people think more clearly when listening to a child or reading a statement of their complaint, to have a clear process for evaluating the child’s account. By using a recognised model professionals are more likely to remain neutral and perhaps less likely to overlook indicators of possible false accusation.

In the 1950s Undeutsch developed a set of criteria that became known as the Undeutsch hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that statements about actually experienced events differ in content and quality from statements based upon fantasy, fiction and coercion (Undeutsch, 1967, p125). This work was organised and systematised by Steller and Köhnken (1989) into specific criteria that are referred to as content criteria. Content criteria are used to assess the content of a statement. The presence of such criteria would indicate an actually experienced event; however, the absence of such criteria does not indicate necessarily that a statement is false – the age and understanding of the child or young person must also be taken into account.

**Content criteria categories**

***General characteristics***  
1. Logical structure   
2. Unstructured production   
3. Quantity of details

***Specific contents***  
4. Contextual embedding   
5. Descriptions of interactions   
6. Reproduction of conversation   
7. Unexpected complications during the incident

***Peculiarities of content***  
8. Unusual details   
9. Superfluous details  
10. Accurately reported details misunderstood   
11. Related external associations   
12. Accounts of subjective mental state   
13. Attribution of perpetrator’s mental state

***Motivation-related contents***  
14. Spontaneous corrections   
15. Admitting lack of memory   
16. Raising doubts about one’s own testimony   
17. Self-deprecation   
18. Pardoning the perpetrator

***Offence-specific elements***  
19. Details characteristic of the offence.

**General characteristics**  
The first category looks at the entire statement. Having logical structure means making sense. Unstructured production is present if the important information is scattered throughout the statement as opposed to coming out like a script. The quantity of detail refers to the presence of details about time, place, persons and objects related to the event being described. It is generally accepted that very young children and children with learning difficulties are likely to give fewer details and may have particular difficulties with time and dates. For sexually abused children where the abuse has occurred regularly it may prove difficult for them to distinguish one incident from another.

**Specific contents and peculiarities of content**

Specific content and peculiarities of content refer to specific aspects of the child’s statement. These content criteria take into account the child’s cognitive capacities.

Contextual embedding is present if the account given places the alleged event within time and space relevant to the child’s routine life experiences.   
Descriptions of interaction, reproduction of conversations and accounts of complications such as interruptions to the event all indicate that the child is recalling an actually experienced event.

Unusual details, refers to the child’s unique experience. Superfluous details refers to the detail given in an account that is extra to a straightforward telling of what happened – such details are given spontaneously and the child may remember them as an aid to recall more significant aspects, ie ‘the curtains were drawn back and the window was open.’ Sometimes children give accurate detail but have misinterpreted it because of the limits of their knowledge and or understanding, ie the child that describes ejaculation of semen as urine (‘He pee’d on me’).

Related external associations refers to descriptions of other sexualised events or conversations about sex that the perpetrator may have introduced into the relationship or that the child has witnessed or overheard.

Accounts of subjective mental state refers to the child making comments about their own mental state at the time of the event, ie ‘He scared me when he locked the door,’ or ‘I was worried that he might kill me or my sister.’

Attribution of perpetrator’s mental state refers to statements about how the perpetrator may be feeling, ie ‘He was real mad with me, screaming at me and going crazy.’

**Motivation-related contents**

This category examines whether or not the child would have a motivation to make a false accusation. The following contents, where present in a statement, would indicate a lack of motivation to lie about an event.  
Spontaneous corrections refers to when a person starts giving an account and then realises they have got some of the detail wrong and corrects themselves.

A child giving a true account may admit to certain lack of memory or gaps in memory: ‘I can’t remember why he was there,’ or, ‘I remember my mum coming home but can’t remember when,’ or simply, ‘I can’t remember what happened after that.’

Sometimes the child is seen to raise doubts about his or her own testimony, ‘I’m not sure if it was Tuesday or Wednesday’, or, ‘I might be wrong.’

Some children will make statements that appear to be pardoning the perpetrator: ‘It wasn’t his fault, I shouldn’t have been there,’ or, ‘He wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t struggled.’ Children making a statement about abuse perpetrated by a close relative may feel the need to try to redeem the abuser, to minimise the hurt they have caused. Children who have been groomed may have been told, by the perpetrator, words to the effect that they just couldn’t help themselves. This puts the blame and responsibility onto the child.

**Details characteristic of the offence**

The last of these five categories looks at whether there are aspects of the child’s statement that fit known modes of operation of a sexual offender. For instance the child may talk about being threatened into not telling, or may say that the perpetrator always made sure that the house was empty when the abuse occurred.

**Other factors for consideration**

Content analysis is only one part of an assessment, a child’s age and understanding and the complexity of a particular event must also be considered. Also it is important to examine the context and circumstance within which the child disclosed and the response of those receiving the disclosure. Was the disclosure given in the form of a free flowing account or was the child questioned? If the child was questioned were the questions used open or leading?

Steller and Boychuck (1992) describe a ‘validity checklist’ which provides investigators with a tool to systematically assess validity. The checklist includes examining:

* Appropriateness of language and knowledge for the child’s age and understanding. If the child spoke as though they had been coached or as if they were reading a script given by adults, this would cast doubt on the child’s statement.
* Appropriateness of affect – does the child behave in a way we would expect of a child making a disclosure of abuse? This doesn’t mean that we should always expect to see overt signs of distress, some abused children develop coping mechanisms that would allow them to answer an interviewer’s questions without any outward signs of distress.
* Susceptibility to suggestion – if it was found that the child was susceptible to suggestion during an interview this would have to taken into consideration, it is also important to acknowledge the importance of evidence of resistance to suggestion.
* Part of the assessment must examine motives to report – does the child have questionable motives to report? Is there an adult coaxing a child and for what motive?
* Does the account of the event fit with laws of nature? – Is it feasible?
* Are any parts of the statement contradicted by another statement made by the same child? Have they told one person one thing and another something different? In a truthful account one would expect that the aspects central to the event remain the same throughout while a child may forget some of the peripheral aspects.

On top of all the above, assessment of a child’s statement will need to be examined in respect of and alongside other evidence. Can their version of events be corroborated. In cases of sexual abuse it may be particularly difficult to find evidence that corroborates the child’s statement. Sexual abusers often ensure that there are no witnesses, medical examinations may be carried out long after the abuse has occurred and may then be limited in providing forensic evidence. However, children sometimes provide detail in their statements that could not have been gained without having experienced the event or details that strongly suggest they were in a particular place where the abuse is alleged to have taken place, ie the child who was able to describe in detail the interior of their abductor’s garage allowing the police to be confident that the child had been inside that particular garage.

**Finally**

In very difficult cases, where it is basically one person’s word against another’s, it is useful to have a process, a way of carefully examining what has been said by both parties. Having such a tool allows us to be objective in our approach and clear in our heads that we have properly thought it through.

Remember though – education staff are not in a position to investigate possible abuse, and child protection procedures should always be followed when a child discloses abuse.

This article is offered to help education professionals to understand some of the indicators of truthful accounts. However, I would stress that these are indicators, not proof, and where content criteria is not present in a child’s account it does not necessarily mean that the child is not telling the truth.