

Failing to keep it simple: Language use in child sexual abuse interviews with 3–8-year-old children

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(Received 26 September 2006; revised 20 February 2007; accepted 23 March 2007)

Abstract

Previous studies have found that legal interviews with children often are conducted in a language that exceeds the cognitive level of the interviewed children. In the present study, investigative interviews with 3–8-year-old children ($n = 43$) in cases of suspected child sexual abuse (CSA) were analysed. Interviewers were mental health professionals working with children, and thus it was hypothesized that they would conduct the interviews using language that would be age-appropriate for the young interviewees.

However, results showed that the language used included long and complex sentences, multiple questions before the child was allowed to answer, as well as unclear references to persons and situations. These were all associated with fewer details from the child and they also raise concerns about the credibility of the information gained in these interviews. Interviewers had some age sensitivity; all categories occurred more frequently in interviews with older (6–8 years) than with younger children (3–5 years), except for the unclear references. The interviewers often introduced the topic of abuse in a leading yet unclear way, and the interviews were characterized by fluctuation between on- and off-topic discussions, adding to the concerns.

The issue of how to more properly and age-appropriately conduct CSA interviews needs further attention, both within research and in attempts to translate research findings into clinical practice.

Keywords: *Child sexual abuse investigations, forensic child interviews, interviewer utterances, language use in interviews, interview structure*

Introduction

“Experience is the source of meaning, and what we need to keep in mind when we talk to children is that mutual experience cannot be assumed. Not with life, and not with words” (Walker & Warren, 1995, p. 156).

The question of how children should be interviewed in legal contexts has been at the centre of much scientific interest for a number of years. There are several excellent guidebooks summarizing the relevant literature for interviewers (e.g. Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Poole &

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Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001) and many countries have also developed official guidelines on how to conduct these interviews (e.g. Home Office, 2002; Taskinen, 2003). While the child's reasoning is dependent on the development of memory, understanding of concepts, emotional maturity and language skills, age *per se* is not always a good predictor of a child's abilities, as there is great variation between individual children (Wilson & Powell, 2001). Generally, though, the younger the child, the more challenging it is to conduct a successful interview. For instance, when posed yes/no questions, younger children are less accurate and consistent than older children (Brady, Poole, Warren, & Jones, 1999). However, if interviewed correctly, even young children are able to provide detailed and accurate accounts of events (for a review of the research, see Lamb & Brown, 2006). In fact, children's accuracy may have as much to do with the abilities of adults to communicate with them, as with their own abilities to remember and describe their experiences (Saywitz, Nathanson, & Snyder, 1993). Quite a lot has been written about the kind of questions interviewers should use when interviewing children in order to achieve as uncontaminated accounts as possible (see, for instance, Goodman & Aman, 1990; Hershkowitz, 2001; Korkman, Santtila, Westeråker, & Sandnabba, in press; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998), less about whether or not the language used in forensic interviews is adapted to the developmental level of the child. The studies that have been conducted addressing this aspect of interviewing have in general been concerned with lawyers' questioning style (e.g. Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Brennan, 1995; Zajac, Gross, & Hayne, 2003). Instead, in the present study, the focus is on the language used by mental health care professionals – that is, personnel experienced in talking to children.

The linguistic development of the child is, naturally, of crucial importance for the understanding of how children should be interviewed. While memory research has shown that already very young children have detailed memories of events that are important to them (e.g. Fivush, 1997), we know that they are dependent on language to communicate these memories. Interviewers thus need to be aware of the developmental linguistic level of the child and modify their own language use accordingly (e.g. Saywitz & Camparo, 1998). However, several studies suggest this is not always done. Brennan and Brennan (1988) found that children testifying in trials were often faced with what the authors called "strange language", that is, questions posed in such a confusing way that they could not be understood, much less appropriately responded to. According to Brennan (1995), cross-examination strategies used in court deny children the possibility to come forward with their own experiences, as children are faced with questions that are hard to decode. Kebbell and Johnson (2000) further demonstrated that (adult) witnesses' accuracy was reduced when attorneys posed confusing questions. Kebbell, Hatton, and Johnson (2004) showed that lawyers failed to modify their language when interviewing witnesses with intellectual disabilities, as the cognitive capacities of the witnesses would have required. This is particularly problematic since children are known to often try to respond to questions, even when they have not understood them – indeed, children may not even be aware of their miscomprehension (Saywitz et al., 1993; Walker & Warren, 1995). Children may answer questions they have not understood in order to please the person posing the question (Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2000) as children as young as 3 years of age understand the social pattern of a conversation, i.e. that a question requires an answer (Aldridge & Wood, 1998).

Children's vocabulary develops over a long period of time and provides a critical building block for many other language processing abilities (Gathercole, Willis, Emslie, & Baddeley, 1992). The development of vocabulary is very much related to the environment in which

the child lives, implying that children's linguistic abilities develop at different paces. Children often have difficulties with certain prepositions (in front of/behind), adjectives (more/less), adverbs (before/after), pronouns (this/that), verbs (ask/tell or know/think/guess), and nouns (distinction between lie and mistake, for instance; Walker & Warren, 1995). A child may understand some words in certain contexts but not in others (Wilson & Powell, 2001), and while pre-school children may be able to use words in a way that seems correct, they can nonetheless have difficulties giving the appropriate interpretation to some of them (e.g. Home Office, 2002).

There are certain concepts that are of particular importance in CSA investigations but that may pose problems for children. The concept of touching, for instance, is a complex one that can have a variety of different meanings and is difficult for pre-school children to understand (Walker, 1994). Also the concept of time may be crucial in forensic investigations, but is problematic, since children have difficulties reporting how many times or how long ago something has taken place (Saywitz et al., 1999). Temporal terms, such as "before" and "after" may not be completely understood until the age of seven (Walker, 1994), and children have a limited capacity for identifying days and times accurately until at least 10 years of age (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Consequently, interviewers should use temporal terms only if it has been established that the interviewee understands them. Friedman (1991) showed that children as young as 4 years of age were able to judge the relative recency of two events (1 and 7 weeks ago), as well as to account for the time of day the events occurred. At the age of 6 years, the children were also able to tell the day of the week, the month, and the season of the event, something the 4-year-olds were not capable of doing. It is known that children under the age of seven use different strategies for measuring time than do older ones and that it is only at the age of 10 that most children use the same strategies as adults (Levin, Wilkening, & Dembo, 1984). When trying to describe the length of an event, younger children may actually describe the intensity of the experience when talking about how "long" something went on (Wilson & Powell, 2001).

Kebbell and his colleagues (2004) found that, when cross-examining witnesses with intellectual disabilities, who, similarly to children, may have problems with concepts related to time, lawyers posed as many questions regarding times and dates as they did with other witnesses. Poole and Lamb (1998) note that children can be helped in correctly expressing time through using meaningful markers, such as asking whether the event occurred on a school day, and state that interviewers should try to identify the time frame through asking more generally about the context first. A simple piece of advice by Saywitz and Camparo (1998) is for interviewers not to ask a child how many times something has happened before ensuring that the child can actually count.

Memory skills limit how much information a child can retain at once, implying that questions should not be too long. Korkman, Santtila, and Sandnabba (2006) found long questions posed by the interviewers to be associated with short and non-informative responses by the children. Young children usually focus on one aspect at a time in conversations and, therefore, the best sentence structure is one containing simply a subject, a verb, and an object – a pattern that is recommended until the age of 8 years (Walker, 1994). Consequently, multiple questions in one sentence and long and complicated sentences should be avoided altogether (Brennan, 1995; Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Home Office, 2002; Perry et al., 1995). Imhoff and Baker-Ward (1999) conducted an investigation where children were interviewed about a personally experienced event after a 2-week delay. The results indicated that by using developmentally appropriate language, in particular pre-schoolers' resistance to suggestibility increased. Also, Carter *et al.* (1996)

examined the influence of linguistic complexity on children's reports and concluded that simple, developmentally appropriate questions elicit the most accurate information from children. Perry and colleagues (1995) reached similar conclusions: Confusing language (including multipart questions, negatives, double negatives, complicated syntax or vocabulary) decreased the accuracy of young witnesses. The need to use developmentally sensitive language in interviews is thus particularly important with pre-school children, but also school-aged children and even adults have difficulties with regard to linguistically complex questions (e.g. Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Walker & Warren, 1995).

Interviewers should also mention the name of the person or the situation being referred to in order to avoid misunderstandings caused by so-called extended references, for instance by asking "Did your grandparents visit you often?" instead of asking "Did they visit you often?" (Walker, 1994; Carter et al., 1996). Children may face difficulties in understanding what "it" represents, as "it" on its own is an abstraction rather than a referent that is specified (Brennan, 1995). In order to help children stay on board, interviewers should ask about one concept at a time, avoid using the passive voice, as well as negatives, and place the main idea early in the question (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Also topic coherence develops as children grow older. Young children structure conversations differently from older children and adults (or rather, they do not structure them) and may jump from one topic to the other abruptly, which is why interviewers need to mention the topic repeatedly during a conversation to make sure both the child and the interviewer are "on track" with what is currently being discussed (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Zajac, Gross, and Hayne (2003) found that in court proceedings children were frequently cross-examined using an inappropriate questioning style. Defence lawyers' questions included complex questions to a significant degree, which caused as much as 75% of the children to change aspects of their testimonies. In another study, Zajac and Hayne (2003) found that the accuracy of 5- and 6-year-old witnesses severely diminished as a result of being interviewed in cross-examination style (i.e. too complicated) language. In their study, Zajac and colleagues (2003) also found that defence and prosecution lawyers differed in their language use, notably in that defence lawyers used more complex and grammatically confusing language. The authors attributed this difference to the fact that prosecution lawyers were more often specialized in representing children and thus could be expected to have more knowledge on how to interview children than lawyers who are used to representing adults.

Compared to lawyers and non-specialized police officers, psychologists and psychiatrists, who on a daily basis interact with children and conduct large numbers of assessments through verbal interaction with children, would be expected to be experts in using age-appropriate language when interviewing children. In Norway, Melinder and colleagues (Melinder, Goodman, Eilertsen, & Magnussen, 2004) found that psychiatrists and psychologists, as compared to police officers and lawyers, tended to favour using clinical techniques (such as play observations and clinical tests) when conducting CSA investigations. Another study by Melinder (2004) showed, when comparing police officers to clinical psychologists who interviewed 4-year-olds about a medical event, that police officers had a more appropriate interviewing technique in terms of staying on topic and using open-ended questions. This result may well be related to the previous one, since psychologists may have a less structured approach to interviewing, due to their experience in conducting clinical observations. If play observation is also commonly favoured among Finnish mental health care personnel, this might be expected to manifest itself in the form of less structured

interviews, resulting in fluctuation between on- and off-topic discussions, which in the context of a forensic interview may be problematic.

It is well known that interviewers must be careful not to influence the child witnesses. This might be particularly difficult when trying to introduce the topic of the alleged abuse to the child witness, as the interviewer must make the child understand what is supposed to be discussed while, at the same time, not influence their accounts. Walker and Warren (1995) state that it is the interviewer's responsibility to name the topic that is supposed to be discussed – however, in cases where there is no evidence of the abuse, naming the topic in the beginning of the interview is a delicate manner as it easily implies a suggestive statement. Others (e.g. Steward & Steward, 1996; Wilson & Powell, 2001) recommend that interviewers clarify the child's understanding of the reason for the interview. This may be done through open-ended questions such as "Can you tell me why you came here to talk to me today?", as advised for instance in the NICHD interviewing protocol (Orbach et al., 2000). Option-posing and suggestive questions are particularly dangerous if used early on in the interviews (Goodman & Aman, 1990; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Memon, Holley, Wark, Bull & Köhnken, 1996). Warren and colleagues (Warren, Woodall, Hunt, & Perry, 1996) analysed how interviewers brought up the topic of sexual abuse and found that less than half of the interviewers introduced the topic of abuse through general or open-ended questions and that the most common way of introducing the topic of abuse was to refer to inappropriate touching, which in some cases was followed by a discussion of *good* and *bad* touching.

The aim of the present study was to analyse whether interviewers in the sample used appropriate language in view of the young age of the children in the sample (3–8 years) or whether these interviews included the same kind of problems as in the study by Zajac and colleagues (2003). Interviewers (child mental health professionals) were expected to be sensitive to the developing cognitive abilities of their interviewees. This was expected to be demonstrated by interviewers avoiding complex language use. In particular, interviewers were expected to speak with the younger children (3–5 years) using simpler language than they used with the older ones (6–8 years). Complex interviewing language was expected to be associated with fewer details in the children's responses. Furthermore, the study aimed at exploring how interviewers introduced the topic of abuse, whether they in their questions maintained a coherent pattern of dialogue (avoiding jumping on- and off-topic) and how they used the forensically important but cognitively demanding concepts of touch and time.

Method

Cases

The data consisted of a sample of CSA interviews conducted in Finland between 1997 and 2002 with children ($n=43$) aged 3–8 years. The aim of all interviews was to investigate allegations of CSA. Allegations included cases of suspected intrafamilial as well as extra-familial abuse. The alleged acts ranged from exposure of the perpetrator's genitals (paired with asking the child to touch) to penetration. The six largest hospital districts in Finland were contacted, out of which hospitals from four districts participated in the study. The hospitals in the two remaining hospital districts reported various reasons for not participating in the study, such as lack of taped interviews, the sensitivity of the material, and lack of time on the part of the personnel to assist in the data collection. The majority of the contacted hospitals provided the researchers with all recorded interviews conducted

with the target age group conducted within the given time frame. The participating hospitals differ in size, location and regional density of population. All interviews had been videotaped apart from two, which had been audio taped. Of the provided material, there was a fallout of, for instance, investigations where the quality of recordings was too poor to enable transcription. The interviewers were mental health care professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers). Only in one case was the interviewer a man, thus it was not possible to conduct any analyses involving the gender of the interviewer. It should be added that until recently there has been no education for mental health care professionals in Finland on how to conduct CSA interviews (there still is no systematic training in place) and, therefore, it is safe to assume that none of the interviewers can be considered expert in forensic interviewing. The sample can be regarded as non-biased in terms of quality as no other criteria for selection was used than availability of recordings as well as time and age frames (and the willingness/possibility of the hospitals to participate).

Of the children in the study, 67.4% were girls ($n=29$) and 32.6% were boys ($n=14$). The average age was 5.2 years (in months; $M=62.58$, $SD=20.82$). An independent sample t -test showed that there was no significant age difference between the sexes, $t(41) = 1.26$, $p < 0.216$, thereby indicating that possible differences between the sexes found in the analyses were not caused by a difference in age between boys and girls. For the analyses, two age groups were defined: One consisting of children aged 3–5 years (roughly estimated as the pre-school age group), the other consisting of children aged 6–8 years (being the school age group). It is well known that pre-school children and school-age children differ in their mastery of cognitive competencies related to language and memory (e.g. Walker, 1994; Morison, Moir, & Kwansa, 2000).

Procedure

So that longer interviews would not affect the interviews more than short ones, only the 30 first substantial utterances posed by the interviewers and children were transcribed from interviews with each child, counted as question–answer pairs. The reason for choosing 30 as the limit was that a large number of cases, particularly with the youngest children, would otherwise have been excluded from the sample as they did not contain more than 30 question–answer pairs. In some cases, particularly among the younger children, the 30 utterance pairs included almost all discussion related to the alleged abuse. Instead, for some older children they constituted only a small part of the “on-topic” discussion related to the investigated events. The 30 utterance pairs were equal for all children in that they were always from the beginning of the first interview with each child. Utterances were deemed substantial or on-topic when they were related to the event under investigation. A total of 1290 question–answer pairs were thus coded. The analyses in this study were undertaken on two different levels: The first one being the utterance level, where an analysis was run for each question–answer pair, and the second one being the interview level, where some phenomena (see below) were investigated for each interview.

Interview-level analyses

Introducing topic. In order to analyse how the subject of the alleged abuse was introduced into the interview, the *two first* introductory comments in each interview were coded (similarly to Warren et al., 1996). The categories were chosen as a result of a preliminary

qualitative analysis of the introductory utterances, and the utterances were categorized according to content.

1. The child introduces the topic *spontaneously*.
2. The interviewer asks if the child knows the *reason for the interview*.
3. The interviewer states that *someone else* has claimed that something has happened to the child.
4. The interviewer asks whether *bad/negative things* have happened to the child.
5. The interviewer refers to something that the child has *previously said*.
6. The interviewer asks whether the child experiences/has experienced any *physical pain/ been hurt*.
7. *Other*. Utterances that do not fit in the categories above, for example indirect questions through play.

Rapid switch of topic. Interviews were also coded for the occurrence of rapid switches of topic by the interviewer (without proper transition). The interviews were coded as belonging to one of the following categories: 1 if no rapid switch of topic occurred; 2 if it occurred one to three times; and 3 if rapid switches of topic occurred more than three times.

Utterance-level analyses

Linguistic complexity of questions. In order to analyse the linguistic and cognitive complexity of the interviews, the interviewer utterances were coded into different categories of “problematic” language. The categories identified would, based on previous findings (e.g. Brennan, 1995; Kebbell et al., 2004; Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999; Perry et al., 1995; Warren et al., 1996; Zajac, Gross & Hayne, 2003), be expected to be influential when interviewing children and interviewers are recommended to avoid these kinds of expressions (e.g. Home Office, 2002; Walker & Warren, 1995). It should be noted that the categories do not necessarily exclude each other, i.e. a statement was coded according to all the categories it belonged to. These factors are not bound to a specific language and could be influential regardless of the language used in the interview. In this study, all interviews were conducted in Finnish. The linguistic categories were defined as follows (for examples of the different categories, see Table I):

1. *Long sentences*. The limit was defined as the 10% longest interviewer utterances, resulting in interviewer utterances of 22 words or more.
2. *Compound sentences*. Utterances including several different ideas, without distinguishing the main question. Compound sentences include complex syntax and double negatives (see, for instance, Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Zajac et al., 2003).
3. *Multiple questions*. One or more questions posed in one rejoinder, without allowing the child to respond in between (see, for instance, Kebbell et al., 2004; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Warren et al., 1996).
4. *Extended references*. Questions making unclear references to persons, situations or places. These include expressions such as “he”, “she”, “they”, if the person/persons talked about has not been mentioned in the previous statement and “it” and “there”, when the situation/place has not been accounted for in the previous statement. The persons or events can be accounted for either directly by the interviewer or indirectly

Table I. Occurrence of different types of introductory comments used in CSA interviews and the frequency of judicial details associated with these.

Category	Example	%	Details % <i>n</i> = 14*
Spontaneous	"My uncle touched me and my sister here." (Interview with 5-year-old girl). "X touched our breasts" (Interview with 4-year-old girl).	15.1	78.6
"Reason for interview"	"What do you think, why did you come here today? Why do we have these meetings?" (Interview with 7-year-old boy).	20.9	0
"Someone said"	"The reason we meet today is because your mother was worried that something has happened to you last winter at Mr X's house." (Interview with 8-year-old girl).	17.4	0
"Bad things"	"I meet with you because of the bad things that happened, which are the reasons for these investigations." (Interview with 4-year-old girl). "Has anything bad happened to you?" (Interview with 4-year-old girl).	20.9	7.1
"Reference"	"You told me last time about X and a penis, what was that?" (Interview with 4-year-old boy).	10.5	14.3
"Pain/hurt"	"Are you hurting somewhere?" (Interview with 4-year-old boy).	5.9	0
Other	"Do you remember playing some kind of games that adults were wondering why you were playing, or that they were wondered why you wanted to play them?" (Interview with 7-year-old girl). "Did they move away because they were afraid of Mr X?" (Interview with 7-year-old boy).	9.3	0
Total		100	100

*In all, there were 86 judicially significant details, out of which 14 came within the introductory statements.

when the child's previous response shows that he/she knows what the interviewer is referring to (see, for instance, Brennan, 1995; Carter et al., 1996).

Concepts of touch and time

Whether and how often the concept of touch occurred in the interviews was investigated, as was whether it usually was presented in a specific way (e.g. touching by hand or touching of a specific body part), or in an unspecific way (e.g. "Where you touched by someone?"). The possible emotional labelling of the touching was also considered, for instance, whether the interviewer asked if some "bad" touching has occurred, or if the interviewers asked about touching without any emotional emphasis.

Questions concerning time were counted and categorized into three groups: The first group included time questions where the interviewer asked for the *frequency* of incidents. The second group included questions where the interviewer asked *when* an event had taken place. The third group included questions where the interviewer asked *how long ago* an event had occurred.

Informativeness of the child responses

The children's responses were coded according to the occurrence of new details describing or identifying relevant events, objects or persons involved. Differing from previous studies, a more limited definition of details was used: Only details that gave clear evidence for or against the events investigated abuse were counted. New details were coded only if the child had introduced them into the interview, i.e. if the child repeated information that had earlier been introduced by the interviewer, the statements were not coded (Yuille & Cutshall, 1986; Cutshall & Yuille, 1989; Orbach et al., 2000).

Inter-rater reliability

A number of interviews were preliminarily coded in co-operation by two of the authors in order to develop the definition of the different categories. After the categories had been defined, all interviews were coded according to the finalized coding scheme, including the ones that had been preliminarily coded. Ten randomly selected interviews were coded separately in order to measure the inter-rater reliability between the authors, which was 91.8% ($\kappa=0.90$, $p<0.001$) for the interviews in general. For the various linguistic categories, the inter-rater reliability was as follows: Compound questions: 95.9% ($\kappa=0.78$, $p<0.001$), multiple questions: 100% ($\kappa=1.0$, $p<0.001$), extended references: 97.3% ($\kappa=0.86$, $p<0.001$), introductory comments: 94.5% ($\kappa=0.86$, $p<0.001$), questions concerning time 97.3% ($\kappa=0.87$, $p<0.001$), and questions concerning touching 98.6% ($\kappa=0.94$, $p<0.001$).

Results

A total of 1290 question-answer pairs were analysed. The shortest interviewer utterance contained one word and the longest 397 words, ($M=10.76$, $SD=17.50$). The shortest child response contained 0 words and the longest 44 words ($M=3.99$, $SD=5.01$).

Introducing the topic of the alleged abuse to the child

The frequencies of the different ways to introduce the topic of the alleged abuse in the CSA interviews are presented in Table I, along with the associations between introductory comments and judicial details in the children's responses.

The two most common ways for the interviewer to introduce the topic of abuse were to ask if the child knew the cause for the interview or whether "bad/negative" things had happened to the child. It was also relatively common for the interviewer to state that someone else had claimed something had happened to the child. In about 15% of the cases, the child spontaneously started talking to the interviewer about the alleged abuse. The highest number of details provided by the child occurred when the child introduced the topic spontaneously. Of the other introductory types, only comments where the interviewer asked whether "bad things" had happened and comments where the interviewer referred to something the child had previously said resulted in the child providing judicial details. Of the introductory questions by the interviewer, only 20.9% were non-specific (questions where the interviewer asked whether the child knew the reason for the interview), while 52.7% were specific and can be considered leading (categories "someone said", "bad things", "reference", and "pain/hurt"). The rest of the statements ("other": 9.3%) did not fall into any of the categories but usually referred to something scary or odd in an indirect way.

Structure of interviews

Rapid switch of topic, as defined in the method, refers to the interviewer changing the focus of the discussion suddenly, without proper transition. In 39.5% of all the interviews, no rapid switch of topic occurred. In 44.2% of the interviews, rapid switch of topic occurred one to three times, while in 16.3% of the interviews there were more than three rapid switches of topic. Many of these “interviews” tended to be completely unstructured and rather consisted of situations where the child played and interviewer occasionally introduced questions about the alleged abuse.

Associations between rapid switch of topic and judicial details

There was an association between the occurrence of rapid switches of topic and new details ($\chi^2(2) = 8.00, p < 0.05$). When interviews included no rapid switches of topic, 52.3% of the children’s responses included new judicial details. When they included one to three rapid switches of topic, 34.6% of the children’s responses included new judicial details, and when rapid switch of topic occurred more than three times, 13.1% of the children’s responses included new judicial details.

Associations between rapid switch of topic and age of child

The interviews conducted with younger (3–5 years) children rarely included *no* rapid switch of topic (37.5%) as compared with the older (6–8 years) children (45.4%), while the percentage of one to three rapid switches of topic was about the same (43.8% for the younger children; 45.5% for the older). More than three rapid switches of topic occurred frequently in interviews with younger children, the frequency being 18.8% as compared with 9.1% for the older children ($\chi^2(2) = 18.17, p < 0.001$).

Linguistic categories

The most frequently occurring categories in the material were long questions, multiple questions, compound utterances, and referential expressions (see Table II for examples and frequencies of the categories).

Associations between the categories

There was a significant association between long and compound utterances ($\chi^2(1) = 351.26, p < 0.001$) as well as between long and multiple utterances ($\chi^2(1) = 70.80, p < 0.001$). Of the long questions, 43.2% were also compound, compared with 1.9% of the short questions. Of the long questions 27.3% were coded as multiple, compared with 6.0% of the short questions.

The occurrence of judicially significant details in the different categories

There were fewer judicial details in the children’s utterances when multiple questions were posed: 2.8% as compared with 8.7% when the questions were not multiple ($\chi^2(1) = 4.53, p < 0.03$). When the interviewer’s utterances were labelled as long, only 3.0% of the children’s responses included judicial details, the corresponding number for short interviewer utterances being 8.9% ($\chi^2(1) = 5.36, p < 0.021$). In other words, shorter interviewer utterances were associated with more details provided by the child. No other

Table II. The occurrence of the linguistic categories in interviewer utterances.

Categories, definition	%	Examples
<i>Long</i> Interviewer utterances containing more than 22 words	10.0*	<p>“Your mother was here in the spring already, or already in the summer she wished that I would meet you here and talk about these things, she said that you, that you told about something already in the spring, that had happened, some bad things that had happened when you were at your uncle’s house.” (Interview with 4-year-old girl)</p>
<i>Compound</i> Complicated utterances with one or more clauses/ideas in one rejoinder or where the meaning of the question is hard to detect.	6.1	<p>“And then X told that you, the first time, when your mother was here, when I wasn’t here, you talked about these visits, that these visits are arranged because adults are worried about, what you have told about, what you told has happened between you and your dad.” (Interview with 8-year-old boy).</p> <p>“And then, when we met here, your father said that he is not worried about you and that when you are at his place everything is alright, that’s alright, but the moments when you leave, or when you return to your mother, or when you leave from your mother to go to your father and when you return to your mother, those situations are difficult. Because your mother and father don’t get along. And it’s hard to arrange your things, they are fighting. Have you noticed that?” (Interview with 8-year-old girl)</p>
<i>Multiple</i> Utterances including more than one question in a statement without allowing the child to respond in between	8.2	<p>“What did your mother say, why did you come here? Did she say to talk and to play? Did she say something like that? Didn’t she say anything?” (Interview with 4-year-old girl)</p> <p>“Would you like to tell me . . . how should I say it, who was with you when it happened? Was your mother there? Was your uncle there? Was your grandmother there? Was your father there?” (Interview with 3-year-old boy)</p>
<i>Referential expressions</i> Unclear references regarding persons/situations/places	6.0	<p>“– It’s important that I know what the bad things are. Can you say?</p> <p>– I still can’t say. – Mmm. – And I never will. – Mmm. Are they connected to something? – [child remains silent] – Mmm. Where did it happen? – In our house. – Hmm. Were there any people involved? – [child remains silent] – Who? – I don’t remember their names. – Mmm. Were they children or adults? – Children.</p>

Table II (Continued)

Categories, definition	%	Examples
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Yeah. Did they do something? – [child remains silent] – What happened there? – I don't remember. – You don't remember? Was it something bad? – [child remains silent]"
		(Interview with 6-year-old boy)

*Long utterances were defined as the 10% of the utterances containing most words. Based on this procedure, the limit was set at 22 words.

significant associations between the number of new details in the children's responses and the linguistic categories were found.

Associations of the child's gender and age with interviewer utterances

There was no significant association between the gender and age of the children ($t(41) = 1.26$, $p < 0.216$). Potential differences with regard to gender are therefore not due to the age of the children.

There was a significant association between compound utterances and gender ($\chi^2(1) = 4.67$, $p < 0.031$). Of the questions posed to girls, 7.1% were coded as compound, compared with 4.0% of the questions posed to boys. There was also a significant association between gender and questions concerning touching ($\chi^2(1) = 3.91$, $p < 0.048$). Of the questions posed to girls, 3.7% were concerned with physical touching, the corresponding number for boys being 1.7%. The frequencies of other categories were not significantly associated with the gender of the child.

Results showed that the three most frequently occurring categories, i.e. long, compound, and multiple utterances were posed more often to the older children (see Table III). No significant age associations between age and referential expressions, using the concepts of touch and time or source monitoring were found.

Utterances containing the concept of touch

The concept of touch was addressed in 13 of the 43 interviews, the number of utterances involving the concept being $n = 39$. The majority of these utterances ($n = 24$) were categorized as emotionally *neutral*, i.e. the interviewers did not assume a particular type

Table III. Association between the child's age and the frequencies of the linguistic categories of interviewer utterances.

Category	Frequency (%)		Statistical results (χ^2)
	Age group 1 (3–5 years)	Age group 2 (6–8 years)	
Long	7.7	17.6	26.03***
Compound	3.9	12.7	33.63***
Multiple	7.0	11.8	7.63**
Referential expressions	6.4	5.2	0.63

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. d.f. = 1 for all analyses

of touching to have occurred. The interviewers also generally *specified* what kind of touching they meant, e.g. touching by hand or touching some specific body part ($n = 24$), e.g. "And, I would still like to ask you if anyone has touched you, either on the bottom or on the breasts?" (interview with 5-year-old girl), "Did he touch your breasts?" (interview with 8-year-old girl). In four cases, the child was asked whether any negative touching had occurred and these were also uttered in a non-specific fashion, i.e. the interviewer did not specify what kind of touching was meant, e.g. "Did someone touch you in a way that was scary? Or painful?" (interview with 4-year-old girl). One utterance was coded as both non-specific and neutral, i.e. the kind of touching meant was not specified and there was no emotional emphasis, e.g. "Aha, your mother told you. Well, has someone touched you?" (interview with 4-year-old girl). No utterances were coded as both specific and emotional.

Utterances containing the concept of time

In 14 of the interviews, the concept of time was evoked, the number of utterances concerning time being $n = 28$. Most of these utterances were concerned with *how many times* something had occurred ($n = 14$), e.g. "But how, has it happened often or only once?" (interview with 3-year-old boy), "Has it happened one time or many times?" (interview with 5-year-old girl). The second most common way to ask children about time was to ask about the time when an event had occurred ($n = 11$). This type of time reference often included utterances where the interviewer gave alternatives for the occurrence of the event, e.g. if something had happened in the winter or in the summer, "Was it in the summer or in the winter?" (interview with 4-year-old girl). In one of the cases the interviewer asked *how long ago* something had occurred: "Was it a short or a long time ago?" (interview with 3-year-old boy).

When posing questions concerning time, the interviewers tended to apply option-posing questions (i.e. questions which require the child to choose one of many alternative answers suggested by the interviewer or to answer yes or no). In some cases, the child did not respond to these questions at all but when they did so, they merely had to choose one of the alternatives given by the interviewer, and did thus not report details about time as a spontaneous response to open-ended questions (see examples below).

Example from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: Do you remember when this happened?

Child: [no response]

I: Do you? Was it in the summer or in the winter?

C: [no response]

I: Was it long ago or a short time ago?

C: [no response]

Example from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: Okay. Has this happened once or many times?

Child: Well, quite many times.

Example from an interview with a 3-year-old child:

Interviewer: Was this during the day or during the night?

Child: The da . . . Night.

Example from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: You told me that X hurt you. Did it happen once or several times?

Child: Look, let's play with these!

I: I know it is difficult to talk about these things but I really need you to tell me.

C: We can have a tea party [is playing].

I: It is really important that you tell me about the time he hurt you, can you tell me if it happened just once or many times?

C: Many times.

Discussion

The interviewers in the present study failed to adapt their language to the mostly pre-school aged children in the sample, using complicated, multiple and long questions, as well as unclear references to persons and places. More than a fifth of the interviewer utterances were coded to at least one of these categories. Scholars have warned against using such complicated language, particularly in interviews with young children (e.g. Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Brennan, 1995; Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Walker & Warren, 1995; Zajac et al., 2003; Zajac & Hayne, 2003). Interviewers in the studied sample showed some age sensitivity with regards to language use, apparent, for instance, in the fact that most of the long, compound and multiple utterances in the present study were posed to the older (6–8 years) children. Also, interviewers posed more compound questions to girls than to boys, perhaps considering girls as more linguistically mature than boys. Such an assumption would, in fact, receive support from research (see, for instance, Bauer, Goldfield, & Reznick, 2002). However, the high frequency of these types of utterances overall shows that the interviewers in the sample failed to keep their language use simple.

Unclear references regarding situations, places or persons occurred to the same extent with younger and older children, possibly indicating that interviewers are unaware of the potential problems of such references. The interviewers might not be aware that while the things referred to may be obvious for themselves, for the child they may not be clear at all. A comment by a 16-year-old girl interviewed about her experiences as a witness (Westcott & Davies, 1996, p. 464) is quite revealing: "Cause if she asked a question, she like went on about it for ages and then she goes, what do you think? I'd completely forgotten what on earth she was going on about". Examples illuminating this problem were frequent in the present material. Consider, for instance, this free translation extracted from an over 300 words long question included in the material, posed to an 8-year-old child:

"Sometimes a child has nightmares, like for instance in those situations when the child has some kind of worry or a bad feeling about something. And it is, well it might be, well I don't know if this is the reason since we have not talked about it yet, but it could be that you don't have something on your mind 'just like that', but that the worry only shows in your nightmares. Many times when things are hard to talk about for children, the problems will show elsewhere [...] And then children easily get the idea that, or they think that, had I only been nicer or better, or had I not bothered them or had I not been bad or had I not done this or that, then maybe this would never had happened. Children easily think that it is their own fault. I don't know how much you have thought about these things, but, I've met a lot of children whose parents were divorced and I've noticed

that those children thought like that. [. . .] But I don't know how much you thought about things like these?"¹

Similar long phrases ended with "What do you think about that?" or "Have you noticed that?"

Interviewers in the present study (as those in the study by Melinder, 2004) tended to conduct their interviews in an unstructured way, fluctuating on and off topic, in particular with younger children. Such topic incoherence is typical in younger children (see, for instance, Poole & Lamb, 1998), and interviewers may thus have mirrored the communicative style of their young interviewees. However, this practice was associated with the children being less informative. While the frequent rapid switches of topic might have been a consequence of the children providing less information and avoiding the topic of abuse, leading the interviewers to seek new ways of engaging them (for instance, through playing or drawing), in this study the incoherent way of conducting the interviews seemed more to reflect the fact that interviewers used something of a play-observation approach to interviewing. This in itself is problematic, as it may have given the children the wrong signal of what was expected of them. Children can be serious and task-focused when needed but if they can choose between playing and discussing (possibly difficult things), they might well opt for the first alternative.

Similarly to findings by Warren and colleagues (1996), a common way of introducing the topic of abuse was to ask for the child's understanding of the hospital visit/interview. This opening is recommended by, for instance, Wilson and Powell (2001), who state that the child is likely to immediately disclose an incident in response to this question. This view was not backed up by the results in the present study, as children did not give any detailed accounts in response to these questions. It was mostly in interviews with younger children that interviewers addressed the interview topic by asking whether "bad things" had happened to the child. A possible explanation is that interviewers assume these words ("bad", "evil") to be familiar also to very young children. This type of question can be regarded as leading as it assumes that abuse in fact has taken place and suggests the direction of the answers expected (as well as how the children have experienced the abuse). Concepts like "bad touching" used by the interviewer can be considered problematic since it may not be obvious for the child what kind of touching the interviewer refers to. Children who have not been abused may have experienced other types of "bad touching" (physical reprimands by parents, quarrelling with friends, painful medical examinations, etc.). There might be an interviewer bias towards understanding "bad touching" exclusively as sexual abuse. On the other hand, while the adult interviewer is likely to automatically view CSA as something painful and – aware of the negative consequences of abuse – inherently bad, this notion does not necessarily correspond to the subjective experience of the child. As noted by Steward and Steward (1996), sexual abuse takes many different forms, ranging from non-violent fondling to violent force and, consequently, the child's experience of the abusive event may also range from even pleasure at receiving attention to terror and pain. Within a Finnish prevalence study of CSA, one female victim of severe sexual abuse by her grandfather reported she found the incestuous experience positive. Some of her other responses in the questionnaire suggest, as would be expected, the experiences to have had detrimental effects for her development (see Sariola & Uutela, 1996), but her subjective experience of the abuse was nonetheless not "painful" or "bad".

Asking about "bad things" and referencing back to something the child had previously said were the only introduction types by the interviewer that showed an association with

detailed answers provided by the child. However, it is well established that details reported in response to leading questions are less accurate than those reported in response to open-ended questions (see, e.g. Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Esplin, 2004 for a review of relevant research). Referring back to something someone else has said has happened to the child is problematic also for another reason: If the “someone else” referred to is an adult in an authoritative position, the child might not want to challenge that person’s position (Walker & Warren, 1995). Furthermore, if the interviewer has a preconceived notion (“interviewer bias”, e.g. Ceci & Bruck, 1995) about what has happened, they may (consciously or not) steer and interpret all discussion according to these notions, including whose words they refer to when introducing the topic.

In contrast to results by Warren et al. (1996), it was fairly common for the children in the material to spontaneously report recollections of the investigated events, which might indicate the child feeling comfortable with the interviewer. These responses as a natural consequence tended to include many judicial details regarding the possible assault.

The concept of touch occurred quite sparsely in the sample, which is somewhat surprising, considering the subject matter under discussion (and also in comparison to the study by Warren et al., 1996, where questions concerning touching were more frequent). In most cases, touching was referred to in a specific (specifying what kind of touching) and neutral fashion (without giving an emotional value to the concept). In only four cases, the interviewer uttered a concern that *bad* touching might have occurred. Interestingly, the questions related to touch were posed mainly to girls. It is to be noted that, in this sample, only one interviewer was male, thus it is possible that female interviewers in general felt more comfortable addressing bodily touching with girls than with boys.

The low frequency of questions directly concerning touching is also illustrative of the tendencies of interviewers to discuss the alleged abuse in an abstract way, for instance, concentrating their efforts to get the child to talk about the abuse through questions about “something *sad/bad/painful*” that might have happened to the child. Consider, for instance, the following example of an introductory comment by an interviewer:

“Now I would like to talk to you for a while, to find out if there are some things that sometimes worry you or make you sad. We could try to talk about those things together and see what we can do about them. I know it can be difficult to talk about those kind of scary things but I hope you’ll be a brave boy and tell me all about the things that have happened to you”.

Both questions regarding touch and those regarding time were often option-posing or suggestive (Korkman et al., in press). This is problematic: The children’s responses do not indicate whether or not they have understood the question, and as explained earlier, children may respond to yes/no questions they have not understood in order to please the interviewer (Aldridge & Wood, 1998). This may well have been the case, for instance, in the following exchange from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: You told me that X hurt you. Did it happen once or several times?

Child: Look, let’s play with these!

I: I know it is difficult to talk about these things but I really need you to tell me.

C: We can have a tea party [is playing].

I: It is really important that you tell me about the time he hurt you. Can you tell me if it happened just once or many times?

C: Many times.

The results of the present study show that interviewers failed to phrase themselves simply and thus indicate that not only lawyers (e.g. Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Perry et al., 1995; Zajac et al., 2003), but also professionals who are regarded as child experts have problems in adapting their language to the cognitive-developmental level of the child. Indeed, some of the language used in the analysed interviews would be challenging also for an adult. While clinical interviewers hardly can be suspected of deliberately confusing the child witnesses (see Kebbell et al., 2003; Perry et al., 1995), it is perhaps partly the sensitive subject matter that is to be blamed for the confusing language. According to Anderson (1986), clinicians working with adult clients often need specific training in discussing sexual matters before they feel confident in evoking such themes. The same could easily be imagined to be the case for interviewers talking with children about possibly traumatic sexual events. Furthermore, CSA is a topic that provokes strong emotional reactions. Investigators may feel frustrated in their oftentimes difficult task where a child is reluctant to talk, they may feel sadness for the child and anger at suspected abusers, something that is likely to affect their cognition and behaviour. Ask and Granhag (in press) showed that emotional reactions (e.g. anger) may prevent investigators from critically assessing witness information. White, Leichtman, and Ceci (1997) showed in an experimental study that interviewers conduct their interviews and phrase their questions differently depending on the kind of background information they have received concerning their interviewing topic. If an interviewer receives a child with the information that CSA is suspected, this is likely to influence the interviewer in the direction of seeking information that would support this hypothesis, implying the interviewer would be biased (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995). Instead, it is crucial that the CSA investigators retain a neutral approach to the investigations and keep all possible hypotheses of the reasons for the investigations in mind (e.g. Hypothesis 1: The child has been abused; Hypothesis 2: The abuse claims are deliberately false; Hypothesis 3: There has been a misinterpretation of the child's behaviour/talk leading to the suspicions), so that questions are never phrased in order to confirm only one of these scenarios.

In order to ensure such professional conduct, it is imperative that the role of a forensic investigator and that of a clinical therapist are not mixed up. Herman (2005) extracts a number of relatively simple recommendations on how to improve CSA investigations from the available research corpus. Concerning the professionalism of the interviewer, apart from underlining that the roles of forensic investigator and therapist should always be separated, he stresses the need for training and supervision of interviewers, as well as the need for practitioners to adhere more closely to available ethical and procedural guidelines.

“... we have a professional and ethical responsibility to try to (a) decrease these [the number of substantiation errors], and (b) reduce secondary trauma inflicted on children and families as a result of poorly conducted forensic child sexual abuse investigations” (Herman, 2005, p 111).

Through preparation and exercises (e.g. of their right to ask for clarification when they do not understand, or a rapport-building phase using open-ended questions concerning the child's everyday life), the performance of children in interviews can be significantly enhanced (Saywitz et al., 1999; Sternberg et al., 1997; Wilson & Powell, 2001). Giving the child the opportunity to discuss a neutral topic before starting the actual investigative interview serves two purposes: It helps the child feel more at ease with the situation and it gives the interviewer a sample of the child's language use (Walker & Warren, 1995). Warren and colleagues (1996) found that although interviewers to some extent seemed to recognize this

and other basic principles for conducting successful interviews with children, they did not appear to follow research-based interviewing guidelines.

Orbach and her colleagues (2000) found that, when a protocol developed by the NICHD (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development) was used, children provided more information in response to open-ended prompts and before any option-posing questions were posed, implying the information provided was more likely to be accurate. Furthermore, through focusing the interview around open-ended questions and avoiding suggestive questioning techniques, the risks of contaminating the child's testimony are minimized (e.g. Lamb & Brown, 2006). Training interviewers in using the NICHD protocol and providing them with supervision and feedback has been found to yield dramatic improvements in the quality of interviews (Lamb et al., 2000). Using an interview protocol might, furthermore, help interviewers stay focused on the topic and keep their questions shorter and simpler.

The interviewers in the sample analysed were clinical mental health care professionals. It is clear from the transcripts that they did not generally rely on structured investigative interview protocols and they were unlikely to have had much training, if any, in forensic interviewing since in Finland there is as of yet no systematic training of forensic interviewers. As long as this is the situation, the acute need for improvement in the quality of child abuse investigations and interviews will remain unfulfilled.

Note

- 1 The fact that this and other examples of questions presented in this study are incomprehensible or grammatically unsound is not due to incorrect translation but correspond to how they were presented in their original form.

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