



**Bias/Neutrality Among
Multidisciplinary Team Members
Investigating Child Sexual Abuse**
A Bibliography

June 2018

**Championing and Strengthening the
Global Response to Child Abuse**

nationalcac.org | 256-533-KIDS(5437) | 210 Pratt Avenue NE, Huntsville, AL 35801

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Preferred citation: National Children's Advocacy Center. (2018). Bias/Neutrality Among Multidisciplinary Members Investigating Child Sexual Abuse: A Bibliography. Huntsville, AL: Author.

This project was supported by a grant awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Scope

This bibliography lists publications of research conduct biases among professionals working in multidisciplinary team investigations of child sexual abuse.

Organization

Publications include articles, book chapters, reports, and research briefs and are listed in date descending order. Links are provided to full text publications when possible. However, this collection may not be complete. More information can be obtained in the Child Abuse Library Online.

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Bias/Neutrality Among Multidisciplinary Team Members Investigating Child Sexual Abuse

A Bibliography

Widom, C. S., Czaja, S. J., & DuMont, K. A. (2015). [Intergenerational transmission of child abuse and neglect: Real or detection bias?](#) *Science*, 347(6229), 1480-1485.
DOI:10.1126/science.1259917

The literature has been contradictory regarding whether parents who were abused as children have a greater tendency to abuse their own children. A prospective 30-year follow-up study interviewed individuals with documented histories of childhood abuse and neglect and matched comparisons and a subset of their children. The study assessed maltreatment based on child protective service (CPS) agency records and reports by parents, nonparents, and offspring. The extent of the intergenerational transmission of abuse and neglect depended in large part on the source of the information used. Individuals with histories of childhood abuse and neglect have higher rates of being reported to CPS for child maltreatment but do not self-report more physical and sexual abuse than matched comparisons. Offspring of parents with histories of childhood abuse and neglect are more likely to report sexual abuse and neglect and that CPS was concerned about them at some point in their lives. The strongest evidence for the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment indicates that offspring are at risk for childhood neglect and sexual abuse, but detection or surveillance bias may account for the greater likelihood of CPS report.

Rush, E. B., Lyon, T. D., Ahern, E. C., & Quas, J. A. (2014). [Disclosure suspicion bias and abuse disclosure: Comparisons between sexual and physical abuse.](#) *Child Maltreatment*, 19(2), 113-118. DOI:10.1177/1077559514538114

Prior research has found that children disclosing physical abuse appear more reticent and less consistent than children disclosing sexual abuse. Although this has been attributed to differences in reluctance, it may also be due to differences in the process by which abuse is

suspected and investigated. Disclosure may play a larger role in arousing suspicions of sexual abuse, while other evidence may play a larger role in arousing suspicions of physical abuse. As a result, children who disclose physical abuse in formal investigations may be doing so for the first time, and they may be more reluctant to provide details of the abuse. We examined abuse disclosure and evidence in comparable samples of court-substantiated physical ($n = 33$) and sexual ($n = 28$) abuse. Consistent with predictions, the likelihood that the child had disclosed abuse before an investigation began was lower in physical (27%) than that in sexual (67%) abuse cases, and there was more nondisclosure evidence of abuse in physical abuse cases. These findings have implications for understanding the dynamics and meaning of disclosure in cases involving different types of abuse.

Powell, M. B., Hughes-Scholes, C. H., & Sharman, S. J. (2012). Skill in interviewing reduces confirmation bias. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 9(2), 126-134. DOI:10.1002/jip.1357

Interviewers given prior information are biased to seek it from interviewees. We examined whether the detrimental impact of this confirmation bias in terms of leading question use was moderated by interviewers' demonstrated ability to adhere to open questions. We classified interviewers' adherence as 'good' or 'poor' in an independent interview before they interviewed children about a staged event. Half the interviewers were given biasing true and false information about the event; half were given no information. As predicted, only poor interviewers showed the effect of bias. Poor interviewers asked fewer open questions in the biased condition than the non-biased condition; good interviewers asked the same (high) proportion of open questions in both conditions. Poor interviewers asked more leading questions in the biased condition than the non-biased condition; good interviewers asked the same (low) proportion of leading questions in both conditions. These results demonstrate that interviewers' skill in adhering to open questions reduces the detrimental impact of confirmation bias on question type.

Everson, M. D., & Sandoval, J. M. (2011). [Forensic child sexual abuse evaluations: Assessing subjectivity and bias in professional judgements](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35(4), 287–298. DOI:10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.01.001

Evaluators examining the same evidence often arrive at substantially different conclusions in forensic assessments of child sexual abuse (CSA). This study attempts to identify and quantify subjective factors that contribute to such disagreements so that interventions can be devised to improve the reliability of case decisions. Participants included 1106 professionals in the field of child maltreatment representing a range of professional positions or job titles and years of experience. Each completed the Child Forensic Attitude Scale (CFAS), a 28-item survey assessing 3 forensic attitudes believed to influence professional judgments about CSA allegations: emphasis on- sensitivity (i.e., a focus on minimizing false negatives or errors of undercalling abuse); emphasis-on-specificity (i.e., a focus on minimizing false positives or errors of overcalling abuse); and skepticism toward child and adolescent reports of CSA. A subset of 605 professionals also participated in 1 of 3 diverse decision exercises to assess the influence of the 3 forensic attitudes on ratings of case credibility. Exploratory factor analysis identified 4 factors or attitude subscales that corresponded closely with the original CFAS scales: 2 subscales for emphasis-on-sensitivity and 1 each for emphasis-on-specificity and skepticism. Attitude subscale scores differed significantly by sample source (in-state trainings vs. national conferences), gender, years of experience, and professional position, with Child Protective Service workers unexpectedly more concerned about overcalling abuse and more skeptical of child disclosures than other professionals—a pattern of scores associated with an increased probability of disbelieving CSA allegations. The 3 decision exercises offered validation of the attitude subscales as predictors of professional ratings of case credibility, with adjusted R²s for the three exercises ranging from .06 to .24, suggesting highly variable effect sizes. Evaluator disagreements about CSA allegations can be explained, in part, by individual differences in 3 attitudes related to forensic decision-making: emphasis-on sensitivity, emphasis-on-specificity, and skepticism toward child reports of abuse. These attitudes operate as predispositions or biases toward viewing CSA allegations as likely true or likely false.

Several strategies for curbing the influence of subjective factors are highlighted including self-awareness of personal biases and team approaches to assessment.

Jent, J. F., Eaton, C. K., Knickerbocker, L., Lambert, W. F., Merrick, M. T., & Dandes, S. K. (2011). [Multidisciplinary child protection decision making about physical abuse: Determining substantiation thresholds and biases.](#) *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(9), 1673–1682. DOI:10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.029

The current study examined the threshold at which multidisciplinary child protection team (CPT) professionals substantiate physical abuse allegations and the extent that they utilize potentially biased constructs in their decision making when presented with the same case evidence. State legal definitions of child maltreatment are broad. Therefore, the burden of interpretation is largely on CPT professionals who must determine at what threshold physical acts by parents surpass corporal discipline and constitute child physical abuse. Biased or subjective decisions may be made if certain case-specific characteristics or CPT professionals' personal characteristics are used in making physical abuse determinations. Case vignettes with visual depictions of inflicted injuries were sent to CPT professionals in Florida and their substantiation decisions, personal beliefs about corporal discipline, and coercive discipline were collected. Results of the study demonstrated relatively high agreement among professionals across vignettes about what constitutes physical abuse. Further, CPT professionals strongly considered their perceptions of the severity of inflicted injuries in substantiation decisions. Although case specific characteristics did not bias decisions in a systematic way, some CPT professional characteristics influenced the substantiation of physical abuse. Practice implications and future directions of research are discussed.

Malloy, L. C., & Lamb, M. E. (2010). Biases in judging victims and suspects whose statements are inconsistent. *Law and Human Behavior*, 34, 46–48. DOI:10.1007/s10979-009-9211-y

In this commentary, we point to similarities in characteristics of suspect and victim/witness statements and the underlying motivations of these individuals. Despite the similarities, there are differences in how such statements are evaluated by fact-finders and investigators. Retractions, for example, cast serious doubt on the credibility of victims/witnesses but appear not to diminish the power of confessions. Investigators need to recognize the wide range of motivations behind statements made to the authorities and be mindful of biased dispositions to doubt victims and believe confessors, especially when their statements are inconsistent or retracted. An investigative process that was entirely transparent would help ensure that inconsistencies and retractions, whether in statements from victims, witnesses, or suspects, are viewed in the context of other statements and eliciting circumstances.

Goodman, G. S., & Melinder, A. (2007). Child witness research and forensic interviews of young children: A review. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 12(1), 1–19. DOI:10.1348/135532506X156620

In this article, we provide an introduction to child eyewitness memory issues that are frequently discussed and debated, both within the research and practice communities. We review several of the central areas of research on child eyewitness memory and some of the most promising protocols aimed at standardizing and improving child forensic interviews. We focus primarily on memory in young children, because they pose particular challenges. Research on the use of props and external cues to prompt young children's memory is discussed. We also review research on professionals' knowledge and attitudes about children as witnesses. It is concluded that we must guard against overly negative or overly optimistic views of children's abilities.

Quas, J. A., Malloy, L. C., Melinder, A., Goodman, G. S., D'mello, M., & Schaaf, J. (2007). [Developmental differences in the effects of repeated interviews and interviewer bias on young children's event memory and false reports.](#) *Developmental Psychology*, 43(4), 823-837. DOI:10.1037/0012-1649.43.4.823

The present study investigated developmental differences in the effects of repeated interviews and interviewer bias on children's memory and suggestibility. Three- and 5-year-olds were singly or repeatedly interviewed about a play event by a highly biased or control interviewer. Children interviewed once by the biased interviewer after a long delay made the most errors. Children interviewed repeatedly, regardless of interviewer bias, were more accurate and less likely to falsely claim that they played with a man. In free recall, among children questioned once after a long delay by the biased interviewer, 5-year-olds were more likely than were 3-year-olds to claim falsely that they played with a man. However, in response to direct questions, 3-year-olds were more easily manipulated into implying that they played with him. Findings suggest that interviewer bias is particularly problematic when children's memory has weakened. In contrast, repeated interviews that occur a short time after a to-be-remembered event do not necessarily increase children's errors, even when interviews include misleading questions and interviewer bias. Implications for developmental differences in memory and suggestibility are discussed.

Dickinson, J. J., Poole, D. A., & Bruck, M. (2005). Back to the future: A comment on the use of anatomical dolls in forensic interviews. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 5(1), 63-74. DOI:10.1300/J158v05n01_04

Many researchers and interviewers have become disenchanted with the practice of using anatomically detailed (AD) dolls during forensic investigations, yet there is still support for doll-assisted interviews. This comment discusses five major concerns about AD dolls, involving child-related and interviewer-related factors. The research findings suggest that individuals who advocate for AD dolls bear the burden of proving that dolls are the best alternative for eliciting information about personally-experienced events from children.

Aarons, N. M., Powell, M. B., & Browne, J. (2004). Police perceptions of interviews involving children with intellectual disabilities: A qualitative inquiry. *Policing and Society, 14*(3), 269–278. DOI:10.1080/1043946042000241848

This study employed a qualitative method to explore the experiences of 20 police officers when interviewing children with intellectual disabilities. Three main themes were interpreted as representing challenges to the officers when interviewing special-needs children: police organizational culture, participants' perceptions of these children as interviewees, and prior information. Participants in this inquiry mentioned poor organizational priority within the police force for child abuse cases and children with intellectual disabilities, as well as inadequate support for interviewing skills development and maintenance. Participants also attempted to equalize these children by interviewing them in the same way as their mainstream peers. Finally, participants viewed interview preparation as influential in determining an interview's successful outcome, but recognized that preparedness could bias their interviewing techniques. Increased attention towards these issues will provide a basis for developing strategies to minimize such challenges and thus improve the quality of interviews with children with intellectual disabilities.

Melinder, A., Goodman, G. S., Eilertsen, D. E., & Magnussen, S. (2004). Beliefs about child witnesses: A survey of professionals. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 10*(4), 347–365. DOI:10.1080/10683160310001618717

This research addressed how professionals involved with the legal system evaluate children, primarily between 4 and 8 years old, as witnesses. In particular, we focused on professionals' beliefs and opinions regarding children's memory, suggestibility, and behaviors as they relate to witness credibility. In addition, we surveyed professionals' evaluations of investigative methods related to reliability. Four hundred and seventy-eight professionals working with children in the Norwegian legal system (i.e. judges, police detectives, psychologists, child psychiatrists, prosecutors, and defense attorneys) completed a questionnaire about child witness issues. Results indicated that psychiatrists as well as police officers expressed greater

belief in children's capacities than did other groups, whereas defense attorneys and psychologists were more skeptical regarding children's general credibility. Psychiatrists and psychologists both, however, tended to favor, more than did legal professionals, the use of clinical techniques with children in abuse investigations. Implications are discussed in relation to professionals' attitudes toward children as witnesses.

Lentsch, K. A., & Johnson, C. F. (2000). Do physicians have adequate knowledge of child sexual abuse? The results of two surveys of practicing physicians, 1986 and 1996. *Child Maltreatment*, 5(1), 72-78. DOI:10.1177/1077559500005001009

The objective of this study was to determine if physician knowledge of and biases regarding child sexual abuse (CSA) have changed since 1986. A questionnaire, previously used in 1986, was mailed to 370 physicians who see children in Columbus, Ohio. More respondents in 1996 correctly denied an association between specific sociologic factors and the likelihood of CSA. Seventy-two percent of physicians indicated that they check the genitalia of prepubescent females more than 50% of the time, versus 77% in 1986. Physicians who see more than 25 pediatric patients per week were significantly more likely to check the genitalia ($p < .001$), whereas physicians with more than 10 years experience were less likely to check genitalia ($p < .05$). Physicians surveyed in 1996 were more knowledgeable about socioeconomic and behavioral aspects of CSA but continued to be deficient in identifying prepubescent female genital anatomy and in reporting suspected abuse. Education is necessary to correct these deficits.

Drake, B., & Zuravin, S. (1998). Bias in child maltreatment reporting: Revisiting the myth of classlessness. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68(2), 295-304.
DOI:10.1037/h0080338

Reviews the literature on the degree of class bias in child protective services databases and recent empirical findings on the class distribution of child maltreatment. The evidence

suggests high levels of child abuse and neglect among the poor and, despite debate on the question, there is no body of empirical data suggesting that these findings are a product of bias predisposing toward overestimates of child maltreatment among the poor. Implications for research, practice, and policy are offered.

Goodman, G. S., Sharma, A., Thomas, S. F., & Considine, M. G. (1995). Mother knows best: Effects of relationship status and interviewer bias on children's memory. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 60(1), 195-228. DOI: 10.1006/jecp.1995.1038

This study examined whether interviewer status or a preconceived bias affect: (a) children's memory and suggestibility or (b) adults' descriptions of children's reports. Forty 4-year-olds participated in play activities with a research assistant. Each child was then interviewed either by the child's own mother or by an unfamiliar female. Interviewers were instructed to find out what happened (free interview), but half of the interviewers were misled (biased) about the play activities prior to the interview. To examine how accurately adults recount children's reports, the interviewers were asked to write postinterview descriptions of the play session. Children were then questioned by the interviewer again, who asked a predetermined set of questions (structured interview). Analyses revealed that during the free interview, questioning styles of mothers and strangers differed in several ways: mothers were more task-oriented, whereas strangers spent more time building rapport and were more open-ended in their approach. Biased compared to unbiased interviewers asked more questions about the misinformation provided. Children's free recall accuracy suffered (e.g., they minimized what occurred, made more order errors) when they were interviewed by biased versus unbiased strangers but not when interviewed by biased versus unbiased mothers. The interviewers' descriptions of the children's experiences were generally correct, although mothers reported more correct details than strangers about certain categories of information. Exposure to the biasing misinformation led to greater inaccuracy in interviewers' descriptions. During the structured interview, children were less susceptible to suggestions of abuse when questioned

by their mothers than by strangers. The findings are discussed in relation to concerns about children's eyewitness memory and adults' interviews of children.

Kendall-Tackett, K. A., & Watson, M. W. (1991). Factors that influence professionals' perceptions of behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 6(3), 385-395. DOI:10.1177/088626091006003010

The research examined factors that might influence interviewers' perceptions of convincingness of behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse. As predicted, professionals who believe that children do not lie about sexual abuse were more convinced by various behavioral indicators that sexual abuse occurred than were those professionals who approach children neutrally. For symptoms such as depression, aggression, and fear of the perpetrator, law enforcement professionals were more convinced than were mental health professionals, and women were more convinced than were men, as predicted. Contrary to prediction, there were no effects based on purpose of the interview (investigative vs. therapeutic). In addition, age of the child affected perception of indicators. As predicted, children under age 6 were more convincing than were children ages 6-9 or 10-12 when they demonstrated adult-level knowledge of sexuality. There were no age-of-child effects for symptoms that did not involve children's knowledge of sexuality. The results indicated that interviewer factors and age of the child can influence perceptions of indicators of sexual abuse. Therefore, interviewers should be sensitized to possible sources of bias in their judgments.