

Position Paper on the Use of Human Figure Drawings in Forensic Interviews

The use of human figure drawings (HFDs) during a forensic interview has historically been and continues to be widely discussed and disputed. Decisions are often made based on unspoken value judgments and routine practices, rather than a thorough review of the literature. Proponents of HFD support their stance with statements such as “this is the way that we have always done it” or “it is part of my training or protocol.”

Over the years, forensic interview protocols have varied with respect to the use of HFDs with some protocols advocating for the routine use of HFDs and others excluding their use (NICHD, Lyon’s 10-Step). For many years the CornerHouse and Finding Words/Child First interview protocols recommended the introduction of the anatomically detailed drawings of both sexes to be followed by the identification of body parts including private parts, and questions about appropriate touches as the standard method of transitioning to allegations of sexual abuse. The acronym RATAAC (rapport / anatomy identification / touch inquiry / abuse scenario / closure) reflected the stages of the protocols. In 2012 CornerHouse revised their protocol, adopting a more narrative and open approach and, consequently, CornerHouse no longer references the RATAAC acronym.

The National Children’s Advocacy Center (NCAC) has always promoted an inclusive and flexible approach, acknowledging that many of the decisions about practice are made at the local level. The NCAC does not prohibit the use of HFDs, but also does not recommend their use as common practice. The majority of children who disclose during a forensic interview about sexual or physical abuse are able to do so in response to the question “What are you here to talk about today?” and are able to provide adequate detail and clarification without the introduction of more suggestive questions or props. A large body of research has demonstrated the benefits of obtaining information from children through the use of recall-based questions (open-ended and ‘wh’) which are shown to improve both the quantity and quality of information elicited from child witnesses. The same research documents the dangers of reliance on recognition-based (multiple choice, yes/no, and leading) questions, including when seeking clarification of previous statements. In keeping with these principles, the NCAC discourages the use of HFDs as they are concrete recognition-based prompts.

A bibliography of research on the use of HFDs (clothed and unclothed and with or without anatomical details) may be viewed in the Child Abuse Library Online (CALiO™) [Professional Bibliographies](#) section. Research includes both field studies (reviews of actual forensic interviews) and laboratory studies (staged events or routine medical procedures). Attention to the entire body of this research informed NCAC’s current position.

Some of the main points from the research are as follows:

- HFDs do serve to elicit additional details from children following a narrative description of abuse. However, there is a greater error rate in the information produced, which is similar to the greater error rate when interviewers use recognition-based questions.
- When HFDs are used prior to any discussion of abuse there is a risk of influencing the direction of the conversations with the children.
- The use of HFDs as a means of transitioning to the allegation has been shown to lead to (1) true disclosures about body touches, (2) false disclosures about body touches, and (3) false denials about body touches.
- There is a danger of over-reliance on HFDs for forensic interviewers when the use of a HFD is routine, either because of habit or lack of training and consideration of other approaches.
- Preschool children and children with poorer cognitive and verbal abilities are at the greatest risk of being influenced by the use of recognition-based prompts (questions and tools).
- The risks of using HFDs is magnified when combined with option-posing, yes/no, or leading questions.

In conclusion, it is the NCAC's position that, based on current research, HFDs should not be used as a matter of standard practice. However, when interviewing children with communication challenges, media, including HFDs and free drawings, may be necessary additional tools. For these cases, HFDs should be introduced only if the child has made a verbal disclosure of

maltreatment and other clarification options and approaches have been exhausted.

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