



# **Fantastic Elements in Children's Disclosures**

*A Bibliography*

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

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## Scope

The bibliography lists publications related to forensic interviewing, and credibility of child witnesses when fantastic or bizarre elements are included in the child's statements.

## Organization

Publications include articles, book chapters, reports, and research briefs and are arranged 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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## Fantastic Elements in Children's Disclosures

### A Bibliography

Longobardi, C., Malacrea, M., Giulini, P., Settanni, M., & Fabris, M. A. (2022). How plausible are the accounts of child victims of sexual abuse? A study of bizarre and unusual scripts reported by children. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 31*(2), 216-235. DOI:10.1080/10538712.2021.2014612

Child sexual abuse is a serious social problem. In reports of sexually abused children, victims' narratives often contain elements that suggest the abuse was recorded to create images for child pornography with sadistic, bizarre, or perverted details. The presence of unusual or bizarre elements in the accounts of abused children affects their credibility. The purpose of this paper is to assess the presence and prevalence of these elements in the reports of children with suspected sexual abuse and to examine their consistency with verified cases of child abuse. We conducted two studies. In Study 1, we developed a list of 16 categories of unusual and bizarre scripts reported by children in reports of sexual abuse. In Study 2, we validated the list by examining the presence of the identified scripts in the actual experiences of both individuals convicted of crimes related to child pornography and Italian police officers who were involved with child pornography as part of their official duties. Our findings suggest that children's accounts of sexual abuse should be considered credible even if they contain unusual or bizarre elements that also occur in child pornography and therefore may reflect events actually experienced rather than merely the child's fantasy or imagination.

Macleod, E., Gross, J., & Hayne, H. (2016). Drawing conclusions: The effect of instructions on children's confabulation and fantasy errors. *Memory, 24*(1), 21-31. DOI:10.1080/09658211.2014.982656

Drawing is commonly used in forensic and clinical interviews with children. In these interviews, children are often allowed to draw without specific instructions about the purpose of the drawing materials. Here, we examined whether this practice influenced the accuracy of children's reports. Seventy-four 5- and 6-year-old children were interviewed one to two days after they took part in an interactive event. Some children were given drawing materials to use during the interview. Of these children, some were instructed to draw about the event,

and some were given no additional instructions at all. Children who were instructed to draw about the event, or who were interviewed without drawing, made few errors. In contrast, children who drew without being given specific instructions reported more errors that were associated with both confabulation and fantasy. We conclude that, to maximise accuracy during interviews involving drawing, children should be directed to draw specifically about the interview topic.

Woolley, J. D., & E Ghossainy, M. (2013). [Revisiting the fantasy–reality distinction: Children as naïve skeptics](#). *Child Development*, 84(5), 1496-1510.  
DOI:10.1111/cdev.12081

Far from being the uncritical believers, young children have been portrayed as, children often exhibit skepticism toward the reality status of novel entities and events. This paper reviews research on children’s reality status judgments, testimony use, understanding of possibility, and religious cognition. When viewed from this new perspective it becomes apparent that, when assessing reality status, children are as likely to doubt as they are to believe. It is suggested that immature metacognitive abilities are at the root of children’s skepticism, specifically that an insufficient ability to evaluate the scope and relevance of one’s knowledge leads to an over-reliance on it in evaluating reality status. With development comes increasing ability to utilize a wider range of sources to inform reality status judgments.

Carrick, N., & Ramirez, M. (2012). Preschoolers’ fantasy–reality distinctions of emotional events. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 112(4), 467-483.  
DOI:10.1016/j.jecp.2012.04.010

Research suggests that emotions influence children’s ability to discern fantasy from reality; however, reasons for this association remain unknown. The current research sought to better understand the mechanisms underlying children’s distinctions by examining the roles discrete emotions and context have in 3- to 5-year-olds’ evaluations of fantasy and reality. In Study 1, children’s fantasy– reality distinctions of images depicting happy, frightening, or sad events were obtained under two conditions: Children responded freely or were motivated to respond accurately. When responding freely, older children reported that happy and sad

fantastic and real events could occur but frightening events could not. When motivated to respond accurately, children's accuracy improved for fantasy but not for reality. Study 2 examined real events exclusively and found that children may lack the knowledge that frightening, but not happy or sad, real events can occur. The findings provide new insight into how emotions affect children's fantasy–reality distinctions. ! 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Otgaar, H., Candel, I., Merckelbach, H., & Wade, K. A. (2009). [Abducted by a UFO: Prevalence information affects young children's false memories for an implausible event.](#) *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 23(1), 115-125. DOI:10.1002/acp.1445

This study examined whether prevalence information promotes children's false memories for an implausible event. Forty-four 7–8 and forty-seven 11–12 year old children heard a true narrative about their first school day and a false narrative about either an implausible event (abducted by a UFO) or a plausible event (almost choking on a candy). Moreover, half of the children in each condition received prevalence information in the form of a false newspaper article while listening to the narratives. Across two interviews, children were asked to report everything they remembered about the events. In both age groups, plausible and implausible events were equally likely to give rise to false memories. Prevalence information increased the number of false memories in 7–8 year olds, but not in 11–12 year olds at Interview 1. Our findings demonstrate that young children can easily develop false memories of a highly implausible event. Copyright # 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Lukas Miller, A. (2008). Bizarre & fantastic elements: An forensic interviewer's response. III. *Update*, 21(2-4). [Part I.](#) [Part II.](#) [Part III.](#)

Olafson, E., & Lederman, C. S. (2006). The state of the debate about children's disclosure: Patterns in child sexual abuse cases. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 57(1), 27-40. DOI:10.1111/j.1755-6988.2006.tb00112.x

In current research studies about the disclosure patterns of sexually abused children, experts agree that most victims delay disclosure for years, often until adulthood. Researchers disagree about disclosure rates and recantation rates among children during formal interviews. Studies of children who had not previously disclosed but are known through corroborative evidence to have been sexually abused show lower rates of disclosure than do studies of children who had disclosed prior to the formal interview. Gradual disclosures among children are common, and more than a single interview may be necessary in some cases. Prior disclosure, level of support by non-offending parents, developmental level, and relationship to perpetrator affect children's rates of disclosure and their disclosure patterns. More research is necessary to clarify children's post-disclosure recantation rates and predictors.

Dalenberg, C. J., Hyland, K. Z., & Cuevas, C. A. (2001). Sources of fantastic elements in allegations of abuse by adults and children. In M. Eisen, J. Quas, & G. Goodman (Eds.), *Memory and suggestibility in the forensic interview*. Routledge.

Researchers and clinicians from many backgrounds have noted, with some dismay, that a bizarre, improbable, or fantastic element within an allegation of child physical or sexual abuse is not a rare event (Everson, 1997). Recently reversed convictions in high-profile day-care center cases (in which an initially charged defendant was released) have almost uniformly included allegations that most would find questionable, with children reporting attacks by sharks, abuse aboard ships and airplanes, stabbings that leave no marks, or multiple child murders (cf. Ceci & Bruck, 1995). A random sample collected by Dalenberg (1996b) yielded an estimate that 3% of initial allegations of severe abuse by children between the ages of 3 and 17 might include a fantastic element. The 800 interviews transcribed to date were chosen from among 6,000 videotapes that constituted the records of a child protection facility. "Gold standard" cases were randomly chosen from among those children whose abuse was verified by confession, and whose injuries were judged medically consistent with the allegations. Additional evidence was available for over 80% of these cases.

“Questionable” cases were randomly chosen from among children whose charts indicated a denial by the perpetrator, contradictory physical evidence, and no supportive medical evidence. All tapes were transcribed and evaluated in a three-stage accuracy check process and a six-stage coding of content and demeanor (with interrater reliabilities on coding categories ranging from .77 to .98). Results indicated that fantastic elements were most frequently found in reports from children ages 4 to 9. Fantastic elements were defined by reference to fantasy figures, by impossible or extremely implausible features of the story (as assessed by raters), and by descriptions of extreme abusive acts that should have been (but were not) supported by external evidence.

Garven, S., Wood, J. M., & Malpass, R. S. (2000). Allegations of wrongdoing: The effects of reinforcement on children’s mundane and fantastic claims. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 8(1), 38–49. DOI:10.1037/0021-9010.85.1.38

S. Garven, J. M. Wood, R. S. Malpass, and J. S. Shaw (1998) found that the interviewing techniques used in the McMartin Preschool case can induce preschool children to make false allegations of wrongdoing against a classroom visitor. In this study, 2 specific components of the McMartin interviews, reinforcement and cowitness information, were examined more closely in interviews of 120 children, ages 5 to 7 years. Children who received reinforcement made 35% false allegations against a classroom visitor, compared with 12% made by controls. When questioned about "fantastic" events (e.g., being taken from school in a helicopter), children receiving reinforcement made 52% false allegations, compared with 5% made by controls. In a second interview, children repeated the allegations even when reinforcement had been discontinued. The findings indicate that reinforcement can swiftly induce children to make persistent false allegations of wrongdoing.

Everson, M. (1997). [Understanding bizarre, improbable and fantastic elements in children's accounts of abuse](#). *Child Maltreatment*, 2(2), 134-149. DOI:10.1177/1077559597002002007

Children's accounts of abuse sometimes contain descriptions of events that seem bizarre, improbable, or even impossible. This article contributes to an objective analysis of child



allegations of abuse by offering 24 possible explanations (with illustrative case examples) for such statements. The central thesis of this discussion is that the existence of improbable or fantastic elements in a child's account should not result in an automatic dismissal of the child's report without consideration of the possible mechanisms underlying the fantastic material.

Dalenberg, C. (1996). [Fantastic elements in child disclosure of abuse](https://apsacliibrary.org/publications/1996%20Number%202/10337.pdf). *APSAC Advisor*, 9(2), 1, 5-9. <https://apsacliibrary.org/publications/1996%20Number%202/10337.pdf>

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., & Esplin, P. W. (1994). [Factors influencing the reliability and validity of statements made by young victims of sexual maltreatment](#). *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 15(2), 255-280. DOI:10.1016/0193-3973(94)90016-7

Reports of maltreatment involving young children have increased in recent years. In many cases, alleged victims and perpetrators are the only sources of information about the incidents concerned. This has prompted many efforts to evaluate the reliability and validity of information provided by young children, who are widely believed to be handicapped by a lack of linguistic facility, poor memories, susceptibility to suggestion, and a tendency to confuse fantasy and reality. The relevant literature on these issues is summarized in this article, in which we then suggest ways of interviewing children so as to obtain the most reliable and informative accounts of events they have experienced. Considerable emphasis is placed on the needs to: (a) elicit accounts from free recall, (b) use directive or leading questions sparingly and only in specific circumstances, and (c) develop systematic procedures for evaluating children's testimony.

Goodman, G. S., Bottoms, B. L., Herscovici, B. B., & Shaver, P. (1989). Determinants of the child victim's perceived credibility. In S. J. Ceci, D. F. Ross, & M. P. Toglia (Eds.), *Perspectives on children's testimony* (pp. 1–22). Springer. DOI:10.1007/978-1-4613-8832-6\_1