

CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GENITAL ANATOMY AND THE QUESTION "DID IT GO INSIDE?"



In many jurisdictions across the country, there may be additional charges if a child alleges penetration during a sexually abusive event. Statutes are often written to indicate "penetration however slight." The challenge, in a forensic interview, is eliciting information which accurately depicts a child's experiences and his or her understanding of penetrative offenses.

A common question frequently posed in a forensic interview when a child has alleged sexual abuse is whether an object or a body part "went inside" the child's body. How a child responds to the question "Did it go inside?" may direct aspects of the investigation or impact what charges are levied against the alleged suspect.

When the question of "Did it go inside?" is posed to the child, there is an assumption made by the forensic interviewer and multidisciplinary team members, that the child's understanding of his or her own and other's anatomy is the same as the interviewer and team members.

Children Often Do Not Understand Their Own Genital Anatomy

What is often misunderstood is how the child understands genital anatomy in the context of internal versus external anatomy and, more specifically, the degrees of internal genital anatomy (i.e., labial versus vaginal penetration). Though a child may respond with a "yes" or "no" to the question of "inside" there is often little clarity regarding what the child means if responding affirmatively.

A recent study by Milam and Nugent (2017) examined 674 records of girls (ages 5 – 17) at a sexual abuse clinic and found that children's age and development contributed to their overall understanding of genital anatomy. To assess the child's understanding, the following questions were asked:

- Has anyone talked to you about your private parts [or name provided by child]?
- Do you know the names for those parts of the body?
- What are the names?
- Do you know how many openings or holes you have in that part of your body?

A specific question was asked about toileting because it is one of the daily activities in which girls engage that involves contact to their genitalia. The question "When you wipe after you pee, does it feel like you are wiping on the inside or the outside of your private part [or name provided by the child] or both? This question presented an opportunity to explore a child's understanding of labial versus vaginal penetration.

Additional questions were asked of girls who were menstruating:

- Do you use pads or tampons or both?
- Do you think menstrual blood/your period comes out of the same hole/opening you pee from or from a different hole/opening?

The children's responses were categorized into the following categories:

- Accurate knowledge of genital anatomy
- Limited knowledge of genital anatomy
- Inconclusive

A sobering finding was 83.3% of the children did not demonstrate accurate knowledge of their genitalia. This means that what appears to be a simple question "Did it go inside?" is often misunderstood and can result in erroneous responses. The younger children did appear to use the word "inside" to describe genital contact that only involved labial penetration. However, the study found that older children may say "no" if contact is limited to labial penetration. This finding presents a challenge to forensic interviewers.

"The findings from this current study suggest it is both the definition of penetration and the child's knowledge of anatomy that must be carefully considered when questioning a child" (p. 35).

However, another caveat to consider and one that may have influenced the findings, is the use of an option-posing question to determine penetration ("When you wipe after you pee, does it feel like you are wiping on the inside or the outside of your private part or both?"). Option-posing questions are not as effective in gathering information as are more open narrative-encouraging questions and can result in less accurate information.

Interviewers and investigators should keep in mind that some children may choose a response to option-posing questions regarding penetration that may not be accurate and older girls may limit their description of penetration to vaginal penetration not labial penetration. Instead, the researchers suggest to not ask specifically if something went inside but did something go inside any "part" of the child's genital area.

What Does This Mean for Your Interview?



1. The child may not have an accurate understanding of her anatomy.
2. Ask open, narrative-encouraging questions about the child's experience. Exhaust the child's narrative using breadth (i.e., "What happened next?") and depth (i.e., "You said Uncle Jim touched your privates. Tell me more about Uncle Jim touching your privates") questions.
3. If the child indicates touching of the genital area, ask "Where was Uncle Jim's hand?". If there is still uncertainty regarding penetration, then, depending on jurisdictional preference and state statutes, an interviewer might ask the question "Did [child's words for what touched genitals] go inside any part of your [child's words?]".
4. Older children may respond to yes/no penetration questions with a "no" response if they believe the object/body part was not fully inside their vagina. Ask for further elaboration (i.e., "Talk to me more about his hand not going inside").

5. If a child does indicate penetration, ask for further elaboration (i.e., “Talk to me about his hand going inside your private).
6. Consider a lesser charge where there is higher confidence in the child’s response rather than asking challenging or inappropriate questions regarding penetration and risking eliciting inaccurate information.

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