

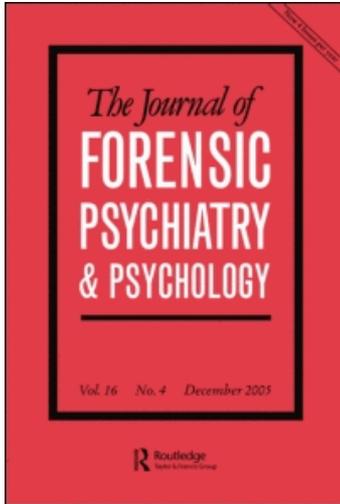
This article was downloaded by: [Gudjonsson, Gisli H.]

On: 22 February 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 919434740]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t714592861>

The ability of suspected victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) to give evidence. Findings from the Children's House in Iceland

Gisli Gudjonsson ^a; Thorbjorg Sveinsdottir ^b; Jon Fridrik Sigurdsson ^{cd}; Johanna Jonsdottir ^c

^a Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, London, UK ^b Children's House, Reykjavik, Iceland ^c Division of Psychiatry, Landspítali - University Hospital, Iceland ^d Department of Medicine, School of Health Sciences, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

First published on: 22 February 2010

To cite this Article Gudjonsson, Gisli, Sveinsdottir, Thorbjorg, Sigurdsson, Jon Fridrik and Jonsdottir, Johanna(2010) 'The ability of suspected victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) to give evidence. Findings from the Children's House in Iceland', Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology,, First published on: 22 February 2010 (iFirst)

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14789940903540784

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14789940903540784>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The ability of suspected victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) to give evidence. Findings from the Children's House in Iceland

Gisli Gudjonsson^{a*}, Thorbjorg Sveinsdottir^b, Jon Fridrik Sigurdsson^{c,d} and Johanna Jonsdottir^c

^aDepartment of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, London, UK; ^bChildren's House, Reykjavik, Iceland, ^cDivision of Psychiatry, Landspítali – University Hospital, Iceland; ^dDepartment of Medicine, School of Health Sciences, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

(Received 11 February 2009; final version received 4 December 2009)

The main objective of the study was to further the understanding of age-related differences in children's ability to give an account of suspected sexual abuse during questioning. Video recordings of 285 Investigative Interviews referred by police and judges to the Children's House in Reykjavik over a five-year period were analysed. The great majority of the youngest children (3½–5 years), and almost all of the older children, had the basic abilities to give testimony, although there were major age-related differences in their understanding of why they were being interviewed, their ability to answer open-ended questions about the suspected abuse, describe the immediate antecedents, conversation with the perpetrator, events immediately after the abuse, and ability to sustain concentration during the interview. The findings show that the interview technique used in the Children's House, which is based on Child Advocacy Model principles and protocol, is being used effectively in Iceland.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; investigative interviews; competence; Child Advocacy Centre; the Children's House

Introduction

In response to public concerns in the 1990s about the credibility of child witnesses (Myers, 1995), a number of experts and professional groups made well-founded and empirically based recommendations about interview practice concerning child witnesses (e.g. Aldridge & Wood, 1998; American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1990; Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1998; Bull, 1995; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1994, 1995; Poole & Lamb, 1998). It has also been argued that there is a need for an integrated health care for victims of assault (Shepherd & Bisson, 2004). The general thrust of this work is that

*Corresponding author. Email: gisli.gudjonsson@kcl.ac.uk

information should be elicited from free recall, direct and leading questions should be used sparingly, and employing a formal and valid interview protocol is the best way to improve the credibility of children's testimony. More recently, Goodman and Melinder (2007) argue for a balanced view of children's capabilities, where overly negative or overly positive views should be avoided. Lamb et al. (2008) provide a detailed account of the factors that affect the capacities and limitations of child witnesses. This includes the developmental level of the child, the nature of the material event the child is questioned about, and the technique used to question the child.

Child Advocacy Centres (CACs) were set up in the USA in the mid 1980s as a result of serious concern about the poor standard of care provided to children by different governmental agencies when investigating cases of suspected child sexual abuse (Cronch, Viljoen, & Hansen, 2006; Orbach et al., 2000; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Jackson, 2004; Lamb et al., 2008). A crucial idea behind the CACs' concept is the focus on 'best practice' and professionalism. In this article we present the first detailed data from the Children's House, which was set up in Reykjavik, Iceland, on 1 November 1998, based on the CACs' model.

The main aim of the present study was to investigate age-related differences in factors associated with the ability to give evidence. This was achieved by conducting a careful analysis of all video recorded Investigative Interviews carried out by 'expert interviewers' over a five-year period at the Children's House in Reykjavik.

Schuman, Bala, and Lee (1999) discuss how children as young as four years sometimes testify in the Canadian courts and give reliable evidence provided their questioning is appropriate for their level of development. In terms of development, Schuman et al. argue that effective questioning needs to take into account the child's linguistic (i.e. language skills), cognitive (i.e. ability to perceive and store information, form and understand concepts, and make inferences), and emotional (i.e. emotional maturity, including coping with parental separation, frustration, and intimidation) abilities. This maximises the ability of children to provide a reliable account of their experiences.

It was hypothesised that even the youngest children would be able to understand basic concepts (e.g. veracity, time, colour, dates, sequence, and the purpose of the interview), answer satisfactorily basic personal and general questions, and provide basic narrative account of the abuse (Lamb et al., 1995). However, due to age-related language and communication limitations (Lamb et al., 1994; Ornstein & Haden, 2002; Schuman et al., 1999), it was anticipated that the younger the child, the less able he or she is to sustain concentration during the interview, answer open-ended questions ('Then what?', 'Tell me more about it'), describe conversation and feelings experienced during the abuse, and the timing of the abuse.

Material and methods

Background

On 1 November 1998 the Icelandic Government set up a special facility, the 'Children's House', for the investigation, medical care, and treatment of children across Iceland, who after a preliminary investigation by a Children's Protection Committee and police are suspected of being victims of sexual abuse. The purpose of the preliminary investigation is to provide some hypothesis about what may have happened to the child. The Children's Committee and the police do not interview the child, but refer the case to a judge if they consider that there are sufficient grounds for suspecting child sexual abuse. The creation of the Children's House was based on the Children's Advocacy Model (Jackson, 2004). It is located in an attractive family house in Reykjavik, which has been specially designed to accommodate the needs of the child and legal requirements for evidence gathering. There is a specially designed interview room with closed circuit television. A judge is in charge of every interview and is present in another room with members from the prosecution, police and child protection services, defence lawyer, and a legal representative for the child. All these people watch the interview via a video link as it takes place and are able to request that the interviewer asks the child further questions, which represents the cross-examination. The suspect, if known, has the legal right to watch the interview take place, but this rarely happens in practice.

All interviews are tape-recorded and are used for evidential purposes, as background information for a medical examination and therapy, as appropriate. There is a video link to a Conference Room in the Children's House, which serves the function of a Court Room, and to one of the Courthouses in Iceland. The child does not have to testify at the court proceedings.

A medical examination room is located in the Children's House where a team of paediatrician, gynaecologist, and a nurse do the examinations when required. Treatment is available for each child as required but is always provided by a person who is independent of the interview as recommended by Pool and Lamb (1998).

The suspected victims

The 'victim' sample consisted of 285 children of whom 241 (85%) were girls and 44 (15%) were boys. The mean age at the time of the Investigative Interview was 11.4 years for girls ($SD = 3.9$, range = 3½–17 years) and 9.6 for boys ($SD = 4.0$, range = 3½–15 years). The boys were significantly younger than the girls ($t = 2.9$, $df = 283$, $p < 0.01$).

For the purpose of the present study, the sample was grouped into five three-year age-bands at the time of their investigative interview: 3½–5 years,

6–8 years, 9–11 years, 12–14 years, and 15–17 years. These age groups are very similar to those used in other studies (e.g. Lamb et al., 2008, p. 226). The first group (3½–5) represents preschool children in Iceland (i.e. formal schooling commences at age six years). The last group (15–17) represents those who have reached the legal age for consensual sex. The number of children falling into each band at the time of the Investigative Interview was 38, 37, 51, 94, and 65, respectively. The mean age at the time of the alleged abuse was 10.7 years for girls ($SD = 3.9$, range = 3½–17 years) and 8.6 for boys ($SD = 3.9$, range = 3½–15 years). The boys were significantly younger than the girls ($t = 3.2$, $df = 283$, $p < 0.01$).

Separate age-bands were created for the age at the time of the suspected offence and used where appropriate (e.g. seriousness of the abuse, relationship between the abused and abuser at the time the actual offence took place). The number of children falling into each band at the time of the offence was 45, 52, 53, 89, and 46, respectively.

Investigative interviews

Between 1 November 1998 and 31 December 2003, 285 children thought to be victims of sexual abuse were interviewed at the Children's House as a part of a formal police and judicial process. All the cases involved a police investigation and were referred by police or judges from different parts of Iceland after the child protection service had been notified of suspected sexual abuse (between 1 November 1998 and 1 May 1999 all cases were referred by the police, whereas after a legal change all subsequent cases were referred by judges only). For the last two months in 1998, 18 children were interviewed. The average number of children interviewed per year during the five-year period 1999–2003 was 53 (range = 42–64). Consistent with the recommendations of Poole and Lamb (1998) only children who were at 3½ years of age or older were interviewed.

Each child was only interviewed once and each interview lasted about 30–40 minutes (range = 15–90 minutes). However, 14 (5%) had previously been interviewed in the absence of the formal proceeding due to the fact that there was insufficient indication that sexual abuse had taken place (e.g. the child had not disclosed an indication of sexual abuse, but there was evidence that a sibling had been sexually abused, or that the child was displaying a sexualised behaviour). When the outcome of the informal interview suggested abuse then a formal interview was arranged. The informal is conducted in the same way as the formal interview, using the same protocol and same interviewers, but only a member of the Children's Protection Committee observes the interview via a video link.

The interviews conducted with the children were based on a modified version of the child interview guide prepared by the Harborview Centre for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress and Washington State Criminal

Training Commission (2005). The Guide is broadly based on the NICHD Protocol for Investigative Interviews of Alleged Sexual Abuse Victims (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, & Esplin, 1999) and is intended to assist various agencies and specialist interviewers with conducting investigative interviews. Interagency cooperation and coordination of interviews is encouraged to minimise the number of interviews required for each child.

There were three 'specialist' interviewers who conducted the interviews of the children. They were all females, one was a psychologist, one was a social worker, and the third had a BA degree in criminology and education. All three interviewers had received training in the USA in the use of the interview protocol guide mentioned above. The cases were randomly allocated to the three interviewers. All three had a long experience of working with children prior to their interviewing training in the USA, but their first experience in applying the interview protocol was in relation to the cases in the Children's House.

The phases of the interviews in the Children's House were as follows:

- (1) The introduction. The interviewer begins with an introduction and explains the procedure, her role and that the interview is video recorded and observed by people outside the interview room (i.e. via a video-link).
- (2) The ground rules. The child is asked to let the interviewer know if a question is not understood or if he/she doesn't know how to reply to a question, and that the same question may be asked more than once. The child is required to demonstrate his or her understanding through practical exercises.
- (3) The child's development and understanding of basic concepts (e.g. days, months, sequence, colours, size, texture, physical position, hard versus soft) and the child is asked to name basic body parts from a picture. This is tested differently for different age groups and the perceived developmental age of the child.
- (4) Truth/lies. The interviewer determines the child's understanding of the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie which for younger children will involve the use of an example or a scenario. The child is then informed that he/she is asked to tell only what happened and a verbal agreement is obtained from the child to that effect. If the child has reached the age of criminal responsibility the interviewer is required to inform the child that it is a criminal offence to lie in court.
- (5) The practice interview. The child is asked questions by his/her name, age, date of birth, home environment, school, friends, and a recent event. This training is designed to familiarise the child with the open-ended strategies and techniques later used to explore substantive issues in the disclosure.

- (6) Introducing the topic. The topic under investigation (i.e. the allegation or suspected abuse) is introduced in a non-leading way (e.g. Tell me why you are here today?) Words such as hurt, bad, or abuse, are avoided. If the child has no understanding of why it is attending the interview he or she is informed that sometimes children want to talk about things that have happened to them and does that apply to them. On occasions this may prove unsatisfactory and more specific questions may need to be asked (e.g. 'Your mother told me that something had happened to you, tell me about that', or 'I heard something happened to you, tell me about that'). This is similar to the follow-up questions recommended in the NICHD Protocol (Lamb et al., 2008, pp. 286–299).
- (7) The free narrative. A general prompt is given, such as, 'Tell me everything you can about that. The child is encouraged to continue with an open-ended comment (e.g. 'Then what?' or 'Tell me more about that').
- (8) Questioning and clarification. Topics are covered in an order that builds on the child's prior answers. Terms and descriptions that appear ambiguous are clarified (e.g. 'Where did it happen?', 'What did he/she do?', 'Did it happen more than once?', 'Has anything like this happened to you before?'). During this phase questions may also be asked of people watching the interview via a video link (e.g. judge, defence lawyer).
- (9) Closure. The child is asked if there is anything else he/she wants to say, and the child is thanked for attending the interview.

Each video-recorded interview was carefully analysed according to a detailed coding frame developed by the authors.¹ The coding frame was developed from the protocol being used in the Children's House. Each item was rated either present or absent. Each item was identified and clearly defined. The inter-rater reliability of the variables used in study was tested on 20 randomly selected cases by two of the researchers who rated each variable independently. Kappa coefficients ranged between 0.92 and 1.0, indicating very high reliability between the two researchers. The areas covered in the coding frame, in addition to basic background information (e.g. age at the interview, age at the time of the offence, gender, the circumstances of the allegation and its reporting, relationship with the accused), included:

- (1) The child had a basic understanding of concepts such as colour, size, firmness, sequence, time, dates, and seasons. Rated as 'good', 'fair', or 'bad' according to pre-determined criteria for time, colour, texture, size, position, and order of objects.

- (2) Has the ability to distinguish truth from lie. A simple standard test was conducted prior to the interview and the outcome was rated as present or absent.
- (3) Understands the basic rules of the interview, including being able to say that he or she does not know or understand questions and can correct the interviewer.
- (4) Able to give satisfactory answers to general questions. For example, was the child able to answer simple questions unrelated to the offence such as the name of the school attended, the names and position of family members, and things they like doing. The answer is rated 'yes' or 'no'. Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, and Horowitz (2006) point out that this pre-substantive phase can be used not only to establish rapport with children but also prepare them in other ways to maximise their willingness and capacity to be informative.
- (5) Has reasonable memory for basic personal information (i.e. similar to that expected of other children in that age-band). For example the child's birthday, age, address, name of his or her school or playschool. This is rated as 'good' or 'bad'. The Hershkowitz et al. (2006) study showed that the proportion of informative responses relative to the total number of responses provided in the episodic memory training phase significantly predicted whether or not the children would later make allegations.
- (6) Able to articulate why he/she was being interviewed in Children's House. This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (7) Able to sustain concentration during the interview. For example, is the child able to sit reasonably still during the interview and pay attention to the questions? This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (8) Gives a reasonably detailed and coherent description of abuse. This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (9) Was able to describe the antecedents leading up to the abuse (e.g. give a description of what had been happening immediately prior to the alleged abuse). This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (10) Was able to describe events after the abuse (e.g. give a description of what happened immediately after the alleged abuse). This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (11) Was able to report the date and time of the abuse. If there was more than one incident of the alleged abuse then the interviewer would focus the child on the first, the last and what the child considered the worst incidence. This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (12) Gave description of conversation with the offender during the abuse. This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (13) Was able to answer open-ended questions (e.g. giving a free narrative reply). This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.

- (14) Was able to answer specific questions that were required after the free narrative account given to the open-ended question was considered by the interviewer to be insufficient. This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.
- (15) Described feelings experienced while being abused (e.g. the child gives one or more examples of how he or she felt during the suspected abuse). This is rated as 'yes' or 'no'.

The first seven items relate to the child's understanding and ability prior to being asked questions about alleged or suspected abuse. In contrast, items 8–15 all address issues related to the suspected abuse.

The seriousness of the offence was classified into five groups (each item was rated as 'present' or 'absent' and in cases where there was more than one offence or repeated offending, the most serious offence was rated):

- (1) Adult's apparent sexual interest in the child, the touching of the child's body parts over clothing excluding sexual parts.
- (2) Masturbation in the presence of a child, touching of the child's sexual parts outside clothing.
- (3) Touching of sexual parts inside of clothing, child masturbated or forced to masturbate the abuser.
- (4) Attempts at penetration with finger, penis or object, or oral sex performed.
- (5) Full sexual intercourse with vagina or anus penetrated.

Results

Disclosure of the allegation prior to the investigative interview

Out of the 285 cases, 177 (62%) involved the child spontaneously reporting the abuse to an adult, whereas in 107 cases (38%) it was somebody else who suspected or witnessed the sexual abuse and reported it (in one case there was insufficient information for classification). Spontaneous reporting of abuse by the victim was significantly related to the age of the victim at the time of the Investigative Interview ($\chi^2 = 25.43$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$), with the corresponding spontaneous reporting of abuse by the child prior to the investigative interview being 42%, 49%, 69% and 82%, respectively for the five age-bands.

The age of the victim at the time of the Investigative Interview was different to that at the time of the abuse. This was due to the long delay in some cases in reporting the offence to the authorities. In 53 (25%) cases there was delayed reporting of more than one year. There were six reasons the children gave for delayed reporting: (1) In 20 (38%) cases, the victims had not intended to disclose the abuse, but when subsequently going

through puberty they experienced emotional and behavioural problems, which resulted in others (e.g. parents, friends) asking questions and they were then willing to disclose the abuse; (2) Other victims disclosed the abuse ($n = 12$; 23%); (3) The abuse was disclosed after talking to professionals (e.g. school counsellors, nurses, psychologists) about related problems ($n = 8$; 15%); (4) There had been a media discussion about child sexual abuse, which gave them the courage to report the offence ($n = 5$; 9%); (5) Concern about younger siblings being abused by the same abuser ($n = 3$; 6%); (6) The departure of the abuser from the family home ($n = 3$; 6%). In two (4%) further cases the explanation was not clear.

Assessment of basic concepts and abilities

Table 1 shows the children's understanding and cognitive ability prior to being asked questions about alleged or suspected abuse. This relates to the first seven items in the coding frame. The table shows that in all the age-bands almost everybody interviewed, regardless of their age, was able to understand basic concepts relevant to the sexual abuse, understood the basic rules of the interview, was able to give satisfactory answers to general questions unrelated to the suspected abuse, and had reasonable good memory for basic personal information. Significant age differences emerged in relation to the child's ability to distinguish between telling the truth and telling a lie, although the great majority ($n = 29$; 91%) of the youngest children performed satisfactorily in this respect and almost every child in the other groups.

The greatest age differences were noted in relation to the child's ability to concentrate during the interview and articulate an understanding of why they were being interviewed at the Children's House. For example, only half of the children ($n = 17$; 49%) in the youngest age-band were able to explain why they were at the Children's House, and only 20 (57%) of them were able to concentrate satisfactorily during the interview. In contrast, all the children in the oldest age-band were able to articulate the reason for their presence at the Children's House and concentrate satisfactorily during the Investigative Interview.

Disclosure of abuse during the investigative interview

Out of the 285 children interviewed, 215 (75%) disclosed sexual abuse (eight or 5% of those who had previously allegedly spontaneously reported abuse did not confirm the abuse during the investigative interview). There was a significant difference in disclosure between the five age-bands ($\chi^2 = 45.71$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). The disclosure rate for the five age-bands was as follows: 3½–5 years ($n = 15$, 40%), 6–8 years ($n = 25$, 68%), 9–11 years ($n = 34$, 67%), 12–14 years ($n = 81$, 86%), and 15–17 years ($n = 60$, 92%).

Table 1. Exploring the child's basic understanding and ability prior to being asked questions about the suspected abuse.

	3½-5 years (N = 38)	6-8 years (N = 37)	9-11 years (N = 51)	12-14 years (N = 94)	15-17 years (N = 65)	χ^2 (df = 4)	Valid cases
Understanding of concepts such as colour, size, firmness, sequence, time, dates, seasons	28 (82%)	35 (95%)	49 (98%)	89 (95%)	61 (94%)	9.0	280
Able to distinguish truth from lie	29 (91%)	37 (100%)	50 (100%)	90 (99%)	60 (100%)	15.96**	270
Understands the basic rules of the interview	30 (97%)	36 (97%)	50 (100%)	90 (100%)	60 (100%)	5.99	268
Able to give satisfactory answers to general questions	31 (94%)	35 (95%)	50 (100%)	90 (98%)	60 (97%)	4.39	273
Has reasonable memory for basic personal information	30 (94%)	36 (97%)	50 (100%)	89 (97%)	60 (98%)	3.43	272
Able to articulate why was being interviewed in Children's House	17 (49%)	24 (65%)	41 (80%)	93 (99%)	65 (100%)	75.27**	282
Able to sustain concentration during the interview	20 (57%)	33 (89%)	49 (96%)	92 (99%)	65 (100%)	72.45**	281

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$.

There was no significant gender difference with regard to disclosure and denial ($\chi^2 = 1.48$, ns) with 185 (77%) of the girls and 30 (68%) of the boys making disclosure of abuse.

Out of the 215 children who disclosed sexual abuse, 104 (48%) said it happened only once, 43 (20%) reported two to four incidents, and 53 (25%) reported five or more incidents (no information about the frequency was available for 15 children).

Witness competence

Table 2 provides information on the ability of the children in the different age-bands to provide salient information about the alleged sexual abuse. The items match those between 8 and 15 in the coding frame. The table shows that significant differences emerged for all eight items with fewer of the children in the youngest age-band providing the required information than those in the other age-bands. Just over half ($n = 8$; 53%) of the youngest children who disclosed abuse were able to give detailed description of the abuse. Their greatest disadvantage, however, was in their ability to describe the events taking place after the abuse ($n = 3$; 20%), give details of any conversation that they had had with the abuser ($n = 3$; 20%), ability to answer open-ended questions ($n = 4$; 27%), ability to report the precise timing of the abuse ($n = 4$; 27%), and describe their feelings experienced while being abused ($n = 5$; 36%).

The seriousness of the suspected offence

Out of the 215 cases where the victim reported sexual abuse, 18 (8%), 37 (17%), 48 (23%), 61 (29%), and 49 (23%) fell into the five categories above, respectively (there were two (1%) missing cases).

As far as the 61 cases in Category 4 are concerned, 27 (44%), 33 (54%), 4 (7%) involved attempted penetration with a penis, finger and object, respectively. In 18 (30%) of the cases oral sex was also performed, but it usually accompanied some type of penetration (the total percentage exceeds 100% as more than one type of abuse occurred in some cases).

Discussion

The setting up of the Children's House in Iceland in 1998, and the careful, thorough, and systematic nature of the interviews conducted, has provided a unique opportunity to examine the capacity of children, down to the age of 3½ years, to provide testimony for judicial purposes. The ability of young children to understand basic concepts, such as veracity, colour, dates, sequence, the purpose of the interview, and provide basic details of the abuse reported, are fundamental to their credibility as witnesses. The findings from

Table 2. Salient information regarding the suspected abuse.

	3½-5 years (N = 15)	6-8 years (N = 25)	9-11 years (N = 34)	12-14 years (N = 81)	15-17 years (N = 60)	χ^2 (df = 4)	Valid cases
Detailed description of abuse	8 (53%)	25 (100%)	31 (91%)	74 (91%)	53 (88%)	22.93***	215
Able to describe the antecedents leading up to the abuse	6 (40%)	19 (76%)	33 (97%)	80 (99%)	55 (92%)	54.95***	215
Able to describe events after the abuse	3 (20%)	15 (60%)	28 (82%)	64 (79%)	50 (83%)	30.59***	215
Ability to report the precise timing of the abuse	4 (27%)	13 (52%)	24 (71%)	77 (95%)	55 (92%)	58.39***	215
Gives description of conversation with the offender during the abuse	3 (20%)	19 (76%)	18 (53%)	62 (77%)	45 (75%)	24.37***	215
Able to answer open-ended questions	4 (27%)	17 (68%)	26 (77%)	62 (77%)	53 (88%)	25.40***	215
Able to answer specific questions	10 (67%)	24 (96%)	31 (91%)	74 (91%)	58 (97%)	14.81**	215
Describes feelings experienced while being abused	5 (36%)	18 (72%)	28 (82%)	63 (78%)	48 (80%)	13.97**	214

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

the present study provide important information about the strengths and limitations of young children, which are of considerable theoretical as well of practical value.

Witness abilities

The findings show that a great majority of the youngest children (3½–5 year age-band), and almost all of the older children, have the basic abilities to give testimony, although there clearly are several age-related differences. These age differences are undoubtedly related to important developmental factors that are involved in the processing and reporting of human experiences (Ornstein & Haden, 2002; Schuman, et al., 1999). Very young children may not have the necessary schemata or mental structures to organise past experiences into a cohesive form that they can articulate and describe in detail (Baker-Ward & Ornstein, 2002; Bartlett, 1932). Therefore, the questions asked of the child during the investigative interview need to be developmentally appropriate to compensate for the linguistic, cognitive, and emotional limitations of very young children (Schuman et al., 1999).

It is generally accepted that children as young as 3½ years are able to give accurate and organised accounts of general events, but they have particular difficulties with responding appropriately to yes-no type questions and coping with repeated leading questions in the same interview (Fivush, Peterson, & Schwarzmüller, 2002). It is well established from experimental studies that young children often provide sparse information when asked general, open-ended questions, which means that often either specific yes-no or who, where, when, and what type of questions are asked during questioning to enhance the completeness of recall. This finding was clearly documented in the present study. The yes-no types of follow-up questions, which may be necessary for sufficient details to emerge for prosecution, are particularly hazardous for young children and the answers to those types of questions need to be interpreted with great caution (Fivush et al., 2002).

Almost all the youngest children had reasonable good memory of basic personal information, were able to give satisfactory answers to general questions unrelated to the suspected abuse, and understood the basic rules of the interview. In addition, the great majority of the youngest children had satisfactory understanding of basic relevant concepts and were able to distinguish between telling the truth and telling a lie. Taken together these factors support the notion that young children are able to act as witnesses to basic facts related to a distinct and personally experienced event.

Age-related differences

The greatest age-related differences were noted in relation to the child's ability to concentrate during the interview, to articulate an understanding

of why they were being interviewed at the Children's House, to disclose that alleged sexual abuse had taken place, to provide details of the abuse they had disclosed, describe the events leading up to and after the abuse, give details of any conversation that they had had with the abuser, to give full answers to open-ended questions, to report the precise timing of the abuse, and describe the feelings they experienced while being abused. Cronch et al. (2006) recommend that the age of the child should be considered when choosing interviewing techniques. This includes using open-ended questions whenever possible with older children, whereas for younger children 'cued invitations and specific yet non-leading questions should be used' (p. 205).

Risks associated with multiple interviews

The fact that only 57% of the youngest children, in contrast to almost all the older children, were able to sustain concentration during the interview, which typically lasted only 30–40 minutes, although is considerably less time among the younger children, raises important questions about whether it is realistic to expect young children to be able to give their entire testimony in one short interview. It may be beneficial in some cases of young children not to restrict the Investigative Interview to one short session, which is the current practice in Iceland. However, there is a fine balance between encouraging and allowing a young child to maximise its disclosure of abuse and risking contamination, unreliable testimony and distress to the child through repeated interviews and over-zealous procedure (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). The alternative may be to give young children a short break during an interview rather than providing another separate interview.

Multiple interviews of children may be necessary in some cases. The risks associated with multiple interviews appear to be twofold: the impact of implicit social demands and the impact of explicit suggestions (Poole & Lamb, 1998, p. 56). However, in cases of sexual abuse, particularly concerning very young children, it may be beneficial for obtaining satisfactory detail, and for consolidating the memory of the abuse and enhancing subsequent retrieval, to interview the child more than once (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Lamb et al. (2008) state that considerably more research on second (or later) interviews is needed to further clarify the benefits and risks of repeated interviewing (p. 269). However, they suggest that the follow-up interviews should have a more narrow focus than the initial interview. LaRooy, Lamb, and Pipe (2009) provide a detailed review of the potentially beneficial and harmful effects of repeated interviews. They point out that in some cases repeated interviews may actually assist witnesses with retaining memory of material event, especially when children are interviewed soon after the material event and when the repeated interviews are closely timed

together. Importantly, they suggest that there is a need to develop developmentally appropriate protocols and guidelines for repeated interviewing.

Disclosure of abuse

The present study shows that there are significant age differences in relation to disclosure of sexual abuse. There was a clear increase in disclosure as the child became older. Whereas only 40% of the children in the youngest age-band disclosed that sexual abuse had taken place, 92% of the oldest children did so. This is consistent with the findings of Hershkowitz et al. (2005) and Hershkowitz, Horowitz, and Lamb (2007) who found that rates of disclosure of sexual allegations increase steadily with age. There are at least three possible explanations: (1) ability (i.e. the ability to identify that abuse took place and articulate it). (2) offence related factors (e.g. the severity and frequency of abuse, the abuse of the younger children being more arbitrary and difficult to identify); (3) who instigated the reporting of the suspected abuse (e.g. a relative vs self). It is likely that young children have difficulties in identifying sexual abuse and articulating it during an Investigative Interview unless it is very explicit.

Additionally, there are at least two other factors relevant to disclosure, but these may not be age related. These are: (1) motivational (i.e. the willingness to disclose abuse). For example, Hershkowitz et al. (2005) found that children were less willing to disclose abuse if a parent was a suspected perpetrator. Hershkowitz, Lanes, and Lamb (2007) found that an expected negative reaction from parents reduces the likelihood of disclosure; (2) the actual foundation for the allegation. For example, Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) found that disclosure was lower when children were primarily referred due to emotional and behavioural problems.

Hershkowitz et al. (2007) provide some data to suggest that the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol may increase disclosure among children suspected of having been sexually abused which they attribute to the fact that the protocol includes a systematic effort to establish rapport with children and prepare them for their role as witnesses, thereby enhancing their willingness and capacity to be informative (p. 71). The high overall rate of disclosure in the present study (75%) suggests that the protocol was highly effective in this respect in Iceland. Indeed, it compares very favourably with the 65% reported by Hershkowitz et al. (2007) using a similar interview protocol in Israel. In the present study, 46 (43%) of the 107 children who had not previously revealed abuse disclosed abuse and were able to give a description of the abuse during the investigative interview. Of course, we do not know the ground truth regarding the rate of abuse in our sample, but the findings suggest that the rate of disclosing abuse substantially increased during the investigative interview.

Main strengths and limitations

The main advantages of the present study are that all the Investigative Interviews were structured according to set criteria, based broadly on the child interview guide prepared by the Harborview Centre for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress and Washington State Criminal Training Commission (2005). They were conducted by 'specially' trained interviewers, there were a large number of interviews over a long period of time, all the interviews were video recorded, and there was a detailed coding frame developed for the analysis of the data.

The current study has two main limitations. First, the authors do not know the foundation or 'ground truth' concerning the suspicions or allegations of sexual abuse. In several of the cases no sexual abuse may have taken place at all and it is not possible to say how this may have been influenced by the age of the child. The second limitation is that all the interviews were conducted in one national Child Advocacy Centre, the Children's House in Iceland, and cultural factors (i.e. shared national differences in attitudes, values, and objectives) may have influenced some of the findings, there was no comparison made with standard police interviews as previously used, and no data were available about the Court's evaluation of the children's testimony. Interestingly, recently concerns have been raised in Scandinavia about the inadequacy of standard police interviews (Cederborg, 2004) and the setting up of the Children's House in Iceland should lead the way in the Nordic countries for an improvement in practice. Children's Houses have now also been set up in Norway and Sweden but are still to be evaluated. As far as the current findings are concerned, the interview protocol is clearly being used effectively in Iceland and we are currently collecting data on the court's evaluation of the children's testimony and determination of the cases.

This article adds to the growing evidence for the feasibility and effectiveness of the interview protocol across different countries and jurisdictions (Cronch et al., 2006; Lamb et al., 2008). Lamb et al. (2008) cite field studies in four different countries – Israel, United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, all co-authored by him). Importantly, Cronch et al. (2006) point out that most of the research involving the NICHD interview protocol and its effectiveness has involved researchers who were directly involved in the development of the protocol. They discuss this as a limitation to studies currently conducted in the field. The current study was conducted independently of the protocol's developers and in a very different jurisdiction. In spite of this, the findings fully support the potential value and effectiveness of the interview protocol with children and are consistent with previous findings.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by a grant (ref. 0213402/3) from the Icelandic Research Counsel. Mr Bragi Gudbrandsson, MA, General Director of the Government

Agency for Child Protection in Iceland, commissioned the study, which formed part of a mandatory audit, and provided all the necessary approval, facilities and support. Ms Vigdis Erlendsdottir, the Director of the Children's House, fully supported the study. The authors are grateful to Helga Runa Peturs from the Government Agency for Child Protection for helpful comments on a previous draft of this article. The Children's House received from the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect the 2006 Multidisciplinary Team Award.

Note

1. A copy of the coding frame is available from the authors upon request.

References

- Aldridge, M., & Wood, J. (1998). *Interviewing children*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. (1990). *Guidelines for psychosocial evaluation of suspected sexual abuse in young children*. Chicago, IL: Author.
- Baker-Ward, L., & Ornstein, P.A. (2002). Cognitive underpinning of children's testimony. In H.L. Westcott, G.M. Davies, & R.H.C. Bull (Eds.), *Children's testimony. A handbook of psychological, research, and forensic practice* (pp. 21–35). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruck, M., Ceci, S.J., & Hembrooke, H. (1998). Reliability and credibility of young children's reports: From research to police and practice. *American Psychologist*, 53, 136–151.
- Bull, R. (1995). Innovative techniques for the questioning of child witnesses, especially those who are young and those with learning disability. In M.S. Zaragoza, J.R. Graham, G.C.N. Hall, R. Hirschman, & Y.S. Ben-Porath (Eds.), *Memory and testimony in the child witness* (pp. 179–194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ceci, S.J., & Bruck, M. (1995). *Jeopardy in the courtroom: A scientific analysis of children's testimony*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Cederborg, A-C. (2004). Factors influencing child witnesses. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 45, 197–205.
- Cronch, L.E., Viljoen, J.L., & Hansen, D.J. (2006). Forensic interviewing in child sexual abuse cases: Current techniques and future directions. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 11, 195–207.
- Fivush, R., Peterson, C., & Schwarzmueller, A. (2002). Questions and answers: The credibility of child witnesses in the context of specific questioning techniques. In M.L. Eisen, J.A. Quas, & G.S. Goodmann (Eds.), *Memory and suggestibility in the forensic interview* (pp. 331–354). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goodman, G.S., & Melinder, A. (2007). Child witness research and forensic interviews of young children: A review. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 12, 1–19.
- Harborview Centre for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress and Washington State Criminal Training Commission. (2005). *Child interview guide*. Seattle: Author.
- Hershkowitz, I., Fisher, S., Lamb, M.E., & Horowitz, D. (2007). Improving credibility assessment in child sexual abuse cases. The role of the NICHD investigative interview protocol. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 31, 99–110.
- Hershkowitz, I., Horowitz, D., & Lamb, M.E. (2005). Trends in children's disclosure of abuse in Israel: A national study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 29, 63–71.

- Hershkowitz, I., Horowitz, D., & Lamb, M.E. (2007). Individual and family variables associated with disclosure and nondisclosure of child abuse in Israel. In M-E. Pipe, M.E. Lamb, Y. Orbach, & A-C. Cederborg (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse. Disclosure, delay, and denial* (pp. 65–75). New York: Routledge.
- Hershkowitz, I., Lanes, O., & Lamb, M.E. (2007). Exploring the disclosure of child sexual abuse with alleged victims and their parents. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 31*, 111–123.
- Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., Lamb, M.E., Sternberg, K.J., & Horowitz, D. (2006). Dynamics of forensic interviews with suspected abuse victims who do not disclose abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 30*, 753–769.
- Jackson, S.L. (2004). A USA national survey of program services provided by child advocacy centers. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 28*, 411–421.
- Keary, K., & Fitzpatrick, C. (1994). Children's disclosure of sexual abuse during formal investigation. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 18*, 543–548.
- Lamb, M.E., Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., & Espin, P.W. (2008). *Tell me what happened. Structured investigative interviews of child victims and witnesses*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- 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*, 255–280.
- Lamb, M.E., Sternberg, K.J., & Esplin, P.W. (1995). Making children into competent witnesses: Reactions to the amicus brief in re Michaels. *Psychology, Public Policy and Law, 1*, 438–449.
- Lamb, M.E., Sternberg, K.J., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., & Esplin, P.W. (1999). Forensic Interviews of Children. In A. Memon & R. Bull (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of interviewing*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- LaRooy, D., Lamb, M.E., & Pipe, M-E. (2009). Repeated interviewing: A critical evaluation of the risks and potential benefits. In K. Kuehnle & M. Connell (Eds.), *The evaluation of child sexual abuse allegations: A comprehensive guide to assessment and treatment* (pp. 327–364). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Myers, J.E.B. (1995). New era of scepticism regarding children's credibility. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 1*, 387–398.
- Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Lamb, M.E., Sternberg, K.J., Esplin, P.W., & Horowitz, D. (2000). Assessing the value of structured protocols for forensic interviews of alleged child abuse victims. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 24*, 733–752.
- Ornstein, P.A., & Haden, C.A. (2002). The development of memory: Toward an understanding of children's testimony. In M.L. Eisen, J.A. Quas, & G.S. Goodman (Eds.), *Memory and suggestibility in the forensic interview* (pp. 29–61). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Poole, D.A., & Lamb, M.E. (1998). *Investigative interviews of children. A guide to helping professionals*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Schuman, J.P., Bala, N., & Lee, K. (1999). Developmentally appropriate questions for child witnesses. *Queen's Law Journal, 25*, 251–302.
- Shepherd, J.P., & Bisson, J.I. (2004). Towards integrated health care: A model for assault victims. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 184*, 3–4.