

---

# How Sexual Abuse Interviews Go Astray: Implications for Prosecutors, Police, and Child Protection Services

James M. Wood

Sena Garven

University of Texas at El Paso

---

*This article argues that child sexual abuse interviews can go astray in two different ways: (a) improper interviewing has the potential to elicit false allegations from children, and (b) clumsy interviewing does not typically produce false allegations, but may have other negative consequences, particularly for child victims. The article clarifies the distinction between the two kinds of bad interviewing and suggests that clumsy interviewing is the more common of the two. The potential negative consequences of both improper and clumsy interviewing are described, along with implications for prosecutors, police, and child protection services. In the authors' opinion, improper interviewing can probably be eliminated rather easily, but clumsy interviewing may be considerably more resistant to change.*

---

A district attorney noted for her vigorous prosecution of child abuse cases recently told us about a meeting with local child protection workers: "I gave them a summary of the Kelly Michaels decision and told them to read it. It was the first sexual abuse case overturned by an appeals court because of bad interviewing. I don't want anything like that happening here."

Like this prosecutor, most professionals involved with child protection now recognize that interviews in sexual abuse cases can sometimes go seriously astray. In several highly publicized cases like that of Kelly Michaels (Bruck & Ceci, 1995; Myers, 1996), prosecutions have foundered or convictions been overturned because of bad interviewing (see summaries in Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Nathan & Snedeker, 1995). The financial expense of these failed cases has been staggering, not to mention the high personal cost to nearly everyone involved, including prosecutors, caseworkers, children, and defendants.

As prosecutors, police, and child protection service (CPS) administrators come to grips with these problems, it may be helpful to distinguish between bad interviews that are improper and those that are simply clumsy. The distinction between improper and clumsy interviewing seems to be a useful one, as we have found over the years in conversations with CPS workers, police, lawyers, academics, and other professionals. In this article, we discuss the possible negative consequences of both improper and clumsy interviewing, along with implications for prosecutors, police, and CPS. In our experience, improper interviewing can probably be eliminated rather easily, but clumsy interviewing may be considerably more resistant to change.

## IMPROPER INTERVIEWING

As we use the term, improper interviewing techniques consist mainly of things that interviewers should not do. Specifically, certain techniques have been widely criticized because they have the potential, either real or perceived, to elicit false allegations from children (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995; Everson, 1997; Myers, 1996; Myers, Saywitz, & Goodman, 1996;

---

Authors' Note: James M. Wood and Sena Garven, Department of Psychology. Sena Garven is now at the Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska at Lincoln. We thank Martha Smithey and Teresa Nezworski for helpful suggestions and questions that contributed to this article. We also thank the anonymous child protective services and police workers who have provided us with information and feedback. Requests for reprints should be sent to James M. Wood, Department of Psychology, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX 79968; e-mail: jwood@miners.utep.edu.

CHILD MALTREATMENT, Vol. 5, No. 2, May 2000 109-118  
© 2000 Sage Publications, Inc.

Reed, 1996). Garven, Wood, Malpass, and Shaw (1998) have suggested that most of these techniques fall into four broad categories: suggestiveness, influence, reinforcement, and removal from direct experience (SIRR).

*Suggestiveness.* This occurs when the interviewer, rather than the child, introduces new information about the topic of concern into an interview. For example, "Did he touch you on the bottom?" would be a highly suggestive question in a sexual abuse interview if the child had not already mentioned inappropriate touching. Many studies have shown that interviewer suggestiveness can reduce the accuracy of children (Cassel, Roebbers, & Bjorklund, 1996; Poole & Lindsay, 1995; see summaries by Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995; Poole & Lamb, 1998). One or two mildly suggestive questions may be necessary to get the ball rolling with some children or focus their attention on a particular abuse-related topic (Home Office, 1992; Jones, 1992; Warren, Woodall, Hunt, & Perry, 1996; Wood, McClure, & Birch, 1996). However, suggestiveness can seriously compromise accuracy when the child is 4 years old or younger, or has been interviewed repeatedly (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995; Garven et al., 1998; Myers et al., 1996).

*Influence.* This category encompasses various techniques that place undue social pressure on a child during an interview. These problematic techniques involve social influence or persuasion (Brewer & Crano, 1994; Cialdini, 1993) and include (a) inducing social conformity by telling the child what other people believe or have said about the topic of concern (Garven et al., 1998; Myers, 1996, p. 218), (b) eliciting obedience to authority by telling the child the interviewer's point of view, and (c) inducing stereotypes by describing an alleged perpetrator in negative terms to the child (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995).

*Reinforcement.* As has long been known, reinforcement in the form of tangible, promised, or implied punishment or reward can have a powerful influence on behavior (Ettinger, Crooks, & Stein, 1994). More specifically, recent research has shown that reinforcement can elicit false allegations of wrongdoing from children during interviews (Garven, Wood, & Malpass, in press; Garven et al., 1998). Several improper interviewing techniques constitute forms of reinforcement (see also Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1995; Myers, 1996, p. 218): (a) praising the child for making allegations; (b) implying that the child can demonstrate helpfulness or intelligence by making allegations; (c) criticizing the child's statements or suggesting that they are false, inaccurate, or otherwise inadequate; (d)

giving tangible rewards (e.g., stickers or food) to reward disclosure; (e) limiting the child's mobility (e.g., delaying a visit to the bathroom or return to home) until he or she has discussed issues of interest to the interviewer; (f) subjecting the child to physically or verbally stressful stimuli during the interview (e.g., calling the child a liar); and (g) repeating a question in a way that suggests the child's first answer was incorrect or otherwise unsatisfactory (Cassel et al., 1996; Poole & White, 1991, 1993; Siegal, Waters, & Dinwiddy, 1988).

*Removal from direct experience.* In forensic interviews with both adults and children, the witness is usually asked to give a direct description of what he or she has observed and experienced. However, some child interviews deviate from this direct format and instead take an oblique or indirect approach to information gathering. Problematic indirect interviewing techniques include (a) inviting the child to speculate about what might have happened, rather than to describe what the child actually observed; (b) encouraging the child to pretend or engage in imaginative play as part of the investigative interview; and (c) interviewing the child using puppets (but see Jones, 1992, p. 40).

Although the SIRR model of Garven et al. (1998) is not the final word on improper interviewing, it provides a helpful organizational framework. Next, we turn to the related but distinct issue of clumsy interviewing.

#### CLUMSY INTERVIEWING

In recent years, many clinical experts and researchers have described basic skills that should be displayed in a child sexual abuse interview (Home Office, 1992; Jones, 1992; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz & Camparo, 1998; Steller & Boychuk, 1992; Warren et al., 1996; Wood et al., 1996; Yuille, Hunter, Joffe, & Zaparniuk, 1993). Skills commonly recommended in books and articles include the following:

1. Make the child feel physically and emotionally comfortable at the beginning of the interview.
2. Convey warmth and interest in the child, both through words and nonverbal cues such as posture, eye contact, and tone of voice.
3. Use simple vocabulary and short sentences, as appropriate to the child's age.
4. Ask open-ended questions in the early interview to encourage the child to give longer, fuller answers in his or her own words.
5. Introduce the topic of concern in as nonsuggestive a way as possible.

6. During the substantive part of the interview, encourage the child to describe what happened in his or her own words, starting at the beginning and continuing to the end.
7. Use open-ended questions as much as possible. If mildly suggestive questions are used to focus the child's attention on a particular topic, follow them up with open-ended questions.
8. Avoid interrupting the child's statement. Save specific questions about details until the later parts of the interview, when the child has finished describing what happened.
9. End the interview by thanking the child and describing what will happen after he or she leaves the interview room. Provide older children with an opportunity to ask questions.

Nearly all experts would agree that the skills listed here are highly desirable in child sexual abuse interviews. A clumsy interview is simply one in which many or all of these skills are missing. Clumsy child interviews seem to be common in police and child protection agencies (Warren et al., 1996; Wood et al., 1996). However, as will be discussed below, even the clumsiest interview is not necessarily improper or likely to elicit false allegations from a child.

#### EFFECTS OF BAD INTERVIEWING ON CHILDREN'S STATEMENTS

In the remainder of this article, improper and clumsy interviewing are treated as two distinct phenomena, with different effects and different remedies within the child protection and legal systems. In fact, the distinction between improper and clumsy is not absolute. For example, suggestive questioning can be both improper and clumsy. However, in our experience, the distinction between these two dimensions can be enlightening and helpful in practical settings.

Wherever possible, we base our discussion on published scientific evidence. Where such evidence is unavailable, however, we draw on our own impressions and experience, and on the reports of other professionals. First, we will discuss the effect of improper interviewing on children's statements in sexual abuse cases. Then, we will turn to the effects of clumsy interviewing.

By definition, improper interviewing techniques have the potential, either real or perceived, to lead children into making false allegations of wrongdoing. For example, the negative effects of suggestiveness, repetitive questioning, stereotype induction, and reinforcement have been well documented in experimental studies (for summaries, see Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995; Garven et al., 1998; Myers et al., 1996; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Reed, 1996).

Other improper techniques have not been studied experimentally, but can be evaluated in light of evidence from the clinic or the courtroom. For example, no study has conclusively demonstrated that children can be led into making false allegations of wrongdoing if an interviewer invites speculation (e.g., What do you think maybe happened?). However, there are several reasons to believe that this technique can lead to false statements from children. First, clinical observation indicates that the technique of inviting speculation can sometimes elicit false statements from children (Everson, 1997, pp. 142-143). Second, the legal system has long harbored doubts about the value of speculative statements. For example, lay witnesses are not generally allowed to speculate or offer opinions in court (Myers, 1992). Third, laboratory research indicates that if individuals are invited to imagine or describe events that did not happen, then false or distorted memories can be created (Ceci, Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994; Hyman & Pentland, 1996). As may be seen, evidence from three separate domains of knowledge (clinical, legal, scientific) suggests that interviewers should avoid inviting children to speculate during sexual abuse interviews.

The effects of improper interviewing techniques have received widespread attention from researchers and clinical experts. Issues relevant to clumsy interviewing have also been studied, particularly in three areas. First, Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney, and Rudy (1991) and Carter, Bottoms, and Levine (1996) have examined the effects of social support in child interviews. Their research indicates that children tend to give more accurate statements when interviewed in a warm, supportive manner. These findings confirm recommendations by experts (e.g., Jones, 1992; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Warren et al., 1996; Wood et al., 1996) and underline the importance of rapport building in child interviews. A second relevant line of research has been pursued by Lamb, Sternberg, and their colleagues (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1997; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996, 1997), who have examined the effects of open-ended versus focused questioning. These researchers have found that children in sexual abuse interviews give longer, more detailed responses to open-ended questions than to focused questions (Hershkowitz et al., 1997; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996). Furthermore, children make more detailed disclosures if the interviewer has used open-ended questions during the early, rapport-building phase of the sexual abuse interview (Sternberg et al., 1997). These findings support recommendations by experts that open-ended questions be used as much as possible in child interviews.

In a third area of research, several studies have documented that children's accuracy and credibility diminish when interviewers use words or sentences above the children's level of comprehension (Perry, McAuliff, Tam, & Claycomb, 1995; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990; Saywitz, Nathanson, & Snyder, 1993; see also discussion by Walker, 1994). These findings support the recommendations of experts that sexual abuse interviewers use language appropriate to the child's developmental level.

As research indicates, clumsy interviewing can affect the accuracy, detail, and quality of a child's disclosure of sexual abuse. Clinical anecdotes also suggest that skillfulness (or lack thereof) may sometimes affect the probability that a disclosure is made at all. For example, in one CPS case we observed, a novice caseworker had unsuccessfully attempted to interview a retarded 13-year-old girl and concluded that the girl "just won't talk." A more skillful interviewer was then called in. Using a blend of kindness, charm, and humor, the second interviewer quickly established rapport with the girl, who freely disclosed sexual abuse by her stepbrother.

Such anecdotes suggest that skillful rapport building may sometimes make the difference between disclosure and nondisclosure. Unfortunately, no published study has examined this issue. One unpublished study with a sample of 1,535 children (Julie Cantlon, personal communication, February 24, 1998) found a small but statistically significant difference in disclosure/report rates (range = 56% to 63%) to seven different interviewers in one agency. Perhaps specific interviewer qualities (e.g., warmth) or skills (e.g., rapport building) encourage disclosure in some cases. The effect may be rather small but merits future study.

#### OTHER EFFECTS OF BAD INTERVIEWING

As we have indicated, research has shown that improper and clumsy interviewing can negatively affect the accuracy or detail of children's statements regarding abuse. However, in our experience, the undesirable effects of bad interviewing can extend much further. First, we will enumerate possible negative consequences of improper interviewing that we have observed.

- Improper interviewing can sometimes cause innocent individuals to be falsely accused or convicted of crimes against children.
- If the child has not been abused but makes false allegations, then he or she may suffer serious and unnecessary stress by being separated from par-

ents or caretakers, or subjected to legal investigations and trials.

- Suggestive interviewing may have the counterproductive effect of lowering the child's credibility in the eyes of adults. For example, in the famous *McMartin* Preschool case, prosecutors failed to obtain any convictions. Jurors afterward stated that the children's credibility had been undermined by suggestive interviewing (Reinhold, 1990; Wilkerson & Rainey, 1990). A recent study by Tubb, Wood, and Hosch (1999) also indicates that adults may find a child's allegations of sexual abuse less convincing if the allegations were elicited by suggestive questioning.
- A true allegation of abuse may be contaminated by falsehood or inaccuracy (Everson, 1997). If an allegation of sexual abuse has been elicited by improper techniques, then the task of sorting out truth from falsehood becomes much more difficult, and the child's credibility may be compromised.
- Resources of child protective services, police, and the legal system may be drained by unsuccessful investigations and trials. It is sobering to reflect that considerable money and time have been expended on criminal prosecutions that ultimately failed or were overturned because of improper interviewing.
- If the limited resources of child protection and legal agencies are drained into unsuccessful or ill-founded cases, then less time and money will be available to help children in cases of genuine abuse.
- Finally, experience has shown that dubious cases involving improper interviewing are sometimes brought to public attention by the media or scholars. Such cases can fuel criticism of the child protection system and damage the reputation of investigators and prosecutors.

As may be seen, improper interviews can have a negative impact on child victims, criminal prosecutions, and the reputation of the child protection system itself. Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, improper interviewing techniques are a matter of concern for child protection administrators, police, and prosecutors, not just for alleged perpetrators and defense attorneys.

In our experience, the negative consequences of clumsy interviewing are not the same as those of improper interviewing. Specifically, if a child is interviewed in a clumsy manner and discloses abuse, then the disclosure will probably be less coherent, detailed, and convincing than it might have been otherwise. Several negative consequences can follow.

- If the child's statement is clumsy, unconvincing, or lacking in detail, then a caseworker or evaluator may be less inclined to judge the disclosure credible (see Faller, 1988).

- If the civil justice system is involved (e.g., in domestic court), judges and attorneys may treat the allegations with more skepticism.
- If the criminal justice system is involved, prosecutors may regard the child as a poor witness and be reluctant to accept the case. Even if the case is accepted for prosecution, a clumsy initial interview, with a piecemeal statement by the child, may become a liability rather than an asset.

Our own experience suggests that the child is probably the biggest loser when clumsy interviewing occurs. A skillful interview may elicit a strong, clear statement of abuse and mobilize powerful forces on a child's behalf. Conversely, a clumsy interview may elicit only a feeble statement and lessen the probability that the child protection or legal system will take strong action.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROSECUTORS

Clearly, both improper and clumsy interviewing are undesirable. But what are the practical implications for professionals who work with abused children? We begin our recommendations by addressing prosecutors, then turn to police and CPS administrators.

First, over the past 10 years, several highly publicized prosecutions have failed or been overturned because of improper interviewing. Prosecutors who wish to avoid costly outcomes of this type should discourage improper interviewing practice within their own jurisdictions.

Second, prosecutors have an interest not only in curbing improper interviewing, but in promoting skillful interviewing. For example, the credibility of a child witness can be increased, and the prosecution's case strengthened, if the initial interview of the child is conducted by a highly skilled interviewer. Thus, the suggestions offered below for police and CPS workers should be of interest to prosecutors as well.

Third, when an interviewer is attacked in court by defense lawyers or experts, the distinction between clumsy and improper can be helpful for rehabilitating the credibility of the interviewer and the interview. As we have described, improper interviewing can increase the probability that a child will make false allegations. However, clumsy interviewing by itself does not usually have such an effect. Thus, if an interviewer is attacked for making errors during an interview, a critical question is whether those errors were improper (i.e., of the type that might lead to false allegations). If an interviewer's errors fall into the clumsy rather than the improper category, they should not be

construed as evidence that the child has been manipulated into making false allegations of abuse.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR CPS AND POLICE

##### *Eliminating Improper Interviewing*

It has been our experience that CPS and police administrators who set out to eliminate improper interviewing within their agencies can often do so rather easily. A small amount of training, combined with minimal supervision of audiotaped or videotaped interviews, can keep the occurrence of improper interviews to a minimum.

*Training.* In our own training sessions, we have noted that most police and caseworkers can quickly be taught to recognize and avoid improper interviewing techniques. In fact, because such training takes less than 2 hours and is intrinsically interesting, it can be presented as an agency in-service, not just to interviewers. We have used the following format.

During the first 5 to 10 minutes, we introduce the topic of improper interviewing by discussing the highly publicized Kelly Michaels and McMartin Preschool cases of the mid-1980s. The interviews in both these cases were widely criticized and the prosecutions ultimately failed. We use these historical examples to illustrate the potential negative consequences of improper interviewing. Information about these cases is available from several scholarly and journalistic sources (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Hicks, 1990; Nathan, 1991; Nathan & Snedeker, 1995; Rabinowitz, 1990; but see Faller, 1996; Manshel, 1990; Summit, 1994).

During the next part of the presentation, which lasts about 45 minutes, the various types of improper interviewing techniques are enumerated and described. The SIRR model provides a helpful way to organize this part of the presentation, particularly if participants are given a written outline. The techniques can be illustrated with examples from the trainer's own experience or from historical cases (e.g., see Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Garven et al., 1998). It can also be helpful to describe some of the more vivid studies on children's suggestibility, such as the Mousetraps, Sam Stone, and Manny Morales studies (see Ceci & Bruck, 1995, pp. 129-132, 218-222; Garven et al., 1998).

During the final part of the presentation, which usually lasts 30 to 45 minutes, two participants role-play extended excerpts from real interviews in which improper techniques were used. First, the two participants read the entire excerpt out loud from beginning to end, with one portraying the child and the other the interviewer. Then, they read the excerpt

again, but pausing so that members of the group can identify precisely which improper technique is being used at a particular spot in the interview. This part of the presentation is enjoyable because participants can actively take part in the exercise and put their new knowledge to use. Trainers may be able to obtain transcripts of improper interviews from the archives of their own agency (with identifying information removed), or by consulting Underwager and Wakefield (1990). Alternatively, the first author of the present article can provide excerpts suitable for training purposes.

*Monitoring interviews.* In our experience, the short presentation that we have just described is effective with the large majority of interviewers. However, a few interviewers may still use improper techniques even after being trained otherwise. Probably the most efficient way to identify such interviewers is to monitor interview tapes or transcripts. Obviously, supervisors cannot monitor all the interviews in their agency. Fortunately, we have the impression that there is often an identifiable pattern in such cases: Improper interviews tend to be conducted (a) by the least experienced interviewers, (b) with the youngest children (5 years and younger), and (c) in interviews that are unusually long for children of that age (i.e., more than 30 minutes). Thus, we suspect that supervisors can probably detect most cases of improper interviewing simply by monitoring those cases in which their newest workers have interviewed preschool children, and by keeping an eye out for unusually long interviews.

It should be remembered that most interviewers easily learn to recognize and avoid improper interviewing techniques. Thus, an interviewer who uses such techniques even after being trained otherwise is behaving in an unusual manner, with potentially serious consequences for the agency. In our experience, interviewers who behave in this way are unlikely to change, even when additional feedback is provided by supervisors. The safest course may be to arrange a transfer to less sensitive positions within the agency.

*Videotaping or audiotaping interviews.* The advantages and disadvantages of taping child sexual abuse interviews have been thoroughly reviewed elsewhere (Davies & Westcott, 1992; McGough, 1994; Myers, 1993). Thus, we will touch only briefly on two issues.

First, unless child interviews are routinely taped, we do not see how prosecutors, CPS, or police will be able to control improper and clumsy interviewing in their jurisdictions. Alternative approaches, such as intensive supervision of interviews through one-way mirrors, are probably not practical or economically feasible in most settings. For obvious reasons, inter-

viewers do not usually recognize the problems with their own interviewing style or report them to supervisors. Thus, taping may be an essential quality control mechanism for supervisors who wish to detect bad interviewing and provide feedback to their workers, or for prosecutors who wish to monitor the actions of frontline workers.

Second, opponents of taping have sometimes argued that defense attorneys will use tapes in court to attack the credibility of child interviewers. However, the historical record shows that such attacks have generally been successful only when interviewing was improper (e.g., the Kelly Michaels case), not when it was simply clumsy. Unless improper interviewing techniques have been used, taping is unlikely to create serious problems for a sexual abuse prosecution.

### *Eliminating Clumsy Interviewing*

In our experience, improper interviewing can be eliminated rather easily by 2-hour in-service presentations and judicious monitoring of interviews. By contrast, clumsy interviewing may be much more difficult to eliminate. For example, in one child protection agency where supervisors had provided training and encouraged good interviewing practice, we found that only about 5% of interviews were clearly improper, whereas 50% to 75% were still clearly clumsy. Although improper interviewing has received the most attention from scholars and journalists, clumsy interviewing is probably much more common (Warren et al., 1996; Wood et al., 1996). And as we have argued above, the child victim is the most likely loser.

At the present time in the United States, the training of police and CPS child interviewers usually seems to take one of three forms, all problematic. First, a substantial number of interviewers are given little more than informal on-the-job training. After receiving brief verbal instructions from a coworker and observing one or two interviews, new workers may start conducting interviews themselves. Such training tends to be incomplete and out of date. Furthermore, the more experienced interviewer who serves as a model may have serious deficits in skill and knowledge.

Second, many interviewers receive brief (i.e., 6 hours or less) formal training, often as part of a more general orientation program. For example, we are acquainted with one police department where all new members receive 1 day of training regarding child abuse, including 2 hours on interviewing. The difficulty, of course, is that 2 hours is much too short a time to learn and practice the skills required for child interviewing.

Third, some jurisdictions provide more extensive interviewer training, in workshops that last 2 or 3 full days. These workshops may be given by trainers within the agency, or by prominent outside experts who are brought in under special contract. Such workshops tend to be more up-to-date and thorough than the other forms of training we have discussed, and typically involve extensive role-playing of relevant skills. However, research indicates that, by themselves, workshops of this type may not be very effective at teaching new interviewing skills (Aldridge, 1992, pp. 235-238; Memon, Bull, & Smith, 1995; Memon, Holley, Milne, Koehnken, & Bull, 1994; Stevenson, Leung, & Cheung, 1992). Interviewers may go home from workshops believing that they have learned new skills, but then continue to conduct interviews in the same way as they did before. As we will discuss below, there may be ways to encourage interviewers to transfer the skills they have learned from workshops.

The sad fact is that there is presently no empirically proven, economically practical method for turning the average police detective or CPS caseworker into a skillful child interviewer. This does not mean that current methods are totally ineffective or that no better approach will ever be found. In fact, the remainder of this article describes some strategies that seem promising. Some of the strategies are incompatible with each other, whereas others can be combined into a single approach. CPS and police supervisors can decide which ideas, if any, are appropriate for their own agency (for further ideas and suggestions, see Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wood et al., 1996).

*Internships for interviewers.* Mental health professionals learn most clinical skills in two stages. First, formal classroom instruction is provided: The student learns through lectures, assigned reading, and elementary practice of the relevant skills. Second, an internship experience is provided: The student practices the skills in a real-world setting, with close supervision and feedback from a qualified professional.

At present, it appears that very few child interviewers have been trained using this two-stage process. The 2- or 3-day workshops described above provide something similar to formal classroom instruction. However, once caseworkers or police have completed a workshop, there is often no internship to monitor their performance and provide feedback. As we have indicated, such workshop training may be insufficient by itself.

The problem might be solved, at least in part, if interviewers went through a simple internship after completing workshop training. For example, they might be asked to submit tapes or transcripts of their

first 10 interviews to a supervisor or other qualified expert, who would provide brief written or verbal feedback. Of course, the success of this approach would depend on the knowledge level and conscientiousness of the supervisor. However, even if feedback consisted of only two comments per interview, we suspect that many interviewers would greatly benefit from this internship experience. In addition, this approach would allow the early identification of interviewers who are poorly suited to the job.

*Interviewing specialists.* In some police and CPS agencies, the detective or worker in charge of a case does not usually interview the child, but instead turns that job over to a specialist who is supposed to be especially well-trained and proficient at child interviewing. Similarly, in many communities around the United States, suspected child victims are taken to a safe house or child advocacy center to be questioned by an interviewing specialist.

In our experience, such interviewing specialists are not always as skillful or well informed as might be hoped. Nevertheless, the idea of designating certain workers as specialists and letting them conduct all or most of the interviews in an agency seems to have considerable merit. Many CPS agencies have high worker turnover. In addition, both CPS and police agencies lack adequate resources to provide every investigator with interview training. Even if available, such training may be ineffective. In light of these problems, perhaps the most effective and economical approach is to select specialists to handle the interviewing for all cases within the CPS or police agency. Of course, if such a system is to work, specialists must be well trained, with knowledge and skills that are truly above average and up to date.

*Formal university training.* Child sexual abuse investigation did not become widely regarded as an important professional skill until the 1980s. Perhaps because the field is relatively new, it still does not receive much attention in most university training programs for social workers, psychologists, and police. Instead, child protection and police agencies have had the responsibility of providing training themselves.

In the future, however, this situation may change. For example, perhaps the day is not far off when most social work and criminal justice programs offer undergraduate or graduate courses on "Child Abuse: Background Information and Investigation" or "Child and Adult Interviewing." Programs offering such courses could simultaneously provide their students with valuable skills and lessen the burden of

training for law enforcement and social service agencies.

*Structured interviews.* Recently, the interesting suggestion has been made that police and caseworkers might use structured interviews to question children in abuse cases (Sternberg et al., 1997). In a structured approach, the interviewer follows a narrowly defined format or script. For example, Sternberg and her colleagues (1997, pp. 1145-1146) have recently published a structured approach that specifies the precise questions a child should be asked during rapport building at the beginning of an interview.

The idea of structured interviews is actually much more workable and attractive than might appear at first glance. First, similar structured approaches have been used very successfully in mental health treatment settings over the past twenty years. For example, the Structured Clinical Interview for the *DSM-III-R* is now widely accepted as a tool for diagnosing psychiatric disorders (Rogers, 1995; Spitzer, Williams, Gibbon, & First, 1990). Similarly, several manualized treatments for psychological disorders have achieved notable success (Barlow & Cerny, 1988; DeRubeis & Crits-Christoph, 1998; Kazdin & Weisz, 1998).

As a second attraction, training for structured approaches is usually simpler than for other approaches. A third attraction is that structured interviews provide a standardized cookbook approach to interviewing, and so leave less room for the mistakes and idiosyncracies of individual interviewers. In a forensic setting, an interviewer would be largely immune to criticism if he or she had used a well-accepted structured interview format.

At present, structured child forensic interviews are still in the formative stage (see Lamb et al., 1998, p. 817; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Once developed, present versions will still need to be tested and revised. However, well-designed structured interviews will gradually become available over the next 5 years, and may prove highly useful to some police and child protection agencies.

*Models of good interviewing.* Not long ago, a CPS trainer asked us for examples of skillful child interviewing. After a long search, we could locate only one published interview of high quality (Steller & Boychuk, 1992, pp. 57-61). Currently, there are many more published examples of bad interviews (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Underwager & Wakefield, 1990) than good ones. In the future, we hope that numerous examples of good interviewing will be published, with a variety of children from different ages and back-

grounds. Such role models would be of great use in training CPS and police interviewers.

*Personnel selection.* The discussion thus far has focused on improved methods for training child interviewers. In closing, we would like to turn to an equally important but generally neglected subject, the criteria for selecting child interviewers. In both police and CPS settings, we have sometimes encountered interviewers who appear to have little natural aptitude for their job, lacking the warmth, flexibility, and liking for children that are required for successful interviewing. Below we list and briefly discuss the qualities that we think are most important in child interviewers. We hope that CPS and police supervisors will keep these qualities in mind when selecting child interviewers.

- Personal warmth, friendliness, and tact. The ability to establish and maintain rapport, even under difficult circumstances, may be the single most important quality in a sexual abuse interviewer. Individuals who are irritable, unexpressive, or awkward in social interactions are not well suited to the job.
- Demonstrated ability to work with children. A surprisingly large number of interviewers have no experience working with children, and lack basic skills for managing or talking with them. Interviewers are preferable who have previous experience in child care or teaching.
- Previous formal training in counseling or interviewing. Many skills required for interviewing are the same as those required for counseling. In our experience, workers who have already taken basic counseling courses have a big head start when learning to interview children.
- Ability to change in response to feedback. Workers who disregard feedback or respond defensively are unlikely to respond well to the intensive training required for good interviewers.
- A master's degree or above-average academic performance as an undergraduate. As we have indicated, child interviewing is a complex field in a process of rapid development. Individuals who are bright and well educated will be better prepared to understand new developments and adapt to them.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the field of child sexual abuse investigation and interviewing is very new, so that professional knowledge and institutions are still growing and changing. The present article reflects current realities and offers suggestions for the next few years. However, new information and needs are sure to appear before long. The most appropriate attitude for prosecutors, police, and CPS administrators is one of flexibility and openness.

## REFERENCES

- Aldridge, J. (1992). The further training of professionals dealing with child witnesses. In H. Dent & R. Flin (Eds.), *Children as witnesses* (pp. 231-244). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Barlow, D. H., & Cerny, J. A. (1988). *Psychological treatment of panic*. New York: Guilford.
- Brewer, M. B., & Crano, W. D. (1994). *Social psychology*. Minneapolis, MN: Western.
- Bruck, M., & Ceci, S. J. (1995). Amicus brief for the case of State of New Jersey v. Michaels presented by Committee of Concerned Social Scientists. *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law, 1*, 272-322.
- Carter, C., Bottoms, B., & Levine, M. (1996). Linguistic and socio-emotional influences on the accuracy of children's reports. *Law and Human Behavior, 20*, 335-358.
- Cassel, W. S., Roebbers, C.E.M., & Bjorklund, D. F. (1996). Developmental patterns of eyewitness responses to repeated and increasingly suggestive questions. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 61*, 116-133.
- Ceci, S. J., & Bruck, M. (1993). Suggestibility of the child witness: A historical review and synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 113*, 403-439.
- Ceci, S. J., & Bruck, M. (1995). *Jeopardy in the courtroom*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ceci, S. J., Huffman, M.L.C., Smith, E., & Loftus, E. F. (1994). Repeatedly thinking about a non-event: Source misattributions among preschoolers. *Consciousness and Cognition, 3*, 388-407.
- Cialdini, R. B. (1993). *Influence: Science and practice*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Davies, G., & Westcott, H. (1992). Videotechnology and the child witness. In H. Dent & R. Flin (Eds.), *Children as witnesses* (pp. 211-229). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- DeRubeis, R. J., & Crits-Christoph, P. (1998). Empirically supported individual and group psychological treatments for adult mental disorders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*, 37-52.
- Ettinger, R. H., Crooks, R. L., & Stein, J. (1994). *Psychology: Science, behavior, and life*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Everson, M. D. (1997). Understanding bizarre, improbable, and fantastic elements in children's accounts of abuse. *Child Maltreatment, 2*, 134-149.
- Faller, K. C. (1988). Criteria for judging the credibility of children's statements about their sexual abuse. *Child Welfare, 67*, 389-401.
- Faller, K. C. (1996). Interviewing children who may have been abused: A historical perspective and overview of controversies. *Child Maltreatment, 1*, 83-95.
- Garven, S., Wood, J. M., & Malpass, R. S. (in press). Allegations of wrongdoing: The effect of reinforcement on children's mundane and fantastic claims. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Garven, S., Wood, J. M., Malpass, R. S., & Shaw, J. S. (1998). More than suggestion: The effect of interviewing techniques from the McMartin Preschool case. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*, 347-359.
- Goodman, G. S., Bottoms, B. L., Schwartz-Kenney, B. M., & Rudy, L. (1991). Children's testimony about a stressful event: Improving children's reports. *Journal of Narrative and Life History, 1*, 69-99.
- Hershkowitz, I., Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., & Esplin, P. W. (1997). The relationships among interviewer utterance type, CBA scores, and the richness of children's responses. *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 2*, 169-176.
- Hicks, R. D. (1990). *In pursuit of Satan*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Home Office. (1992). *Memorandum of good practice on video recorded interviews with child witnesses for criminal proceedings*. London: HMSO.
- Hyman, I. E., & Pentland, J. (1996). The role of mental imagery in the creation of false childhood memories. *Journal of Memory and Language, 35*, 101-117.
- Jones, D.P.H. (1992). *Interviewing the sexually abused child* (4th ed.). London: Gaskell.
- Kazdin, A. E., & Weisz, J. R. (1998). Identifying and developing empirically supported child and adolescent treatments. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*, 19-36.
- Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., Hovav, M., Manor, T., & Yudilevitch, L. (1996). Effects of investigative utterance types on Israeli children's responses. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 19*, 627-637.
- 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., & Esplin, P. W. (1998). Conducting investigative interviews of alleged sexual abuse victims. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 22*, 813-823.
- Leichtman, M. D., & Ceci, S. J. (1995). The effects of stereotypes and suggestions on preschoolers' reports. *Developmental Psychology, 31*, 568-578.
- Manshel, L. (1990). *Nap time*. New York: William Morrow.
- McGough, L. S. (1994). *Child witnesses: Fragile voices in the American legal system*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Memon, A., Bull, R., & Smith, M. (1995). Improving the quality of the police interview: Can training in the use of cognitive techniques help? *Policing and Society, 5*, 53-68.
- Memon, A., Holley, A., Milne, R., Koehnken, G., & Bull, R. (1994). Towards understanding the effects of interviewer training in evaluating the cognitive interview. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 8*, 641-659.
- Myers, J.E.B. (1992). *Legal issues in child abuse and neglect*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Myers, J.E.B. (1993). Investigative interviews of children: Should they be videotaped? *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy, 7*, 371-386.
- Myers, J.E.B. (1996). Taint hearings to attack investigative interviews: A further assault on children's credibility. *Child Maltreatment, 1*, 213-222.
- Myers, J.E.B., Saywitz, K. J., & Goodman, G. S. (1996). Psychological research on children as witnesses: Practical implications for forensic interviews and courtroom testimony. *Pacific Law Journal, 28*, 3-91.
- Nathan, D. (1991). *Women and other aliens*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos.
- Nathan, D., & Snedeker, M. (1995). *Satan's silence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Perry, N., McAuliff, B., Tam, P., & Claycomb, L. (1995). When lawyers question children: Is justice served? *Law and Human Behavior, 19*, 609-629.
- Poole, D. A., & Lamb, M. E. (1998). *Investigative Interviews of Children: A Guide for Helping Professionals*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Poole, D. A., & Lindsay, D. S. (1995). Interviewing preschoolers: Effects of non-suggestive techniques, parental coaching and leading questions on reports of nonexperienced events. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 60*, 129-154.
- Poole, D. A., & White, L. (1991). Effects of question repetition on the eyewitness testimony of children and adults. *Developmental Psychology, 27*, 975-986.
- Poole, D. A., & White, L. (1993). Two years later: Effects of question repetition on the eyewitness testimony of children and adults. *Developmental Psychology, 29*, 844-853.
- Rabinowitz, D. (1990, May). From the mouths of babes to a jail cell. *Harper's Magazine*, 52-63.
- Reed, L. D. (1996). Findings from research on children's suggestibility and implications for conducting child interviews. *Child Maltreatment, 1*, 105-120.
- Reinhold, R. (1990, January 25). How lawyers and media turned the McMartin case into a tragic media circus. *New York Times*, p. 1D.
- Rogers, R. (1995). *Diagnostic and structured interviewing: A handbook for psychologists*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Saywitz, K., & Camparo, L. (1998). Interviewing child witnesses: A developmental perspective. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 22*, 825-843.
- Saywitz, K., Jaenicke, C., & Camparo, L. (1990). Children's knowledge of legal terminology. *Law and Human Behavior, 14*, 523-535.
- Saywitz, K., Nathanson, R., & Snyder, L. (1993). Credibility of child witnesses: The role of communicative competence. *Topics in Language Disorders, 13*, 59-78.

- Siegal, M., Waters, L. J., & Dinwiddy, L. S. (1988). Misleading children: Causal attributions for inconsistency under repeated questioning. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 45*, 438-456.
- Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J.B.W., Gibbon, M., & First, M. B. (1990). *User's guide for the structured clinical interview for DSM-III-R*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Steller, M., & Boychuk, T. (1992). Children as witnesses in sexual abuse cases: Investigative interview and assessment techniques. In H. Dent & R. Flin (Eds.), *Children as witnesses* (pp. 47-71). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P. W., Redlich, A., & Sunshine, N. (1996). The relationship between investigative utterance types and the informativeness of child witnesses. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 17*, 439-451.
- Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Yudilevitch, L., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W., & Hovav, M. (1997). Effects of introductory style on child abilities to describe experiences of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 21*, 1133-1146.
- Stevenson, K. M., Leung, P., & Cheung, K. M. (1992). Competency-based evaluation of interviewing skills in child sexual abuse cases. *Social Work Research & Abstracts, 28*, 11-16.
- Summit, R. C. (1994). The dark tunnels of McMartin. *Journal of Psychohistory, 21*, 397-416.
- Tubb, V. A., Wood, J. M., & Hosch, H. M. (1999). Effects of suggestive interviewing and indirect evidence on child credibility in a sexual abuse case. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 29*, 1111-1127.
- Underwager, R., & Wakefield, H. (1990). *The real world of child interrogations*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Walker, A. (1994). *Handbook on questioning children: A linguistic perspective*. Washington, DC: American Bar Association.
- Warren, A. R., Woodall, C. E., Hunt, J. S., & Perry, N. W. (1996). "It sounds good in theory, but . . .": Do investigative interviewers follow guidelines based on memory research? *Child Maltreatment, 1*, 231-245.
- Wilkerson, T., & Rainey, J. (1990, January 19). Tapes of children decided the case for most jurors. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A1.
- Wood, J. M., McClure, K. A., & Birch, R. A. (1996). Suggestions for improving interviews in child protection agencies. *Child Maltreatment, 1*, 223-230.
- Yuille, J. C., Hunter, R., Joffe, R., & Zaparniuk, J. (1993). Interviewing children in sexual abuse cases. In G. S. Goodman & B. L. Bottoms (Eds.), *Child victims, child witnesses* (pp. 95-115). New York: Guilford.

*James M. Wood, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Texas at El Paso, and a consulting editor for Child Maltreatment.*

*Sena Garven, M.A., is a doctoral student in the Law and Psychology program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*