

[5 yr olds & the truth - study into false sexual abuse stories](#)

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GROUND-BREAKING New Zealand research indicating that many children fabricate stories of sexual abuse when questioned by adults is currently before an international forum in Paris.

The Law Society-funded research, by mainstream Hamilton psychologist Jane Rawls, received publicity when she presented her findings to the society's conference in Dunedin.

She told how a team of lawyers, police and psychologists got an unpleasant surprise when they assessed a study group of 30 five-year-olds: seven of them reported they had been sexually abused.

But, in spite of this, a near-absolute trust in the child persists among many abuse workers, and men in particular still get convicted on the uncorroborated evidence of children.

All 30 had been in the care of one man. The seven told of incidents of genital touching, the man putting his hands under their upper clothing, of him touching their bottoms, and of him making them touch his.

The revelations were a particularly unpleasant surprise because the team assessing the children knew there had been no sexual abuse. The children had invented every supposed incident. Every moment the man – a research assistant – had spent with the children had been videoed.

The children had been taking part in what was intended as a routine study into the nature of children's disclosures under questioning.

Dr Rawls completed her masters degree in psychology and post-graduate diploma in clinical psychology at Waikato University, and a doctorate in developmental and child psychology (in the area of children's testimony) at the University of Kansas in the United States. She has a private practice as a child and clinical psychologist in Hamilton, and serves as a specialist report writer for the Family Court and consulting expert witness in the High Court.

Dr Rawls says she was amazed at what the study showed.

And the results could easily have been worse. Depending on the way questions were asked, the children's total accuracy of recall about a variety of situations at their first set of interviews ranged from 13 per cent to nil.

For some of the children, these errors seemed relatively harmless, including "climbing ladders, going to other rooms, having other children present, wearing elaborate costumes and tickling with feathers".

What was especially frightening was that errors appeared to evolve over time with repeated interviews and, for many, were first reported when diagrams of body parts were used.

The belief that children don't lie – or get it wrong – when making allegations of sexual abuse has been shaken internationally by several much-publicised examples of wrongful arrest and imprisonment.

But, in spite of this, a near-absolute trust in the child persists among many abuse workers, and men in particular still get convicted on the uncorroborated evidence of children.

This is despite growing calls for evidential confirmation to be mandatory before claims are believed.

The trust-the-child theory holds that children don't lie to get someone into trouble, only to get out of trouble. And that on the rare occasions they do make false allegations, the real truth will come out during interviewing procedures.

The research by Dr Rawls, finding that responses to questions are often wrong and that many invent stories of inappropriate touching, has further thrown in doubt the wisdom of acting on child claims without corroborative evidence.

The research, reported at this year's Law Society conference and the subject of seminars in Hamilton and Auckland, has been criticised by the Children and Young Persons' Service (CYPS) for its methodology and lack of "rigour".

But Dr Rawls, in Europe on the eve of presenting her research to a Nato conference in Paris, insists that her methodology was well thought through. She says she is willing to have her work critically evaluated "by those with a thorough understanding and experience in research methodologies". Dr Rawls points out she was not trying to replicate or assess CYPS procedures: the research results, she says, were "an unhappy surprise" to herself and her research assistants.

Interview questions were either closed ("Did he touch you on the . . ."), open ("What happened?") or a mixture of the two forms of questions. The ones who got it most wrong, the study found, were the children who were asked closed questions.

The children participated in a series of four videotaped and observed sessions in which a male adult – a research assistant called Trevor – played a dressing-up game with the child.

The sessions involved small amounts of “appropriate” touching when items such as hats and jewellery were put on or taken off each other, and sometimes required the child to keep secret an additional minor (benign) event.

A body parts’ diagram, similar to those used in evidential interviews, was introduced into the second interview as a prop to make the children’s reporting easier for them.

When children were interviewed for the first time about the initial dress-up session, open questions resulted in an average accuracy of 32 per cent correct, compared with the mixed questions (20 per cent) and closed questions (9 per cent).

Questions about the last dress-up produced accuracy levels for open questions of 13 per cent, mixed 4 per cent, and closed 0 per cent.

According to Dr Rawls, the results with closed questions were of particular concern because errors “seemed to evolve” over time with repeated interviews.

And, for many, they were first reported when body parts’ diagrams were used in the second interviews.

Nearly one-quarter of the total sample (24 per cent) reported inappropriate adult-child touching, though there had been none. Three reported genital touching, two of these also referring to touching under their upper clothes. Two more children reported that the adult either touched their bottom or they touched the adult’s bottom, while two others reported mutual touching under clothing.

The accuracy of children’s diagram markings to illustrate touching was also found to be substantially inaccurate.

When “secrets” were programmed for each child, none volunteered to tell them.

But when specifically asked about them, 23 per cent always declined to “disclose”, 27 per cent sometimes described them accurately and sometimes didn’t “disclose”, 20 per cent consistently provided accurate accounts, 10 per cent gave some true and some false accounts, and 3 per cent, either no account or a false one.

Seventeen per cent described fictional unprogrammed events that included inappropriate touching and said they were the “secrets”.

Dr Rawls also found that only 40 per cent of the five-year-old sample could, after varying degrees of exposure to examples, provide an acceptable definition of truth, lies and promises.

Mary Dawson, managing psychologist at South Auckland’s CYPS specialist services, has responded by saying that artificial interviewing departs from accepted interviewing procedures.

Questioning children about a non-threatening series of “dressing-up games”, she said, was very different from interviewing for clarification of statements already made which had been assessed as strongly indicating the possibility of abuse.

The purpose of the evidential interview, she said, was to clarify abuse details: generalisation from experimental findings involving recall of non-threatening events “cannot be safely applied to children’s recall of traumatic events”.

The responses Dr Rawls gleaned from the use of body diagrams illustrated “the danger of a non-trained interviewer failing to follow proper guidelines”, Dr Dawson said. It was “of grave concern” that Dr Rawls did not specify exactly what type of questions or their exact wording were used in her research.

Of further concern, she said, was that Dr Rawls did not appear to have consulted expert knowledge of the service’s evidential interviewers when setting up her research.

Nor had she checked with the service whether any of the child subjects had been known for any previous concerns relating to the possibility of sexual-abuse victimisation.

Speaking from Athens, Dr Rawls defended her research credentials. Every effort had been made to meet obvious ethical requirements, she said.

“I have been, and continue to be, interested in the effects of interview questioning on the accuracy of children’s answers, regardless of the subject or focus of the interview, and have been trained in interviewing as a clinical psychologist, have researched in this area since 1990, and have evaluated videotaped evidential interviews as part of my work.

“The Family and High Courts in New Zealand have accepted this expertise even though I have not attended any of the evidential training workshops run by CYPS.

“This research did not aim to assess evidential interviewing procedures. If, however, my research is of some use to them then that would be a welcome and positive outcome, especially as there has been no other research that I know of that has produced data on the effects of body parts’ diagrams on children’s reports.”

Dr Rawls also questioned why Dr Dawson, who had attended one of her seminars, had not raised her concerns earlier.

“My intention is not to work against the efforts of CYPS interviewers because I, like them, am concerned about child welfare. I fear that message is getting lost.”

<http://www.articlesaboutmen.com/2010/07/5-yr-olds-the-truth-study-into-false-sexual-abuse-stories-911/>