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Drawings in Forensic Interviews of Children

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Forensic interviews and interview protocols are increasingly incorporating anatomical dolls, anatomical diagrams and/or drawings, as methods of enhancing a child's disclosure. Various types of drawings can be used by the child, the interviewer or both at various stages of the interview process. Drawings are helpful for a variety of reasons, including assessment, investigation and potential prosecution. This article suggests several reasons to use drawings in forensic interviews, several types of drawings that may be helpful, and uses for drawings that would be inappropriate in a forensic setting.

Use of drawings in forensic interviews

Establishing comfort: Drawings may be used initially to build rapport, and throughout the interview to establish comfort for the child. Gross and Hayne report that "drawings may reduce the perceived social demands of the interview. That is, children asked to draw may simply feel more comfortable than children merely asked to tell; this increased comfort level, in turn, may facilitate children's ability to talk about the target event."3

Clarification: Drawings may be used as a tool to clarify all or some of a child's verbal disclosure, which may promote understanding between the child and interviewer. For example, a child may disclose multiple incidents occurring in different rooms or levels of a building. Having a child draw the layout of the location he or she is describing may provide the interviewer with a clearer picture of that child's experience.

Enhancing recall of detail: There is evidence that children who have the opportunity to draw in conjunction with verbalizing their experiences report significantly more information.4 In a study with 3-6 year olds, the children who were given the opportunity to draw and tell about their own

emotional experiences reported more than twice as much information as children asked to tell only.5

Prodding memory: Drawings may help to facilitate disclosure of sexual abuse by helping a child move closer to the abusive event.6 Gross and Hayne hypothesize that drawing may allow the child to generate more of his or her own specific retrieval cues, which facilitates a verbal report.7 Said another way, drawing one aspect of a particular event may remind children about other aspects of the same event.

Reducing intensity: Describing an abusive event may be an intense experience for a person of any age. This feeling of intensity and pressure may be magnified for a child in a small room, talking to someone whom he or she does not know. A flip chart or pad of paper provides another focus for the child's eyes and an outlet for potentially intense feelings. Drawing, rather than verbalizing, certain details of an experience may also remove some of this pressure.8

Documentation: Some types of drawings can serve as an immediate reference for both the interviewer and the child. For example, if the child is describing key players in his or her experience, such as family members or abusers, a simple face picture, along with a name, can help the interviewer and child remember who has been discussed. Other techniques, such as lines or boxes to differentiate residences, can also be useful.

Refocusing the child: It may be difficult to focus small children, even for relatively short periods of time. Drawing engages children in a quiet, interactive activity, thereby allowing the interviewer time to ask additional investigative questions. If children become increasingly active or disengaged in the interview process, refocusing them to the drawing surface may return their attention to the task at hand.

Evidence: In cases of physical or sexual abuse, the child is invariably the only witness to the crime.9 Any drawing made by the child during disclosure can potentially be used for evidentiary purposes in court.10 For example, a child may draw a sexually abusive act, indicating it as something that happened to him or her. Drawings may be less graphic and still have corroborative significance. For example, if a child draws the setup of the room where the child says the abuse occurred, that picture, along with a photograph of the crime scene, could act as a piece of evidence

to corroborate the child's disclosure.

As stated in the American Bar Association's *Guidelines for Fair Treatment of a Child Witness*, "The child should be permitted to use anatomically correct dolls and drawings during his or her testimony."11 Since the forensic interview can be viewed as an extension of the child's testimony, drawings should be actively considered in the interview setting as well.

Types of drawings used in forensic interviews

Child's face picture: During the initial or rapport building stage of an interview, the interviewer can draw a picture of the child's face, perhaps in conjunction with the child. This allows the interviewer time to talk with the child and assess the child's verbal and cognitive abilities, while establishing comfort. A picture of the child's face also lets the child know that he or she is the most important person in the interview room.

Other family/face circles: A discussion of the child's family or caregivers may help an interviewer identify key individuals in the child's life, which may be useful if the child discloses an abusive event. A genogram (or a modification of such a tool) can provide a visual reference when discussing the child's family. Additional information about friends, perpetrators or others may be added throughout the interview. Children may point to these drawings to clarify individuals or reduce intensity.

Pets: Drawing a child's pets can be a useful technique for building rapport with children. In some situations, animals may be a factor in the abuse, for example, if a perpetrator threatened to harm a pet if the child told of his or her experience.

Anatomy identification: Printed anatomical diagrams are commonly used in forensic interviews to identify body parts. Some forensic interviewers prefer to draw pictures of human figures, using these to elicit the child's names for body parts. Such drawings may also be used with children who are reluctant to say the word of the part that was touched.

Crime scene: Children's depictions of crime scenes can be helpful in many ways, including clarifying a child's disclosure, enhancing the recall of detail, prodding the child's memory and providing evidence for potential prosecution. The child's ability to create a helpful crime scene

drawing will vary by developmental level.

Instruments used: If a child describes being abused by certain instruments, or if he or she describes creams, jellies or other aids, it can be useful to have the child draw a picture of what these implements looked like and/or where they were kept. Again, the child's ability to do this will vary depending on developmental level.

Inappropriate uses of drawings in forensic interviews

Therapy: Although drawings are commonly used in the therapeutic treatment of sexually abused children, it must remain clear that a forensic interview differs in function, purpose and scope from a therapeutic session. Any interpretation of children's artwork must remain in a therapeutic setting and handled by a practitioner specifically trained in art therapy and issues of sexual abuse.

Independently for evaluation: In the absence of a verbal disclosure or other factors, it is inappropriate to use a child's drawings in a forensic interview to diagnose a child as having been or not been sexually abused. Drawings should be seen as one of many forensic interviewing tools to be used in combination with other techniques.

Fantasy: It is important to focus the child in the realm of reality whenever possible. Admittedly, this can be difficult when dealing with the creative minds of young children. When asking children to draw, interviewers should avoid using words like "play," "pretend," "make-believe" or "imagine." If children use such terms they should be redirected, with the interviewer saying something such as, "we only talk here about what really happened."

Conclusion

Drawings should be viewed as one of many tools that can be considered during the forensic interview. While drawings can be an integral part of a competent and comprehensive interview, they can also be detrimental if used in ways that impede or distract a child from other forms of communication, or in leading or suggestive ways that threaten the validity of the child's disclosure. Interviewers must fully understand the benefits and limitations of drawings so they can defend their interview methods in court.

Drawings in a forensic interview should be facilitated by a trained child abuse professional who is both comfortable and familiar with their

purpose and function. Training programs such as Finding Words™, by the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse12 and CornerHouse,13 teach appropriate uses of drawings in forensic interviews. Finding Words™ training is available at the national level and at the state level in South Carolina, Mississippi, Indiana and New Jersey. State programs will also be available this year in Georgia and Missouri, and by 2004, in West Virginia, Maryland and Illinois. If you are interested in establishing a Finding Words™ course in your state, contact the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse at (703) 549-4253.

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3 Gross, J., & Hayne, H. (1998). Drawing facilitates children's verbal reports of emotionally laden events. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 174.
4 Gross, supra note 3.
5 Gross, supra note 3.
6 Faller, K. (1988). Child sexual abuse: An interdisciplinary manual for diagnosis, case management and treatment. New York: Columbia University Press, 166.
7 Gross, supra note 3.
8 Burgess, A.W., McCausland, M.P., & Wolbert, W.A. (1981). Children's drawings as indicators of sexual trauma. Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, 19(2), 50-58.
9 Gross, J. & Hayne, H. (1999). The effect of drawing on children's interview performance over long delays. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 5, 265-283.
10 Burgess, McCausland & Wolbert (1981); Kelley , S.J. (1984). The use of art therapy with the sexually abused child. Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, 22(12), 12-18; Cohen-Liebman, M.S, (1995). Drawings as judiciary aids in child sexual abuse litigation: A composite list of indicators, The Arts in Psychotherapy, 22(5), 475-483.
11 American Bar Association (1985). Criminal Justice Policy, Guidelines for Fair Treatment [online]. Although the guidelines use the term "drawings," they may be referring to anatomical diagrams, which are simply outline drawings of nude people at various stages of development and can be used as an interview aid. See Lori S. Holmes and Martha J. Finnegan, The Use of Anatomical Dolls in Child Sexual Abuse Forensic Interviews, 15 (5) Update 2002. If, however, a created document such as a diagram is an acceptable forensic interview aid, then certainly a drawing created during an interview, perhaps entirely by the child, should also be acceptable.

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