

Recalling sexual abuse at the age of 3-7

Children of this age at increased risk

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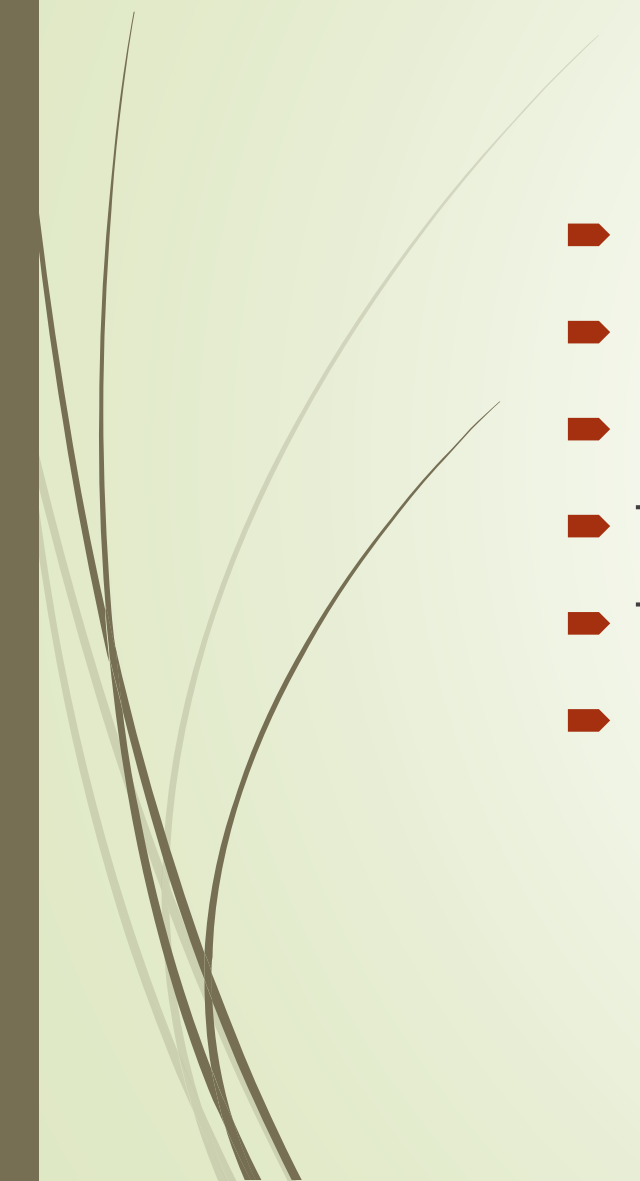


Some statistics from my cases

- ▶ 2004-2022 I had **124** child sexual abuse cases. Most of them forensic examinations ordered by police , some of them therapy
- ▶ Cases of the chosen age group **50**
- ▶ **The narratives are called text corpora** (irregular plural of corpus)they are base of my Ph.D.



Interdisciplinary fields needed

- Developmental psychology
 - Linguistics
 - Psycho-linguistics
 - Trauma psychology
 - The psychology of remembering
 - Experience in child therapy
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Recalling sexual abuse at the age of 3-7

- **Basic situation:** forensic examination to make a report
- Setting: One occasion. Time: One hour
- Exploration 25 minutes max (attention limit)
- Task: 1, make a good rapport
 2. getting information in the given topic (Sexual abuse)
- Suspected time of abuse (it can be one day or a year)
- **Basic principles:** The child is able to make a narrative from the age of 3
- Every child's linguistic-cognitive development is individual (socioeconomic status, ethnic group. etc.)



Basic issues

- Big differences in language development. A child of 5-7 years seemingly in possession of the language, but **NO**
- Concrete thinking "What does this picture tell you?" - confusion until the age of 6-7
- A child at this age is not capable of giving a complex, coherent report,
- **especially in an abuse issue!**
- Cohesion = explicit and local interconnection
- Coherency = an interconnection based on knowledge base
- **Inconsistency in language does not weaken the witness report's credibility**

Let us see a table about children's capacity to recall the abuse

Source: Barnahus (The Iceland method)

	Who did it?	What happened?	Where?	How?	When?	How often?	Chronology
3,5							
3,5-5							
5-7							
7-8							
8-11							
11+							



Basic principles concerning the use of language

- ▶ Words that refer to time: yesterday **Be careful!**
- ▶ **Avoid** using abstract (higher category) ideas (E.g. clothing, touch, hurting)
- ▶ The use of „before” and „after” could be confusing,
- ▶ **Avoid** obscure or double meaning language parts (humor, joke, sarcasm)
- ▶ **Children don't understand it and get confused!**



Basic principles concerning the use of language

- ▶ Question-answer: It is not a real dialogue
- ▶ Hierarchic relationship between the questioner and the child
- ▶ Adult and child
- ▶ The intimate topic
- ▶ The stake of the dialogue, physical and emotional surrounding
- ▶ A child is inclined to answer a question (because it is proper) because the adult is an authority
- ▶ The child cannot say, and does not say that he or she does not understand (answers anyway)
- ▶ It is unnecessary to ask if he/she understands, they will say: Yes
- ▶ They cannot speak about two things at the same time
- ▶ The question should be kept in the work memory, meanwhile the long-term memory is looking for the relevant answer



Basic principles concerning the use of language

- ▶ Yes-No question It is the sign of dominance: prosecutors (DA) use 27% of yes-no questions, 40% asked a question questions which contained a statement.
- ▶ We should use open questions instead! But in this age group it is almost impossible!
- ▶ Experts' questioning is similar to the so-called teachers' questioning.
- ▶ Never ask **Why** questions when talking about the abuse!
- ▶ E.g., „Why did he show you his dicky? Because he wanted me to see it.”



Basic principles concerning the use of language

- ▶ **Words** (from 1000 to more thousands)
- ▶ **Sentences:** subject-verb, you should keep this order. Avoid the use of embedded sentences
- ▶ **Meaning:** to study this part of language you should know some knowledge about cognitive development, cognitive sciences
- ▶ Psycho-linguistic connects these two fields of science
- ▶ **Meaning means that to find a sense (meaning) an explanation in order not to have a hiatus in the narrative of our lives** (Even in therapy children are able to give a coherent report about other traumatic event but not about sexual abuse) This was due to the **lack of meaning** (from 10 only 4 gave a detailed report)



Cognitive-language competence of a child

- ▶ Assessment of linguistic competence even experts do it, and it is a source of making a mistake
- ▶ **Mistake:** A child knows the days of the week, numbers from one to ten, etc. It is not a guarantee that he/she will give us a coherent, complex narrative about the abuse event
- ▶ **The base of narrative:** („kindergarten age“)
- ▶ **Scripts:** Sources of information that are created automatically when we experience an event/happening several times (Think of a restaurant)
- ▶ Scripts are a high-level knowledge - structure, which contains the action sequences of a stereotype situation, and by this it is able to provide background information for understanding. Eg. „Joe waved to the waiter.“
- ▶ Children of 3-7 structure the events through these scripts.
- ▶ **The abuse is not included!!!**



Identifying and expressing (naming) emotions in this age

- ▶ The emotional meaning of words (Osgood 1957) can be understood on three dimensions
- ▶ Value: Good-bad
- ▶ Power: hard- soft
- ▶ Activity: warm-cold
- ▶ Asking: How did you feel, when he did it with you? The answer: „Bad.”
- ▶ Children of this age are not capable of naming emotions.
- ▶ According to literature **when somebody is traumatized** it is a diffusive complex emotion (fear, shame, freezing, defenselessness, helplessness, etc.)
- ▶ It is very difficult to put it in words even for teenagers and adults



Concepts/ideas


Cognitive development

- ▶ The development of concepts/ideas - Big difference between children and adults
- ▶ Piaget: The role of our concepts/ideas is that we can classify/label different objects into sets that are characterized by different criteria
- ▶ One concept can be characterized by features that the members share, and by features that separates it from other categories.
- ▶ This organization is not true with children!
- ▶ Children do not form such structured taxonomic classification, instead they create chain-like structures or thematic pairs/groups E.g. Dog –leash
- ▶ What kind of associations belong to the perpetrator? (NOT sexuality or unpleasant touching!)
- ▶ They don't have cognitive schema, idea, about sexuality!



Remembering Special field in psychology

- ▶ It is even more special in connection with trauma
- ▶ The basic knowledge: Bartlett's book (1932)
- ▶ Recalling past events is guided by **schemas**. Most popular: recital schema
- ▶ **Schema**: A system of expectation in connection with stories, an organizing principle which a person assimilate his/her individual experiences to
- ▶ For an event to happen a **motivation** is needed.(in eskimo stories: there is no fish or woman)
- ▶ The organization of actions: **Who** does **what** and **why** (system of causes and motifs)
- ▶ To understand the story we identify the hero's motif, and his purpose, and we arrange the whole plot in this perspective
- ▶ **Trauma memory is stored in a different memory storage, not in the episodic memory.**
(That is why it is difficult to regain this type of memories, often come up in fractures)



What is missing, or chaotic: The meaning

- ▶ The world of experiences of little children is structured and interpreted through the dialogues with the parents.
- ▶ The parents' role is very important, who instinctively „going down” to the child's relevant level, and by doing this helps the child to interpret and understand the things around him/her and the events that took place.
- ▶ **In the case of sexual abuse** - mainly if the abuser is the other parent or near relative- **the non abusive parent is not able to create a meaning together with the child** (The non abusive parent is confused, and he/she cannot give a meaning for herself/himself)
- ▶ **So the child:**
- ▶ **Is left alone**
- ▶ **Or the non abusive parent** (to whom the child told about the abuse event) **is traumatized and gives a reaction which is not comforting for the child.**

Data that verify the child's report

- ▶ **Body language**
- ▶ (The child roleplays the event e.g. by lying down and showing her genitals saying: „He put his willy here.” (4-year-old girl)
- ▶ Recalling the experience of **smell, or taste**
- ▶ „What was the taste of your daddy's pee? **It tasted bad. As if you picked of some stinky pasta from the ground**” (six-year-old boy)
- ▶ I opened my mouth and he pissed into it. Did you feel the taste of the pee? **Yes, I spat it out. What taste did it have? Poopy-like.**”
- ▶ **Body language referring to sexual action** „I did a bad thing. Something that adults do. I will show it with my hands.(she shows it) What does it mean? That they lie on each other. I did it with my brother.
- ▶ What do you call that body part, that is in your panties? Pussy. What do men use their dicky for? He tucks it in here. **(She is pointing at her genitals.)**


Data that verify the child's report

- ▶ **Analogic connection**
- ▶ May daddy pissed into my mouth, ears and my bottom/ass
- ▶ My daddy put the potato into my bottom. (When it is object that the perpetrator uses, the child is often incapable to identify it. It makes the process of evidence very difficult.)
- ▶ **Recalling the man's genitals, size, movements (verbally or with showing the moving/motion)**
- ▶ What did you do with daddy's dicky? **I was throwing it up and down.** You can do some other things with it, but I did not try that. We take it up and throw it. (She is showing it with her hands) What was this game like? Very good. Daddy liked it. He was smiling. I saw that he was glad. (What was his dicky like? Soft. Who wanted to play this? Daddy. But let's not talk about it anymore."
- ▶ I saw Gilberto's dicky. It was fearful. **When the wind blew into it, it grew. It was too big to go in.** He put his dicky between my feet (She is pointing at her thighs,) and he also put it to my bottom. **He wanted to put his dicky into my pussy, but it was too big.. That's why he did not put it in.** Then he was angry.(4-year-old girl)
- ▶ **Another girl is showing the movement on a play rolling pin** (we use it for playdough)



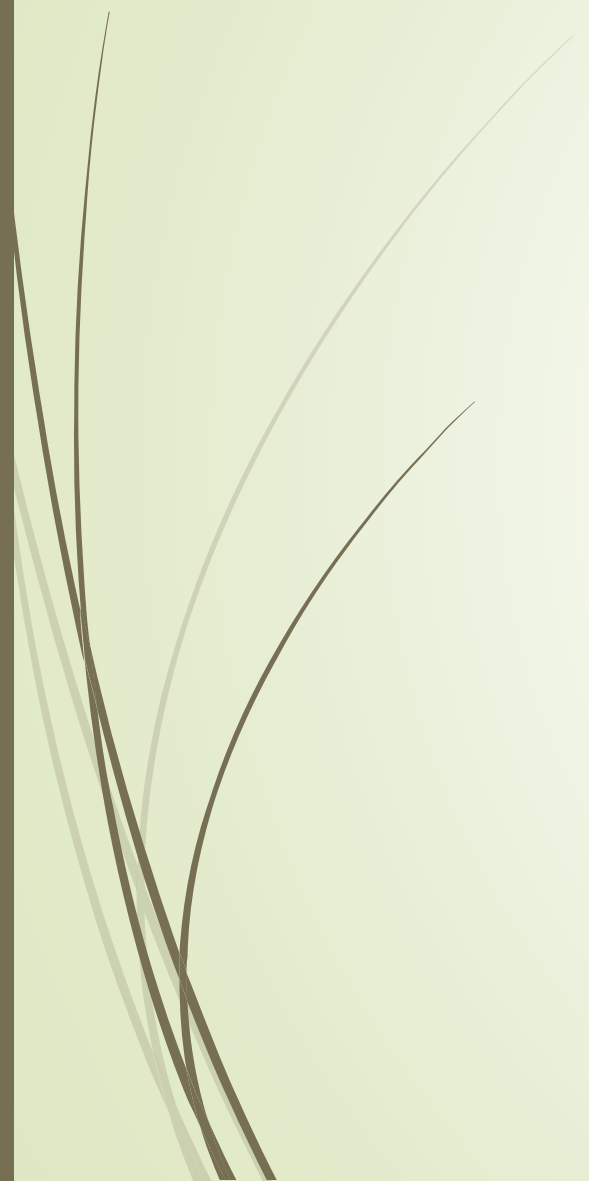
Data that verify the child's report

- ▶ Referring to the **secretum Internum (semen, sperm)**
- ▶ Did you touch his dicky when he was moving it? Yes, I used to. (When you touch it, what is it like? Soft. You said another word for it. **Yes, Slimy**. When is it slimy?
When he is moving it so fast up and down up and down...then something comes out of it. It is white, and slimy.(five-year-old girl)



Metaphors used by the abuser when he invites the child „to play”

- ▶ What was **that magnet play like?** How did you play it? **I am standing and where my pussy is it senses it. And then its head is trending towards it.** What's happening with his dicky? It points into that direction where it is. Like this. **Where my pussy it, it points in that direction.** Then his dick is getting near to your pussy? **It is not so near, but sometimes touches my pussy. What does he touch your pussy with? His dicky.** (six-year-old girl, father went to prison)
- ▶ Daddy said: **Look: The flower is opening. Look, the flower is closing.** (4-year-old girl)
- ▶ Daddy: Look, It is **lights/illuminates in the dark!** (showing his penis)



Thank you for your attention !

