

# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## FINDING COMMON GROUND



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“**M**undus vult decipi: the world wants to be deceived. The truth is too complex and frightening.”

Walter Kaufman (1970, p. 9)

The field of child sexual abuse is increasingly characterized by the competing and contradictory claims of polarized factions. One reaction to the sometimes vitriolic exchanges in the literature is to despair of progress in a field so mired in anger and hyperbole. An alternative reaction is to ask how we might harness the tension that exists in this area to propel the field forward and best serve the interests of children. By adopting the position that many, if not all, of the competing claims pertaining to child sexual abuse ultimately boil down to empirical claims that can be investigated and discussed by persons with initially divergent positions, we create an opportunity to increase consensus in the field. Accordingly, we respond to those aspects of the commentaries that concern empirical issues and do not engage rhetoric, question authors' objectivity, or speculate on decisions about "Golden Fleece Awards."

### THE CORE ARGUMENT

Before addressing specific issues, we restate the core argument we offered in our original article (Fincham, Beach, Moore, & Diener, 1994) to ensure that it is clearly understood. This will allow the reader to better evaluate the extent to which concerns expressed in this exchange represent differences among the authors.

The core argument was that children's well-being should determine all professional action, no matter how painful this may be for the professional. Thus, our article was an exercise in self-scrutiny that attempted to transcend the new denial about child sexual abuse by identifying viewpoints and practices that have the potential to unnecessarily harm children who come to the attention of professionals. We discussed potential harmdoing in relation to children who have not been sexually victimized be-

cause virtually no attention has been paid to such children and because the contingencies in the field overwhelmingly favor false positive errors (finding children to have been abused when no such abuse had occurred). However, we did not limit ourselves exclusively to such cases. Many of the concerns we expressed and the suggestions we made apply equally to decreasing the rates of false positives *and* false negatives, are relevant to gaining greater resources and credibility for child protective services (CPS), and were designed to improve the lot of *all* children who come to the attention of professionals, regardless of whether their case is ultimately determined to be founded or not.

It follows from our argument that we did not adopt, nor do we accept, the view that suffering caused by one type of error (false positive, false negative) is more acceptable than suffering caused by another type of error, and we consider inexcusable any unnecessary continuation of practices harmful to children (abused and nonabused) that were documented in our article. In addition, our arguments and our concerns have clearly centered on the well-being of children. To the extent that parenting responsibilities are unnecessarily disrupted, we are concerned about adults as well, but primarily because of the impact on children's well-being. Any implication that our argument is predicated on the need to protect the rights of adult suspects at the expense of children's well-being is false.

### COMMON GROUND

Perhaps the greatest disservice to children documented in our original article is the adoption of assumptions that are elevated to the status of "truth" without either considering alternative viewpoints or examining data that bear on the assumptions. The commentators do not appear to differ much from us in this regard as, to varying degrees, all three cite empirical research in their commentaries. They deserve to be commended for acknowledging the importance of data. Such acknowledgment from au-

thors representing seemingly divergent perspectives has the potential to move us forward—while we may not always agree in our interpretation of the data, appeals to data have the potential to be self-correcting and therefore ultimately to build consensus.

In light of our common acceptance of data as the appropriate basis for resolving differences of opinion, we highlight a most curious omission. The commentators who take issue with our questioning current CPS practices offer no data to show that victims of sexual abuse who experience CPS interventions are better off than those who do not come to the attention of CPS professionals. This is simply to ask the basic question that any psychotherapeutic intervention is currently expected to answer. Are current methods of intervention better than nothing? It is the failure to ask such obvious questions, and taking issue with those who do ask these questions, that we find most disturbing. At the risk of making an obvious point, if involvement with CPS does not produce reliably better outcomes than noninvolvement, this situation would not imply that we should stop intervening to prevent child sexual abuse. It would, however, strongly suggest that current CPS approaches need to be reviewed carefully to see what steps might be taken to achieve better outcomes.

A similar logic applies to comparing true victims of abuse reported to CPS with those whose cases are unfounded. It is indeed ironic, and quite irrational, to claim concern about the welfare of children but to be unwilling to evaluate possible adverse effects of one's at-

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(*Family Relations*, 1994, 43, 264-266.)



tempts to help them. Without such evaluation how can services be improved? Resistance to such evaluation is consistent with the field's failure to consider children's views of their experiences, a viewpoint that Faulconer (1994) argues should be considered. We agree, and hope that children's perspectives of the abuse they have suffered and their view of the professional response to their experience will be taken more seriously by professionals interested in children's welfare. Mindful of the fact that children are not asked to consent to the services to which they are subject, we consider such a perspective critical to improving the services delivered to them.

## EVALUATING THE COSTS OF ERRORS

We are similarly perplexed by Faulconer's (1994) and Pezdek's (1994) failure to offer any data bearing on a major source of concern they raise, the cost of false positive and false negative errors. Both commentators adopt the position that false negative errors are more harmful than false positive errors, but do not offer any evidence for this empirical claim. Instead, Pezdek rejects the possibility that a false positive case can ever approach the severity of consequences found in a false negative case. Several points need to be considered here.

First, our goal was not to trade off one form of suffering against another, but rather to argue for improving the quality of practice and research. Such improvement would decrease suffering in all child abuse investigations regardless of outcome and would reduce both types of error because testing various hypotheses would likely result in more accurate findings. Thus, mindful of the problems created by the confirmatory bias detailed by Ceci and Bruck (1994), we addressed the issue of unnecessary measurement error in child abuse investigations by calling for hypothesis testing by CPS investigators. In this regard, we agree fully with Pezdek's (1994) call for methods to increase the validity and decrease the error in assessment procedures—such rationality is a vast improvement over the irrational, but understandable, current use of confirmatory heuristics. These changes should improve the quality of the evidence of abuse and thereby decrease the variance within the distributions (making them taller and skinnier) in Pezdek's figure. We are not suggesting that such improvements will produce nonoverlapping distributions, but we are arguing that currently there is unnecessary overlap due to incompe-

tent and biased investigation that produces false negative, and particularly false positive, errors. Thus, there is considerable room for decreasing both types of errors before we need to trade off one type of error against the other.

Second, it is easy to contrast the extreme consequences in some cases of abuse that go undetected (false negatives) against the supposedly mild consequences (Pezdek uses the descriptor *awkwardness* to describe these) caused by false positive errors. However, it is completely erroneous to conclude from such idiosyncratic contrasts that the cost of false negatives is always, or even usually, greater than the cost of false positives. This error in logic is widespread in the literature and reflects two common misconceptions that ignore existing data.

The first of these misconceptions is addressed in our original article and concerns the impact of child sexual abuse. Data reviewed by Kendall-Tackett, Williams, and Finkelhor (1993) show that the impact of sexual abuse can be devastating—surely this is not in dispute. However, as Pezdek (1994) points out, “the consequences of sexual abuse appear to depend on the type of and severity of the abuse, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and a range of situational variables and person-specific variables” (pp. 259-260). We agree, and that is why it is quite misleading, and irresponsible, to simply assert that the impact of sexual abuse is serious and leave it at that. It is far more accurate to state that the impact of sexual abuse varies from apparently minor consequences to very severe consequences. This is perhaps not surprising when one recalls the variability of behavior that is included under the title of sexual abuse. With some 21% to 49% of victims apparently being symptom free (see Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993), we surely need to understand better the variability in impact by examining more closely the very factors that Pezdek identifies. By opposing our call for research to better understand the impact of abuse, Pezdek appears to be abandoning her commitment to science in favor of a priori assumptions.

The second misconception concerns the impact of professional intervention on children and underlines why simply asserting that false negatives are more harmful than false positives is quite irresponsible. Just as one can contrast severe and devastating cases of abuse with the awkwardness of interventions for nonabused children, so also can one contrast devastating cases of intervention with cases of sexual abuse

(e.g., a single incident of noncontact abuse, overhearing parents having intercourse) that leave the child feeling “awkward” but symptom free. One cannot imagine a more devastating impact than the loss of life, yet there are documented cases where children removed from their homes by the state have died unnecessarily while in protective custody. In addition, there are documented cases where the state has simply “lost” children in its care and cannot locate them any longer, where they have been sexually abused by foster parents, been physically abused by foster parents, received inadequate nutrition, received no or inadequate medical attention, and been exposed to safety hazards, infection hazards, and so on (see Benker & Rempel, 1989; Wexler, 1990). The cases are not simply isolated, rare events—the State of Illinois is currently under a federal court order because of such problems in its child protective system. Indeed, it is a supreme irony that the case that gave rise to the modern child protection movement, the case of Mary Ellen Wilson, involved abuse and neglect while *Mary Ellen was in the custody of the state* (Antler & Antler, 1979). Anyone who cares to look into this area will soon learn that placing a child in protective custody is not only traumatic for the child but can also carry additional risks for the physical and mental well-being of the child.

In view of these two misconceptions, simply concluding that false negative errors are more costly than false positive errors is clearly naive and not in the best interests of the child. Equally, it should not be concluded that false positive errors are inevitably more costly than false negative errors. It seems most reasonable, on the basis of available information, to conclude that each kind of error can be devastating, depending on the circumstances in which it occurs.

## CHILDREN'S MEMORY

Finally, we would like to address comments raised about the suggestibility of children. In our original article, we offered a number of conclusions about children's memory. The conclusions were not our own—they were those reached in the most thorough and scholarly review of the literature available (Ceci & Bruck, 1993), and in an analysis presented by 45 “concerned developmental, social, and psychological researchers, social scientists and scholars” in the form of an Amicus Brief (filed in *State of New Jersey v. Kelly Michaels*, 1993). If, as Pezdek (1994) asserts, we cannot draw any conclusions from the

substantial literature on this topic, then we must also not draw any conclusions from the literature on the impact of sexual abuse on children. In both sets of literature one can find studies that are not consistent with the conclusions drawn. Rather than eschew all data, we chose to be careful in presenting the conclusions on children's memories by including the qualifications and subtleties of existing knowledge (e.g., "children *may* inaccurately report, *some* children are extremely resistant, children *sometimes* embellish").

The manner in which we handled the literature on children's memory is consistent with a major theme of our original article, namely, that simple, unqualified generalizations in the area of child sexual abuse are most likely to be erroneous, or at least misleading. We do not regret exercising such care but, rather, believe it is integral to good scholarship, and, ultimately, in the best interests of children. The temptation to adopt simple rules, sweeping generalizations, and easy solutions is indeed great, but has to be resisted if we are to better serve children's needs. A major theme in our original article was that such rules and heuristics seem better suited to meeting the needs of professionals than to advancing children's welfare.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding and responding to the phenomenon of child sexual abuse is more complex than it seems. The responses to our original article begin to acknowledge such complexity and demonstrate that empirical data provide common ground for those approaching child sexual abuse from differing perspectives. Because we agree that child sexual abuse, its consequences, and efforts to intervene reflect a complex reality, we are happy to see exchanges like the current one. It seems likely that by discussing candidly our differing perspectives and the different experiences they articulate, we will come to a view of child sexual abuse that is a more adequate representation of the complex reality and a more useful framework for guiding efforts at child protection.

Everyone wants what is best for children, and all are disturbed by harm done to them. We believe that only self-protective denial could lead to the argument that harm done by professionals is somehow less painful than harm done by parents. Unfortunately, a recent City Health Report produced by the Public Interest Health Consortium for New York City concludes,

we are permitting two entirely different standards of justice. When parents act in a manner to harm or risk harm to their children, they are charged with abuse and neglect. But when government officials persistently, willfully, and unnecessarily harm children . . . these officials are not held accountable. (Benker & Rempel, 1989, pp. 33-34)

The truth is indeed complex and frightening. We applaud the respondents for joining us in addressing this reality. Despite our differences, we remain convinced that it is only through finding common ground that we will be able to adequately meet the needs of children.

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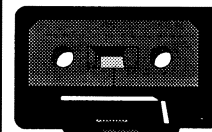


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