



**rape and abuse
crisis center**

advocacy. counseling. education.

Do Children Lie about Sexual Abuse?

Why Children Don't Report

Reporting of sexual abuse is a developmental phenomenon. Children do not automatically report in the way adults do. Reports vary at different ages. For example, a young child might not have the vocabulary or conceptual ability to express an abusive act correctly. "He peed in my mouth" is technically incorrect, yet graphically descriptive. The manner in which children store and retrieve material also changes as they grow. For example, a child who is recalling details from incidents that occurred when s/he was four, is attempting to recall from a very different cognitive arrangement than that of an adult. These differences and inconsistencies might initially appear as "lies" but they are not.¹

Alternating Stories

Although with extensive prompting or interrogating, children can be moved to recant or alter details about stories, most often they rework details they are least clear about, but usually remain adamant about central details.²

Inconsistent Data

Children who have suffered multiple abusive encounters often present conflicting data, sometimes combining information from years of abuse into one or two accounts with apparently inconsistent details. The more often a child has been abused, the more emotionally damaged s/he is. Often, it is precisely these children who are asked to give us clear, specific, consistent data that will stand up in court. Just because charges of alleged abuse have been dropped and children have recanted certain statements, does not indicate that children lie about sexual abuse.

Children's Cognitive Structure

The criminal justice system has certain rules necessary for its functioning. Some of these rules don't fit a child very well, nor do they take into account the normal differences between a child and an adult's cognitive structure and memory function. Only when a child's statements can fit criteria of reliability and consistency, can they

24-hour Crisis Line (701)293-7273
www.raccfm.com

07/12

This material may be reproduced provided credit is
given to the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center.

F: Education/Revised Handouts/Do Children Lie about Sexual Abuse

be successful in criminal court. While a child's inconsistencies may seem like lying, they are often normal for his or her age and developmental status.

When Protection System Fails

By believing the child and his/her attorney, the support of the child protection system is critical to protect the child from the angry repercussions of accusers. If the system fails and the child is no longer protected, the best way for a victimized child to cope with life might be to deny one's allegations and go back to life the way it is.² Sadly, along with the risk of further abuse, comes the reality that the protection system has failed.

Exposure to Sexual Act

There is no way a child can provide explicit details of sexual acts performed on him or her unless they have experienced it; a child's life does not typically involve exposure to such experiences.³

References:

1. American Humane:
http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=nr_fact_sheets_childsexabuse
2. Prevent Abuse Now:
<http://www.prevent-abuse-now.com/stats.htm#Disclosures>
3. Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton: SACE: <http://www.sace.ab.ca/Myths.htm>