

# **XXXVIII. International Post Graduate Course on Victimology, Victim Assistance and Criminal Justice**

## **• Little Children's Narratives of Sexual Abuse**

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# **Background:**

- **30 years practice in forensic examinations**
- **128 sexual crime examination until now**
- **50 children 2,5-6 years old**
- **30 years therapy practice with children (and adults)**

## **The corpus of our survey:**

**50 narratives of 3,-7-year-old children who underwent sexual abuse by a near relative a family member, or somebody taking care of them.**

## **The purpose of our survey:**

**to prove, that children of this age can be examined and their narratives about the abuse can be considered credible if special professional knowledge is applied in their examination: including developmental psychology, cognitive development of this age, language development, trauma psychology.**

## **Why is it important to research this field?**

**Questioning children of this age is very special. The usual questioning methods used by teachers, police agents or legal practitioners can lead to false results, or no result at all.**

## **Examining children in Hungary's legal system – present day landscape:**

**Forensic/judicial experts deal with cases of civil law and penal law. These experts do not get a special training for examining sexually abused children, which ought to involve:**

- 1. General characteristics of this age group**
- 2. Language development**
- 3. Cognitive development**
- 4. The effect of the questioning situation**
- 5. The impact of the trauma on the narrative**
- 6. Dangers of multiple interrogation**

## General characteristics of this age group

In Hungary children go to kindergarten at the age of 3 and stay there until the age of 6-7

Going to kindergarten is compulsory in Hungary.

Children spend 6-8 hours with 2 kindergarten teachers and some helpers

## Developmental psychological findings of this age group:

According to Erikson's stages of development preschool children's developmental stage can be characterized by

**initiative vs. guilt.**

Each stage contains a conflict, and if it is resolved the child steps forward towards a psychological quality.

Ericson says that this stage is for exploration of the world. (Freud called it the phallic phase)

The child's initiative should be encouraged by parents and kindergarten teachers.

**A sexual abuse can stop this process and can make the child withdraw, and feel guilt.**

## Language development, **the role of script** in organizing children's (and adults') experiences

**People organize experiences in scripts,** which make it easier to arrange the events they went through. This happens from a from their very early age, in paralel with usage of language – this is the way we arrange our memories, and life experiences taking benefit of the reoccurring typical situations.

It means:

**Little children can structure and understand their life events through these scripts.**

**The abuse is not included in the scripts of the child's everyday life and daily routine!**

## Cognitive development

**Piaget's theory: there are four stages of cognitive development - the age group we deal with belongs to the "preoperational" stage.**

**Children of the preoperational stage begin to think symbolically and learn to use words and pictures to represent objects.**

**It will be important to see this when we question them:**

**They cannot use abstract ideas yet!**

**It is also very important, that cognitive development and language development cannot be separated,  
they determine each other in every child.**



## The effect of the questioning situation

In Hungary licensed judicial experts examine the children of this age group. Children of this age never have to stand as witnesses in court.

The examination is just one occasion and it takes 45 minutes to one and a half hour (depending in the child's age and capacity)

### **Questioning is not a real dialogue**

The child-adult relationship is hierarchical even with family members.

Here the child meets a complete stranger, who is questioning him/her.

The room is not always child friendly.

It is a stressful situation for the child.

The issues mentioned above make child feel in discomfort in the situation,

**so the expert should make a good rapport first.**

## **The impact of the trauma on the narrative, and the child's behavior**

**Most of the children coming to be examined are traumatized. They are shy or closed, anxious or uncommunicative.**

**The trauma has a great impact on their narratives as well.**

**Recalling the traumatic event has some problems which can be explained by the nature of memorizing it.**

**Literature has proved, that trauma is stored in a memory storage, which is different from episodic memory, where our life events are stored.**

**It is the cause why recalling traumatic event is fragmental.**

## **The Barnahus model: a very good protocol to question children about sexual abuse**

**At the beginning we show the Barnahus model's table about children's capability to recall the sexual abuse events according their age.**

**Barnahus is a special questioning model from Iceland specially developed to interrogate children victims of sexual abuse. The child is questioned in special room furnished with cameras which can focus on the child while he/she is talking about the events. In the other room the prosecutor, the detective, and other persons involved in the case watch the interrogation, and the prosecutor can suggest questions to be asked through the earphone to the questioning person. So the children are questioned only once and the footage can be analyzed later by another expert(s).**

## The Barnahus model: a very good protocol to question children about sexual abuse

### Repeated questioning

**Remark.** We are not going to work on the effect of repeated questioning of children in this lecture, just mention that multiple questioning deteriorates the so called “experientialness” of their abuse story which is always a key question from the court, police in Hungary. It means that the child’s recollection about the event is attended with deep (traumatic) emotions. If a child is questioned several times about the abuse these emotions do not appear and - at least in Hungary - it questions the credibility of the child witness for the court.

# Children's Capacity to Recall the Abuse

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?	Cronology
3,5							
3,5-5							
5-7							
7-8							
8-11							
11+							

## **Basic rules in the questioning situation from literature and my own experiences**

### **Safe and friendly atmosphere:**

**We have to be objective, keep some distance, but at the same time create a “friendly” atmosphere.**

**Balancing between these two attitudes is not easy, it needs a lot of practice.**

### **Never start with questioning him/her about the abuse event:**

**We establish the base for the child’s being able to recall and report the abuse event.**

**So we can start an easygoing dialogue about the child’s everyday life.**

**I will ask questions to make it easier for him/her. So I ask questions about the birth, toddler phase, like:**

**Who fed you? Who bathed you? Who told you fairy tales when going to bed? Etc.**

**I always start with the sentence: When you were born you were a wonderful, beautiful baby...**

**Have you seen your baby photos recently?**

**Then in the life story we get to the point when the sexual abuse happened.**

## **Basic rules in the questioning situation from literature and my own experiences**

### **Approaching the abuse:**

**One way for very little children (3-5) is asking about the differences between boys and girls.**

**We can get closer by focusing on the biological differences concerning the genital organs. We should ask the child how he/she calls it.**

**There are different nick names for the genital organs in Hungary, too. After that we can ask about getting in touch with an adult's genitals or being touched by adult's genitals or being touched on their intimate parts by an adult.**

## Interpreting Childrens' Narratives through their Language Tools

### Naming the action, the way of touching

We would like to know the way of touching, and the child uses different words for that. Like **putting his hand into, tickling, stroking, kissing**, but there are special ways of seducing the child into sexual activity in the camouflage of playing:

e.g.

Playing in the shower: the „magnet play”

„I am standing like this, and where my pussy is it (the dicky) senses it, and its head is heading towards it

Does it touch your pussy? Sometimes it does” (6 year old girl)



## Interpreting Childrens' Narratives through their Language Tools

### Action of touching the man's genitals

How to deal with men's genitals is also an important part of the child's report.

They usually **show the movements** they were instructed to make, **with their hands**. (Pulling and lifting, etc.)

How do they **name the semen** they don't know and have no idea about:

They call it urine (piss) Sometimes they differentiate it from the urine by giving it another color (blue, red)

## THE SENTENCES

- **We cannot expect from the child long, compound sentences about the abuse. Through asking questions we discover the details going deeper and deeper into the event. So we get short sentences after each question, sometimes just one word. It is our task to put these details together and create the whole situation. How the child tells us it does not seem coherent. But it becomes coherent for us if we have a lot of experience and expertise.**
- **Note:**
- **The lack of coherence is also blamed on adult victims, because there is another factor which must be taken into consideration when interrogating sexual abuse victims: The trauma event is stored in a memory compartment different from episodic memory.**

## THE MEANING

- While acquiring the language the meaning is an important issue.
- Does the child find a meaning in the abuse story? **NO!**
- Why? Because the **child's dictionary does not contain the words** of the event.
- This event is **not contained in the child's daily routine, the SCRIPT of his/her life.**
- The **perpetrator's behavior makes it a secret event** which has to be hidden from other persons (also from the non-abusive parent)
- **The emotions** the child goes through **make the event shameful, as if the child would have done something very bad.** (At this age the child is not able to refer it to the abuser and blame him/her for it)
- **The non-abusive parent is usually not able to give a meaning for the child, because she cannot find one either.**
- She is also traumatized when reported by the child. The abuser is her husband, partner or ex partner.

**Some helping factors (clues) verifying the child's report:**

- **Recalling of smell, taste**
- **Body language showing the different movement that happened through the event**
- **Referring to the nature of the excrementum (sticky, lubricating)**
- **Metaphors created by the perpetrator (magnet, flower etc.)**

**The main topic/ result of the next, more comprehensive survey:  
How to question this age group about sexual abuse.**

- **Open questions (Yes, no questions contain two suggestions from which the child must choose one)**
- **It is very difficult to use only open questions at this age group**
- **Simple, short questions - always always must be adopted to the information we already have**
- **It is not allowed to use so called imbedded questions!**

Thanks for your attention!

