

How often do children's reports of abuse turn out to be false?

Research has consistently shown that false allegations of child sexual abuse by children are rare.

Jones and McGraw examined 576 consecutive referrals of child sexual abuse to the Denver Department of Social Services, and categorized the reports as either reliable or fictitious. In only 1% of the total cases were children judged to have advanced a fictitious allegation. Jones, D. P. H., and J. M. McGraw: Reliable and Fictitious Accounts of Sexual Abuse to Children. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2, 27-45, 1987.

In a more recent study, investigators reviewed case notes of all child sexual abuse reports to the Denver Department of Social Services over 12 months. Of the 551 cases reviewed, there were only 14 (2.5%) instances of erroneous concerns about abuse emanating from children. These consisted of three cases of allegations made in collusion with a parent, three cases where an innocent event was misinterpreted as sexual abuse and eight cases (1.5%) of false allegations of sexual abuse. Oates, R. K., D.P. Jones, D. Denson, A. Sirotnak, N. Gary, and R.D. Krugman: Erroneous Concerns about Child Sexual Abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24:149-57, 2000.

Everson and Boat interviewed child protective service workers and found an estimated rate of false allegations that fell between 4.7 to 7.6% of all child and adolescent reports of sexual abuse. Everson, M.D., and B.W. Boat: False Allegations of Sexual Abuse by Children and Adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28, 230-5, 1989.

After reviewing the empirical literature concerning the frequency of false allegations of sexual abuse, Mikkelsen, Gutheil, and Emens concluded: "False allegations of sexual abuse by children and adolescents are statistically uncommon, occurring at the rate of 2 to 10 percent of all cases." Mikkelsen, E.J., T.G. Gutheil, and M Emens: False Sexual-Abuse Allegations by Children and Adolescents: Contextual Factors and Clinical Subtypes. *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 46: 556-70, 1992.

When four different states (Florida, Missouri, Vermont, and Virginia) reviewed Child Protective Service (CPS) records to determine the extent of false reporting, they found intentionally false reports to comprise less than 1% of all unsubstantiated reports of child abuse (0.00999634 or less than 1 out of 100 unsubstantiated reports)

1997 NCANDS REPORT, Statistics on Intentionally False Reports

STATES	TOTAL REPORTS	UNSUBSTANTIATED	INTENTIONALLY FALSE
Florida	186,726	92,337	868
Missouri	80,185	49,490	460
Vermont	2,309	1,257	18
Virginia	51,227	37,282	457
TOTAL	320,447	180,366	1,803

Section D-9, adapted from Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (1999). *Child Maltreatment 1997: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/ncands97/apd.htm>

Children Tend to Understate Rather than Overstate the Extent of Any Abuse Experienced

Research with children whose sexual abuse has been proven has shown that children tend to minimize and deny abuse, not exaggerate or over-report such incidents.

In one study, researchers examined 28 cases in which children had tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease by forensically accepted procedures. To be included in the study, the children had to have presented for a physical problem with no prior disclosure or suspicion of sexual abuse. In addition, subjects were required to be over the age of three but prepubescent and were required to have adequate expressive language capabilities. Each of the 28 children was interviewed by a social worker trained in abuse disclosure techniques and use of anatomically correct dolls. Only 12 of the 28 (43%) of the abused children interviewed gave any verbal confirmation of sexual contact. Lawson, L., & Chaffin, M. False negatives in sexual abuse disclosure interviews. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7(4), 532-42, 1992.

The "gold standard" study in this area comes from Sweden. This case involved a lone perpetrator who pled guilty after videotapes of his abuse of ten children were found by authorities. Because of these detailed videotape recordings, researchers knew exactly what happened to these children and were able to compare it to what the children told investigators when they interviewed. The researchers found here was a significant tendency among the children to deny or minimize their experiences. Some children simply did not want to disclose their experiences, some had difficulties remembering them, and one child lacked adequate concepts to understand and describe them. Despite

the fact that some of the interviews included leading questions, there were no false allegations. Sjoberg, R. L., & Lindblad, F. Limited disclosure of sexual abuse in children whose experiences were documented by videotape. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159(2), 312-4, 2002.

Some people believe that recantations are a sure sign that a child lied about the abuse. However, a recent study found that pressure from family members play a significant role in recantations. Mallory et al. (2007) examined the prevalence and predictors of recantation among 2- to 17-year-old child sexual abuse victims. Case files (n = 257) were randomly selected from all substantiated cases resulting in a dependency court filing in a large urban county between 1999 and 2000. Recantation (i.e., denial of abuse post disclosure) was scored across formal and informal interviews. Cases were also coded for characteristics of the child, family, and abuse. The researchers found a 23.1% recantation rate. The study looked for but did not find evidence that these recantations resulted from potential inclusion of cases involving false allegations. Instead, multivariate analyses supported a filial dependency model of recantation, whereby abuse victims who were more vulnerable to familial adult influences (i.e., younger children, those abused by a parent figure and who lacked support from the non-offending caregiver) were more likely to recant. Malloy, L.C. , Lyon, T.D. , & Quas, J.A. (2007). Filial dependency and recantation of child sexual abuse allegations. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 46, 162-70.

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