Dynamics of forensic interviews with suspected abuse victims who do not disclose abuse[☆]

Irit Hershkowitz [a], Yael Orbach [b], Michael E. Lamb [c,*],
Kathleen J. Sternberg [b], Dvora Horowitz [d]

[a] *University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel*
[b] *National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Bethesda, MD, USA*
[c] *Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK*
[d] *Israeli Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Jerusalem, Israel*

Abstract

Objectives: The present study was designed to explore structural differences between forensic interviews in which children made allegations and those in which children did not make allegations.

Methodology: Fifty forensic interviews of 4- to 13-year-old suspected victims of abuse who did not disclose abuse during the interview were compared with the same number of forensic interviews of alleged victims who made allegations of sexual or physical abuse. Only cases in which there was substantial reason to believe that abuse had taken place were included in the study. Audiotapes of the interviews were examined with a focus on interviewer utterances and children's responses during the pre-substantive rapport-building, episodic memory training, and 'getting the allegation' phases of the interviews, which all employed the NICHD Investigative Interview Guide.

Findings: Forensic interviews which yielded allegations of child abuse were characterized by quite different dynamics than interviews with children who did not make allegations. When interviewing non-disclosers, interviewers made less frequent use of free recall prompts and offered fewer supportive comments than when interviewing children who made allegations of abuse. Children who did not disclose abuse were somewhat uncooperative, offered fewer details, and gave more uninformative responses, even at the very beginning of the interview, before the interviewers focused on substantive issues and before the interviewers themselves began to behave differently.

Conclusions: A premature focus on substantive issues may prevent children who are not responsive in the episodic memory training phase from disclosing abuse. Identifying reluctant disclosers and making more extensive efforts to

---

build rapport before substantive issues are broached, or interviewing such children in more than one session, may help suspected victims disclose their experiences.
Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Introduction

In the last decade, many professionals have described the best ways to interview alleged child abuse victims (e.g., American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], 2002; Bull, 1992; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Memorandum of Good Practice, 1992; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Raskin & Esplin, 1991). Recognizing the remarkable agreement among professional groups and researchers with respect to optimal practices, researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) operationalized these recommendations in the form of an investigative interview protocol comprising specific and concrete guidelines that forensic interviewers can follow (Orbach et al., 2000). Introduction of the NICHD protocol has facilitated systematic research on the dynamics of interviews with alleged abuse victims, and has permitted researchers to show how much information can be elicited, even from quite young children, when they are interviewed in accordance with "best practice" guidelines (Aldridge et al., 2004; Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Esplin, & Hershkowitz, 2002; Lamb et al., 2003; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). To date, however, studies using the protocol have been limited to interviews with cooperative alleged victims who have made specific allegations of abuse during the forensic interview. As a result, researchers and professionals do not know about the dynamics of interviews with reluctant victims who do not disclose abuse. The present study was designed to explore differences between protocol-guided interviews in which 4- to 13-year-old children made allegations and those in which children did not make allegations despite strong evidence of abuse.

Research on suspected victims of abuse who do not make allegations is urgently needed because many suspected victims do not make allegations when formally interviewed. The exact numbers cannot be calculated because an unknown number of victims never disclose their victimization and because some proportion of those who initially offer denials and later make allegations may be doing so falsely, perhaps in response to repeated suggestive questioning. Debate about the relative sizes of the false positive and false negative groups is intense (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Lyon, in press), but there is consensus that many abuse victims cannot be protected or helped because they never disclose their experiences or do so belatedly.

Approximately a third of the alleged victims interviewed in Israel do not disclose abuse during forensic interviews, despite suspicion that abuse might have occurred (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). Victims who withhold information or deny that they were abused presumably do so in order to protect familiar perpetrators, especially family members (Paine & Hansen, 2002; Yuille, Tymofievich, & Marxsen, 1995), or because they are yielding to requests for secrecy (DeYoung, 1988; Goodman-Brown, 1995), assume some responsibility or blame (Lyon, 2002; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002), feel ashamed or embarrassed (Lyon, 1995; Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan, 1991), or fear threatened or imagined negative outcomes (Berliner & Conte, 1995; DeYoung, 1988; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Palmer, Brown,

Rae-Grant, & Loughlin, 1999). In addition, young victims may not understand that they have been abused and may have failed to encode or remember experiences that did not appear salient to them (Cederborg, Lamb, & Laurell, in press). The current study is the first to examine closely the dynamics of interviews with a group of non-disclosing children, selected for study because there were good objective reasons to believe that they had actually been abused.Because children are typically somewhat shy in initial encounters with unfamiliar adults, forensic interviewers are routinely advised to establish rapport before turning attention to the possible abuse (Poole & Lamb, 1998). The pre-substantive phase can be used not only to establish rapport with children but also prepare them in other ways so as to maximize their willingness and capacity to be informative (Saywitz & Goodman, 1996; Sternberg et al., 1997). In the NICHD Protocol, children are also instructed to tell the truth, to report only personally experienced events, and to admit lack of knowledge or lack of understanding, correcting the interviewer when necessary (Orbach et al., 2000; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Sternberg et al., 2001). Explicit rules of communication are also explained in order to diminish confusion and inaccuracy while maximizing the resistance to suggestion. To further motivate them, children are typically reminded that they are unique sources of information and are encouraged to practice reporting information from episodic memory by describing other meaningful personal events (Fivush & Shukat, 1995). Clear expectations are conveyed to the children regarding the amount of details and level of spontaneous elaboration expected of them in order to increase the amounts of event-specific information they provide.

Recent field research on forensic interviewing practices has shown that use of the NICHD investigative interview protocol improves retrieval in both the pre-substantive and substantive phases of the interview (Lamb et al., 2003; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 2001). Because free-recall prompts are more likely than recognition prompts to elicit accurate information (Dale, Loftus, & Rathbun, 1978; Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Hutcheson, Baxter, Telfer, & Warden, 1995; Oates & Shrimpton, 1991), protocol-guided interviews are characterized by greater reliance on such prompts than non-protocol interviews are (Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 2001). Children interviewed using the protocol also provide more information in response to free-recall prompts than do children interviewed using other approaches (Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 1997, 2001). Because recognition prompts introduce information provided by the interviewer rather than the child, they are delayed as much as possible in NICHD protocol interviews.

The present study was designed to explore structural differences between forensic interviews in which children reported being abused (here described as the 'allegation group' with the children therein labeled 'disclosers') and those in which children did not mention being abused (here called the 'non-allegation group' with the children therein labeled 'non-disclosers'). To assess these differences, we compared the interviewers' prompts and the children's responses especially during the initial phases of forensic interviews, prior to any discussion of possible abuse. Interviews in the allegation and non-allegation groups were matched with respect to age of child, abuse type, perpetrator familiarity, and, where possible, strength of the suspicion that triggered the investigation. The variables explored included the interviewers' eliciting utterance types (i.e., free-recall versus recognition prompts), as well as their supportive and non-supportive behaviors. We also categorized the children's responses to the interviewers' prompts as informative, uninformative, and denial responses.

As in interviews with young suspects or perpetrators (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, Lamb, Orbach, & Sternberg, 2004), we expected that interviewers might use more focused and even coercive strategies while withholding support from children who were reluctant to provide information. We also expected that children in the 'no-allegation' interviews would be less engaged in the rapport-building and less

cooperative in the memory training phase than would peers who made allegations. We thus predicted that interviewers would use more recognition than free-recall prompts and would be less supportive and more confrontational when interviewing children who did not make allegations. We expected that children in "no-allegation" interviews would show their reluctance by giving more uninformative (e.g., omission, "don't know," "don't want to talk," "don't remember"), digressive (e.g., reversions to "non-substantive" responses or issues), and denial (e.g., "never happened") responses during the "getting the allegation" phase than children who made allegations of abuse.

Methods

Subjects

A total of 100 forensic interviews with nearly 4- to 13-year-old alleged victims ($M = 8.8$ years; $SD = 2.99$; 57 boys and 43 girls) were examined. There were 20 children aged 3–5 years, 42 aged between 6 and 9 years, and 38 aged between 10 and 13. The first 50 interviews to be identified included all interviews of 3- to 13-year-old suspected victims who did not allege abuse when interviewed but for whom there was compelling evidence that the child had indeed been abused. We then sought case-by-case matches with forensic interviews of alleged victims who made allegations of sexual or physical abuse. Cases were matched with respect to age, abuse type (sexual, $n = 19$; physical, $n = 31$) perpetrator familiarity (parent, $n = 33$; non-parent, $n = 17$), and basis for suspicion (strong evidence, $n = 32$; prior disclosure, $n = 18$). Cases in which there are compelling reasons to believe (not merely suspect) that abuse has occurred in the absence of allegations by the child are rare and the 50 cases included in the study resulted from an comprehensive review of a data base comprising more than 26 000 cases (Hershkowitz et al., 2005). Matches were easier to locate in the same data base; in each case, the match chosen was the first appropriate match to be identified. Interviews were only transcribed and coded after they had been matched and selected.

All interviews were the first forensic interview conducted with alleged or suspected victims between 1998 and 2003 by 25 trained youth investigators, who are the only officials who can formally question child victims, witnesses, and suspects under the age of 14 in Israel; their recommendations have a major impact on the interventions attempted by courts and social service agencies (see Sternberg, Lamb, & Hershkowitz, 1996, for further information about the Israeli system). The interviewers each contributed between one and 28 interviews ($M = 4$) to the overall sample. The research was approved on ethical and human subjects protection grounds and as a quality improvement exercise by the Department on Youth Investigation in the Israeli Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

All interviews were rated with respect to the strength of evidence or the basis for suspicion using the 'Ground Truth' scheme described by Lamb and colleagues (Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, & Orbach, 1997; Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, Orbach, et al., 1997). The Ground Truth scheme describes information of five types (1: medical evidence, 2: eyewitness accounts, 3: suspect's confession, 4: material/physical evidence, and 5: miscellaneous information) that can be used to organize independent (i.e., not influenced by the child's statement) validating information indicating how likely it is that the alleged abuse took place. Within each category, the available information was used to judge whether it was "very likely," "likely," "very unlikely," or "unlikely" that the event took place, or that "no judgment was possible"). Only cases in which there was substantial reason to believe that

abuse had taken place (i.e., sufficient information of one or more types that the abuse was "likely" or "very likely" and no ratings of "unlikely" or "very unlikely") were included in the study. Examples of corroborative ("likely" or "very likely") medical information included semen traces, vaginal tears, and relevant physical injuries, corroborative eyewitness accounts included reports by disinterested eyewitnesses (i.e., those who were unrelated to either victim or suspect), perpetrator confessions were deemed corroborative when they contained details matching those provided by the victims, and corroborative miscellaneous information included clear disclosure to a non-interested person (such as a teacher or counselor).

Procedure

All interviews were conducted using the NICHD investigative interview protocol (see Orbach et al., 2000). As explained earlier, protocol interviews open with a pre-substantive phase designed to establish rapport with the interviewees, prepare child-witnesses for their role as information providers, and teach narrative responsive styles, while exploring neutral experienced events. Interviewers then switch focus to substantive issues (the getting the allegation phase) in a non-suggestive fashion, using a structured series of 'getting the allegation' prompts in which increasingly focused, non-suggestive prompts are used when 'free-recall' prompts fail to elicit a disclosure. If the child makes an allegation, the interviewer seeks further information, primarily by using open-ended invitations (the substantive phase). The interview closes with a discussion of a neutral topic. The research focused only on the first two (rapport-building/narrative training and getting the allegation) phases of the interviews.

Audio-taped recordings of the interviews were transcribed and checked to ensure their completeness and accuracy. Native Hebrew speakers blind to the purposes of the study then coded the pre-substantive and "getting the allegation" phases of the interviews. Two raters coded interviewers' utterances with respect to type and supportiveness, categorized children's response types, and tabulated the number of details conveyed in children's responses.

Inter-rater reliability

The coders were trained on an independent set of transcripts until they agreed 98% of the time in their categorization of interviewers' utterance types, supportiveness, and insistence, as well as the children's responses and the number of details reported. During the course of training, 20% of the transcripts were independently recoded by two or more of the raters to ensure that they remained equivalently reliable. In these assessments, raters agreed regarding the classification of at least 98% of the interviewer utterances and 95% of the children's responses and details.

Coding interviewer behavior

All interviewers' utterances (defined as "turns" in the discourse) in both the pre-substantive and the substantive phases of the interview were classified as either information-requesting prompts or non-information-requesting utterances, as defined and detailed below. In addition, interviewers' comments inserted within any type of utterance in either the pre-substantive and substantive phases of the interview were coded for supportiveness.

Information-requesting prompts

1. *Invitations* prompted free-recall responses from the child. Such prompts provided a general invitation to report what happened, without limiting the child's focus except in a general way (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened") or used details disclosed by the child as cues (e.g., "You mentioned that you touched him. Tell me everything about the touching").
2. *Directive prompts* refocused on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child had previously mentioned and provided a category for additional information, typically in the form of "wh-" questions (e.g., "When did it happen?" when the child disclosed that something happened).
3. *Option-posing prompts* focused the child's attention on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child had not previously mentioned and prompted the child to affirm, negate, or select among investigator-given options, using recognition memory processes (i.e., yes/no and 'forced-choice' questions), but did not imply that a particular response is expected (e.g., "Did she touch you over or under your clothes?" when the child mentioned being touched).
4. *Suggestive prompts* were stated in such a way that the interviewer strongly communicated what response was expected (e.g. "He forced you to do that, didn't he?") or assumed details that had not been disclosed by the child (e.g., Child: "We laid on the sofa." Interviewer: "You laid on her or she laid on you?").

These codes were introduced and initially defined by Lamb and his colleagues (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, & Everson, 1996; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996). Interviewer utterances that did not request information were not included in the utterance type analyses.

Non-information-requesting utterances

Non-information-requesting utterances provided procedural information during the interview (e.g., "Please stay in your seat.") but did not prompt the interviewees for information. In addition, all unfinished and unclear interviewer utterances were included in this category.

Interviewer supportiveness

Supportive comments involved comments anywhere in the interview intended to unconditionally encourage children to be informative, typically about neutral topics because we only coded the first two phases of the interview. *Supportive comments* were categorized using four exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories:

1. *Non-suggestive positive reinforcement* involved positive responses to the children's behavior during the interview unrelated to the content of their reports or to any other substantive issue (e.g., "You are telling very well").
2. *Addressing the child in a personal way* involved using names or terms of endearment (e.g., "Dan, tell me everything about that").
3. *References to the child's emotions* involved expressions of empathy in response to the children's expressions of positive or negative emotion during the interview (e.g., "I understand that it is very difficult for you to tell me this").

4. *Facilitators* involved non-suggestive encouragement—by saying "ok", "aha", or by echoing the children's last few words—to continue talking.

By contrast, *unsupportive comments were interviewer comments anywhere in the interview exerting pressure* on children to respond by challenging information they provided or criticizing their behavior. *Unsupportive comments* were categorized using four exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories:

1. In *Confrontations,* interviewers challenged the information provided by the children by referring to an external source (e.g., ". . . but I heard from the police officer that [details] happened"), a physical mark on the child's body ("You said the nothing had happened, so how do you explain this burn on your hand?"), or the implausibility of the child's statement (or contradiction).
2. *Reference to positive outcomes* involved conditional statements that positive outcomes would follow if the children were cooperative (e.g., "If you tell me, you'll feel better"; "If you tell me, we can help you").
3. *Warnings about negative outcomes* involved conditional statements that negative outcomes would follow if the children did not cooperate (e.g., "We cannot help children who do not talk").
4. *Negative references to the child's behavior* involved criticism of the children's behavior during the interview (e.g., "You're looking away"; "Don't touch the tape-recorder"; "Sit still!"; "You are talking too softly, I can't hear you").

Coding children's responses

The children's responses were categorized using three exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories, i.e., *informative*, *uninformative*, and *denials*. Because the study only involved coding the rapport-building/narrative training and getting the allegation phases of the interviews, most of the coded responses were non-substantive, that is, about events or details unrelated to the suspected abuse.

In *Informative responses*, children provided the information requested in the eliciting prompts. *Informative details* were thus defined as words or phrases identifying or describing individuals, objects, or events (including actions), which were related to the topics being investigated (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996). Details were used as units to measure the amount of information reported and were only counted when they were new and added to understanding of the topic discussed. As a result, restatements were not counted.

Uninformative responses did not provide the information requested in the eliciting prompts and were classified using the following five exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories:

1. *Omissions* involved failing to respond informatively, omitting a response (i.e., no answer), providing unclear, inaudible, or unfinished responses, excusing an inability to provide an informative response (e.g., "don't know," "don't remember," "not sure"), or requesting clarification (e.g., "What do you mean?").
2. *Digressions* involved responses that were unrelated to the eliciting content (e.g., Interviewer: "How old are you?" Child: "My friend did not behave well at school").
3. *Displacements* involved unexpected and irrelevant allegations in response to any of the "Getting the allegation" prompts (e.g., Interviewer: "Do you know why you are here today?" Child: "A kid in

my class threw a stone at me") or implausible explanations in response to questions about bruises or injuries (e.g., Interviewer: "I have a Doctor's report showing that you have serious burns on your . . ." Child: "I fell on a hot plate").

4. *Resistance* involved verbal expressions or actions indicating that the children were unwilling to provide information or be interviewed (e.g., verbal responses such as "I don't want to tell;" action responses like unplugging the microphone or leaving the interview room).

5. *Denials* involved claims that an investigated event, a previous interaction, or an earlier disclosure never happened, or admissions that a previous disclosure was false.

Results

Pre-substantive phase of the interview

Rapport-building. Table 1 shows the total number of interviewer utterances, the proportion of utterances that requested information, and their distribution across the four categories (invitations, directive, option-posing, and suggestive). Inspection of the table shows that the interviewers behaved similarly during the rapport-building phase, whether or not the children later made allegations. The children in the two groups behaved somewhat differently, however. Children in non-allegation interviews tended to give more uninformative responses [$t_{(97)} = 1.85$, $p < .07$] (specifically, more omissions [$t_{(97)} = 2.17$, $p = .03$]), and fewer informative responses [$t_{(97)} = 1.85$, $p = .07$] than children who later made allegations did.

Table 1
Interviewers' utterances and children's responses in the rapport-building phase

	Non-disclosers		Disclosers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Interviewers' utterances				
Total number of utterances	12.90	5.32	12.94	11.23
Total number of Information-requesting prompts	11.14	4.47	11.18	7.99
Proportion of Information-requesting prompts	.87	.12	.91	.11
Information-requesting prompts (proportions)				
Invitations	.82	.18	.80	.21
Directive	.15	.17	.14	.15
Option-posing	.02	.05	.05	.10
Suggestive	.01	.03	.01	.03
Interviewers' supportiveness				
Proportion of supportive comments	.51	.19	.57	.24
Proportion of non-supportive comments	.01	.02	.01	.05
Children's responses (proportions)				
Informative	.73	.26	.82	.22
Uninformative	.26	.26	.17	.22
Denial	.03	.23	.00	.02

Table 2
Interviewers' utterances and children's responses in the narrative training phase

	Non-disclosers		Disclosers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Interviewers' utterances				
Total number of utterances	14.91	7.43	11.67	6.56
Total number of information-requesting prompts	12.76	6.44	10.52	6.01
Proportion of information-requesting prompts	.86	.10	.92	.11
Information-requesting prompts (proportions)				
Invitations	.69	.22	.70	.20
Directive	.15	.20	.13	.16
Option-posing	.13	.11	.16	.14
Suggestive	.02	.06	.01	.04
Interviewers' supportiveness				
Proportion of supportive comments	.47	.21	.50	.25
Proportion of non-supportive comments	.01	.03	.01	.05
Children's responses (proportions)				
Informative	.73	.24	.89	.17
Uninformative	.27	.24	.11	.17
Denial	.00	.00	.00	.02

Episodic memory training. In the rapport-building/narrative training phase (see Table 2), interviewers directed more utterances to non-disclosing children than to disclosing children [$t_{(90)} = 2.22$, $p = .03$]. Table 2 also shows that, relative to the total number of interviewer utterances, interviewers tended to make proportionally fewer requests for information from non-disclosers than from children who alleged that they had been abused [$t_{(90)} = 2.75$, $p = .07$]. The proportions of information-requesting prompts that were invitations, directive, option-posing and suggestive did not differ by group, however, and there were also no differences in the proportion of supportive and unsupportive comments addressed by interviewers to disclosing and non-disclosing children during this phase.

Disclosing and non-disclosing children again behaved differently, however. Non-disclosers provided proportionally more uninformative responses [$t_{(90)} = 3.71$, $p < .000$] (specifically, more omission responses [$t_{(90)} = 2.27$, $p = .026$]) and proportionally fewer informative responses [$t_{(98)} = 3.59$, $p < .001$] than children who made allegations.

Substantive phase of the interview: getting the allegation

Interviewers behaved very differently during the substantive 'getting the allegation' phase depending on whether or not the children made allegations. Overall, interviewers directed more utterances to children who did not make allegations than to those who did [$t_{(96)} = 8.58$, $p < .000$] (see Table 3). Interviewers directed proportionally fewer information-requests [$t_{(96)} = 3.49$, $p < .001$] and invitational prompts [$t_{(95)} = 2.42$, $p < .000$] as well as proportionally more directive prompts [$t_{(95)} = 2.12$, $p = .04$] to children who did not make allegations than to children who disclosed. In addition, interviewers directed proportionally fewer supportive comments [$t_{(96)} = 4.51$, $p < .000$] and non-significantly more unsupportive

Table 3
Interviewers' utterances and children's responses in the 'getting the allegation' phase

	Non-disclosers		Disclosers	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
Interviewers' utterances				
Total number of utterances	27.59	16.08	5.96	7.30
Total number of information-requesting prompts	20.87	12.06	4.83	4.46
Proportion of information-requesting prompts	.78	.13	.91	.19
Information-requesting prompts (proportions)				
Invitations	.43	.32	.59	.33
Directive	.12	.17	.06	.11
Option-posing	.33	.24	.25	.26
Suggestive	.10	.13	.08	.15
Interviewers' supportiveness				
Proportion of supportive comments	.39	.21	.65	.33
Proportion of non-supportive comments	.05	.14	.01	.04
Distribution of children's responses (proportions)				
Informative	.37	.21	.76	.28
Uninformative	.32	.26	.14	.21
Denial	.29	.20	.08	.15

comments [$t_{(96)} = 1.92$, $p < .057$] to children who did not make allegations than to children who disclosed (see Table 3).

Children who did not disclose provided proportionally fewer informative responses [$t_{(96)} = 7.75$, $p < .000$] and proportionally more uninformative responses [$t_{(96)} = 3.74$, $p < .000$], (specifically more resistance responses [$t_{(96)} = 3.67$, $p < .000$]) than did children who disclosed. Non-disclosers also denied more [$t_{(96)} = 5.68$, $p < .000$] than did children who disclosed.

The relative effectiveness of different types of prompts

To compare the effectiveness of the different types of information-requesting prompts, the average numbers of details elicited per prompt were examined. Children in both groups provided more details in response to invitations than in response to directive, option-posing or suggestive prompts in all phases of the interview [$F_{(4, 35)} = 8.41$; $p < .000$ and $F_{(4, 8)} = 7.27$; $p = .01$ for non-allegation and allegation interviews, respectively] (see Table 4).

A *t*-test comparing the mean number of details provided by children in the two groups revealed that disclosers provided more details in total [$t_{(98)} = 3.32$, $p < .001$], non-significantly more details in response to invitations [$t_{(98)} = 1.67$, $p = .10$], and significantly more details in response to suggestive prompts [$t_{(57)} = 3.02$, $p = .01$] than did children who did not disclose. In addition, children in the disclosure group provided non-significantly more details spontaneously, in response to utterances that did not request information, than did children in the non-disclosure group [$t_{(87)} = 1.96$, $p = .06$].

Table 4
The average number of details retrieved spontaneously and in response to interviewers' information-requesting prompts

Detail type	Non-disclosers			Disclosers		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Spontaneous details (following non information-requesting prompts)	49	1.47	2.53	40	2.93	4.40
Details in response to information-requesting prompts						
Invitations	50	6.28	9.43	50	9.23	8.22
Directive	45	2.62	2.47	41	5.58	13.13
Option-posing	48	1.26	2.71	42	1.25	1.99
Suggestive	41	1.48	2.89	18	5.19	6.62
Total	50	3.71	4.65	50	7.60	6.88

Effects of support in the interview

The total sample (including the 50 disclosers and the 50 non-disclosers) was divided at the median into 'high support' and 'low support' groups on the basis of the proportion of utterances in the interview containing supportive comments. There were 28 low and 22 high support children in the non-disclosure group and 22 low and 28 high support children in the disclosure group. A 2 (support levels) × 2 (disclosure, non-disclosure) MANOVA revealed a significant effect for support level [$F_{(2, 95)} = 3.64$; $p = .03$], a significant effect for disclosure [$F_{(2, 95)} = 43.47$; $p < .000$] as well as a significant interaction [$F_{(2, 95)} = 3.13$; $p = .04$] (see Table 5). Specifically, children who received more support provided more informative [$F_{(1, 99)} = 6.79$; $p = .01$] and fewer uninformative [$F_{(1, 99)} = 7.29$; $p = .008$] responses than children who received less support. Amount of support did not affect the number of denials provided. Disclosure status also affected the children's informativeness. Disclosing children provided more informative [$F_{(1, 99)} = 37.85$; $p < .000$],

Table 5
The effects of interviewer support on children's response type and details

Support level	Non-disclosers			Disclosers		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Children's response type						
Informative						
Low support	28	.52	.22	22	.76	.24
High support	22	.63	.13	28	.85	.14
Uninformative						
Low support	28	.37	.25	22	.19	.22
High support	22	.21	.15	28	.13	.14
Denial						
Low support	28	.12	.08	22	.04	.06
High support	22	1.59	.10	28	.02	.03
Number of reported details						
Low support	28	2.14	1.83	22	6.15	4.65
High support	22	5.71	6.23	28	8.75	8.17

Table 6
Distribution of cases into disclosure groups based on the children's informative responses

Informative responses	Non-disclosers		Disclosers		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Partially informative	38	82.6	20	43.5	58	63.0
Fully informative	8	17.4	26	56.5	34	37.0
Total	46	100.0	46	100.0	92	100.0

fewer uninformative [$F_{(1, 99)} = 10.07$; $p < .002$] and fewer denial [$F_{(1, 99)} = 56.44$; $p < .000$] responses than children who did not disclose. An interaction [$F_{(1, 99)} = 6.09$; $p = .015$] indicated that disclosers who received high levels of support denied less, whereas non-disclosers who received high support denied more (see Table 5).

The *number of details* children provided was subjected to a separate ANOVA with levels of support and disclosure as between-subjects variables. There was a main effect of support level [$F_{(1, 99)} = 7.14$; $p = .009$], with high levels of support associated with the recall of more details. The main effect of disclosure status was also significant [$F_{(1, 96)} = 9.35$; $p = .003$], with disclosing children reporting more details than non-disclosers. There was no significant interaction.

Prediction of disclosure

To examine whether the proportion of informative responses relative to the total number of responses in the episodic memory training phase predicted the level of disclosure in the substantive phase, the children were divided into two groups: those who provided informative responses to all the information requests (fully informative) and those who provided informative responses to only some of the information-requesting prompts (partially informative). Table 6 shows that only 17.4% of the children who did not disclose gave informative responses to all the prompts posed by the interviewers in this pre-substantive phase. A logistic regression analysis revealed that the proportion of informative responses relative to the total number of responses provided in the episodic memory training phase significantly predicted whether or not the children would later make allegations [$\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 15.71$, $p < .001$]. The overall predictive probability was 69.6%, with partial informativeness predicting non-disclosure in 82.6% of the cases and full informativeness predicting disclosure in 56.5% of the cases. Partially informative children were about six times less likely to make allegations than fully informative children were (Odds Ratio = 6.18) (see Table 6).

Discussion

The analyses reported here make clear that forensic interviews which yielded allegations of child abuse were characterized by quite different dynamics than interviews with children who seemed equivalently likely to have been abused but did not make allegations during the interview. Non-disclosing children and disclosing children behaved differently in both the rapport-building and the episodic memory training of the pre-substantive phase, providing proportionally fewer informative and more uninformative responses.

By contrast, interviewers behaved similarly with children in both disclosure groups during the pre-substantive rapport-building phase, regardless of the children's reluctance to be informative. Differences in the interviewers' behavior became evident during the pre-substantive episodic memory training, at which time non-disclosers continued to be uninformative when asked about neutral events. For their part, the interviewers worked harder, directing more utterances in total and proportionally fewer information-requesting prompts to non-disclosers than to disclosers. To that extent, it seems that interviewer behavior was shaped by the children's reluctance to provide information even at this early phase of the interview. Even in this phase of the interview, however, interviewers behaved similarly to disclosers and non-disclosers with respect to prompt type and supportiveness: They did not resort to more recognition than recall prompts and did not address non-disclosers with fewer supportive and more unsupportive comments, despite clear signs of the children's reluctance to be informative. Of course, our reliance on audiotapes precluded examination of non-verbal cues, and it is possible that the interviewers were giving children in the two groups different non-verbal cues.

Marked group differences in interview dynamics, as well as higher concordance between the interviewers' and children's behavior were evident in the 'getting the allegation' section, the only substantive portion of the interview in which children in both disclosure groups could be compared because the absence of allegations from the children in the non-disclosure group led the interviewers to terminate those interviews. During this section of the interviews, non-disclosing children remained reluctant to provide information, instead providing proportionally more uninformative responses (specifically, more resistance and denials) and fewer informative responses than children who made allegations of abuse. When interviewing non-disclosers, meanwhile, the interviewers adhered less closely to the NICHD protocol with respect to both memory-elicitation strategies and expressions of support. They made fewer requests for information, less frequent use of free-recall prompts, more use of recognition memory prompts, and offered fewer supportive comments, while tending to offer more unsupportive comments when interviewing non-disclosers than when interviewing children who made allegations of abuse.

Guided by the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, all interviewers began the 'getting the allegation' sequence with free-recall prompts (e.g., "Tell me why you came to talk to me today.") and offered recognition memory prompts (e.g., "Does your mum think that something happened to you?") only when free-recall prompts were ineffective. Thus, in most allegation interviews, interviewers did not have to proceed very far along the sequence of 'getting the allegation' prompts before the children made allegations, whereas in the non-allegation group interviewers tended to use each prompt in the 'getting the allegation' sequence, thereby using increasingly focused recognition prompts when attempting to elicit information. Interestingly, as in the case of young offenders (Hershkowitz et al., 2004), the non-disclosers behaved like cooperative 'disclosing' children to the extent that they were more responsive and informative in response to free-recall invitations than in response to recognition prompts even though the interviewers relied on proportionally more of the latter when interviewing them than when interviewing disclosers.

Although reluctant children probably needed more rather than less emotional support, non-disclosers were given less support than children who made allegations and they became less informative and increasingly resentful in their responses. Higher levels of interviewer support were associated with more informative and fewer uninformative responses in both groups. These findings are consistent with previous findings (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Davis & Bottoms, 2002; Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney, & Rudy, 1991; Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999) that interviewer supportiveness has a positive effect on the amount of information provided by children in the interviews.

All the interviews we studied involved children who were believed to have been victimized, although the children in the two groups appeared to differ with respect to their motivation to be informative, and the children's reluctance to disclose the abuse they had experienced may have been exacerbated by the interviewers' strategies. Children who did not disclose abuse were somewhat uncooperative, offered fewer details, and gave more uninformative responses even at the very beginning of the interview, before the interviewers focused on substantive issues and before the interviewers themselves began to behave differently, however. In addition to being uninformative, non-disclosers provided less information about themselves, their families, schools, and things they liked to do—personal topics that children were invited to talk about in the rapport-building phase. The rapport-building phase was thus less successful for non-disclosers than for children who made allegations of abuse. Non-disclosers continued to be uncooperative during the narrative training phase which is designed to continue rapport-building while providing children with opportunities to describe in detail recent personally experienced events, such as their birthday parties. From this point on, the interpersonal dynamics of non-allegation interviews progressively deteriorated, with the children exhibiting more omission, digression, displacement, and resentment following the interviewers' comments and in response to the interviewers' prompts. A close examination of the interviews showed that, just before the substantive issue was broached, a critical point at which children's trust and cooperation should have been at its peak, non-disclosers were the least responsive. Not surprisingly, therefore, responses to the "getting the allegation" prompts initiating the substantive phase were characterized by further reluctance. Non-disclosers were not only increasingly uninformative, but showed clear resentment and resistance; at the same time, the interviewers asked fewer open-ended questions and became less supportive. These experienced interviewers were clearly influenced by the children's reluctance to be informative and acted as though they were unaware of how important it was to maintain rapport and be supportive, especially when children may have emotional and motivational reasons to avoid disclosing their experiences. It is not clear what the non-disclosers knew in advance about the purpose of the interview and whether other social and psychological factors may have affected their uncooperativeness. Whether they are affected by feelings of guilt, shame, commitment, or fear, reluctant children are likely to experience forensic interviews as stressful and to perceive the interviewers as threatening.

The conclusiveness of our findings is limited by our exclusive focus on the interviewers' and children's verbal behavior, of course, and further insight may have been obtained if we had been able to examine body language and facial expressions. Both interviewers and children may have communicated their incredulity and reluctance non-verbally earlier than these appraisals were communicated verbally, and this may have exacerbated both the non-supportiveness and the reluctance of the interviewers and children, respectively.

Our findings obviously have important implications for the everyday practices of forensic investigators, who can expect to encounter non-disclosers quite commonly (Hershkowitz et al., 2005). In this study, the rapport-building and pre-substantive narrative training phases of the interview were not successful when reluctant children were being interviewed. Because the children's informativeness in the narrative training phase predicted whether or not the children would disclose, it appears that interviewers should not proceed to the substantive 'getting the allegation' phase when children are not responsive in the narrative training, because a premature transition to the substantive phase may provoke non-disclosure or denial of abuse in children who are motivated to withhold information (e.g., to protect familiar perpetrators, in response requests for secrecy, embarrassment, or fear). In some cases, denial of abuse may be irreversible, especially when perpetrating parents become aware of the investigation and pressure their children to keep silent. It may thus be better to avoid discussing substantive issues unless it appears likely that the children will be cooperative.

The findings also suggest that interviewers can assess children's engagement in rapport-building and their likelihood of disclosure with reasonable validity by observing the children's responsiveness. Such assessments may help investigators decide whether or not to proceed with the substantive phase of forensic interviews. Using this simple, easy to apply, predictive indicator of informativeness, many reluctant disclosers can apparently be identified and given additional rapport-building and support before substantive issues are broached. If non-reluctant children are incorrectly identified as reluctant, we assume that no harm will be caused by providing them with additional support. When traditional rapport-building is unsuccessful, however, alternative means need to be explored. It is possible that some children may need to be interviewed on another occasion and that investigators need to consider ending the interview without addressing substantive issues. Our results suggest that intrusive and confrontational interviewer behaviors certainly do not help reluctant children disclose abuse.

Acknowledgements

References

Aldridge, J., Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W., & Bowler, L. (2004). Using a human figure drawing to elicit information from alleged victims of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *72*, 304–316.

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. (2002). *Guidelines for psychosocial evaluation of suspected sexual abuse in young children*. Chicago, IL: American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children.

Berliner, L., & Conte, J. R. (1995). The effects of disclosure and intervention on sexually abused children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *19*, 371–384.

Bull, R. (1992). Obtaining evidence expertly: The reliability of interviews with child witnesses. *Expert Evidence*, *1*, 5–12.

Carter, C. A., Bottoms, B. L., & Levine, M. (1996). Linguistic and socioemotional influences on the accuracy of children's reports. *Law & Human Behavior*, *20*, 335–358.

Cederborg, A.-C., Lamb, M.E., & Laurell, O. (in press). Delay of disclosure, minimization and denial when the evidence is unambiguous: A multivictim case. In M. E. Pipe, M. E. Lamb, Y. Orbach, & A.-C. Cederborg (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse: Disclosure, delay and denial*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dale, P. S., Loftus, E. F., & Rathbun, L. (1978). The influence of the form of the question of the eyewitness testimony of preschool children. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, *74*, 269–277.

Davis, S. L., & Bottoms, B. L. (2002). The effects of social support on the accuracy of children's reports: Implications for the forensic interview. In I. B. Weiner (Ed.), *Personality and clinical psychology series* (pp. 437–457). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Dent, H. R., & Stephenson, G. M. (1979). An experimental study of the effectiveness of different techniques of questioning child witnesses. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *18*, 41–51.

DeYoung, M. (1988). Issues in determining the veracity of sexual abuse allegations. *Children's Health Care*, *17*, 50–57.

Fivush, R., & Shukat, J. R. (1995). Content, consistency, and coherence of early autobiographical recall. In M. S. Zaragoza, J. R. Graham, G. C. N. Hall, R. Hirschman, & Y. S. Ben-Porath (Eds.), *Memory and testimony in the child witness: Vol. 1*, (pp. 5–23). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Goodman, G. S., Bottoms, B. L., Schwartz-Kenney, B. M., & Rudy, L. (1991). Children's testimony about a stressful event: Improving children's reports. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, *1*, 69–99.

Goodman-Brown, T. B. (1995). Why children tell: A model of children's disclosure of sexual abuse. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *56*, 2325 (Doctoral dissertation, California School of Professional Psychology, 1995).

Hershkowitz, I., Horowitz, D., & Lamb, M. E. (2005). Trends in children's disclosure of abuse in Israel: A national study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *29*, 1203–1214.

Hershkowitz, I., Horowitz, D., Lamb, M. E., Orbach, Y., & Sternberg, K. J. (2004). Interviewing youthful suspects in alleged sex crimes: A descriptive analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *28*, 423–438.

Hutcheson, G. D., Baxter, J. S., Telfer, K., & Warden, D. (1995). Child witness statement quality: Question type and errors of omission. *Law & Human Behavior*, *19*, 631–648.

Imhoff, M. C., & Baker-Ward, L. (1999). Preschooler's suggestibility: Effects of developmentally appropriate language and interviewer supportiveness. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *20*, 407–429.

Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Sternberg, K. J., Boat, B., & Everson, M. D. (1996). Investigative interviews of alleged sexual abuse victims with and without anatomical dolls. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *20*, 1251–1259.

Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., Hovav, M., Manor, T., & Yudilevitch, L. (1996). Effects of investigative utterance types on Israeli children's responses. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *19*, 627–637.

Lamb, M. E., Orbach, Y., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., & Hershkowitz, I. (2002). The effects of forensic interview practices on the quality of information provided by alleged victims of child abuse. In H. L. Westcott, G. M. Davies, & R. Bull (Eds.), *Children's testimony: A handbook of psychological research and forensic practice* (pp. 131–145). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., & Esplin, P. W. (1998). Conducting investigative interviews of alleged sexual abuse victims. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *22*, 813–823.

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., Hershkowitz, I., & Orbach, Y. (1997). Assessing the credibility of children's allegations of sexual abuse: A survey of recent research. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *9*, 175–194.

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., & Hovav, M. (1997). Criterion-based content analysis: A field validation study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *21*, 255–264.

Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W., Stewart, H. L., & Mitchell, S. (2003). Age differences in young children's responses to open-ended invitations in the course of forensic interviews. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *71*, 926–934.

London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. J., & Shuman, D. W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and the Law*, *11*, 194–226.

Lyon, T. D. (1995). False allegations and false denials in child sexual abuse. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, *1*, 429–437.

Lyon, T. D. (2002). Scientific support for expert testimony on child sexual abuse accommodation. In J. R. Conte (Ed.), *Critical issues in child sexual abuse* (pp. 107–138). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lyon, T. D. (in press). False denials: Overcoming methodological biases in abuse disclosure research. In M. E. Pipe, M. E. Lamb, Y. Orbach, & A. C. Cederborg (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse: Disclosure, delay, and denial*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Memorandum of Good Practice (MGP). (1992). London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Oates, K., & Shrimpton, S. (1991). Children's memories for stressful and non-stressful events. *Medical Science and the Law*, *31*, 4–10.

Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., Esplin, P. W., & Horowitz, D. (2000). Assessing the value of structured protocols for forensic interviews of alleged child abuse victims. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *24*, 733–752.

Paine, M. L., & Hansen, D. J. (2002). Factors influencing children to self-disclose sexual abuse. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *22*, 271–295.

Palmer, S. E., Brown, R. A., Rae-Grant, N. I., & Loughlin, M. J. (1999). Responding to children's disclosure of familial abuse: What survivors tell us. *Child Welfare*, *78*, 259–282.

Poole, D. A., & Lamb, M. E. (1998). *Investigative interviews of children: A guide for helping professionals.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Raskin, D. C., & Esplin, P. W. (1991). Statement validity assessments: Interview procedures and content analyses of children's statements of sexual abuse. *Behavioral Assessment*, *13*, 265–291.

Saywitz, K. J., & Goodman, G. S. (1996). Interviewing children in and out of court: Current research and practice implications. In J. Briere, L. Berliner, J. A. Bulkley, C. Jenny, & T. Reid (Eds.), *The APSAC handbook on child maltreatment* (pp. 297–318). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saywitz, K. J., Goodman, G. S., Nicholas, E., & Moan, S. F. (1991). Children's memories of a physical examination involving genital touch: Implications for reports of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *59*, 682–691.

Sjöberg, R. L., & Lindblad, F. (2002). Delayed disclosure and disrupted communication during forensic investigation of child sexual abuse: A study of 47 corroborated cases. *Acta Paediatrica*, *91*, 1391–1396.

Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., & Hershkowitz, I. (1996). Child sexual abuse investigations in Israel. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *23*, 322–337.

Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Yudilevitch, L., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W., & Hovav, M. (1997). Effects of introductory style on children's abilities to describe experiences of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *21*, 1133–1146.

Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W., & Mitchell, S. (2001). Use of a structured investigative protocol enhances young children's responses to free recall prompts in the course of forensic interviews. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *86*, 997–1005.

Yuille, J. C., Tymofievich, M., & Marxsen, D. (1995). The nature of allegations of child sexual abuse. In T. Ney (Ed.), *True and false allegations of child sexual abuse: Assessment and case management* (pp. 21–46). New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.

Résumé

Objectifs : L'étude en question a été conçue dans le but d'explorer les différences structurelles entre des entrevues avec des enfants qui ont révélé avoir été victimes de mauvais traitements et des entrevues où les enfants n'ont pas dévoilé.

Méthode : Cinquante entrevues avec des présumée victimes âgées de 4 à 13 ans qui n'ont pas révélé durant l'entrevue qu'ils avaient été maltraitées ont fait l'objet d'une comparaison avec un même nombre d'entrevues durant lesquelles les enfants ont dévoilé avoir été abusés physiquement ou sexuellement. Seuls les cas où il y avait bonne raison de croire que les dévoilements étaient légitimes ont été retenus aux fins de l'étude. On a enregistré, puis passé en revue les entrevues en portant une attention particulière aux interventions de la personne menant l'entrevue ainsi qu'aux réponses des enfants, ceci au cours des phases suivantes de l'entrevue: l'établissement de la relation entre les parties, l'encouragement de la mémoire épisodique, et la recherche du dévoilement. On s'est servi d'un guide spécialisé.

Constats : On a noté une dynamique très différente selon que les entrevues étaient révélatrices ou non. Les personnes menant des entrevues avec des enfants non "révélateurs" utilisaient plus rarement des techniques promouvant le rappel libre et offraient moins souvent des interventions aidantes que dans des entrevues avec des enfants "révélateurs". Les enfants qui n'ont pas révélé des incidents de maltraitance étaient moins aptes à vouloir collaborer avec l'intervieweur, ils fournissaient moins de détails et donnaient des réponses vagues même au tout début de l'entrevue et même avant que l'intervieweur leur pose des questions propres à la maltraitance ou qu'ils commence à manifester lui-même des comportements inusités.

Conclusions : Quand les enfants ne réagissent pas lorsque l'intervieweur tente d'encourager leur mémoire épisodique, on risque d'empêcher les enfants de dévoiler la maltraitance si on porte une attention prématurée sur les questions de maltraitance. Il faut savoir reconnaître les enfants craintifs et s'efforcer de développer avec eux une bonne relation avant d'aborder des questions portant sur la maltraitance qu'ils ont subie. Ou encore, il serait utile de mener plus d'une entrevue avec ces enfants.

Resumen

Spanish language abstract not available at time of publication.