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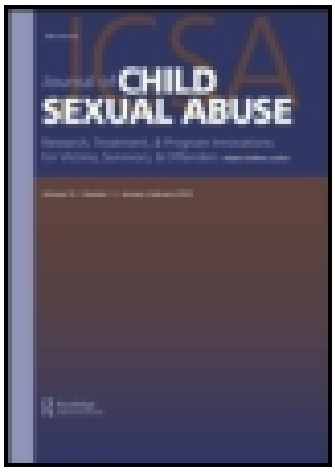

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Eliciting Accounts of Alleged Child Sexual Abuse: How Do Children Report Touch?

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Abstract

Investigative interviewers frequently question alleged victims of child sexual abuse about any touching or bodily contact that might have occurred. In the present study of forensic interviews with 192 alleged sexual abuse victims, between four and 13 years of age, we examined the frequency with which alleged victims reported bodily contact as 'touch', and the types of prompts associated with 'touch' reports. Even young alleged victims of sexual abuse reported bodily contact as 'touch', and they used the word 'touch' more frequently in response to recall than recognition prompts. Further, regardless of age, children typically referred to 'touch' before interviewers used this term, suggesting that even young children are able to report 'touch' without being cued by interviewers.

Keywords: investigative interviewing, bodily contact, touching, children

In investigative interviews exploring suspicions of child sexual abuse, interviewers frequently question children about any touching or bodily contact that might have occurred. Furthermore, when anatomical dolls and human body diagrams are introduced as interview aids, the word 'touch' is often used in association with them to question children about bodily contact during the alleged abuse. When children either do not understand 'touch' or do not understand the word as intended, such questions may make errors of commission and omission more likely: children may erroneously acquiesce to the cue 'touch', or fail to report bodily contact that actually occurred because they do not associate the word 'touch' with their experiences. Unfortunately, we know very little about children's reports of 'touch' in forensic interviews. The present study examined

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the effects of age and eliciting question type on children's use of the word 'touch' in forensic interviews.

Previous studies exploring children's reports of touching have focused primarily on the accuracy of non-abused children's claims that they have or have not been touched, typically in the context of either medical or analog events. Findings from these studies are mixed. Several studies indicate that children can respond to 'abuse-relevant' questions about touch very accurately. For example, Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, and Moan (1991) reported that, when five-year-old girls did not actually experience genital touch during a medical examination, they almost never made an error of commission when questioned verbally. Similarly, Krackow and Lynn (2003) found that preschool-aged children who were innocuously touched were no more likely to falsely assent to 'abuse-related' touch questions (e.g., "Amy touched your bottom, didn't she?") than were children who were not touched. However, other studies have revealed contrasting findings, especially when human figure diagrams or body maps were used to elicit reports of touch from non-abused children (Brown, Pipe, Lewis, Lamb, & Orbach, 2007; Steward et al., 1996; Willcock, Morgan, & Hayne, 2006). In Steward et al.'s (1996) study, three- to six-year-old children's free-recall reports of body touch during a pediatric examination were very accurate but incomplete. When the children were directly questioned using dolls and diagrams, they still failed to report many experienced touches. Brown et al. (2007) found that children who were questioned in association with the diagrams reported more incorrect information than those not shown diagrams. In Willcock et al.'s study, 10% of the children erroneously indicated that they had been touched in the genital region, while 25% of the children erroneously indicated that they had been touched on their chest/breast area.

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How then should accurate reports of touching be elicited? In Saywitz et al.'s (1991) study, the majority of children who experienced a vaginal and anal examination revealed genital contact only when asked directly about it. In Krackow and Lynn's (2003) study, children who were asked suggestive questions made more errors of commission in response to abuse-touch questions than children who were not asked these questions. These findings suggest that children's reports of innocuous touching vary depending on the way in which they are questioned, at least in analogue contexts. Although young children sometimes provide free-recall reports of innocuous touching, such reports are often incomplete (errors of omission; Steward et al., 1996), whereas the focused or direct questions that help elicit reports of touch from children are associated with errors of commission. Because sexually abusive touches can be significantly more emotion-laden or stressful than non-abusive touches, and because many children may not understand or use the word 'touch', alternative interviewing strategies may be necessary in forensic contexts. Researchers have not yet directly examined the types of questions associated with children's reports of 'touch' in the context of investigative interviews.

Studies using drawings and dolls suggest developmental differences in the ways children accurately report touch. Young children may not have the linguistic or cognitive abilities necessary to recognize behaviors as abusive and older children may feel ashamed or embarrassed about the acts involved. Further, even though older children are expected to have learned about sexual body parts and functions, sexual behaviors, reproduction, and sexual abuse prevention, they may not understand such activities as sexual intercourse (Gordon, Schroeder, & Abrams, 1990). Reviewing research on the use of interviewing aids when questioning children about touches, Poole, Bruck, and Pipe (2011) proposed that younger children may have difficulty reporting

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touches even with the help of props such as anatomical dolls and body diagrams because they have difficulty understanding and encoding touches. If young children indeed lack the semantic and conceptual knowledge needed to correctly identify touches (Bruck, 2009), they might fail to remember and report touches that have actually occurred (because they do not find them to be memorable) or erroneously report touches because they acquiesced to questions about 'touch'. Such a possibility is alarming because many forensic interviewers, especially when using anatomical dolls or drawings, ask questions such as, "Did anyone touch you there?," and, "Which part of your body did s/he touch?" If some children respond inaccurately to such inquiries because they do not fully understand or use the word 'touch', then specific questions about 'touch' are problematic. On the other hand, even if some children fail to or inaccurately report touch because they simply do not understand or use the word 'touch' well, they are capable of using other words to describe bodily contact. There is also evidence that young children may have an under-inclusive definition of the word 'touch' – they believe that it applies only to use of the hand (as opposed to the mouth or sexual body part) (Bruck, 2009). Hashima, Barton, and Steward (1988) found specifically that three- to six-year-olds sometimes did not consider touching with a washcloth 'touch' and often did not consider kissing 'touch'.

There is compelling evidence for developmental differences in the ways children respond to different types of prompts in investigative interviews (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Orbach, Katz, & Horowitz, 2012; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 2000; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, Stewart, Mitchell, 2003). Nonetheless there is growing evidence that even preschool-aged children are more informative in response to recall than recognition prompts, suggesting that young children may be able to clearly report and describe abuse without being asked option-posing or leading

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questions (Lamb et al., 2003). Since it is still unclear as to how children's reports of touching are elicited in the forensic context, we need to examine possible developmental changes in children's touch reports in relation to the types of prompts used by interviewers.

As Poole et al. (2011) pointed out, most research on children's reports of 'touch' involves children's experiences of innocuous touches or bodily contact. They speculated that young children might not associate the word 'touch' with common physical contact, such as kissing and hugging or with touches that are embedded in sequences of actions. It is possible that children do not report innocuous touches on the arm or shoulder, for example, because such touches are not salient or personally meaningful (Brown et al., 2007). Sexually abusive touches can be particularly intrusive, traumatic, and embarrassing for some children, and so children might not encode and recall sexual abuse like other types of bodily contact. However, we know very little about how children report touches in the context of sexual abuse. Teoh, Yang, Lamb, and Larsson (2010) found that alleged victims of sexual abuse were generally able to describe the body parts that had been touched clearly, but that younger children often failed to provide information indicating the severity of the abuse. In the present study, we focused specifically on children and interviewers' use of the word 'touch' when talking about the alleged sexual abuse. However, as in Teoh et al.'s (2010) study, our use of field data meant that the accuracy of the alleged victims' statements could not be ascertained. Instead we focused on possible age effects in reports of 'touch' by suspected child victims and on the types of prompts that elicit these reports.

In the present study, we examined the frequency with which children reported bodily contact as 'touch', and the extent to which these reports varied with age and the type of prompts the interviewers used. For the purpose of consistency, we refer in this paper to children and

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interviewers' use of the word 'touch' as 'reports of touch' or 'touch reports'. In line with Poole et al.'s (2011) assertion that young children do not use the word 'touch' as an umbrella term referring to all forms of bodily contact, and have difficulty using the word 'touch', we expected that the number of 'touch' reports would increase with age. We also asked whether children used the word 'touch' before the interviewers did, and whether the frequency of children's 'touch' reports was associated with the frequency of interviewers' 'touch' reports. Finally, we examined whether the interviewers questioned children about touching more frequently using open-ended or recall prompts than focused or recognition prompts.

Method

Participants

The study included forensic interviews of 192 alleged sexual abuse victims varying in age from four to 13 years (M = 8.01, SD = 2.63). All of the interviews followed the National Institute of Child Health and Development Investigative Interview Protocol (NICHD) (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001), designed to elicit complete and accurate episodic information about the alleged incidents to facilitate decisions about child protection or criminal prosecution and all were the first formal interviews of the alleged victims. The interviews were conducted between 1997 and 2001 by 23 participating police officers in two police departments in the western United States. All of the interviewers received extensive training from researchers at NICHD on the use of the Protocol during the course of the project. Of the 233 interviews conducted by the investigators, 41 were

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excluded: 22 because touch was not mentioned at all in the interviews, 10 because only exposure was alleged (and the present study focused on bodily contact), seven because the victims did not make allegations, and two because the interview records were missing. In the final sample of 192 children, there were 136 girls and 56 boys. One hundred and eleven of the children reported two or more incidents of sexual abuse, and 80 reported a single incident. The alleged perpetrators were co-residing family members in 73 cases, other family members in 36 cases, familiar but unrelated individuals in 80 cases, and unfamiliar to the alleged victim in three cases. As for the type of abuse reported, 34 of the children alleged touching over clothes, 108 reported touching under clothes, and 49 children reported oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. The reported delay between the last alleged incident and the date of the interview ranged from one day to 234 weeks (4.5 years).

Procedure

The NICHD investigative interview protocol. The NICHD Protocol provides structured guidelines for all phases of the investigative interview, translating research-based recommendations into general operational guidelines that help investigators elicit complete, informative, and uncontaminated reports from alleged child victims (Lamb et al., 2008). The structured interview starts with an introductory phase, in which the police investigator introduces him/herself, specifies the child's task (to truthfully describe an event), and establishes the ground rules and expectations. The first part of the rapport-building phase is designed to create a relaxed, supportive environment. Children are then prompted to describe a recently experienced neutral event in detail. In a transitional phase between the pre-substantive and substantive parts of the interview, a series of prompts are used to identify the target event(s) under investigation

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non-suggestively, and the investigator only moves on to some carefully scripted and increasingly focused prompts (in sequence) if the child fails to identify the target event(s).

Following disclosure of the allegation, the substantive phase begins with the main invitation ("Tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end as best as you can remember"). Follow-up free-recall prompts (e.g., invitations) are then recommended. As soon as the first narrative is completed, the investigator prompts the child to indicate whether the incident occurred "one time or more than one time" and then proceeds to secure incident-specific information, using follow-up and cued invitations (e.g., "Earlier you mentioned a [person, object, or action]. Tell me everything about that"), making reference to details mentioned by the child to elicit uncontaminated free-recall accounts of the alleged incident(s). Only after exhaustive free-recall prompting do investigators proceed to directive questions (focused questions addressing details previously mentioned by the child), such as, "When did it happen?" If crucial details are still missing at the end of the interview, investigators may ask limited option-posing questions (mostly yes/no questions referencing new issues that the child failed to address previously) such as, "Did he touch any part of your body when he was talking to you?" Suggestive utterances, which communicate to the child what response is expected ("At that time he was lying on top of you, wasn't he?"), are strongly discouraged in all phases of the interview.

Data Coding

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the written transcripts were subjected to coding. Children's and interviewers' reports of 'touch' in the substantive phase were identified and coded according to the following categories:

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(a) *Reporter*. Touch reports were coded as reported by the child or the interviewer.

(b) *Type of eliciting prompt*. When 'touch' was reported by the child or interviewer, the eliciting prompt (or concurrent interviewer prompt) was coded as a recall or recognition prompt. Using the definitions provided by Lamb and his colleagues (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, & Everson, 1996; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996), the interviewers' prompts were categorized as follows: (i) *recall* prompts (those that prompted free recall from children or refocused on details previously mentioned by the child [i.e., invitations, directive prompts, summaries; e.g., "You mentioned that he touched you. Tell me what happened."]) and (ii) *recognition* prompts (those that presented details not previously mentioned by the child to elicit a response [i.e., option-posing/leading prompts, suggestive prompts; e.g., "Did he touch you more than once?"]).

Non-substantive prompts, comprising interviewer statements or questions that were not focused on the investigated incident, were not coded. These included prompts that had non-substantive content or were instructive or explanatory in nature.

Cases were also coded according to the following:

(a) *First report of touch*. Cases were coded as whether the interviewer or child first reported 'touch' in the substantive phase.

Interrater reliability. Interrater reliability was calculated for 32 (17%) of the interviews. Agreement was 97.8% for the identification of the use of the word 'touch'. Using Cohen's κ, agreement was 1.00 for reporter, .98 for type of prompt, and 1.00 for first report of 'touch'.

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Results

Preliminary Analyses

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were carried out to examine the effects of gender, familiarity of the alleged perpetrator, frequency of the incident, and type of abuse on each dependent variable (total number of 'touch' reports by child, total number of 'touch' reports by interviewer, proportion of 'touch' reports in response to and involved in recall prompts, and proportion of 'touch' reports in response to and involved in recognition prompts). Chi-square analyses examined the effects of the above-mentioned case characteristics on who first reported 'touch'. There were significant effects of type of abuse on who first reported 'touch', χ^2 (2, N = 191) = 7.26, $p < .05$. Children were more likely than interviewers to first report 'touch' when touching over clothes and when touching under clothes (percentages of cases for child = 71% and 61%, interviewer = 29% and 39%, respectively) were alleged than in cases where penetration was alleged (percentages of cases for child = 43%, interviewer = 57%). Thus, type of abuse was included in the main analyses where applicable.

Main Analyses

Children and interviewers' reports of 'touch'. On average, interviewers (M = 10.69; SD = 10.85) referred to 'touch' more frequently than did children (M = 4.21; SD = 5.14), $t(192) = 8.94$, $p < .01$, although children were more likely than interviewers to first report 'touch' (Ns = 111 and 81, respectively). Both children and interviewers used the word 'touch' more frequently when the

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children mentioned it first (*Ms* = 6.32 and 12.42; *SD* = 5.63 and 10.81, respectively) than when the interviewers first mentioned it (*M* = 1.35 and 8.32; *SD* = 2.23 and 10.53, respectively), t_{child} (190) = 36.31; $t_{interviewer}$(190) = 2.71, *ps* < .001.

We performed a logistic regression analysis to determine whether child age predicted who first reported 'touch'. Type of abuse was dichotomized (touches over and touch under clothes were compared to penetration cases) and included in the regression as a covariate. The analysis revealed that child age and type of abuse as a set significantly predicted who first reported 'touch', χ^2 (2, *N* = 191) = 6.28, *p* < .05, and accounted for 3% to 4% of variability. However, as shown in the preliminary analyses, only type of abuse made a unique statistically significant contribution to the first reports of 'touch', *p* = .016, with an odds ratio of 2.28, indicating that the interviewers were 2.28 times more likely to first report 'touch' in penetration cases than in cases involving touch only.

We performed separate standard linear regression analyses to examine the extent to which child age and the number of interviewers' references to 'touch' predicted the number of children's reports of 'touch'. Child age did not significantly predict children's reports of 'touch'. The number of 'touch' reports by the interviewer significantly predicted the number of children's 'touch' reports, β = .39, *t*(192) = 7.44, *p* = .00, and explained a significant proportion of the variance in children's 'touch' reports, R^2 = .15, *F*(2, 189) = 17.28, *p* < .001. Hence, the more often interviewers reported 'touch', the more often children did so, too.

Type of prompts associated with reports of touch. Chi-Square analyses revealed a significant association between who first mentioned 'touch' (child, interviewer) and the type of prompt associated with the first mention of 'touch' (recall, recognition, non-substantive), χ^2 (2, *N* = 191) =

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110.37, $p < .001$. We found that children were more likely to first mention 'touch' following recall prompts ($N = 92.7\%$) than recognition ($N = 4.5\%$) and non-substantive prompts ($N = 2.7\%$). Interviewers were more likely to first mention 'touch' using recognition prompts ($N = 74.1\%$) than recall ($N = 18.5\%$) and non-substantive prompts ($N = 7.4\%$). The latter results merely indicated that the interviewers adhered to the interview protocol.

T-tests were carried out to examine differences in the number of 'touch' reports involving the use of recall and recognition prompts. Non-substantive prompts were excluded from the analyses because they were rarely used by interviewers ($M = 1.42$, $SD = 3.72$) or responded to by children ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.76$). In the analysis of children's reports, we excluded cases in which the children never reported 'touch'. In the analysis of interviewers' reports, we excluded cases in which the interviewer never reported 'touch'. Outliers (cases reporting 'touch' only one or twice) were also excluded from the analyses. Proportions rather than raw numbers of 'touch' reports were entered into the analyses. The results showed that children reported 'touch' significantly more frequently following recall ($M = .89$, $SD = .22$) than recognition ($M = 0.11$, $SD = .22$) prompts, $t(144) = 21.62$, $p < .001$. The interviewers mentioned 'touch' just as frequently when using recall prompts ($M = .48$, $SD = .31$) as when using recognition prompts ($M = 0.52$, $SD = .31$), $t(183) = -.75$, *n.s.*

We also performed a standard linear regression analysis to examine the extent to which child age and the proportion of interviewers' recall prompts that made references to 'touch' predicted the proportion of children's 'touch' reports elicited by recall prompts. Neither variable significantly predicted the relative frequency of children's 'touch' reports in response to recall prompts.

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Discussion

In line with previous research, we had expected child age to predict children's reports of 'touch' in forensic interviews. However, we did not find a linear relationship between child age and (a) use of 'touch' and (b) first use of 'touch'. Further, both the children and interviewers reported 'touch' more frequently when the word was first used by the children rather than by the interviewers. Children also reported 'touch' more frequently in response to recall than recognition prompts, although interviewers referenced 'touch' just as frequently using recall as recognition prompts. Recall prompts such as cued invitations and summaries typically include details that children had mentioned earlier. Previous research has shown that although open-ended questions and free recall may not elicit many details, especially from the youngest children, accounts elicited using recall probes can be highly accurate (Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Poole & White, 1991; Lamb et al., 2003). These findings suggest that young children may understand or use the word 'touch' without being prompted by the interviewer. However, because our sample included only children who had previously disclosed sexual abuse, our findings do not generalize to children who did not disclose or denied abuse. Further, if interviewers were the first to use the word 'touch', this could mean that the child had not disclosed 'touch' or that she had used a different label (e.g., feel, stroke, play) earlier.

As expected, we also found that the frequency with which the interviewers used the word 'touch' predicted the frequency with which children reported 'touch'. Thus how children use the word 'touch' may be less affected by their age and more related to the extent to which interviewers use the word. However, because our data do not allow for inference of causality, it is also possible

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that the frequency with which interviewers use the word 'touch' is predicted by children's use of the word. That is, interviewers may refrain from using the word touch until the child has indicated that s/he was touched (whether or not the child used the word 'touch').

Although our preliminary analyses did not show that the type of abuse was associated with differences in the number of 'touch' reports, 'touch' was more likely to be reported when the alleged abuse involved touching over or under clothes rather than oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. Further, children were significantly more likely to be the first to report 'touch' when the alleged abuse involved touch over and under clothes rather than when penetration was alleged. That is, when penetration was involved, interviewers were more likely to use the word 'touch' before children did. Thus, children may be more likely to use the word 'touch' for bodily contact that involves the use of the hand while using specific words to depict contact between the genitalia or acts of insertion. Perhaps the nature of the abuse, rather than individual differences in children, affects how children encode and recall bodily contact in the context of sexual abuse.

Children's accounts may provide the information necessary to determine the severity of sexual abuse, which in turn helps establish the relevant criminal charges. Information that distinguishes fondling from penetration, for instance, can significantly influence the nature of the crime involved. Analyses of children's descriptions of touches, rather than reports of whether or not a touch occurred, can yield valuable information about how children understand and report touch, and why they might fail to report certain touches. Findings from the present study suggest that even young alleged victims of sexual abuse report bodily contact as 'touches', although they were less likely to do so when the alleged abuse involved penetration. Even though young children in the study reported bodily contact as 'touch', investigative interviewers should nonetheless refrain

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from cueing children with the word 'touch' because they may inadvertently cue reports of 'touches' that have not occurred, or lead children not to report other forms of bodily contact. Instead, interviewers should question children about sexual abuse using the child's own words or terms, and seek to clarify such terms. One of the limitations of our study is, of course, that the accuracy of the children's reports could not be ascertained, but the findings nonetheless show convincingly that even quite young children refer to 'touch'.

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