

Reflections on Emerging Issues



Forensic Use of Anatomical Diagrams

As best practices in the field of forensic interviewing evolve, it is important to consider and incorporate new research. It is equally important to think critically about the applicability of laboratory and other research to the practice of forensic interviewing. In order to pursue both the best interests of children and the interests of justice, it is essential to evaluate research with regard to what is truly relevant and applicable to improved practice.

Over the past several years, the research community has paid increased attention to the use of anatomical diagrams. Important questions are being asked about their place in the forensic interview process and the potential disadvantages of their use. In a recent article by Poole and Dickinson (2011), the authors highlight the potential for “false reports” when researchers use “body diagrams” in a laboratory setting. While any interview tools, including anatomical diagrams, should be used judiciously and only by those trained in their proper use, this study has several significant shortcomings in regard to its applicability for forensic interviews:

- None of the reports determined as “false” in the study were reports of genital touch; this is a significant limitation of the research findings and reduces the applicability of the study to actual forensic interview settings (Lyon, in press).
- The body diagrams omitted genitalia:
 - i. Because the body diagrams used are significantly different than the ones used by CornerHouse, we question the relevance of the research to our practice.
 - ii. McCormick points out that with regard to children’s use of demonstrative aids in court, “the theory justifying admission of these exhibits requires only that the item be sufficiently explanatory or illustrative of relevant testimony...” (as cited in Myers, 1992). Gender neutral diagrams are arguably not “sufficiently explanatory” as they are not an accurate representation of the human body. This limits the application of the Poole and Dickinson research in both court and forensic interview settings.
- Child sexual abuse dynamics, which impact abused children’s ability to disclose during a forensic interview, are not replicated in this study. As with all laboratory research, the absence of these dynamics limits the applicability of research findings to practice. The “incidental touch” experienced by these children during an educational activity would not likely result in the shame, guilt or embarrassment often experienced by abused children. In fact, these touches may not be memorable to the child at all (Lyon, in press).

CornerHouse continues to support the use of anatomical diagrams during forensic interviews when it is developmentally appropriate to conduct anatomy identification with a child, as a reference when conducting touch inquiry with some children and as a tool that may be offered for clarification. Anatomical diagrams can be a helpful communication tool within the forensic interview process but, like any other interview tool, their efficacy is contingent upon the interviewer’s skill and training. The introduction of anatomical diagrams is an important decision that should be based on the interviewer’s training as well as the child, their development and case circumstances. Further, their use should not undermine developmentally appropriate questioning that promotes narrative responses. When used appropriately, anatomical diagrams can enhance verbal communication between a child and interviewer and serve as a tool for clarification and reference.

References

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