

# How (not) to Interview Children

## Interviews with Young Children in Sexual Abuse Investigations in Finland



Julia Korkman



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my excellent supervisors, Pekka Santtila and Kenneth Sandnabba. Pekka has shown incredible flexibility in supervising me in various cities and countries (and trains and buses between these), as well as often long-distance. A hardworking, sharp, and efficient mentor, working with him can best be defined in the word: fun. Kenneth has been a wonderful support throughout this work. I have very much appreciated his wise comments, sensitive listening and the moral support he has provided when – and it happened – it was needed.

I also wish to thank to the rest of the staff at the nice department of Psychology at Åbo Akademi University, and in particular I wish to mention Professor Matti Laine who always has been encouraging and supportive. My co-authors, Malin Westeråker and Tove Drzewiecki, have contributed to this work enormously. Working with you has been a pleasure.

I am indebted to Professor Michael E. Lamb and Professor Pär Anders Granhag for their careful reviews of a previous version of this manuscript, including constructive criticism and valuable comments.

Sirpa Taskinen has kindly supported this research and her help when planning the data collection was invaluable. I also want to thank Katarina Finnilä-Tuohimaa for many inspiring and pleasant discussions related to our common professional interests (and much else). I wish to dedicate this work to Katarina, Eeva Aronen and my other soon-to-be-colleagues at the recently established knowledge centre for children involved in forensic investigations (Pienten lasten oikeuspsykiatrisen osaamiskeskus, HUS), in the hope that the present thesis will be of some use when working towards improving the situation for young victims and witnesses in Finland.

A warm thanks goes to Anna Mladenov, Dana K Mason, Kim Bast, and Lucia Ray for their different, but all of them highly professional and much appreciated, inputs. Tove Ekman deserves a particular note of gratitude for graciously letting me use her nice and calm apartment as my office during the last months of working with this thesis.

I also wish to thank the team, and in particular Björn Lundström, at the Psychiatric policlinic for children in Ekenäs (Tammisaari) with whom I had the advantage of working at the outset of my career and who supported me when I initially took interest in the topic of this thesis. Working with the CRC team in Geneva was likewise a highly motivating experience, providing me with valuable insight in children's rights, including new perspectives to my own topic. I also wish to thank the nice personnel at Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut.

On a more personal level, I wish to thank my family, in particular my mother Marit, whose respectful ways of relating to and interacting with children I much admire, and my wonderful husband Jussi, who has provided all kinds of technical and other (more important) support.

This thesis was financially supported by: Kotisisaropiston Kannatusyhdistys, Paulon Säätiö, Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, Suomen Kulttuurirahasto, Svenska Kulturfonden, and Åbo Akademi University.

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## LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following original publications:

- I. Korkman, J., Santtila, P., & Sandnabba, N. K. (2006). Dynamics of verbal interaction between interviewer and child in interviews with alleged victims of child sexual abuse. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 47, 109-119.
- II. Korkman, J., Santtila, P., Westeråker, M., & Sandnabba, N. K. (in press). Interviewing techniques and follow-up questions in child sexual abuse interviews. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*.
- III. Korkman, J., Santtila, P., Drzewiecki, T., & Sandnabba, N. K. (submitted). Failing to keep it simple: Language use in child sexual abuse interviews with 3-8-year-old children.
- IV. Santtila, P., Korkman, J., & Sandnabba, N. K. (2004). Effects of interviewer phase, repeated interviewing, presence of a support person, and anatomically detailed dolls on child sexual abuse interviews. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 10, 21-35.



## ABSTRACT

The present thesis had two main objectives: The first was to assess how child sexual abuse (CSA) interviews in Finland are conducted through analysing the interviewing techniques applied and the language used by the interviewers, as well as to suggest ways to improve interviews if they were found to have deficiencies. The second main aim was to contribute to the growing research corpus concerning CSA interviews, in particular, by addressing how interviewers follow up information provided by the child, by analysing whether child health care professionals would use child-adapted language, and by studying the kind of modifications in the verbal behaviour of interviewers and children that were associated with a) repeated interviews, b) a support person's presence at the interview, and c) the use of anatomically detailed dolls.

Two complementary samples of CSA interviews were analysed. The first one was composed of child interviews with 3-12-year-old children ( $N = 27$ ) that had been considered problematic by lawyers or other involved professionals (Studies I and IV). The second sample consisted of unselected interviews ( $N = 43$ ) with children aged 3 to 8 years conducted in a number of hospitals in different parts of the country (Studies II and III).

**Study I:** The verbal interaction between interviewer and child was analysed in a sample of interviews that had been considered to be problematic by involved professionals. Results showed that interviewers used inappropriate questioning techniques, relying on option-posing, specific suggestive and unspecific suggestive questions to a significant extent, these comprising around 50% of all interviewer utterances. The proportion of invitations, which the research community recommends interviewers to rely on, was strikingly low. Invitations and directive utterances were associated with an increase in informative responses by the child in terms of response type, number of new details reported, as well as length of response. The

opposite was true for option-posing and suggestive utterances. Longer questions by the interviewer (in number of words) often rendered no reply from the child, whereas shorter questions were followed by descriptive answers. Even after the child had provided an informative answer, interviewers failed to follow up the information in an adequate way and instead continued to rely on focused and leading questions.

**Study II:** Due to the possible bias of the sample analysed in Study I, the most important analyses were rerun with the unselected sample and reported separately. Results were quite similar between the two studies, indicating that the problems observed in Study I, with interviewers relying on option-posing and suggestive questions to a significant extent, are likely to be general and not specific for those interviews. Even if suggestive questions were slightly less and invitations slightly more common in this sample than in the previous study, almost half of the interviewer questions were still option-posing or suggestive, and also in this sample, interviewers failed to follow up information by the child in a facilitating manner. Differentiating between judicial and contextual details showed that while facilitators, invitations, and directive utterances elicited more contextual than judicial details, the opposite was true for specific suggestive utterances. These results might be explained by the reluctance of children to describe sexual details related to the abuse events. Alternatively, they may also be due to children describing incorrect sexual details as a result of suggestive interviewing techniques.

**Study III:** This study examined features of the language used by the interviewers. Interviewer utterances included multiple questions, long statements, complicated grammar and concepts, as well as unclear references to persons and situations. More than a fifth of the interviewer utterances were coded as belonging to at least one of these categories. The results suggest that even professionals who are experienced in interacting with children may have difficulties in using a child-sensitive language, adding to the pool of studies showing similar problems to occur in legal hearings with children conducted by lawyers. As children rarely comment on, or even recognise, their

lack of comprehension, the use of a language that is too complex can have detrimental consequences for the outcomes of investigative interviews. Interviewers used different approaches to introduce the topic of abuse. While 15% of the children spontaneously addressed the topic of abuse, probably indicating that they felt confident with the interviewer and the situation, in almost 50% of the cases, the interviewer introduced the topic of abuse in a way that can be considered leading. Interviews were characterised by a lack of structure, apparent in frequent rapid switches of topic by the interviewer. This manner was associated with a decrease in the number of new details provided by the children.

**Study IV:** This study analysed possible changes in the interview dynamics associated with repeated interviewing, the presence of a support person (related to the child), and the use of anatomically detailed (AD) dolls. Repeated interviewing, in combination with suggestive questions, has previously been found to seriously contaminate children's accounts. In the present material, interviewers used significantly more suggestive utterances in the repeated condition, thus endangering the reliability of the children's reports. Few studies have investigated the effects of a support person's presence at the interview. The results of the present study showed that interviewers talked more and children provided less information when a support person was present. Supporting some earlier findings regarding the use of AD dolls, the present results showed that using AD dolls was associated with longer interviewer utterances and shorter, less responsive, and less detailed child responses. Interviewers used up to five times more unspecific suggestive utterances when dolls were used, for instance through repeatedly asking the child to show "what really happened" with the dolls.

**Conclusion:** The results indicate that CSA interviews in Finland are not conducted in a manner that follows best practice as defined by the research community and as stated in a number of guidelines. When comparing these questioning strategies with the recommendations, which have been predominant in the field for more than ten years now, it can be concluded that the interviews analysed were conducted in a manner that undermines the possibility to elicit an

uncontaminated and accurate narrative from the children. A particularly worrying finding was the fact that interviewers did not follow up relevant information by the children in an adequate way. A number of clinical implications can be drawn from the results, particularly concerning the need for improvement in the quality of CSA interviews. There is convincing research regarding how to improve CSA interviews, notably through training forensic child interviewers to use a structured interviewing protocol, and providing them with continuous supervision and feedback. Allocating appropriate resources to improve the quality of forensic child interviews is a matter of protecting the rights of all persons involved in CSA investigations, in particular those of the children.

*Keywords:* child sexual abuse investigations, forensic child interviews, interviewer utterances, child response types, language use in forensic child interviews, anatomically detailed dolls, repeated interviewing, presence of a support person at CSA interviews, improving CSA interviews.

## INTRODUCTION

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and which entered into force in Finland in 1991, contains four universal principles intended to give overall guidance for national implementation of the Convention. Among these four principles is "*the views of the child*" (article 12 of the Convention), according to which the opinion of children should be given due weight "*in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*". In particular, children should be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting them.

Conducting interviews with children in a way that enables them to come forward with their views in a non-biased, non-suggestive way is, however, challenging. A study conducted by Plotnikoff and Woolfson (2004), in which the authors interviewed 50 young child victims serving as witnesses in court, showed that these had very negative experiences of acting as witnesses. Children often had problems understanding the use of language in the forensic interviews and many reported that appearing as witnesses was as traumatic as the original abuse.

As pointed out in Finnish recommendations (Taskinen, 2003) on how to conduct child sexual abuse (CSA) investigations, the children should be heard as soon as possible after the suspicion of abuse has arisen. First of all, it is well established that memories fade over time and that the risk of suggestion grows with the gap between the alleged event and the interview (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). Furthermore, particularly when intra-familial abuse is suspected, it is imperative to conduct the investigations as rapidly as possible in order to protect the psychological well-being of the child, as well as of the family as a whole. The importance of avoiding unnecessary delay in the disposition of cases involving child victims and witnesses is emphasised also by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, 2000). Unfortunately, CSA investigations and legal proceedings involving children tend to be long in present day Finland, with children being interviewed repeatedly, sometimes long after the suspicions of abuse

have arisen, sometimes by several different interviewers. In a report by the Finnish League for Human Rights (Ihmisoikeusliitto, 2000), the concern was raised that incest investigations in Finland are not conducted in an appropriate manner, that they are lacking in professionalism and that the orders of the Pre-trial Investigation Act are not followed. Furthermore, according to a report by the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland (Lastensuojelun keskusliitto, 2003), the needs of children are not currently recognised during judicial processes concerning matters involving them. The report stresses that in these legal proceedings, *“the adult perspective on the protection of law is stressed more forcefully than protecting the status of the child in the sense intended by the CRC”* (p 14).

The best that the legal and mental health systems can do to improve the situation of children involved in CSA investigations is to ensure investigative interviews are conducted in ways that are in accordance with current knowledge concerning how best to interview children, taking into account the age and development of the child as well as the rights of the child.

### **Definition of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)**

According to the CRC, a child is defined as any person under the age of 18 years (the Convention on the Rights of the Child). The Finnish law related to sexual crimes was revised in 1998 (for a discussion containing some interesting aspects related to the historical development of the law concerning sexual crimes, see Niemi-Kesiläinen, 2000). Child sexual abuse is defined according to Finnish criminal law as: 1) having sexual intercourse with a child under 16 years of age; 2) engagement in a sexual act with children younger than 16 years of age by means of touching or by other behaviour that is bound to harm their development or; 3) making them engage in such an act. The act is not considered child sexual abuse, however, if there is no great difference in age or mental and physical maturity between the parties.

Aggravated child sexual abuse is defined separately, as occurring: 1) if the abuse, due to the age or developmental stage of the child, is bound to cause particular harm to the child; 2) if the crime is

conducted in a particularly humiliating way, or 3) if the crime is bound to cause particular harm to the child as a result of particular trust the child has in the perpetrator, or as a result of the child otherwise being in a position of dependence in relation to the perpetrator and, in all cases, if the crime on the whole can be deemed to be aggravated. While the age specified as a limit for child sexual abuse according to Finnish law is 16 years, if the perpetrator is the child's parent or a person comparable to a parent and lives in the same household as the child, it is 18 years.

Within the present thesis, the aim was to concentrate on how to conduct interviews with children who are still in the process of cognitive and social development, posing a major challenge to interviewers. In two of the studies included in the present thesis, the sample age range was from 3 to 12 years, in the other two it was from 3 to 8 years. The vast majority of the children in the sample were of pre-school age.

## **Prevalence Estimates and Reporting of CSA**

There is a lack of updated, reliable figures on the actual prevalence of CSA in Finland, as the last representative prevalence study was conducted more than 15 years ago (Sariola, 1990; 1994). In that study, based on a comprehensive sample of about nine thousand 15- and 16-year-olds, 6-8% of the girls and 1-3% of the boys had experiences that could be defined as sexual abuse. The higher percentage stands for cases where the age difference between perpetrator and child was at least five years, the lower for cases where the age difference was at least ten years. The study defined sexual abuse as: *“(a) All incidents where the perpetrator had been at least 5 years older and used force or violence regardless of the level of sexual contact. (b) All incidents where sexual contact with a person at least 5 years older progressed, at the minimum, to one or more of the following acts: the child exposed her or his genitals to an adult, an adult touched the child's genitals through clothing, an adult touched or fondled the child's exposed genitals, the child touched or fondled an adult's exposed genitals, imitating sexual intercourse without penetration, sexual intercourse.”* Experiences of serious sexual abuse were mainly concentrated on girls in puberty

and seemed to increase as the girls matured physically. Among the respondents, less than one percent of the girls (0.8%) and one boy in a thousand had experienced abuse when they were less than 10 years of age. These frequencies of CSA are lower than those of American studies, for instance (e.g., Russell, 1983; Wyatt, 1985; Finkelhor, Hotelling, Smith & Lewis, 1990), which is likely to be at least partially explained by differences in the criteria used to define CSA (Sariola & Uutela, 1994; see also Sariola & Uutela, 1996). Of the experiences of CSA in Finland, about 10% consisted of father-daughter or stepfather-daughter incest. Boys did not report any intra-familial abuse, neither were there cases of mother-child incest (with one exception of a 15-year-old boy and his 26-year-old stepmother).

There is, according to Sariola (2005), a popular impression that the phenomenon of child sexual abuse has grown over the past decades. Sariola suggests this might be due to the amount of media attention the phenomenon attracts and insists that new prevalence studies are needed in order to inform the debate. Merely observing the number of reported cases does not necessarily give reliable information, as the frequency of reporting may be related to factors other than the actual incidence rates. For instance, the extent to which the problem is acknowledged in society is likely to be related to reporting rates.

The Finnish prevalence rates from 1990 are slightly higher than those of a more recent prevalence study conducted in Denmark using similar definitions (Helweg Larsen & Bøving Larsen, 2002). The results of the Danish study showed that the prevalence of what the children themselves considered as maybe or certainly constituting sexual abuse was about 3% of the whole sample, including 5% of the girls and 1% of the boys. In this study, 11% of the experiences were intra-familial abuse, which, compared to an earlier Danish study from 1988 (Leth, Stenvig, & Pedersen), implies there has been a decrease in the occurrence of intra-familial abuse over those years. The authors (Helweg Larsen & Bøving Larsen, 2002) hypothesise that this might be related to greater public attention to the problem and to better opportunities for children in risk families to have other adult contacts and support.

In contrast, when observing official Finnish statistics, a dramatic increase in the reporting of CSA is obvious, with the number of cases



reported to the police authorities having risen from 399 cases in 1999 to 846 cases in 2004 (Oikeuspoliittinen tutkimuslaitos [*National Research Institute of Legal Policy*], 2004). However, according to Sariola (2005), these statistics are not reliable sources, due to variations in the reporting of cases; a series of CSA incidents might, in one instance, be reported as one crime, and in another, as several. According to the most recent official study conducted by the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health in Finland (Stakes, 2000), during a 12-month period over the years of 1998 and 1999, 778 cases of suspected CSA were reported. This number is four times higher than the one obtained in the previous study from 1984 (Kauppinen, Sariola & Taskinen, 2000). Again, the increase of reported cases of suspected CSA is more likely to be associated with increased public awareness of the problem than with an increase in prevalence. To the extent that the Danish and Finnish societies can be expected to have similar CSA prevalence trends, there does not seem to have been dramatic changes in prevalence. Assuming that the actual CSA prevalence would have remained roughly the same, it can be extrapolated from the above figures that, while in the mid 80's only about 2% of the CSA cases were reported to the authorities, this figure has now risen to roughly 10% (Sariola, 2005). The proportion of abuse cases coming forward remains low, in spite of the increase – a fact that is also reported in a study by London, Bruck, Ceci and Shuman (2005); the majority of abused children do not reveal their abuse during childhood. Very interestingly though, within the Finnish context, the regions where children reported the highest abuse rates were the regions where the lowest number of cases was reported to the authorities. No direct relationships can thus be assumed between the frequency of abuse and the rates of reporting such cases (Sariola, 2005).

## FORENSIC INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

In the year 1900, Alfred Binet, who was among the first scientists and psychologists interested in children's witness statements and the problems associated with interviewing children in legal settings, had already published his work "*La suggestibilité*", warning professionals against the contaminating effects that suggestive interview practice has on children's accounts (Binet, 1900). For instance, through innovative experimental studies, Binet showed that "forced" memory ("*memoire forcée*"), that is, memories retrieved through very focused questions, are much more prone to erring than "spontaneous" memories. A few years later, in 1909, Clara and William Stern published their book "*Recollection, testimony and lying in early childhood*" (*Erinnerung, Aussage und Lüge in der ersten Kindheit*). Among other things, the Sterns discuss the capabilities of children to act as witnesses in legal proceedings and they hope for a new generation of judges who will make legal hearings with children more child-sensitive "*through ...encouraging spontaneous reporting, through consciously avoiding suggestive influences and leading questions, and through strictly psychological means of checking what the child says*" (pp. 141-142). Later research has proven how salient these points were, and still are.

Within child sexual abuse investigations, the child interviews are often the sole source of information available regarding the alleged abuse, as there typically is an absence of medical or physical evidence, witnesses or perpetrator confessions. While factors related to the children, such as attention, development of memory and linguistic skills, influence their capacities to act as witnesses, it is the responsibility of the interviewers, through their interviewing methods, to facilitate the children in providing their accounts. The following sections will deal with some cognitive-developmental aspects that interviewers need to take into account when interviewing young children, and describe questioning techniques that have been found to influence children's accounts.

## **Issues of Attention and Memory in Childhood and their Consequences for Conducting Child Interviews**

In order to be able to remember something, we must first attend to it. Attention develops throughout childhood and even into young adulthood. While pre-school children are more easily distracted than older children, and these in turn are more easily distracted than adults, there are strategies for helping children to concentrate during interviews. Poole and Lamb (1998) recommend not using therapy or diagnostic observation rooms for investigative interviewing as these may have an abundance of distracters. Furthermore, in view of the limited amount of time a young child will be able to concentrate, interviewers should plan their interviews well and beforehand decide what information is most crucial to cover. Children concentrate better when understanding the language and the interview situation overall, which is why interviewers are recommended to phrase their questions more simply when children seem to be drifting off as well as to explain the roles and rules of the interviews as clearly as possible (*ibid.*).

Memory is not a neutral or mechanical process of recording events. Rather, it is a highly constructive process, which is affected by our previous knowledge and assumptions (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). The development of memory skills is dependent on the cultural context of the child (Mistry, 1997). For instance, children whose parents explain events and engage in elaborative conversations about events with them, learn to construct meaningful and organised representations of events and are consequently better at recalling events from the past (Fivush, 1997).

The three main stages of the memory system are *encoding*, *storage*, and *retrieval*, and during all of these phases our memories may be shaped, they may be added to or parts may be deleted. These modifications are shaped by our knowledge and expectations. Only a small part of all surrounding stimuli is attended to, and this determines what may be encoded. Generally speaking, the more knowledge a person has about an event, the better that event will be encoded (e.g., Bjorklund & Douglas, 1997). Encoding is highly dependent on the salience of the event, its duration, as well as the stress level of the person (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995). When events are

encoded, they enter the short-term memory, which has a limited capacity of retaining information. Thus, only a small proportion of the encoded information proceeds to the long-term memory, from which memories may finally be retrieved. Retrieval is the process we tend to refer to when we in everyday conversations say we “remember” something. The way in which information is encoded will affect if and how that information will later be retrieved (Bjorklund & Douglas, 1997). While trying to retrieve information, we may use our *scripts*, or knowledge about how events typically occur, to fill in aspects we do not remember (*script-based knowledge*). If an event is very much in accordance with our script-based knowledge, it is more likely to be remembered; however, also when an event completely mismatches our expectations, it is likely to be retrieved – probably due to its bizarreness (Ceci & Bruck, 1995).

Younger children are more dependent on retrieval cues to access information stored in their long-term memory than are older ones. However, the interviewer “helping” an interviewee remember through providing them with such cues may be risky. Trying to remind the interviewee about elements of the events may promote false recall and thus even false accusations of CSA.

For instance, an aspect of memory that is highly relevant for CSA interviews is the issue of determining the origins of children’s memories or knowledge of events (*memory source monitoring*). Young children in particular have been found to confuse between “learned-about” or actually experienced events (e.g., Roberts & Blades, 1996). The research concerning memory source monitoring underscores the importance of interviewers not introducing new information (e.g., naming specific events or persons) into an interview before the child has done so (e.g., Ackil & Zaragoza, 1995; see also Poole & Lamb, 1998, for a more comprehensive discussion of the topic).

There has been a whole debate, in society at large as well as among professionals and academics, about so called *recovered memories* of childhood abuse and, while the discussion of false memories is beyond the scope of this thesis, evidence (see Ceci & Bruck, 1995) shows that where persons have been interviewed with suggestive techniques over a long period of time, it is impossible to judge whether evoked memories are true or false and that children as well as adults can be led to believe events happened to them, which in fact

never did (see also, Bruck, Ceci & Hembrooke, 1998, Loftus, 1996; 1997; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995).

Until the 1980's, children were perceived within developmental psychology as having poor memory skills and, therefore, being unreliable witnesses. Most research until that period focused on children's limitations (e.g., Fivush, 1997). However, later it has been demonstrated that even very young children have remarkably detailed memories for personally experienced events that have been meaningful to them. Research has shown that preschoolers are able to provide verbal reports of events that occurred during their second year of life (*ibid.*). There are age differences in how well children remember and present their memories, with the accounts of older children being longer and more elaborated than those of younger children. One of the explanations for this are the more developed linguistic skills of older children, which enable them to give more detailed verbal accounts. Younger children may be helped in remembering through nonverbal means (e.g., through acting the events; Bauer, 1997), however, the nonverbal means most commonly used within CSA investigations, anatomically detailed dolls, have been subject to critical discussion among researchers. We will return to the issue of using anatomically detailed dolls in the course of CSA interviews later in this thesis.

## Questioning Style

Children understand the social pattern of questions and answers from an early age, and in general understand that questions require answers and may thus well try to answer questions they have not understood (e.g., Aldridge & Wood, 1998). Lamb and Brown (2006; see also Poole & Lamb, 1998) talk about implicit rules that guide conversations and note that if these rules are not specified, children (as well as adults) are likely to follow the rules that, in their experience, typically guide conversations. In most conversations between adults and children, children are expected to give short and superficial answers to quite focused questions. Children are familiar with situations where adults are testing their knowledge through posing questions and are used to a dialogue pattern that merely

requires them to answer in a way that mirrors the presumption included in the adult's question, reflecting what the child thinks the adult wants to hear rather than what the child actually remembers (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). Instead, in forensic interviews, interviewers often have no forehand information of which there is absolute evidence, therefore they need to communicate in a way that differs from most everyday adult-to-child interaction, attempting to elicit as much and as specific information as possible from the child (Taskinen, 2003).

While the type of interaction prevailing in a forensic interview, with the child being the informed expert and the interviewer the "naïve partner" (Lamb & Brown, 2006), might seem strange to children, it is something that can be learned. Sternberg and her colleagues (Sternberg, Lamb, Hershkowitz, Yudilevitch, Orbach, Esplin, et al., 1997) showed that if children are allowed a practice interview about a neutral event, conducted using open-ended prompts, they give more information in response to the first question in a subsequent investigative interview. Other authors, too, have emphasised the need for preparation and exercise (e.g., of the children's right to ask for clarification when they do not understand, or a rapport-building phase using open-ended questions concerning the child's everyday life) to enhance the performance of children in interviews (Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999; Wilson & Powell, 2001). Giving the child the opportunity to discuss a neutral topic before starting the actual investigative interview serves two purposes: it helps the child feel more at ease with the situation and it gives the interviewer the possibility to assess the child's use of language (e.g., Saywitz & Camparo, 1998; Walker & Warren, 1995).

Both the quality and the quantity of the child's testimony can be greatly affected by the way the interviewer seeks to elicit the information (e.g., for an overview of the research, see Lamb & Brown, 2006). Interviewers need to be careful when phrasing their questions in order to avoid pushing the child's narrative in any direction. Different question types will be more explicitly defined in the Method, but a general distinction can be made between open-ended, specific, closed and leading questions. Open-ended questions, or *invitations*, are such that they require a multi-word response and prompt the respondent to use free recall (e.g., "Tell me everything that

happened"). Specific, or *directive* questions instead focus on a particular detail ("What colour was her hair?"). These are typically "wh"-questions, which can often be answered in one or just a few words. Closed questions, henceforth referred to as *option-posing* questions, provide the child with response options to choose from (multiple choice or only yes/no as alternative responses, e.g., "Was he young or old?"). *Suggestive* questions are stated in a way that clearly push the child's response in a certain direction and/or assume details that the child has not mentioned ("He forced you to do that, didn't he?").

It has long been known that interviewers should attempt to obtain as much information as possible through invitations. Researchers, like interviewing guidelines, recommend that interviewers use invitations and have warned against the detrimental effects suggestive questions may have on the interviews, as they are associated with internal contradiction and less reliable information in the reports made by children (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Craig, Scheibe, Raskin, Kircher, & Dodd, 1999; Goodman & Aman, 1990; Home Office, 2002; Lamb, 1994; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, & Esplin, 1999; Orbach & Lamb, 2000, 2001; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Qin, Quas, Redlich, & Goodman, 1997; Walker & Warren, 1995; Wilson & Powell, 2001).

While responses to invitations initially may be brief, the interviewer may follow up by using information provided by the child in a previous response to an invitation, for instance: "Earlier you mentioned a [person, object, or action]. Tell me everything about that," (Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, & Horowitz, 2003; Orbach & Lamb, 2000). Invitations lead to more consistency in children's reports than more focused question types (e.g., Ghetti, Goodman, Eisen, Jianjian, & Davis, 2002) and have been shown to yield more accurate responses than specific questions (e.g., Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Orbach & Lamb, 1999; 2001). Studies (Lamb et al., 2003; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001) have shown that invitations can be used efficiently also with quite young children. Invitations outperform more focused question types, since they require the child to freely recall information, as opposed to recognising one or many options presented by the interviewer. When the interviewer poses a specific question, this might focus on details that the child has never encoded

or does not remember very well, and the child might respond anyhow to please the interviewer or out of convention. Through option-posing and suggestive utterances the interviewer may also implicitly point the child's response in a certain direction, thus rather confirming the interviewer's preconceptions of the events than eliciting the child's uncontaminated report (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995). For instance, children almost never say, "*I don't know*" when asked option-posing questions, even when asked about details they do not recall. The same is true for questions that are unanswerable (Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2001) or impossible to understand, such as "*Is a jumper angrier than a tiger?*" (Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2002). In contrast, children replied, "*I don't know*" or "*I can't remember*" almost three times out of four if asked directive (but not option-posing or suggestive) questions to which they did not know the answer (Peterson et al., 1999). In an interview with legal implications, the "*I don't know*" answer is obviously preferable to yes/no replies based on guessing. Lamb and Fauchier (2001) also found that directive (wh-) questions outperformed option-posing questions with regard to the accuracy of the obtained information.

Suggestive questions are particularly influential when the memory of an event is not rich or recent, when the question asked is complicated and, therefore, confusing, or when the interviewer appears to have such authority that the witness feels compelled to accept the interviewer's suggestion. Likewise, suggestions are more influential when the suggestive questions are repeated (Poole & White, 1991). The pressure the child might feel to conform to such suggestions can even result in children making false allegations of sexual abuse (Hershkowitz, 2001) as well as in false memories. A study by Ackil and Zaragoza (1998) showed that when children were pressed to fabricate information they would not otherwise have provided, this resulted in false memories about the confabulated incidents.

Younger children are more vulnerable to the deleterious effects of suggestive questions than older children (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Goodman & Aman, 1990; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Poole & Lindsay, 1998; White, Leichtman & Ceci, 1997). Geddie, Fradin, and Beer (2000) found that, while other child characteristics, such as metamemory ability, intellectual functioning and temperament, were helpful in



predicting the accuracy of children's recall and resistance to misleading questions, the child's age remained the best predictor for the amount of information that the child recalled and for the child's suggestibility.

There are numerous famous examples of children making false allegations as a result of repeated suggestive interviewing (e.g., Bruck, Ceci, Francoeur, & Renick, 1995; Poole & Lindsay, 1995). Among such examples is the widely publicised McMartin Preschool Case, where seven pre-school teachers, including several elderly women, were accused of having abused many hundreds of children over a period of more than ten years. Garven, Wood, Malpass, and Shaw (1998) derived a number of suggestive interviewing techniques based on the transcribed interviews used in the McMartin case and showed that by using these techniques (suggestive questioning combined with social pressure, reinforcement and removal from direct experience), 58% of the children interviewed in their experimental study made false accusations. For the most famous case of a debated CSA investigation in Finland, see Hellblom-Sjögren, 1999.

It should be noted that the main principles for interviewing children do not actually differ from the principles of interviewing adults, as stipulated, for instance, in 1989 by Yuille and Cutshall:

*"In order to minimise errors in eyewitness recall, police are encouraged to begin with a free narrative format, followed by specific questions when necessary. The specific questions should be as open-ended as possible and should never be leading or suggestive" (p.176).*

*An aim of the present thesis was thus to analyse the quality (in terms of the questioning strategies employed by the interviewers) of a sample of CSA interviews deemed to be conducted inappropriately by professionals involved in assessing CSA investigations (expert witnesses and lawyers). The sample was selected solely on the basis of these professional judgments and, accordingly, the interviews in the sample were expected to have deficiencies (in terms of interviewers using suggestive interviewing methods). A further aim was to explore the verbal interaction between interviewer and child utterances (i.e. how the former affect the latter and vice versa). The way in which the child responded to different interviewer questions was analysed: verbally, non-verbally, with a change of subject, or*

*with a meaningful response. This was expected to provide new information, not only concerning which interviewer questions would elicit new details from the child, but also concerning the nature of the communication (henceforth referred to as the dynamics of the interview) that the different types of interviewer questions created between the interviewer and the child.*

## **Field Studies of CSA Interviews**

Several studies conducted in different countries have shown that, despite the fact that the research-based recommendations described above are widely endorsed, they have not been as widely followed. Analyses of forensic interviews in Israel, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the USA have demonstrated that forensic interviewers rarely use invitations, and instead rely on focused and even leading question types (e.g., Cederborg, Orbach, Sternberg & Lamb, 2000; Craig et al., 1999; Davies, Westcott, & Horan, 2000; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, Hovav, Manor, & Yudilevitch, 1996; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001; Sternberg, Lamb, Hershkowitz, Esplin, Redlich, & Sunshine, 1996; Thoresen, Lønnum, Melinder, Stridbeck, & Magnussen, in press).

Furthermore, while it is recommended that focused questions be used as late as possible in an interview (e.g., Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001), Cederborg et al. (2000) found that, in a sample of Swedish interviews, investigators used option-posing and suggestive utterances very early on in the interviews, sometimes even as the first utterance.

Even interviewers who have received training in investigative interviewing have been found to fail to use appropriate interviewing strategies (e.g., Craig et al., 1999). Stevenson, Leung and Cheung (1992) assessed social workers' skills in conducting initial assessment interviews in CSA evaluations after a ten-day curriculum and found that performance in conducting such interviews immediately following training improved only to a limited extent. Likewise, Freeman and Morris (1999) assessed the impact of investigative interviewing training workshops conducted with police officers and child protective service officers prior to, immediately following, and three months following the training. They found improvements in

interviewer skills to be rather limited. Aldridge and Cameron (1999) found that the effect of a one-week intensive training course with police and social worker forensic interviewers had no impact on interviewer behaviour; both trained and untrained interviewers used inappropriate questioning strategies, relying heavily on specific rather than open-ended questions. Warren and her colleagues (Warren, Woodall, Thomas, Nunno, Keeney, Larson et al., 1999) reached similar conclusions. While interviewers' knowledge about the abilities of children increased and the scientific basis of various interviewing protocols increased, this did not have an impact on their actual interviewing behaviour.

*Consequently, another aim of this study was to analyse a larger and unselected sample of Finnish interviews in order to see whether these interviews would reveal problems similar to those found in interviews conducted in other countries and in order to compare these with the interviews from the first sample, considered problematic. It was expected that these interviews would not rely as much at inappropriate interviewing techniques (such as suggestive questions) as the ones analysed in the first sample, but that the interviewers would not be fully aware of the need to concentrate their interviews around open-ended prompts (which would be manifested in a low frequency of invitations).*

## **Interviewer Reactions to Child Responses**

A hypothetical explanation for interviewers using focused and even leading interviewing strategies might be the unresponsiveness of the child. Following this line of argument, interviewers might be expected – and hoped – to modify their interviewing behaviour as a consequence of the type of responses provided by the child. The child providing new relevant information could be expected to influence the interviewers' interviewing style in a positive way, decreasing the use of focused and, in particular, leading questions. Poole and Lamb (1998) recommend interviewers to follow up all information provided by the child, inasmuch as possible, with open-ended questions (“*Tell me more about that*”) or facilitators (“*Oh really?*”). However, few studies have focused on the influence of child behaviour on interviewer behaviour. In an experimental study, Gilstrap and Ceci (2005)

analysed such child-to-adult effects, for instance, by looking at the kind of child behaviour that preceded leading questioning by interviewers. They found that interviewers modified their questioning style depending on the children's answer, interestingly, by posing suggestive questions more often after child refusal than after child acquiescence.

While there is an impressive corpus of studies analysing the effectiveness of certain interviewer behaviours in eliciting information from child witnesses, analyses of how interviewers in fact follow up information provided by the child have not been conducted to any great extent. Analysing the interviewer's reactions to informative child responses (including judicially significant details) would be particularly informative for assessing the sensitivity of the interviewer to what the child is saying.

*A further aim of the present study was to analyse how interviewers followed up relevant information provided by the children. The expectation was that informative responses would influence the interviewers' questioning style in a positive way, increasing the frequency of invitations, and decreasing the frequencies of option-posing and, in particular, suggestive prompts.*

## Language Use

*"The implication of witnesses being unable to understand a question is that failure to understand what response a question requires may result in witnesses failing to provide an accurate answer even though their memory would allow them to do so" (Kebbell & Johnson, 2000).*

The linguistic development of the child is, naturally, of crucial importance for the understanding of how children should be interviewed. While memory research, as mentioned before, has shown that already very young children have detailed memories of events that are important to them (e.g., Fivush, 1997), they are dependent on language to communicate these memories. Interviewers thus need to be aware of the developmental linguistic level of the child and modify their own language use accordingly (e.g., Saywitz & Camparo, 1998). However, several studies suggest this is not always done. Brennan and Brennan (1988) found that children testifying in trials were often

faced with what the authors called “strange language”, that is, questions posed in such a confusing way that they could not be understood, and much less appropriately responded to. According to Brennan (1995), cross-examination strategies used in court deny children any possibility to come forward with their own experiences, as children are faced with questions that are hard to decode. Kebbell and Johnson (2000) further demonstrated that (adult) witnesses’ accuracy was reduced when attorneys posed confusing questions. Kebbell, Hatton and Johnson (2004) showed that lawyers failed to modify their language when interviewing witnesses with intellectual disabilities, as the cognitive capacities of the witnesses would have required.

The study of language is commonly divided into four main topics, each of which need to be, at least to a basic extent, familiar to child interviewers. These topics are: phonology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics (See Poole & Lamb, 1998, for a more detailed overview of these than the one provided here).

*Phonology* refers to language sounds and consequently, the child’s articulation (or problems with articulation) may cause misunderstanding. In fact, the ability to produce phonemes correctly develops much more slowly than the ability to perceive them correctly. When an interviewer does not understand what the child is saying, a rule of thumb is to avoid guessing and suggesting a specific interpretation, as the child may well accept the interviewer’s suggestion even if it is not correct. The interviewer may instead follow up with a series of questions that may provide clarification. Interviewers may also be helped by knowing the typical phonetic errors, and if a child seems to have major problems with pronunciation, the interviewer should try to assess the typical errors for that child, for instance by asking the child to identify pictures illustrating problematic sounds (Poole & Lamb, 1998). As recommended in the guidelines by STAKES (Taskinen, 2003), interviewers may also use psychological (or other) tests assessing linguistic skills in order to get an idea of the linguistic abilities of the individual child.

Children’s *vocabulary* develops over a long time and provides a critical building block for many other language processing abilities (Gathercole, Willis, Emslie & Baddeley, 1992). The development of

vocabulary is very much related to the environment in which the child lives, implying children's linguistic abilities develop in different paces. A child may understand some words in certain contexts but not in others (Wilson & Powell, 2001), and pre-school children may also use words before they actually understand them (e.g., Home Office, 2002).

There are certain concepts, which are difficult for pre-school children that are of particular importance in CSA investigations. The concept of touching, for instance, is a complex one that can have a variety of different meanings and is difficult for pre-school children to understand (Walker, 1994). Also the concept of time may be crucial in forensic investigations, but problematic, since children have difficulties reporting how many times or how long ago something has taken place (Saywitz et al., 1999). Temporal terms, such as "before" and "after" may not be completely understood until the age of seven (Walker, 1994), and children have a limited capacity of identifying days and times accurately until at least 10 years of age (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Consequently, interviewers should use temporal terms only if ensured that the interviewee understands them. Friedman (1991) showed that children as young as four years of age were able to judge the relative recency of two events (one and seven weeks back in time), as well as to account for the time of day the events occurred. At the age of six years, the children were also able to tell the day of the week, the month, and the season of the event, something the four-year-olds were not capable of doing. It is known that children under the age of seven use different strategies for measuring time than do older ones and that it is only at the age of ten that most children use the same strategies as adults (Levin, Wilkening & Dembo, 1984). When trying to describe the length of an event, younger children may actually describe the intensity of the experience when talking about how "long" something went on (Wilson & Powell, 2001).

Kebbell and his colleagues (2004) found that, when cross-examining witnesses with intellectual disabilities, who, similarly to children, may have problems with concepts related to time, lawyers posed as many questions regarding times and dates as they did with other witnesses. Poole and Lamb (1998) note that children can be helped in correctly expressing time through using meaningful markers, such as asking whether the event occurred on a school day,

and state that interviewers should try to identify the time frame through asking more generally about the context first. A simple advise by Saywitz and Camparo (1998) is for interviewers not to ask a child how many times something has happened before ensuring that the child can actually count.

Interviewers need to avoid using complex language constructions, or *syntax*. This implies avoiding passive voice, as well as embedded clauses, that is, too much information packed into a sentence. Studies have shown that simple, developmentally appropriate questions elicit the most accurate information from children, and that multiple questions in one sentence as well as long and complicated sentences should be avoided (Brennan, 1995; Carter, Bottoms & Levine, 1996). For instance, Perry and colleagues (Perry, McAuliff, Tam, Claycomb, Dostal, & Flanagan, 1995) showed that confusing language (including multipart questions, negatives, double negatives, complicated syntax or vocabulary) decreased the accuracy of reports by young witnesses.

The need to use developmentally sensitive language in interviews is thus particularly important with pre-school children, but also school-aged children and even adults have difficulties with regard to the type of linguistically complex questions that tend to be used in forensic proceedings (e.g., Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Walker & Warren, 1995). Interviewers should also mention the name of the person or the situation being referred to in order to avoid misunderstandings caused by so-called extended references, for instance by asking "*Did your grandparents visit you often?*" instead of asking "*Did they visit you often?*" (Walker, 1994; Carter et al., 1996). Children may face difficulties in understanding what "it" represents, as "it" on its own is an abstraction rather than a referent that is specified (Brennan, 1995). In order to help children stay on board, interviewers should ask about one concept at a time, avoid using passive voice, as well as negatives, and place the main idea early in the question (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

*Pragmatics* refers to the social functions of language and includes understanding the social conventions of conversations (taking turns in discussions) as well as how to meaningfully use language in different social situations. Young children structure conversations differently from older children and adults (or rather; they do not structure them)

and may jump from one topic to the other abruptly, which is why interviewers need to mention the topic repeatedly during a conversation (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Zajac, Gross and Hayne (2003) found that, in court proceedings, children were frequently cross-examined using an inappropriate questioning style. Defence lawyers' questions included complex questions to a significant degree, which caused as much as 75% of the children to change aspects of their testimonies. In another study, Zajac and Hayne (2003) found that the accuracy of 5 and 6-year-old witnesses severely diminished as a result of being interviewed in cross-examination style (i.e. too complicated) language. In their study, Zajac and colleagues (2003) also found that defence and prosecution lawyers differed in their language use, notably in that defence lawyers used more complex and grammatically confusing language. The authors attributed this difference to the fact that prosecution lawyers were more often specialised in representing children and thus could be expected to have more knowledge on how to interview children than lawyers who are used to representing adults.

Compared to lawyers and non-specialised police officers, psychologists and psychiatrists, who on a daily basis interact with children and conduct large numbers of assessments through verbal interaction with children, would be expected to be experts in using age-appropriate language when interviewing children. In Norway, Melinder and colleagues (Melinder, Goodman, Eilertsen & Magnussen, 2004) found that psychiatrists and psychologists, as compared to police officers and lawyers, tended to favour using clinical techniques (such as play observations and clinical tests) when conducting CSA investigations. Another study by Melinder (2004) showed, when comparing police officers to clinical psychologists who interviewed 4-year-olds about a medical event, that police officers had a more appropriate interviewing technique in terms of staying on topic and using open-ended questions. This result may well be related to the previous one, since psychologists may have a less structured approach to interviewing, due to their experience in conducting clinical observations. If play observation is also commonly favoured among Finnish mental health care personnel, this might be expected to manifest in the form of less structured interviews, resulting in



fluctuation between on and off-topic discussions, which in the context of a forensic interview may be problematic.

It is well known that interviewers must be careful not to influence the child witnesses. This might be particularly difficult when trying to introduce the topic of the alleged abuse to the child witness, as the interviewer must make the child understand what is supposed to be discussed while, at the same time, not influence their accounts. Walker and Warren (1995) state that it is the interviewer's responsibility to name the topic that is supposed to be discussed – however, in cases where there is no evidence of the abuse (at least prior to the child interview), naming the topic would seem hazardous as it could be suggestive. Others (e.g., Steward & Steward, 1996; Wilson & Powell, 2001) recommend that interviewers clarify the child's understanding of the reason for the interview. This may be done through open-ended questions such as "Is there anything you want to tell me?" or "Is there anything you think I should know?" or "Is there anything you want me to tell the judge [or, in the Finnish context, the police]?" (Saywitz & Camparo, 1998). Option-posing and suggestive questions are particularly dangerous if used early on in the interviews (Goodman & Aman, 1990; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Memon, Holley, Walker, Bull & Köhnken, 1996). Warren and colleagues (Warren, Woodall, Hunt, & Perry, 1996) analysed how interviewers brought up the topic of sexual abuse and found that less than half of the interviewers introduced the topic of abuse through general or open-ended questions and that the most common way of introducing the topic of abuse was to refer to inappropriate touching, which in some cases was followed by a discussion of *good* and *bad* touching.

*The study furthermore aimed at analysing whether interviewers in the sample used appropriate language in view of the young age of the children in the sample (3-8 years – the larger sample). Interviewers (child mental health professionals) were expected to be sensitive to the developing cognitive abilities of their interviewees. This was expected to be demonstrated by interviewers avoiding complex language use. In particular, interviewers were expected to speak with the younger children (3-5 years) using simpler language than they used with the older ones (6-8 years). Furthermore, the study aimed at exploring how interviewers introduced the topic of abuse, whether they in their questions maintained a coherent pattern of dialogue*

*(avoiding jumping on- and off-topic) and how they used the forensically important but cognitively demanding concepts of touch and time.*

## **Repeated Interviewing, the Presence of a Support Person and the Use of Anatomically Detailed Dolls**

Bruck and Ceci (2004) note that it is a common misconception that abused children do not initially want to disclose their experiences of abuse, but need to be “helped” through repeated interviewing. However, there are certain risks associated with repeated interviewing. Already in 1909, Stern and Stern had warned against the possible negative effects of repeated interviewing, among other things, arguing that the children might remember their original verbal responses better than the actual events they are interviewed about (Stern & Stern, 1909). Melnyk and Bruck (2004) found repeated suggestive interviewing to have more detrimental effects, in terms of children incorporating incorrect information into their memories of events, than a single suggestive interview. In a summary of research conducted in the field, Qin et al. (1997) conclude that repeated interviewing does not seem to have a negative influence on children’s eyewitness performance *per se*, provided that the prior interviews are conducted in an appropriate manner. However, they underline that repeated interviews including misleading questions lead to significant increases in erroneous responses on the part of the child.

In Finland, the guardians of children under the age of 15 years have a legal right to attend an interview conducted by the police, provided that they do not interfere with the interview in any way, while the Finnish guidelines on how to conduct CSA investigations (Taskinen, 2003) recommend that, in general, guardians be discouraged from attending the interview. Within CSA interviews, a purpose for having a support person<sup>1</sup> present may be a wish to make the interviewing environment more secure to the child. However, according to Poole and Lamb (1998), professionals tend to underestimate the ability of children to discuss stressful events and overemphasise their fears. As there is no conclusive evidence

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<sup>1</sup> The term *support person* will be used henceforth, implying a person with a personal relation to the child; professionals are not included in this category.

regarding the benefits or possible problems related them, the presence of support persons is best avoided, since there is a possibility that these persons could interfere with the interview (*ibid*). Such interference could be the support person interrupting the interview or prompting the child. Also, even if the support person does not interfere with the interview, it is possible that the child would be affected by the presence of, in particular, a parent. The child might find it odd that the parent does not say anything, especially if the child has told the parent about the event under investigation (Mum knows, why doesn't she tell them?).

The question of whether anatomically detailed (AD) dolls can prove useful tools when conducting investigative interviews with children has also been the focus of debate and scientific attention. A review of AD doll research and practise (Koocher, White, Sivan, Goodman, Friedrich & Reynolds, 1995) concluded that AD dolls, though often used as a "psychological test" for sexual abuse, lack any documented validity. However, the authors argue that CSA investigations may benefit from using dolls to aid in determining children's labels for certain body parts and in re-enacting events that the child has already told about. Summing up contradictory views and scientific findings concerning the use of AD dolls, Ceci and Bruck (1995) stress the lack of scientific evidence supporting AD dolls as means of determining whether a child has been abused or not. They also pinpoint the abundant evidence of potential misuse of AD dolls, which might result in a false diagnosis of abuse. In a study by Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat and Everson (1996), interviews involving AD dolls were compared to interviews in which dolls were not used. Results showed that, overall, interviews involving the use of AD dolls did not differ significantly from those in which AD dolls were not used with regards to either the type of questions uttered by the interviewer or the number of new details reported by the child. However, when the AD dolls were actively used in the interview, the children gave responses that, on average, were significantly shorter and contained significantly fewer details than they did in the interviews without the dolls.

*Thus, this study further aimed at analysing possible changes in interview dynamics related to repeated interviewing, the presence of a support person at the interview as well as the use of anatomically detailed*

*dolls. In view of previous findings, repeated interviews were expected to have a negative impact on the interview dynamics, particularly if associated with high frequencies of suggestive questions. While few studies have focused on their effects on the interviews, the presence of support persons was, nevertheless, expected to be associated with more negative interview dynamics. Researchers have been more sceptical towards the use of anatomically detailed (AD) dolls than practitioners. However, in the light of previous findings, the use of dolls was expected to be associated with negative interview dynamics.*

## AIMS OF THE PRESENT THESIS

The present thesis had two main aims: The first one was to investigate the need for improving child sexual abuse (CSA) interviews in Finland through assessing whether the interviewers' behaviour can be deemed appropriate in the light of research on how forensic interviews should be conducted. The second main aim was to contribute to the growing research corpus concerning CSA interviews, particularly by analysing the children's responses to different interviewer question types, addressing how interviewers follow up information provided by the child, and analysing the language use in the interviews. Furthermore, the use of anatomically detailed dolls and their association with interview dynamics, as well as the possible effects of repeated interviewing and a support person's presence at the interview were analysed. An additional overall aim of the thesis was to observe whether there would be regional differences in terms of the quality of investigative interviews.

In **Study I**, the aim was to analyse the questioning strategies employed by interviewers in a sample of CSA interviews deemed to be conducted inappropriately by professionals involved (expert witnesses and lawyers). Further aims were to explore the dynamics that the different types of interviewer questions created between the interviewer and the child and to analyse how interviewers followed up relevant information provided by the child.

Building on the previous study, **Study II** was conceived to rerun the analyses pertaining to the quality of interviews with a larger and unselected sample, focusing on the question and response types that were most common in Study I. The study also separated between details of contextual as opposed to judicial interest, the latter being details that clearly gave evidence for or against abuse, in order to analyse whether question types would be found to be differently associated with different types of details.

The aim of **Study III** was to explore whether the interviewers in the sample (child mental health professionals) were child-sensitive in their language use, which would be demonstrated in their avoidance of complex language in general and, in particular, in using simpler language with the younger children. How the interviewers introduced

and remained on topic and their use of the concepts of touching and time were also explored.

The aims of **Study IV** were to analyse possible changes in interview dynamics related to repeated interviewing, the presence of a support person at the interview, as well as the use of anatomically detailed dolls. All of these elements were expected to be associated with negative interview dynamics.

## DATA AND METHOD

### Cases, Studies I and IV

The data for Studies I and IV were obtained from transcribed interviews conducted between 1990 and 1998 in Finland. The original sample included 40 interviews obtained from professionals, such as lawyers and expert witnesses, who were involved in cases of alleged CSA. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and police officers had conducted the interviews for forensic purposes. The scope of all interviews was the same: to investigate the veracity of allegations of CSA.

Cases were excluded from the material when the interview had not been transcribed word for word, and when the main interviewer was not a professional, but a person related to the child (e.g., the child's parent). The final sample, therefore, consisted of 27 interviews. The number of children interviewed in these 27 interviews was twelve, of which five were interviewed once ( $\approx 42\%$ ), four, twice ( $\approx 33\%$ ), one, three times ( $\approx 8\%$ ), one, five times ( $\approx 8\%$ ) and one, six times ( $\approx 8\%$ ). The mean age of the children at the time of the interview was approximately 6 years ( $M = 70$  months,  $SD = 18$ ). All on-topic utterances were coded<sup>2</sup>.

The alleged events discussed in the interviews included anal or vaginal penetration, fondling of the child's sexual organs, and

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<sup>2</sup> As the children contributed different numbers of question-answer pairs to the data set, there was a possibility that the results might have been more affected by children with long interviews, and that the dynamics of these interviews might differ from the other interviews in the sample. In order to compensate for this possibility, a control data set was created for Study IV. First, children with less than 80 question-answer pairs were excluded, creating a data file with 640 question-answer pairs (80/child). This data set is called the balanced data set. In the results section of the thesis summary, only results confirmed by the balanced data set are reported. In Study IV, also some results with discrepancies between the two data sets are presented. The results obtained by using the balanced data set confirmed the majority of the results in the study, showing no significant contradictory results and only one result with a tendency contradicting the result obtained in the original sample. The fact that some of the results concerning the associations between the interviewer and child utterance categories were not confirmed was likely due to the reduction of the sample size in the balanced data set. The results that were confirmed tended to derive from the categories with the most observations.

exposure of sexual organs by the offender. The alleged events included both single and multiple incidents. In some cases, the alleged perpetrator was a member of the child's family, while in other cases it was a person outside the family. The cases included eight girls and four boys. Since the number of children was small, it was not possible to reliably explore gender or age effects. Due to the total anonymity guaranteed by the authors, qualitative details of the alleged events have been sparsely reported. Also, where examples from the interviews have been included, they have been slightly altered.

All of the cases analysed in Studies I and IV were ones that had been processed in court repeated times and, in many of the cases, lawyers had expressed their concern that the interviews might not have been conducted in an appropriate manner.

### **Cases, Studies II and III**

The cases analysed in Studies II and III consisted of interviews conducted with 43 children, aged 3 to 8 years, in four different hospital districts in Finland, between the years 1997-2002. A research permit was obtained for the study from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Health, after which the six largest hospital districts were contacted. The final sample includes interviews from four districts, conducted both in larger university hospitals as well as in smaller hospitals. The hospitals in the two remaining hospital districts reported various reasons for not participating in the study, such as lack of taped interviews, the sensitivity of the material, and lack of time on the part of the personnel to assist in the data collection. The majority of the contacted hospitals provided the researchers with all recorded interviews conducted with the target age group within the given time frame. Of the provided material, interviews were excluded in cases where the quality of recordings was too poor to enable transcription. The interviewers were mental health care professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers). Only in one case was the interviewer a man, thus it was not possible to conduct any analyses involving the gender of the interviewer. The sample can be regarded as non-biased in terms of quality, since the only criteria used for selection were the availability of recordings and time and age



frames (as well as the willingness/possibility of the hospitals to participate).

The total sample included 50 interviews (of which 48 were videotaped and 2 audio-taped). Seven interviews had to be excluded from the original sample due to poor recording quality (i.e., it was impossible to transcribe the interviews, as most of the dialogue was unintelligible) or due to lack of substantial material (i.e., fewer than 30 on-topic utterance pairs), leaving 43 interviews for further analysis.

Of the children in the material, 67% were girls ( $n = 29$ ) and 32% were boys ( $n = 14$ ). The average age in months was  $M = 62.58$  ( $SD = 20.82$ ). An independent sample  $t$ -test showed that there was no significant age difference between the sexes  $t(41) = 1.26$ ,  $p < .216$ , thereby indicating that possible differences between the sexes found in the analyses were not caused by difference in age between boys and girls. For the analyses in Study III, two age groups were defined; one consisting of children aged 3 to 5 years (roughly estimated as the pre-school age group), the other consisting of children aged 6 to 8 years (being the school age group). It is well known that pre-school children and school-age children differ in their mastery of cognitive competencies related to language and memory (e.g., Walker, 1994; Morison, Moir & Kwansa, 2000).

## Procedure

### *The Coding of Interviewer Questions and Child Responses (Studies I, II, and IV)*

Each interviewer utterance and the subsequent child response was coded in Studies I and IV, while in Studies II and III, the thirty first on-topic utterance pairs were coded. A total of 1,290 question-answer pairs were thus coded within the latter sample. The thirty utterance pairs corresponded for all children, in that they were always taken from the beginning of the first interview with each child. Utterances were deemed substantial or on-topic when they were related to the event under investigation.

The interviews in both samples were coded from the first utterance introducing the topic of the alleged abuse. The coding of interviewer utterances was adapted from a scheme presented by

Lamb et al. (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996; Lamb et al., 2000). In the coding of the interviewer utterances, no distinction was made between questions and statements (*ibid.*; Cederborg et al., 2000). One of the original categories, the category of suggestive utterances, was split into two new categories, *specific suggestive utterances* and *unspecific suggestive utterances*. The latter category was included because many of the interviewers frequently uttered statements that were highly suggestive, pushing the child's narrative in a certain direction, but nonetheless did not fall into the category of suggestive utterances, due to a lack of specific details. The six most common question types (Studies I, II, and IV) are provided in Table 1, along with examples of the categories from the interviews.

The child responses were also coded separately, as presented in Table 2 (for details on the elaboration of the categories, see Study I). In a couple of studies (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, et al., 1996; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, et al., 2001), some child responses have been differentiated, but none of the studies focused specifically on the relationship between the type of interviewer utterance and the type of child utterance.

Table 1  
*Interviewer Utterance Types*

Question type	Definition and examples
1. <i>Facilitators</i>	<p>Non-suggestive encouragements to continue with a response. This category includes utterances such as “ok” or “hmm”, restatements (echoing) of the child’s previous utterance and non-suggestive words of encouragement. Requests for clarification were also coded under this category, for example, when the interviewer did not hear the response of the child.</p> <p><i>Child: “Do you know what”? Interviewer: “What”?</i></p>
2. <i>Invitations</i>	<p>Open-ended utterances (questions, statements or imperatives) used to elicit free recall responses from the child. An invitation could be general or relate to the issue just mentioned by the child.</p> <p><i>“Tell me what happened.”</i>  <i>“What happened after that?”</i></p>
3. <i>Directive utterances</i>	<p>Questions focusing the child’s attention on details previously mentioned by the child, requesting further elaboration. Within these utterances, the interviewer tended to look for answers to the questions what, who, where, and when.</p> <p><i>Interviewer: “What was his name?”</i></p>
4. <i>Option-posing utterances</i>	<p>Questions focusing the child’s attention on incident-related issues that the child had not previously mentioned but which did not imply that a particular response was expected. These were commonly questions that implied answers like “yes” or “no” or the choice of alternative answers given by the interviewer.</p> <p><i>“Did he do something to you that you didn’t like?”</i>  <i>“Have you seen x without clothes?”</i></p>
5. <i>Specific suggestive utterances</i>	<p>Questions stated in such a way that the interviewer strongly communicates what response is expected or that assumes details that have not been revealed by the child. In this category, utterances including at least one new specific detail not previously mentioned by the child were coded.</p> <p><i>“I know what happened, whose idea it was to go there, was it your idea Peter?”</i>  <i>“Sometimes adults touch children in a way that they should not, that is bad.. I know you have been touched in a bad way by an adult, have you not?”</i></p>

*"Who took your underwear off?" (when the child had never stated that any clothes had been taken off)*

*"Were you inside or outside the house when he took his clothes off?" (when the child had not stated that he ever did).*

6. *Unspecific suggestive utterances*

Questions stated in such a way that the interviewer strongly communicates the kind of response expected, but without including specific details. E.g., when the interviewer describes emotional characteristics of the event without the child having accounted for them earlier, or claims to know what has happened. Social pressure and negative feedback on the child's response were also coded here, as was repeating the same question more than twice when the child had already answered it. While the *specific suggestive utterance* is prompting for one specific answer from the child, the *unspecific* is rather pointing the child in the "general direction" of the answer by the interviewer.

*"I want you to tell me all about those horrible things that sometimes happen to children and that have happened to you"*

*"I know what has happened to you, but I want you to tell me yourself".*

*"We cannot continue with this interview unless you tell me what really happened!"*

*"Your mother already told us, now you tell us too."*

*Interviewer: "What was awful about that evening?"*

*Child: "I did not like the food."*

*Interviewer: "What else was awful about that evening?"*

*Child: "I was very bored."*

*Interviewer: "What else was awful about that evening?"*

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Table 2  
*Child Response Types*

Response type	Definition and examples
1. <i>Descriptions</i>	<p>The child narrates salient events, characteristics etc. All utterances from the child that were understandable and referred to the topic suggested by the interviewer in the preceding sentence were coded here. This code does not imply that the child conveys new details.</p> <p><i>Interviewer: "Do you know why you were at the hospital?"</i>  <i>Child: "Because X was touching me between the legs and I know that is why I went to the hospital".</i></p>
2. <i>Don't remember/ Don't know/ Clarification</i>	<p>A statement showing the child does not remember or know the answer. Statements reflecting reluctance from the child to discuss a certain event, and statements indicating that the child did not understand the question and asked for clarification were also coded here.</p> <p><i>"I don't know because I don't remember."</i>  <i>"I don't want to tell."</i></p>
3. <i>Yes/No/ Alternative</i>	<p>The child answers yes or no, or chooses among alternative answers provided by the interviewer.</p> <p><i>Interviewer: "Were you two alone there?" Child: "Yes", or:</i>  <i>Interviewer: "Was he young or old?" Child: "Old."</i></p> <p>However, if the child continues with a descriptive answer after answering yes/no or choosing an alternative, the answer is coded as a description.</p> <p><i>Interviewer: "Were you alone?" Child: "Yes, we were alone because mummy had gone shopping."</i></p>
4. <i>Repetition</i>	<p>The child repeats some of the words stated by the interviewer in the previous sentence; perhaps indicating the child has not understood the interviewer's utterance.</p> <p><i>Interviewer: "Tell me all you remember about the time when you met him." Child: "The time when I met him."</i>  <i>Interviewer: "Tell me all you can remember about it." Child: "All I can remember..."</i></p>
5. <i>Other</i>	<p>The child changes the subject and begins discussing something else, perhaps because he or she has misunderstood the question or in order to avoid the subject</p>

being discussed.

*Interviewer: "Tell me all about that evening."*

*Child: "Look, there is a bird outside! We have birds like that in our yard."*

6. *Unclear response or meaningless response*

This code was used when it was hard to identify what the child was talking about or when the child gave an answer that made no sense in the context. Sounds and words without meaning, such as "umm" and "mmh" were also coded here.

*Interviewer: "What did you do when he asked you to take your clothes off?"*

*Child: "Yes."*

*Interviewer: "What did he mean when he said you had to lie down?" Child: "No"*

7. *No response*

The child ignores the question and remains silent.

8. *Restatement of earlier answer*

The child repeats, literally, an answer he or she has presented earlier. This was not coded when the restatement of the answer was due to a repeated question by the interviewer, rather in cases where the restatement seemed to be a way for the child to avoid the subject or try to manage the situation.

*Interviewer: "What happened?" Child: "He did these odd things."*

*Interviewer: "What did he do?" Child: "He did these odd things."*

*Interviewer: "What was he like?" Child: "He was angry."*

*Interviewer: "Do you remember anything else about him?" Child: "He was angry."*

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### *The Coding of Details (All Studies)*

The children's responses were coded based on the type of details they included (see Table 3 for the reporting of details used in the different studies). In all four studies, new details were coded only if the *child* had introduced them into the interview. Only details that added to the understanding of the event were counted (Cutshall & Yuille, 1989; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Esplin, et al., 1996; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 2000; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Yuille & Cutshall, 1986, 1989). In Study II, a distinction was made between contextual (adding to the understanding of the child's general situation) and judicially significant details (giving clear evidence for or against abuse). Restatements or reformulations of previously provided details were not coded the second time they occurred. It is important to note that within these samples, the *accuracy* of the details reported by the child could not be assessed.

Table 3  
*Definition of Details*

<b>Study</b>	<b>Definition of details</b>
Studies I, IV	New details describing individuals, objects, or events (including actions) that were related to the event being investigated.
Study II	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <i>No details</i>: Statements from the child that did not include any significant details.</li><li>2. <i>Contextual details</i>: Details which added to the understanding of the child's situation and to circumstances surrounding the event being investigated, such as family structure and, for instance, who is allowed to help with washing and/or dressing the child etc.</li><li>3. <i>Judicially significant details</i>: Explicit details about the sexual abuse or details clearly pointing to the non-existence of evidence for such abuse.</li></ol>
Study III	Only the judicially significant details were analysed, i.e.; explicit details about the sexual abuse or details clearly pointing to the non-existence of evidence for such abuse.

### *Analyses of Language Use (Study III)*

The analyses in Study III were undertaken on two different levels, the first one being the utterance-level, where analyses were run for each question-answer pair, and the second one being the interview-level, where some phenomena were investigated with the interview as the unit of analysis.

#### *Interview-level Analyses: Introducing and Remaining on Topic*

In order to analyse how the subject of the alleged abuse was introduced into the interview, the two first *introductory comments* in each interview were coded according to content (similarly to Warren et al., 1996). The categories were chosen as a result of a preliminary qualitative analysis of the introductory utterances.

1. The child introduces the topic *spontaneously*.
2. The interviewer asks if the child knows the *reason for the interview*.
3. The interviewer states that *someone else* has claimed that something has happened to the child.
4. The interviewer asks whether *bad/negative things* have happened to the child.
5. The interviewer refers to something that the child has *previously said*.
6. The interviewer asks whether the child has experienced any *physical pain/has been hurt*.

The interviews were also coded for the occurrence of *rapid switches of topic* by the interviewer (without proper transition). The interviews were coded as belonging to one of the following categories: (1) no occurrences of rapid switches of topic, (2) 1-3 occurrences of rapid switches of topic, and (3) more than three occurrences of rapid switches of topic.



### *Utterance-Level Analyses: Linguistic Complexity of Questions and Use of the Concepts of Touch and Time*

In order to analyse the linguistic and cognitive complexity of the interviews, the occurrence of different types of “problematic” interviewer utterances were coded into different categories. Based on previous findings (e.g., Brennan, 1995; Kebbell et al., 2004; Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999; Perry et al., 1995; Warren et al., 1996; Zajac et al., 2003), the categories identified would be expected to be influential when interviewing children and it is recommended that interviewers avoid these types of expressions (e.g., Home Office, 2002; Walker & Warren, 1995). These factors are not bound to a specific language and could be influential without regard to the specific language used in the interview. In this study, all interviews were conducted in Finnish. It should be noted that the criteria for more than one category may be applicable to a single statement. Statements were coded according to all the categories they belonged to.

The linguistic categories were defined as follows:

1. *Long sentences.* Of all utterances, the 10% containing the most words were designated as long (these included 22 words or more).
2. *Compound sentences.* Utterances including several different ideas, without the main question being distinguished. Compound sentences include complex syntax and double negatives. (See, for instance, Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Zajac et al., 2003).
3. *Multiple questions.* One or more questions posed in one rejoinder, without allowing the child to respond in between. (See, for instance, Kebbell et al., 2004; Kebbell & Johnson, 2000; Warren et al., 1996).
4. *Extended References.* Questions making unclear references to persons, situations or places. These include expressions such as “he”, “she”, “they”, if the person/persons talked about has not been mentioned in the previous statement and “it” and “there”, when the situation/place has not been accounted for in the previous statement. The persons or events can be

accounted for either directly by the interviewer or indirectly when the children's previous responses show that they know what the interviewer is referring to (See, for instance, Brennan, 1995; Carter et al., 1996).

Whether, and how often, the concept of touch occurred in the interviews, was counted. The manner in which it was presented was specified as follows: in a specific way, where the interviewer clarified the kind of touching intended (e.g. touching of a specific body part; "*Did he touch your behind?*"), or, in an unspecific way, where the interviewer did not clarify where or how the child would have been touched (e.g., "*Were you touched by someone?*"). Whether the interviewer referred to the touching in an emotionally charged or in a neutral way was also noted (for instance, whether the interviewer asked if the child had been touched in a *bad* way).

Questions concerning time were counted and categorised into three groups. The first group included time-questions where the interviewer asked for the *frequency* of incidents. The second group included questions where the interviewer asked *when* an event had taken place. The third group included questions where the interviewer asked *how long ago* an event had occurred.

### ***Repeated Interviewing, the Presence of a Support Person and the Use of Anatomically Detailed Dolls (Study IV)***

The presence of a person related to the child was coded. In some of the interviews where another person was present, the interview was directly affected, in that the other person answered on the child's behalf, though the interviewer's question had been directed to the child. Therefore, these incidents were also coded separately and the number of words uttered by the other person present was counted. Furthermore, in order to examine the possible effects that repeated interrogation might have on the interviews, the first interview with each child was compared with the dynamics in all the other interviews. Also, to investigate the possible associations between using AD dolls and the interview dynamics, all the utterances in which dolls were actively used (e.g., the interviewer

asking the child to demonstrate something with the dolls or the child demonstrating with the dolls) were coded separately.

## **Statistical Analyses and Inter-Rater Reliability**

The data were analysed with SPSS, version 10.0. The statistical tests used were the Student's *t*-test for independent samples, the  $\chi^2$ -test, tests of correlation, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Utterance pairs were selected as the main unit of analysis. It was, therefore, necessary to assume that even if a number of utterance pairs resulted from the interaction of a particular interviewer and a particular child, this would not introduce dependence into the data. After the Complex Samples module became available with the introduction of SPSS, version 13, all the central analyses were recomputed using the procedures available in this module, which allow for the definition of the interview as a cluster variable. The results remained essentially the same, independent of whether the Complex Samples definition was used or not. However, the original analyses included in the published or submitted manuscripts will be followed in the present summary in order to avoid confusion.

In Studies I and IV, the author and a co-author coded all interviewer and child utterances. A research assistant coded a number of interviews until reaching agreement with the authors on at least 85% of the utterance types and details. The assistant then coded a randomly selected 10% of the interviews. The inter-rater reliability between the authors and the assistant was 84% for the interviewer utterances, 85% for the child utterances, and 89% for the new details.

In Study II, 20% of the utterance pairs were randomly selected and coded separately for question types, answer types and details. The inter-rater reliability was good for all question types and details measured with the Kappa measure of agreement (see Study II for more information).

In Study III, a number of interviews was preliminarily coded by the author, in co-operation with a research assistant, in order to develop the definitions of the different categories. After the categories had been defined, all interviews were coded according to the finalised coding scheme, including the ones that had been preliminarily coded.

Ten randomly selected interviews were coded separately in order to measure the inter-rater reliability between the author and the research assistant, which was 92% ( $\kappa = .90$ ,  $p < .001$ ) for the interviews in general. The inter-rater reliability was also good for all separate linguistic categories (see Study III for further information).

## RESULTS

A summary of the most important findings in each of the four studies is presented below. For detailed information on the results, including the statistical analyses, please refer to the respective studies.

### Study I<sup>3</sup>

*Interviewer utterances and child responses.* Within the interviews, the investigators produced 73% of the words, while the children produced 27%. Most interviewer utterances were *option-posing utterances*, *directive utterances*, and *specific suggestive utterances* (see the first row of Table 4). The amount of *invitations* was small, constituting only two percent of the utterances. It is notable that the very first interviewer utterance in the interviews in only one case was an *invitation*.

*Invitations and directive utterances* elicited the longest child responses, while the shortest responses were those following *specific suggestive utterances*. The highest number of new details by far was elicited with *directive utterances*, followed by *invitations*, *specific suggestive*, and *option-posing* utterances. Longer interviewer utterances were associated with less informative response types from the child than were shorter ones. For instance, the longest interviewer utterances resulted in the child changing topic (the response type *other*), repeating the question or not responding at all. Instead, the shortest interviewer utterances were associated with *descriptions* and new details provided by the children.

The posing of *specific suggestive utterances* was associated with a significant decrease in the number of response types indicating a functioning communication between interviewer and child (such as *descriptions*, *don't remember/know*, *yes/no/alternative* responses), as well as with a significant increase in cases where the child did *not respond* at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Only the most frequent question and response categories are accounted for here. For a description of all utterance categories originally used, please refer to Study I.

*Interviewer reactions to child responses.* Interviewers were found to modify their questioning style as a result of the response type provided by the child, by posing fewer *specific* and *unspecific suggestive utterances* after the child had given a *descriptive* response. However, they also posed fewer *invitations* after the child had given a *descriptive* response. After the child had provided a new detail, interviewers tended more frequently to pose *facilitators* and *directive* utterances, while posing fewer *invitations* and *suggestive (specific as well as unspecific)* questions (compare the rows in Table 4).

Table 4  
*Type of Interviewer Utterance Following Informative Child Responses (%)*

	Facilitators	Invitations	Directive	Option- posing	Specific suggestive	Unspecific suggestive
Question types in the whole material	12	2	22	31	21	5
Question types following new details	18	1	29	33	13	2
$\chi^2$ (1)	10.6***	4.9*	10.3**	1.0	13.6***	5.5*

*Note.*  $N = 2,627$  for the overall analysis, 320 child responses contained new details. Also note that results pertaining only to the 6 most frequently occurring question types are presented here, therefore the rows do not add up to 100%. For results concerning the remaining question types, please see Study I. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Study II

*Interviewer utterances and child responses.* The majority of questions asked were either *option-posing* or *directive*, followed by *facilitators*, *specific suggestive questions*, *invitations* and *unspecific suggestive questions*. *Option-posing*, *specific suggestive* and *unspecific suggestive* question types together accounted for 48% of all the interviewer utterances, while *directive* questions accounted for 31%. *Invitations* accounted for 6% and *facilitators* for 15%. The longest interviewer utterances were *unspecific suggestive questions*, with a mean of more than 30 words, while *facilitators* were notably shorter.

Example of an *unspecific suggestive* utterance:

Interviewer: "Your mum is worried that when you spent some time at your daddy's place, something... something might have happened, something that... what do you think it could be, was there something that you didn't like, or you think that mummy thought you didn't like? Was there? At your daddy's place?"

Child: "No."

The majority of the responses given by the child were either *descriptive* answers (44%) or *yes-no/alternative* responses (20%), followed by *other*, *no response*, *don't know/don't remember* and *unclear/meaningless* responses. *Facilitators*, *invitations*, and *directive* questions were associated with more *descriptive* responses by the child, the contrary being true for *option-posing*, *specific suggestive* and *unspecific suggestive* utterances, which rendered the vast majority of *no responses*.

No significant associations were found between the child's age and the type of questions or responses or the pattern of associations between the two. The same applied for gender. Most contextual details as well as judicial details were given in response to *directive* utterances, and also *facilitators* and *option-posing* utterances elicited many of the new details, both contextual and judicial (see Table 5). Eleven percent of the judicial details were elicited by *specific suggestive* utterances, and 7% by *invitations*. Taken together, the results show that 22% of the judicial details were elicited by open-ended prompts

(*invitations* and *facilitators*), 41% by *directive* utterances, and 37% by *option-posing* or *suggestive* utterances.

Table 5

*The Association between Interviewer Question Types and the Percentages of Different Detail Types Provided by the Child*

Question type	No new details %	Contextual details %	Judicial details %
Facilitators	14	21	15
Invitations	6	8	7
Directive	29	44	41
Option- posing	35	20	25
Specific suggestive	9	6	11
Unspecific suggestive	7	1	1
Total	100	100	100

*Note.* Overall association between the question type asked and details provided by the child  $\chi^2(10) = 41.49, p < .001$

The differentiation between contextual and judicial details showed that the balance of eliciting contextual as opposed to judicial details differed between the question types. While *facilitators*, *invitations*, and *directive* utterances elicited more contextual than judicial details, the opposite was true for *specific suggestive* utterances (See Table 6).

There was also an association between the number of words in interviewer utterances and the type of response provided by the child: the shortest questions elicited *descriptive* answers from the child, while the longest questions tended to render *no response* at all. The mean number of words in the child responses for all interviewer utterances was 4 ( $SD = 5$ ). The children responded to *option-posing* questions with the shortest responses, while *facilitators* and *invitations* rendered the longest responses by the children (See Table 6).



Table 6

*The Association between Question Type and the Average Number of Words in the Child Response as well as the Proportions of Different Detail Types Provided by the Child*

Question type (% of all question types)	No new details (%)	Contextual details (%)	Judicial details (%)	Total (%)	Average number of words in response	
					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Facilitators (15%)	77	14	9	100	6.00	6.28
Invitations (6%)	79	12	9	100	4.79	5.15
Directive (31%)	75	14	11	100	4.14	4.45
Option-posing (33%)	88	6	6	100	2.96	4.55
Specific suggestive (9%)	83	6	11	100	3.67	5.38
Unspec. suggestive (6%)	98	1	1	100	3.65	4.63

*Interviewer reactions to child responses.* In terms of the interviewer’s reaction to a child providing new details, results were similar to those of Study I. Almost 80% of the child responses containing judicially significant material were followed by question types other than *facilitators* and *invitations*.

### Study III

*Introducing topic.* Interviewers most commonly introduced the topic of abuse by asking if the child knew the cause for the visit or whether bad or scary things had happened to the child. It was also relatively common for interviewers to state someone else had claimed that something had happened to the child. In about 15% of the cases, the child spontaneously started talking about the alleged abuse. Of the introductory questions by the interviewer, only a fifth were non-specific (questions where the interviewer asked whether the child knew the reason for the interview), while more than 50% were specific and can be considered leading (categories *someone said*, *bad things*, *reference*, and *pain/hurt*). In addition to the spontaneous introductory statements by the children, only introductory questions where interviewers asked whether bad things had happened or referred to something the child had previously said were associated with new judicial details.

*Rapid switch of topic.* Rapid switch of topic, as defined in the method, refers to the interviewer changing the focus of the discussion suddenly, without proper transition. In 40% of all the interviews, no rapid switch of topic occurred. In 44% of the interviews, rapid switch of topic occurred one to three times, while in 16% of the interviews, there were more than three rapid switches of topic. Many of these "interviews" tended to be completely unstructured and rather consisted of situations where the child played and the interviewer occasionally introduced questions about the alleged abuse. There was an association between the occurrence of rapid switches of topic and new details ( $\chi^2 (2) = 8.00, p < .05$ ), that is, the more rapid switches of topic the interview included, the fewer details were provided by the child. It was more common to use rapid switches of topic more than three times in interviews with younger children ( $\chi^2 (2) = 18.17, p < .001$ ), the frequency being 19%, as compared to 9% for the older children.

*Complex language use.* Long questions, multiple questions, compound utterances, and referential expressions were all present in the material (see Table 7 for examples and frequencies of the categories). Interviewer utterances were coded as belonging to one or

more of these categories in 22% of the cases. Multiple and long questions were associated with fewer details in the children’s responses. While long, compound, and multiple utterances were posed more often to the older children, no significant associations between age and referential expressions were found.

Table 7  
*The Occurrence of the Linguistic Categories in Interviewer Utterances*

Categories, definition	% of all utterances	Examples
<b>Long</b> Interviewer utterances containing more than 22 words	10 <sup>a</sup>	<i>“Your mother was already here in the spring, or already in the summer, she wished that I would meet you here and talk about such things, that you then had already told about in the spring, that what had happened, what bad things had happened when you were at your uncle’s house.”</i> (Interview with 4-year-old girl)
<b>Compound</b> Complicated utterances with one or more clause/idea in one rejoinder or where the meaning of the question is hard to detect.	6	<i>“And then X said that you, the first time, when your mother was here, when I wasn’t here, you talked about these visits, that these visits are arranged because adults are worried about what you have said about it, what you have told that has happened between you and your dad.”</i> (Interview with 8-year-old boy).  <i>“And then, when we met here, your father said that he is not worried about you and that when you are at his place everything is alright, that’s alright, but the moments when you leave, or when you return to your mother’s, or when you leave your mother’s to go to your father’s and when you return to your mother’s, those situations are difficult. Because your mother and father don’t get along. And it’s hard to arrange your things, they are fighting. Have you noticed that?”</i> (Interview with 8-year-old girl)

<p><b>Multiple Utterances</b> including more than one question in a statement without allowing the child to respond in between</p>	<p>8</p>	<p><i>“What did your mother say, why did you come here? Did she say to talk and to play? Did she say something like that? Didn’t she say anything?”</i> (Interview with 4-year-old girl)</p> <p><i>“Would you like to tell me that, how should I ask it, who was with you when it happened? Was your mother there? Was your uncle there? Was your grandmother there? Was your father there?”</i> (Interview with 3-year-old boy)</p>
<p><b>Referential Expressions</b> Unclear references regarding persons/situations/ places</p>	<p>6</p>	<p><i>“It is important that I know what the bad things are. Can you say?”</i> - <i>I still can’t say.</i> - <i>Mmm.</i> - <i>And I never will.</i> - <i>Mmm. Are <b>they</b> connected to something?</i> - <i>(child remains silent)</i> - <i>Mmm. Where did <b>it</b> happen?</i> - <i>In our house.</i> - <i>Hmm. Were there any people involved?</i> - <i>(child remains silent)</i> - <i>Who?</i> - <i>I don’t remember their names.</i> - <i>Mmm. Were they children or adults?</i> - <i>Children.</i> - <i>Yeah. Did <b>they</b> do something?</i> - <i>(child remains silent)</i> - <i>What happened <b>there</b>?</i> - <i>I don’t remember.</i> - <i>You don’t remember? Was <b>it</b> something bad?</i> <i>(child remains silent)”</i> (Interview with 6-year-old boy)</p>

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<sup>a</sup> Long utterances were defined as the 10% of the total number of utterances, which contained most words. Based on this procedure, the limit was set at 22 words. Note, that the categories were not mutually exclusive; utterances were coded to all categories they belonged to.

*Concepts of touching and time.* Only 3% of the coded utterances included the concept of touch, and interviewers more often posed questions concerning physical touching to girls than to boys. The majority of the utterances related to touching were coded as emotionally neutral (the interviewer was not referring to the touching

as bad, scary, or painful) and specific, for instance: Interviewer: *"I would still like to ask you if anyone has touched you, either on the bottom or on the breasts?"* (Interview with a 5-year-old girl).

The concept of time was included in 2% of the utterances. Most of these utterances were concerned with *how many times* something had occurred. Interviewers tended to give alternative answers (i.e., posing *option-posing* questions) that the child could choose from when enquiring about the timing of events, and consequently, the reported details about time were generally not elicited as spontaneous responses to open-ended questions (see examples below).

Example from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: *Do you remember when this happened?*

Child: (no response)

I: *Do you? Was it in the summer or in the winter?*

C: (no response)

I: *Was it long ago or a short time ago?*

C: (no response)

Example from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: *Okay. Has this happened once or many times?*

Child: *Well, quite many times.*

Example from an interview with a 3-year-old child:

Interviewer: *Was this during the day or during the night?*

Child: *The da...Night.*

## Study IV

*Repeated interviewing.* Results on the effect of repeated interviewing (i.e., the child being interviewed more than once within the course of the CSA investigation) showed that the number of new details by the child was significantly higher in the first interview than in the repeated condition. Also, in the repeated condition, interviewers used significantly more specific suggestive utterances.

*Presence of a support person.* When another person was present at the interview, the child became more silent and the interviewer more talkative: The interviewer produced 83% (compared to 73% in the overall material) of the words uttered in the interview when a support person was present. The child produced 15% (compared to 27% in the overall material) and the other person uttered the remaining 2%. The presence of a support person was associated with a significant increase in the number of both specific and unspecific suggestive utterances, while the proportion of directive utterances decreased by 50%. The proportion of descriptions, as well as new details provided by the child, was significantly smaller when a support person attended the interview.

*Anatomically detailed dolls.* Utterances posed when the interviewer was using anatomically detailed dolls were found to be associated with longer questions from the interviewer, shorter responses from the child, and a decrease in the number of details reported by the child. AD doll utterances were associated with the interviewers using significantly fewer facilitators and significantly more unspecific suggestive utterances. AD doll utterances were also associated with a significantly lower number of descriptions by the child. To investigate whether the results reflected a tendency already present among the children before the dolls were used, that is, whether the results might have depended on the fact that investigators chose to use AD dolls with less talkative children (as seemed to have been the case in the study by Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, et al., 1996), a number of utterances in the doll interviews which were made prior to the actual use of the AD doll was compared to the same number of utterances from interviews where no dolls were used. Similarly to previous studies, the children

interviewed with AD dolls also seemed to be less talkative before the introduction of the dolls.

However, when comparing the utterance pairs of the interviews where dolls were actively used to utterance pairs in the same interviews where they were not used, the active use of dolls seemed to result in a decrease of new details from the child. The interviewer used significantly more words when the dolls were actively being used, than when the dolls were not being used within the same interviews.

### **Regional Variations in Conducting CSA Interviews<sup>4</sup>**

Differences within Finland were also explored. The aim was to analyse whether the overall pattern of interviewer behaviour would be similar in hospitals of different regions and in different-sized hospitals. As can be observed in Table 8, there were differences in interviewer behaviour between the hospitals analysed. Interestingly, smaller hospitals did no worse in the comparison than large university hospitals (rather the contrary), although one might have expected otherwise, since larger hospitals have more resources and thus better access to specialized staff. There were similar results for the occurrence of different linguistic categories and rapid switches of topic (i.e., interviewers used more complicated language and included more rapid switches of topic in the larger hospitals than in the cluster of small hospitals), indicating significant differences in interviewer behaviour among the regions.

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<sup>4</sup> Since these findings are of purely national interest, they were included here even though they are not presented in the articles.

Table 8  
*Regional Differences in the Distribution of Interviewer Utterances*

Question type	University Hospital 1 %	University Hospital 2 %	Small Hospitals %
Facilitators	15	14	19
Invitations	6	7	6
Directive	27	34	33
Option-posing	35	32	31
Specific suggestive	8	9	9
Unspecific suggestive	9	5	2
Total	100	100	100

*Note.* Overall association:  $\chi^2 (10) = 22.33, p < .05$ . The third group is a cluster of smaller hospitals and clinics.



## DISCUSSION

Study I and II present two new types of analyses not previously reported: associations between the types of interviewer utterances and the types of child responses, as well as analyses regarding what kind of questions interviewers use to follow up informative child responses with. The results of Studies I and II indicate that interviews in the two samples rely heavily on closed and suggestive question types, while rarely using open-ended prompts and that such practice is associated with the children being less informative. These results are in line with those of similar studies conducted in other countries. The balance of eliciting contextual as opposed to judicial details differed between the question types, with facilitators, invitations, and directive utterances elicited more contextual than judicial details, while specific suggestive utterances elicited more judicial than contextual details. Results in Study I also show that long questions (in number of words) are frequent in the interviews and that they are associated with the children being less informative.

Study III further examines the issue of complex language use, showing that interviewers used complex language, as well as long and multiple questions, and that such language use has negative consequences for the interviews. The results of the study suggest that even professionals who are experienced in interacting with children may have difficulties in using a child-sensitive language, adding to the pool of studies showing similar problems to occur in legal hearings with children conducted by lawyers. The results also show that interviewers have a hard time phrasing themselves adequately (i.e., in accordance with guidelines) when introducing the topic of abuse, many times suggesting “bad things” may have happened to the child and thus contaminating the reliability of the children’s accounts.

Study IV analysed possible changes in interview dynamics associated with repeated interviewing, the presence of a support person (related to the child), and the use of anatomically detailed (AD) dolls by the interviewer. Interviewers in the present study used

a significantly higher number of suggestive utterances in the repeated condition, thus endangering the reliability of the children's accounts. The results of the present study also showed that interviewers talked more and children provided less information when a support person was present, thus supporting the critical approach of existing guidelines. Using AD dolls within the interviews was associated with longer interviewer utterances and shorter, less responsive, and less detailed utterances by the child. The interviewers' use of *unspecific suggestive utterances* increased significantly when dolls were used. A typical situation was that interviewers repeatedly asked the child to show "*what really happened*" with the dolls.

## Opening the Interviews

Results from Studies I, II and III showed that interviewers failed to open the interview in an appropriate way. In almost 50% of the cases, interviewers introduced the topic of CSA in a way that can be considered leading; through referring to claims of abuse made by someone else, asking whether the child experienced pain or had been hurt, or, particularly in interviews with younger children, by asking whether *bad things* had happened to the child. A possible explanation for this is that interviewers may assume these words (*bad, evil*) to be familiar to very young children. This type of question can, however, be regarded as leading, as it assumes that abuse, in fact, has taken place, and suggests the direction of the answers expected (as well as how the children may have experienced the abuse). Concepts like "bad touching" used by the interviewer can be considered problematic, since it may not be obvious for the child what kind of touching the interviewer is referring to. Children who have not been abused may have experienced other types of "bad touching" (physical reprimands by parents, quarrelling with friends, painful medical examinations etc.). There might be an interviewer bias towards understanding "bad touching" exclusively as sexual abuse. Also, interviewers are likely to automatically view CSA as something painful and – aware of the negative consequences of abuse – inherently bad. However, this notion does not necessarily always correspond to the subjective experience of the child (see, for instance,

Sariola & Uutela, 1996), particularly since all cases of CSA do not necessarily involve inflicting physical pain to the child.

In contrast to the results by Warren et al., (1996), it was fairly common for the children in the material to spontaneously report recollections of the investigated events, which might indicate that the child felt comfortable with the interviewer. It may also be that interviewers allowed enough time for children and avoided rushing into the topic. These responses, as a natural consequence, tended to include many judicial details regarding the possible assault.

### **Questions and Responses Types<sup>5</sup>**

Interestingly, in spite of the data having been collected in quite different ways, with the first data set consisting of interviews considered as problematic, and the second one being an unselected sample of interviews from hospitals around the country, the results of Study I and Study II were very much in line with each other. The reason that the first set of interviews had become the focus of attention by expert witnesses and other involved professionals might thus not be what was expected – that the quality of these interviews was actually worse than that of interviews in general – but rather that there happened to be people (the defendants or their lawyers, for instance) involved who were aware of the research on suggestibility and who were alert to possible problems in the interviews. Persons with a higher education might be hypothesised to have better means to identify such problems and address them in an appropriate way. On the other hand, the unselected second sample might show a more positive picture of the general situation than what is actually the case, since the fact that some hospitals did not want to participate in the study might be related to an apprehension of allowing their investigations to be critically analysed. The hospitals were informed beforehand that the scope of the research was to assess strengths and

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<sup>5</sup> As the results concerning interviewer and child utterances did not differ much between Studies I and II, the results referred to in this discussion are, in general, based on the analyses from the larger sample (Study II).

weaknesses in the interviews and propose remedies for the possible weaknesses.

When examining the frequency of the different interviewer utterance types, it is clear that investigative interviews in both studied samples share the heavy reliance on directive, option-posing and suggestive utterances found in the interviews conducted in other countries, for example, Sweden (Cederborg et al., 2000), Israel (Orbach et al., 2000), England, Wales (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies et al., 2001) and the USA (Lamb et al., 2000). A comparison between the results of the present thesis and the mentioned international studies is presented in Table 9.

Table 9

*The Frequencies of Different Interviewer Utterance Types: An International Comparison*

Utterance type	Israel N=50	USA N=145	Sweden N=72	England & Wales, N=119	Finland N=43
Invitation	5%	3%	6%	6%	6%
Facilitators	-	17%	-	12%	15%
Directive	52%	31%	41%	47%	31%
Option-posing	33%	31%	39%	29%	33%
Suggestive	10%	5%	14%	5%	9% (6%)

*Note.* The *unspecific suggestive utterances* were presented within parenthesis next to those of *suggestive utterances*.

As can be seen in Table 9, the general structure of the interviews analysed in the present research shared many characteristics with other studies. All studies in this comparison show that invitations were in minority among the interviewer utterances, while there was a clear over-reliance on directive and option-posing utterances. In the present study, there were more suggestive utterances and less directive utterances than in most of the international studies, while the percentages of invitations, facilitators and option-posing utterances were quite similar to those of the other studies. The (even)

stronger reliance on suggestible interviewing practice in the Finnish sample might be due to differences in how the interviewer samples were selected. For instance, the sample studied by Sternberg and colleagues (2001) consisted of interviewers trained to interview according to the Memorandum of Good Practice, giving guidance to forensic interviewers, while Finnish interviewers were unlikely to have received any training in forensic interviewing.

Of all new judicially significant details provided by the children during the interviews, almost 20% were elicited with option-posing or suggestive questions, raising concerns about the reliability of the information provided by the children in these interviews. While there was no way in the present study to conclude whether the details were accurate or not, it is a well-established fact that open-ended questions elicit more accurate information than suggestive questions (e.g., Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, & Orbach, 2002; Waterman, Blades & Spencer, 2002), and that details elicited with option-posing and suggestive utterances are associated with high numbers of internal contradiction (Orbach & Lamb, 2001; Poole & Lamb, 1998).

More worryingly still, results showed that even when children provided new and judicially significant information, around 80% of the subsequent questions were directive, option-posing or suggestive, that is, the interviewer failed to neutrally facilitate the child's account. Instead, the already rarely occurring invitations were even more infrequent after the child had given an informative answer. Thus, the tendency to rely on leading and suggestive question types cannot solely be explained by the non-responsiveness of the child, but also seems to reflect deficiencies in the interviewers' skills.

The differentiation between contextual and judicial details in Study II was interesting, as it showed that the balance of eliciting contextual as opposed to judicial details differed between the question types. While facilitators, invitations, and directive utterances elicited more contextual than judicial details, the opposite was true for specific suggestive utterances. This might be due to reluctance on the part of the children to describe the abuse. If abuse occurs within the family or the perpetrator is a person related to the child, a child may display difficulties to describe the abuse due to factors of loyalty or out of fear for punishment. Recent research suggests that even when the perpetrator (in cases of verified abuse allegations) is a stranger

and factors of loyalty and the like can be excluded, children still show difficulties in addressing and describing sexual details related to the abuse events (Leander, 2006). In such cases, children might be argued to find it easier to respond to highly specific questions than to describe the abuse in a more spontaneous way. In fact, this is a quite common assumption but it is highly debatable (see e.g., Bruck & Ceci, 2004; Poole & Lamb, 1998). In the present sample, in view of the high frequencies of suggestive questions, a more likely explanation seems to be that the interviewers through suggestive questioning have coerced the children into reporting certain (abuse-specific) information, the accuracy of which may not be taken for granted.

In conclusion, the present findings seem to indicate that interviewers in Finnish CSA investigations do not follow best interview practice as defined by the research community.

## Language Use

*“Sometimes a child has nightmares, like, for instance, in situations where the child has some kind of worry, or a bad feeling about something. And it is, well it might be, well I don’t know if this is the reason, since we have not talked about it yet, but it could be that you have something on your mind, something that worries you, but that the worry only shows in your nightmares. Many times when things are hard to talk about for children, the problems will show elsewhere [...] And then children easily get the idea that, or they think that, had I only been nicer or better, or had I not bothered them or had I not been bad or had I not done this or that, then maybe this would never have happened. Children easily think that it is their own fault. I don’t know how much you have thought about these things, but, I’ve met a lot of children whose parents were divorced and I’ve noticed that those children thought like that. [...] But I don’t know how much you thought about things like these?”* (Free translation extracted from an over 300-word long question included in the material posed to an 8-year-old child. Similar long phrases ended with “What do you think about that?” or “Have you noticed that?”).

The interviewers in the present study failed to adapt their language to the mostly pre-school aged children in the sample, using complicated, multiple and long questions, as well as unclear references to persons and places. More than a fifth of the interviewer utterances were coded to at least one of these categories. Scholars have warned against using such complicated language, particularly in interviews with young children (e.g., Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Brennan, 1995; Kebbell & Giles, 2000; Perry et al., 1995; Walker & Warren, 1995; Zajac et al., 2003; Zajac & Hayne, 2003). Interviewers in the sample showed some age sensitivity with regards to language use, apparent, for instance, in the fact that most of the long, compound and multiple utterances in the present study were posed to the older (6-8 years) children. Also, interviewers posed more compound questions to girls than to boys, perhaps considering girls as more linguistically mature than boys. Such an assumption would, in fact, receive support from research (see, for instance, Bauer, Goldfield & Reznick, 2002). Instead, unclear references regarding situations, places or persons occurred to the same extent with younger and older children, possibly indicating that interviewers are unaware of the potential problems of such references.

Interviewers in the present study (as those in the study by Melinder, 2004) tended to conduct their interviews in an unstructured way, fluctuating on and off topic, in particular with younger children. Such topic incoherence is typical in younger children (see, for instance, Poole & Lamb, 1998), and interviewers may thus have mirrored the communicative style of their young interviewees. However, such practise was associated with children being less informative. While the rapid switches of topic might have been a consequence of the children providing less information and avoiding the topic of abuse, leading the interviewers to seek new ways of engaging them (for instance, through playing or drawing), in this study the incoherent way of conducting the interviews seemed more to reflect the fact that interviewers used something of a play-observation approach to interviewing. This in itself is problematic, as it may have given the children the wrong signal of what was expected of them. Children can be serious and task-focused when needed but if they can choose between playing and discussing (possibly difficult things), they might well opt for the first alternative.

The concept of touch occurred quite sparsely in the sample, which is somewhat surprising, considering the subject matter under discussion (and also in comparison to the study by Warren et al., 1996, where questions concerning touching were more frequent). In most cases, touching was referred to in a specific (specifying what kind of touching) and neutral fashion (without giving an emotional value to the concept). In only four cases, the interviewer uttered a concern that *bad* touching might have occurred. Interestingly, the questions related to touch were posed mainly to girls. It is to be noted that, in this sample, only one interviewer was male, thus it is possible that female interviewers in general felt more comfortable addressing bodily touching with girls than with boys.

The low frequency of questions directly concerning touching is also illustrative of the tendencies of interviewers to discuss the alleged abuse in an abstract way, for instance, concentrating their efforts to get the child to talk about the abuse through questions about “something *sad/bad/painful*” that might have happened to the child. Consider, for instance, the following example of an introductory comment by an interviewer:

*“Now I would like to talk to you for a while, to find out if there are some things that sometimes worry you or make you sad. We could try to talk about those things together and see what we can do about them. I know it can be difficult to talk about those kind of scary things but I hope you’ll be a brave boy and tell me all about the things that have happened to you”.*

The fact that time questions tended to be option-posing is problematic: the children’s responses do not indicate whether or not they have understood the question, and as explained earlier, children may respond to yes/no-questions they have not understood in order to please the interviewer (Aldridge & Wood, 1998). This may well have been the case, for instance, in the following exchange from an interview with a 5-year-old child:

Interviewer: *You told me that X hurt you. Did it happen once or several times?*

Child: *Look, let’s play with these!*

I: *I know it is difficult to talk about these things but I really need you to tell me.*



C: *We can have a tea party (is playing).*

I: *It is really important that you tell me about the time he hurt you. Can you tell me if it happened just once or many times?*

C: *Many times.*

## **Repeated Interviewing, the Presence of a Support Person and the Use of Anatomically Detailed Dolls**

Interviewers used a significantly higher number of specific suggestive utterances in the repeated interviews, with an increase of as much as 63%. The combination of repeated interviewing and suggestive utterances is one that researchers have warned against, since it has been proven to seriously contaminate children's accounts (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Qin et al., 1997). One limitation of the analyses regarding repeated interviewing is that the time that had elapsed between the alleged events and the interview was not known and could, therefore, not be taken into account, although the timing of repeated (suggestive) interviews is related to the reporting of children (Melnyk & Bruck, 2004).

The results concerning the effects of the presence of a support person at the interview were particularly interesting, since few studies have been conducted on the topic and since the findings were surprisingly clear on the matter. The presence of such a person was associated with longer interviewer utterances and shorter and less detailed child responses. It also had significant effects on the interviewer and child utterance types, the most important being the increase in the number of suggestive utterances by the interviewer and the simultaneous decrease in the number of descriptions by the child.

The present findings thus suggest that the presence of a support person contaminates the interview dynamics, reflecting the recommendation expressed by Aldridge and Wood (1998), as well as Poole and Lamb (1998), of avoiding the presence of a support person at the interview. Another possible explanation for the results is that parents, for instance, were allowed to participate in interviews with particularly reserved or frightened children, something that could obviously have affected the interview dynamics independently. Even so, instead of allowing a support person to be present at the interview,

interviewers could be advised to seek other ways of reassuring shy or frightened children, for instance, through communicating their understanding for the child's situation through emphatic comments (that are not biased), for instance: *"I wonder if it makes you nervous to be questioned by a stranger?"*, *"Sometimes children worry because they don't know what to expect here."* (Saywitz & Camparo, 1998). Interviewers should also adapt the rapport-building phase to the needs of the individual child.

The interviews where dolls were used seemed to be associated with negative interview practises, the most notable of which was the increase in unspecific suggestive utterances by the interviewer; the amount of these utterances increased by more than five times. This probably reflects the way in which the dolls were used – the interviewer insisting that the child should show "what happened" with the dolls. In these situations, the children tended to respond with more unclear utterances and fewer descriptions. Interviewing with the help of AD dolls was also found to be associated with longer questions from the interviewer, as well as shorter and less detailed responses on the part of the child. However, these results partly seemed to reflect a tendency already present in the interview dynamics before the introduction of the dolls, as the interviewers apparently chose to use AD dolls with less talkative children. When dolls were actively used in the interviews, the children gave significantly fewer new details, while the interviewer used significantly more words than within the same interviews when the dolls were not used. While it is understandable that interviewers long to help a distressed child through providing this nonverbal means of describing their experiences, these results do reiterate findings that AD dolls might not be very effective tools for helping children to talk about experiences of abuse – at least not when used in combination with suggestive questioning techniques, as seemed to be the case in the sample studied here. The associations between using AD dolls and the verbal interaction in the interviews in the present research were thus in line with the findings by Lamb and his colleagues (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, et al., 1996), who likewise found that children's responses were longer and more detailed when dolls were not used.

## Limitations of the Studies

The material analysed in the present thesis consisted of transcribed interviews. No background information was collected concerning the involved cases or persons; neither did the researchers see any other material relevant to the investigations. Thus, the ways in which the legal conclusions were related to the quality of the interviews and other factors could not be clarified. These circumstances, on one hand, implied that researchers had no pre-opinion of the cases, which might have biased the coding of, for instance, question types. On the other hand, the study could have been designed with research assistants, blind to other facts, coding the interviews. However, since already the present research approach (only minidisk recordings of the videotaped interviews were removed from the hospitals) resulted in refusal by some hospitals to take part in the study, a more elaborated design, most certainly, would have made also other hospitals more reluctant to give out their information.

There are, however, a number of factors, likely to have affected the interviews to a high degree, that have not been included in the analyses, such as significant elements of the alleged abuse, for example, was the suspected abuse intra-familial or was the suspect a stranger to the child? How much time had elapsed since the alleged event(s)?

Furthermore, the non-verbal behaviour of the interviewers was not analysed. For instance, the tone the interviewers use when posing the questions and their non-verbal behaviour are likely to affect the child's interpretation of a question. The gender of interviewers has also been found to be associated with the interview dynamics (Lamb & Garretson, 2003). However, the sample analysed for Studies I and IV was too small for gender analyses, while in the sample analysed in Studies II and III, only one interviewer was male, likewise excluding gender analyses. Most of the interviews in the two samples were women, which is likely to correspond to the general situation (most child mental health workers in Finland being women).

In the second sample studied (Studies II and III), only the thirty first on-topic utterances were analysed. This was done to avoid longer interviews affecting the results more than others, although it is probable (as also shown in the results of this thesis; see the results in

the original Study IV regarding the interview phase) that interview dynamics change character throughout the interview and that repeated interviews are different from the first ones. If this is the case, then the method used implies that the results tell the truth about what in many cases consisted of only the first parts of the first interviews. However, as several researchers have pointed out, it is most crucial that interviewers do not begin interviews with suggestive interviewing techniques, as this would undermine the accuracy of all narration that follows (e.g., the child might report what the interviewer has suggested earlier). In this sense, the first parts of the interviews are in fact the most important to investigate. Taken into account that the present results showed interviewers using large proportions of suggestive questions already within the 30 first questions, analysing the rest of the interviews becomes slightly less important as any disclosures made by the child later may have been contaminated and thus less reliable.

A further limitation was that, while the utterance categories are very similar, or to a large extent identical, with the ones used by the researchers whose findings the present results are compared to, it is possible that there may nonetheless be some differences in coding (e.g., the definition of suggestive questions applied may have been less or more strict in the present thesis than in other studies). However, translating interviews for checks by the other researchers in the area could have affected the content and such a procedure would have required more time and resources than were available. Also, the categories (both the ones used here and those by other authors) are well defined with a number of examples. Lastly, even if there were slight differences in the categorisation of questions, these are not likely to be significant and are also not likely to include confusion between the most different question types (open-ended versus closed or leading questions).

The fact that the analyses conducted in Study I are rerun in almost an identical way in Study II might not seem as the most striking example of innovative hypothesis testing. However, it was deemed necessary to conduct the analyses pertaining to interview quality again with the unselected sample as these results are of high relevance for the national context. In addition, without this replication

the unforeseen similarities between the two samples would have remained undetected.

Within Study III, it was found that mental health professionals use a complex language. It might, however, be argued that in order to make such a point, the interviews should be compared with ones conducted by other professional categories (in Finland, the other category frequently conducting forensic interviews would be police officers). Such analyses would be the logical follow-up of this study. However, the results of the present study do show that the children's responses are affected in a negative way when the interviewer uses a complicated interviewing strategy, including aspects that have not been focused on much within research, e.g., unclear referencing. Further the results give clear indication for how interviews should be improved within this group of professionals.

## CONCLUSIONS AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the present thesis show, in line with previous studies, that the way in which children are interviewed is a major problem. The clear over-reliance on narrow and often leading question types among interviewers is problematic. More worryingly still, even when children do provide interviewers with new and relevant information concerning the abuse allegations, interviewers largely fail to pose the recommended open-ended questions and stick to option-posing, or even suggestive questions.

Another problem found in the present thesis was the use of language. The results in the present study show that not only lawyers (e.g., Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Perry et al., 1995; Zajac et al., 2003), but also professionals who are regarded as child experts have problems in adapting their language to the cognitive-developmental level of the child. Indeed, some of the language used in the analysed interviews would be challenging also for an adult. While clinical interviewers hardly can be suspected of deliberately confusing the child witnesses (see Kebbell et al., 2003; Perry et al., 1995), it is perhaps partly the sensitive subject matter that is to be blamed for the confusing language.

According to Anderson (1986), clinicians working with adult clients often need specific training in discussing sexual matters before they feel confident in evoking such themes. The same could easily be imagined to be the case for interviewers talking with children about possible, perhaps traumatic sexual events. Furthermore, CSA is a topic that provokes strong emotional reactions. Investigators may feel frustrated in their oftentimes difficult task where a child is reluctant to talk, they may feel sadness for the child and anger at suspected abusers, something that is likely to affect their cognition and behaviour. Ask and Granhag (in press) showed that emotional reactions (e.g., anger) may prevent investigators from critically assessing witness information. White, Leichtman and Ceci (1997) showed in an experimental study that interviewers conduct their interviews and phrase their questions differently depending on the kind of background information they have received concerning their

interviewing topic. If an interviewer receives a child with the information that CSA is suspected, this is likely to influence the interviewer in the direction of seeking information that would support this hypothesis, implying the interviewer would be biased (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; 1995). Instead, it is crucial that the CSA investigators retain a neutral approach to the investigations and keep all possible hypotheses of the reasons for the investigations in mind (e.g., Hypothesis 1: The child has been abused; Hypothesis 2: The abuse claims are deliberately false; Hypothesis 3: There has been a misinterpretation of the child's behaviour/talk leading to the suspicions), so that questions are never phrased in order to confirm only one of these scenarios.

In order to ensure such professional conduct, it is imperative that the role of a forensic investigator and that of a clinical therapist are not mixed up – something that does not seem to be unusual at the moment in Finland. Herman (2005) extracts a number of relatively simple recommendations on how to improve CSA investigations from the available research corpus. Concerning the professionalism of the interviewer, apart from underlining that the roles of forensic investigator and therapist should always be separated, he stresses the need for training and supervision of interviewers, as well as the need for practitioners to adhere more closely to available ethical and procedural guidelines.

*“...we have a professional and ethical responsibility to try to (a) decrease these [the number of substantiation errors], and (b) reduce secondary trauma inflicted on children and families as a result of poorly conducted forensic child sexual abuse investigations” (Herman, 2005, p 111).*

The interviewers in the larger sample were clinical mental health care professionals. It is clear from the transcripts that they did not generally rely on structured investigative interview protocols and, as previously mentioned, they were unlikely to have had much training, if any, in forensic interviewing. This is particularly likely in Finland, where the tradition of forensic psychology is in its early childhood and until very recently, universities have not included forensic psychology in their curricula.

A recent study by Finnilä-Tuohimaa and her colleagues (Finnilä-Tuohimaa, Santtila, Sainio, Niemi, & Sandnabba, 2005) shows that clinical mental health professionals rely more on their clinical experience than their scientific knowledge when evaluating their own expertise as CSA investigators. The results obtained in the present thesis give good reason to be sceptical towards this evaluation and these results taken together further underline the need for more debate and more knowledge on how CSA interviews need to be conducted in order not to undermine the accuracy of child witnesses.

There is still a lack of a clear national framework for methodological and adequate training of CSA interviewers in Finland, mirrored in the results presented in this thesis. Many of the clinicians encountered when collecting the data for this study expressed their concern about the lack of clear structure for how CSA investigations should be conducted, including the co-operation between police and mental health workers, as well as the sometimes excessively long durations of the investigations.

Since the beginning of 2004, the ultimate responsibility for these investigations has been with law enforcement. Child interviews may nonetheless be conducted by other professionals, notably psychologists familiar with child interviewing (Esitutkintalaki [Pre-Trial Investigation Act] § 39). Though useful guidelines and recommendations in these types of cases have been released during the last years (Duodecim, 2000; Suomen Psykologiliitto, 2000; Taskinen, 2003), the application (or neglect) of these guidelines is not followed up, nor is there any systematic training in place for child interviewers. As long as this is the situation, the need for improvement in the quality of child abuse investigations and interviews will remain unfulfilled.



## **Improving the Quality of Investigative Interviews through Interviewing Protocols, Interviewer Training, Feedback and Follow-up**

What can be done to improve the quality of CSA interviews? In fact, there are means, well-researched in other countries, which could be applied in the Finnish setting. A number of good child interview protocols are available (see Poole and Lamb, 1998 for a review), all sharing the same central content for the kind of questioning techniques the interviewer should use. After the interviewer has established a rapport and explained the ground rules of the interview to the child, the aim should be to elicit a free narrative from the child by using open-ended questions and prompts to continue the narrative. The free narrative may be followed by more specific, but non-leading questions to fill in gaps, and the interviewer should close the interview by summarising what the child has said to allow for the correction of any misunderstandings.

Among the interview methods available is the *cognitive interview* (CI). While the CI was originally developed for use with adult eyewitnesses, studies have shown it can also be efficient for interviewing children (see Köhnken, Milne, Bull & Memon, 1999 for a meta-analysis, and also Larsson, Granhag and Spjut, 2003; Milne and Bull, 2003; Akehurst, Milne & Köhnken, 2003).

Traditional CI techniques include a “mental reinstatement of context” instruction, asking the interviewee to mentally reinstate both the external (physical surroundings) and internal contexts (subjective states-of-mind) of the experienced event as well as a “change perspective” instruction, where the interviewee is asked to recall the event from an alternative perspective. These techniques may surpass the cognitive level of younger children, which is why some interviewing guidelines advise against using the CI with children below a developmental age of 7 years (Home Office, 2002). In order to be used efficiently with young children, a developmentally adapted version of the CI should therefore be used (e.g., Geiselman & Padilla, 1988). Holliday and Albon (2004) found that a developmentally adapted CI was highly efficient, even with children as young as 4 years old.

Other scholars have also found components of the CI to be useful with young children. For instance, Hershkowitz and her colleagues (Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg & Horowitz, 2002) found that alleged CSA victims interviewed using mental context reinstatement (MCR) techniques reported more details in response to open-ended questions than did children interviewed using an identical interviewing protocol but leaving out the MCR techniques. In short, research suggests that the CI and the techniques used therein may also be useful for interviewing young children, however, interviewers should be cautious to use an adapted version of the protocol with young children.

Rather than a static set of instructions, the CI is best viewed as a set of tools for interviewing. Several structured interview protocols have been developed, many of them influenced by the tools included in the CI (for an overview, see Poole & Lamb, 1998). Of the currently available interview protocols, the one developed at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the USA is the one that has been most extensively researched and will therefore be focused on here.

The NICHD protocol was developed with a view to maximising the adherence of clinical interviewers to the interviewing techniques recommended by researchers through prioritising open-ended question and memory retrieval cues (Orbach et al., 2000). The interview consists of different phases. In an introductory phase, the interviewer explains the roles of interviewer and child and explains the ground rules of the interview. For instance, these include that the child should say *"I don't remember," "I don't know," "I don't understand,"* or correct the interviewer when necessary. Children are also instructed that they should tell the truth and report only personally experienced events. Then a rapport-building phase follows, in which the interviewer attempts to establish a rapport with the child and the child is prompted to give descriptions of neutral, recently experienced events in as much detail as possible, using invitations and follow-up invitations (*"Tell me more about that"*). This phase prepares the child for the unusual type of interaction in the investigative interview, where the interviewer is a naïve listener and the child is the informed expert. When moving further to the substantive part of the interview, the interviewer aims at getting the

child to identify the target event under discussion through non-suggestive prompts (“*Can you tell me why you came to talk with me today?*”). Only in the event that the child fails to identify the reason of the interview does the interviewer move on to more focused prompts. After a possible disclosure, the interviewer starts with a main invitation (“*Tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end as best you can remember*”). Details and time cues reported by the child are used to elicit further information through combining them with invitations (cued invitations): “*You said [something happened]; tell me more about that*”. Orbach and Lamb (2000) have showed that cued invitations can be successfully used and underline that using them implies the interviewers carefully need to monitor the child’s narrative in order to extract the cues to build further questions around.

Only once all information possible has been elicited through open-ended prompts does the interviewer proceed to focused questions (mainly wh-questions) addressing details the child has mentioned earlier. If crucial details are still missing after this, interviewers may then ask limited option-posing questions (mostly yes/no questions, referring to new issues that the child has failed to address previously), for instance, “*Did he touch any part of your body when he was talking to you?*” The interviewer should not at any point use suggestive questions, i.e., signal the kind of response the child is expected to give (Lamb et al., 2003).

Several studies have demonstrated the NICHD protocol’s effectiveness in reducing leading and suggestive questioning, increasing the use of open-ended questions, and increasing the number of details elicited in response to invitations (e.g., Lamb et al., 2002, 2003; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001), and these beneficial effects have been found to occur regardless of the child’s age (Lamb et al., 2003). Furthermore, the effects of individual differences between interviewers diminish when interviewers use the protocol. Lamb and Garretson (2003) explored the effects of gender on interviews, comparing interviews in three countries conducted according to either the NICHD structured interview protocol or local standard interview practices. They found that, while male interviewers interviewed boys and girls in the same way, female interviewers used more invitations and suggestive utterances when

interviewing boys. However, these differences decreased when interviewers used the structured protocol. The protocol has been found useful regardless of whether the child is a victim or a witness of the abuse (Lamb et al., 2003).

Studies by Orbach and colleagues (2000) and Sternberg and colleagues (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, et al., 2001) showed that the interviewer behaviour improved dramatically when interviewers were trained to follow the NICHD protocol and were given supervision and written as well as verbal feedback on their interviews. In both studies, interviewers who followed the NICHD protocol used many more open-ended questions and thereby increased both the quality and the quantity of the child reports.

However, when comparing the performance of interviewers during close supervision with their performance six months after the supervision had ended, Lamb and his colleagues (2002) found that after the termination of the supervision, the quality of the interviews declined notably. After the supervision had ended, interviewers used fewer open-ended questions, they relied more on focused prompts and introduced focused prompts into the interviews at an earlier stage. Consequently, the authors concluded that ongoing supervision and feedback are necessary components to achieve lasting improvements.

At present, forensic interviewers (or rather, professionals required to conduct forensic interviews, as there still is no specialisation for forensic interviewers) in Finland are recommended to use the NICHD protocol (Taskinen, 2003). However, when considering the results of the above-mentioned studies (in particular, the study by Lamb et al., 2002), merely advising interviewers to use the protocol and providing them with limited training, is not likely to be enough to achieve long-lasting improvements in interviewer behaviour. The results in the present thesis show that there is an urgent need for improving the quality of CSA interviews, the outcomes of which have enormous consequences for all persons involved. Changing interviewing practices is no simple or quick matter. However, if appropriate resources are put in to train interviewers and provide them with continuous feedback and supervision, the allocated resources will pay off in diminishing the need for expert witnesses being called in at a later stage, child

witnesses being interviewed over and over again and above all, protecting the rights of both children and adults involved in CSA investigations.

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During the last decades, the number of child sexual abuse (CSA) investigations has increased dramatically. Investigations often depend on the testimony of the alleged child victim, as there typically is an absence of other evidence. An amount of research has been conducted regarding how children should be interviewed to provide as accurate and detailed reports as possible, and there has been a consensus among researchers for more than ten years concerning desirable interview practice. However, field studies in many countries have shown that CSA interviews rarely are conducted in accordance with these recommendations.

The present thesis is the first comprehensive analysis of Finnish CSA interviews. The thesis provides an overview of key areas concerning forensic interviews with children as well as four original studies focusing on different aspects of CSA interviews.



ISBN 952-12-1807-X