INTRODUCTION


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This article introduces the first in a two-part special issue focusing on forensic, cultural, and systems issues in child sexual abuse cases. The five articles contained in this issue include a diversity of perspectives on approaches to extended interviews and evaluations of child sexual abuse suspicions, an exploration of the ways culture affects child sexual abuse disclosure and reporting, considerations relevant to the management of a child’s mental health needs while forensic process are ongoing, and the use of anatomical dolls in forensic interviews. We call for attention to several practice areas, including (a) prioritizing a child’s mental health needs while minimizing disruption of forensic processes, (b) developing best practices and models of child sexual abuse assessment and evaluation when a one-session forensic interview is insufficient, (c) appropriately evaluating child sexual abuse concerns when they occur without a disclosure and/or in children with communication limitations, and (d) the integration of cultural sensitivity into interviews and evaluations.

KEYWORDS forensic evaluations, forensic interviews, child sexual abuse, child abuse allegations, culture and sexual abuse, systems issues and sexual abuse, sexual abuse disclosures

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is recognized as a significant risk factor for children, in line with other forms of child maltreatment. However, CSA presents some unique challenges, and these have been the impetus for debate and research as well as, at times, significantly discrepant outlooks about how to best evaluate and intervene when CSA is suspected or identified. The inherent difficulties presented by CSA are manifold, partially because it involves so many interests and disciplines, in addition to a particular culture and the political climate within which it occurs or is suspected. Moreover, at the heart of all suspected cases of CSA is a child at a specific developmental and chronological point in his or her life span. Whether or not the CSA suspicions are true, often a swirl of events encompass a child with the inception of CSA allegations or concerns. CSA is not only a risk factor for mental health and other undesirable outcomes throughout a person’s life span if intervention does not occur (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998), but it is a crime as well. Thus, legal systems are implicated, and because CSA frequently leaves few or no easily discernable traces in the forms of forensic evidence, other incontrovertible indices, or witnesses aside from the victim, it is often the child’s own words that are crucial to attempts to understand CSA. We know, however, that many children delay disclosing for significant time periods or speak about their experiences in ways that are inadequately articulated for a forensic context (for reviews related to delayed disclosure, see Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

This two-part special issue of the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* is devoted to a range of topics we deem to be critical to comprehending the issues involved in CSA and the intersection of the child’s needs with forensic and other systems as well as culture. We chose a broad spectrum of articles we believe may inspire debate and that, at a minimum, identify some of the most critical areas to be addressed in our combined efforts to move the field forward in research and practice. In the past 30 or so years, tremendous energy and research has been devoted to disentangling some of the complexities of CSA. Many of our readers will recall that decades ago children were routinely interviewed multiple times by different professionals in a diversity of disciplines, often with little in the way of research to guide best practices. We now have Child Advocacy Centers and coordinated multidisciplinary team interviews of children suspected of CSA in many areas of the United States (Cross et al, 2008), systematic and research informed interview guidelines (e.g., Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007), and a bedrock of research on children’s memory and reports in the face of CSA concerns (e.g., Greenhoot & Tsethlikai, 2009; Klemfuss & Ceci, 2009). This has been invaluable in protecting not only abused children but also those who might be incorrectly suspected of abusing them. Nevertheless, there is much yet to be done, as can be gleaned by the articles included in this special issue.

We have taken a broad view, choosing to include topics as far ranging as myths and beliefs that exist in our communities regarding CSA that can
impinge on children’s disclosures, expectations, and responses, both legal and otherwise (Cromer & Goldsmith, in press). We have included a proposal for a new and novel framework for CSA evaluation (Tishelman, Meyer, Haney, & McLeod, this issue) and empirically based research. Additionally, in order to reflect the diversity of professions involved in CSA, we have included authors representing legal, mental health, and medical perspectives in this two-part special issue. Each discipline has a unique place in the sometimes convoluted systems involved in CSA, and we have attempted to capture this complexity through our choice of articles.

ARTICLES IN PART I OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles in this first part of a two-part series begin with an overview and discussion of culture and disclosure by Fontes and Plummer. Culture is pertinent to each case of suspected CSA but yet, surprisingly, only barely touched on by existing research. The authors include suggested guidelines meant to enhance cultural competence during forensic interviews, composed of a combination of clinical and forensic interviewing experience and informed by extant research when available. Next, Hlavka, Olinger and Lashley revisit a controversial yet important area of practice: the use of anatomically detailed dolls during CSA interviews. This is a significant area of study since the use of these dolls has been controversial at times (see Faller, 2005 for a review; see Klemfuss & Ceci, 2009 for cautions regarding anatomical doll use). Nevertheless, others, including the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (1995), have supported their integration into practice if the interviewer relegates the use of dolls to appropriate functions. The article included in this issue offers an empirical perspective on proposed, forensically sound uses for these dolls as a demonstration aid.

The subsequent article by Kuehnle and Connell spotlights the interplay between clinical considerations and forensic needs, including a discussion of how to account for a child’s therapeutic requirements during an often protracted forensic process. This problem can be extremely complex given that a child’s report can be influenced by experience and the necessity to protect a child’s memory from contamination in the legal arena. However, legal issues need to be balanced with the significant priority of ensuring a child’s essential psychological well-being while forensic processes are ongoing.

Faller, Cordisco-Steele, and Nelson-Gardell present a review of the limited research on extended assessments of children when a single forensic interview is insufficient. This topic is of critical importance at this juncture. As Faller and colleagues indicate, for many children a one-session interview approach is perceived as inadequate. In fact, it appears that too often a single interview does not yield sufficient information to determine the likelihood of CSA. Faller and colleagues observe that more details may emerge when
additional interviews are conducted with the same child and contend that literature suggests that the dangers of memory contamination are minimized when best practices are utilized. Kuehnle and Connell (this issue) argue for role preservation (ensuring that the therapeutic and forensic roles are not collapsed) and posit, as well, that more research is needed on the most effective techniques for extended interviews, asserting that in some cases a court-appointed comprehensive forensic evaluation may be an appropriate approach for children with ambiguous allegations or disclosures. Both Faller and colleagues and Kuehnle and Connell recognize that the current framework of a one session forensic interview may be suboptimal in certain cases of suspected CSA.

Finally, Tishelman, Meyer, Haney, and McLeod present a novel framework for evaluation of CSA in a clinical setting using forensically informed practices. They focus on a circumstance scarcely addressed through discussion or research yet calling for attention and empirical investigation: how to manage suspicions of CSA when other systems (child protection/legal) are no longer involved, or have never been involved, but concerns exist. This is an important gap in the current CSA intervention system.

As scientist/practitioners, we are strongly in favor of new research to significantly inform best practices when a one-session forensic assessment does not provide an adequate model. Because this is a relatively new area, empirically based best practices should be investigated to identify the appropriate approaches based on context(s) (family court, criminal court, clinical setting), culture, and other child and family factors such as age, disability status, and whether CSA concerns emerge in concert with other forms of family violence. Research can resolve issues such as the optimal time frame for developing rapport, how to conduct a several session forensic evaluation yet maintain multiple hypotheses as to the ultimate question of whether the child was sexually abused and by whom, and best practices for integrating adult interviews and multiple sets of data into the evaluation. As Tishelman and colleagues (this issue) and Faller and colleagues (this issue) observe, funding extended CSA assessments and evaluations requires more resources than a single forensic interview and can be a challenge yet may be necessary to unravel and understand complex CSA allegations.

These and other areas that are underresearched but of critical importance are emphasized in the articles included in this issue. Ultimately, we hope to advance the field of CSA research and practice by inspiring others to attend to the following questions:

1. How can we prioritize a child’s mental health needs while minimizing disruption of forensic processes?
2. When is it appropriate to pursue an extended assessment and/or evaluation, and what are best models and practices?
3. How can we understand concerns of CSA when they are generated absent a disclosure and/or in children with communication limitations?
4. How can we best imbue all of our work with culturally sensitive practices?
5. How can we continue to modify standard forensic procedures through research?

Much of the previous discussion applies to the most vulnerable of children: those who are developmentally, psychologically, or circumstantially at risk. As noted, unlike other areas of maltreatment, CSA determinations up to this point have relied almost exclusively on a child’s coherent disclosure. We anticipate that the next decade of research will delve into the complex problems of discerning risk in children whose disclosures are likely to be ambiguous at best while simultaneously attempting to coordinate attention to forensic and mental health interventions within ecological contexts.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR NOTE**

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