

The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

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Interviewing Sexually Abused Children
The need for additional training in the Law Enforcement Community

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An Administrative Research Paper
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Submitted by
Gary Warman

Humble Police Department
Humble, Texas
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ABSTRACT

The need for more sufficient training and more trained officers in the field of interviewing sexually abused children is a serious problem facing today's law enforcement community. The lack of adequate training and sufficiently trained interviewers can result in a sexual predator going free to further victimize innocent children. In order to protect these children from such trauma and abuse, Texas police agencies must make higher standards of training in this field a top priority.

Police agencies from all over Texas, 27 total, were surveyed to assess the current policies for training child interviewers. The information provided by these officers reflected a serious lack of sufficient training in this field and an inadequate number of officers trained to handle the task. Research shows that inadequate training leads to faulty interviewing techniques that ultimately result in a criminal going free to abuse again.

The findings of this research lead to the conclusion that intensive training is absolutely necessary to prepare officers to interview sexually abused children. Without this preparation and an acceptable amount of officers trained to interview these children, the consequences can be tragic. It is the duty of the law enforcement community in Texas to protect these children by providing superior training to the officers assigned to help them.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important problems facing today's law enforcement community is the need for sufficient training in dealing with sexually abused children. Law enforcement agencies in Texas must address the pressing questions; are there enough adequately trained officers to interview these children, and is there a need for more sufficient training?

To date, there are no set rules or standards within Texas police departments determining how many hours of training an officer must complete before he or she is deemed qualified to interview sexually abused children. However, interviewing a sexually abused child requires a level of skill that cannot be mastered overnight. It takes many hours of extensive training and hands on experience before becoming proficient at this task. Each time an officer interviews a child, he or she becomes more experienced to the ways of breaking through the barriers the victim has put in place. With time and experience, the officer gains a heightened awareness that all events are not the same, and all children are not as open as others are.

Sufficient training is crucial to the officer, especially during the first interview, which is the most important. The interview should be both audibly and visually recorded, as attention to detail is vital. This documentation becomes a valuable tool, which enables the officer to review the interview's contents and effectively discern truth from deception. This initial interview will be an extremely important part of the investigation and will be a permanent record to be repeatedly reviewed during the investigation and court proceedings.

For many years, the officers of the Humble Police Department have taken the stand that a female officer should conduct the interviewing of children. However, this is a faulty reasoning, as it should be every officer's responsibility to get involved and take part in this delicate matter. A poor interview could mean the difference between a criminal going free to abuse again or being incarcerated and unable to prey on other victims. Because these interviews will be scrutinized by the district attorney, defense attorney, Child Protective Services, and many other participants during the judicial process, the need for accuracy is overwhelming.

The purpose of this project is to address the need for adequately trained officers to interview these children, and to conduct thorough research into the problems the officer will face during the interview process. Through extensive research of available literature, as well as a survey and analysis of the current policies of 27 statewide agencies, these problems will be addressed, and potential solutions established.

The focus of this research is to provide an in-depth look at the problems officers face during and after child interviews, and throughout their career, due to lack of training in this field. Along with the information compiled from books, manuals, and the opinions of experienced officers from different agencies, the researcher's knowledge gained as a 26 year veteran in law enforcement, 16 years as an investigator, and 8 years working in child abuse should contribute to the credibility of this research.

It is anticipated that research will reveal the serious need for additional training in the field of interviewing sexually abused children throughout the state of Texas. The results of

this research can and should be shared with other agencies throughout the state. If the sharing of this information results in saving even one child from additional sexual abuse through officer education, then the effort put forth is a reward to humanity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing current literature detailing facts, statistics, and common problems facing the investigator of sexual child abuse, the need for proper training and preparation in this field becomes glaringly obvious. Because children require special care and attention when being interviewed, extensive training is essential in order to identify when a crime has been committed, as well as to prevent future occurrences. Though most investigators do go through some amount of cursory training and acquire experience as interrogators, very rarely have they completed enough training to acquire the specialized skills necessary to successfully interview a young child. The inability to recognize and address the necessary differences in technique can result in further trauma and victimization of the child. Clearly, the ability to identify a sexually abused child is a tremendous responsibility that today's law enforcement community must be equipped to deal with. Because inadequate training can lead to future child abuse, police agencies must provide sufficient preparation for their interviewers. Along with providing investigators with the necessary training for child abuse interviewing, these agencies must also be ready and willing to give the interviewers the support they will undoubtedly need to deal with the stress and frustration such a challenging career brings. Because of the high stress level, many interviewers without professional

support become less effective over time (Jones 30). Investigators encountering cases of child sexual abuse are often reminded of their own children, and frequently experience intense frustration and stress at the sight of these helpless and traumatized children. Because the statistics of extreme work related stress are so high with these interviewers, it is recommended that administrators provide these men and women with a mechanism to discuss the difficulties and frustrations they encounter with each case (Romano 17).

The benefits and/or consequences of an interviewer's investigative training (or lack thereof) are evident not only during the sensitive process of the interview itself, but during subsequent legal proceedings as well. The interviewer's skill and level of professionalism often mean the difference between putting an offender behind bars or setting him free to abuse again. Because the interviewer's conduct and interaction with the child are subject to intense scrutiny during judicial proceedings, deficiencies in interviewing techniques can cause the interview to be deemed unreliable by judges and juries (IPT 5). Properly trained interviewers realize that remaining objective is absolutely vital to the case. In many cases, abuse has not occurred at all, and the ability to distinguish abuse cases from non-abuse cases protects the interviewer from charges of being overly zealous in court (Pence 82). The inability of the interviewer to distinguish between true and false allegations can have tragic results. If the allegations made are indeed false, the child may still be traumatized by implanted memories of abuse that never occurred. On the other hand, if true allegations are disclosed, but the interviewer uses faulty techniques, the child's testimony may be found useless in court, thus setting the perpetrator free to victimize again (How Children Disclose Sexual Abuse 3).

Research shows that many outdated and faulty interviewing procedures are currently being practiced by some agencies. In fact, several highly regarded books and manuals encourage using extremely leading questions and even lying to the child to establish credibility (Underwager 196). Obviously, such underhanded tactics compromise the credibility of the interviewer's evaluations. Most experts have come to agree on several common techniques in interviewing a child to determine whether or not sexual abuse has occurred. The first step in the interviewing process should be to establish rapport with the child. Introducing one's self and explaining the purpose of the interview help to gain the child's trust and establish the interviewer's credibility. In order to ease the child's anxiety, the interviewer should also explain that it is acceptable to answer a question with "I don't know," and that the child may correct the interviewer if he or she is mistaken (NIH News Alert 1). Most experts emphasize the technique of asking general, open-ended questions to avoid leading the child to a false disclosure. This method is much more effective than leading questioning, as research shows recall memory to be significantly more accurate than recognition memory (NIH News Alert 1). It is also important to make the child comfortable by sitting neither too close (which may be intimidating) nor too far away (which may convey lack of concern). The interviewer must always appear genuine and approachable (Morgan 30). Though interviewing children can at times be quite frustrating, it is critical to remain patient and show no sign of anger (31). Research indicates that because personal biases can so easily contaminate the interviewing process, it is essential to speak to the child without prior knowledge of his or her background or the alleged abuse. This reduces the chance of asking prejudiced questions that may lead the child to an unreliable disclosure (31).

Children who have been sexually abused have suffered enormously, and it is a crucial part of the interviewer's job to protect them from further trauma. In this respect, it is important for the interviewer to know when to stop the interview (Underwager 198). Though it can be frustrating when a child cannot effectively answer questions that would determine whether abuse has occurred, the interviewer must abstain from damaging repetitive questioning and have the proper judgement to end the interview (198).

While a thoroughly trained and prepared interviewer is equipped with the knowledge and skills to conduct a successful child interview, a lack of proper training can lead to mistakes with disastrous results. Unfortunately, these mistakes and tragic consequences are all too common among today's law enforcement community. "Although the methods typically employed in an abuse or neglect investigation have long been discredited, they continue to be used...Children are often kept from their parents only to be threatened, coerced, or otherwise intimidated into providing the responses deemed appropriate" (Thoma 1). One common mistake of the under-trained interviewer is the use of repetitive questioning. Repeated questions only tell the child that previous answers were unacceptable, which forces the child to lie in order to accommodate the interviewer (Interviews With Children 3). Other types of problematic questioning include overly generalized questions (since younger children require more specific questioning), questions that imply value judgements (such as "good touch" or "bad touch"), or questions that fail to consider the child's literal interpretation of the question. A young child's capacity to reason is

significantly limited, and this age barrier must be recognized and accommodated by the trained professional (Walker). Because a young child's vocabulary tends to be limited, it is necessary to focus on behavioral cues during the interview (Hewitt 158). Proper training provides the interviewer of a sexually abused child with the skills needed to identify and recognize these behavioral cues. Without sufficient training, grave errors can occur by not recognizing certain behavioral signs.

Keeping a permanent record of the interview is essential, not only to provide an accurate and fully documented account of the interview, but also for future review in order to discover clues and behaviors not previously recognized. Videotape provides the most accurate documentation of the interview, but at minimum, at least an audiotaped recording should be made during the proceedings. Substantial documentation leaves little room for speculation about bias or prejudicial questioning (199). Experts recommend interviewing the child alone in order to prevent distortions or omissions in the child's statement. A child that has suffered abuse may be hesitant to discuss his traumatic experience in front of others, while a child who has not been abused may disclose information about abuse that never occurred if he believes others want him to (199). Thus, conducting the interview alone increases the credibility of the child's account. While it is important to enter an interview with minimum prior knowledge of the child's background information, it is an essential part of the post-interview process to gather as much information as possible about the child and the alleged incident. Once the interview has been completed, the interviewer should gain information by observing behavior with the alleged abuser (if possible), conducting

interviews with family members, and reviewing school and medical records. This information is especially important in divorce and custody cases, where false allegations of abuse are common (199). A highly trained interviewer is qualified to review this information, along with information provided by the child during the interview, and make an informed, unbiased, and fair decision based on the provided evidence.

METHODOLOGY

Law enforcement agencies in Texas must address the urgent question; are there enough adequately trained officers to interview sexually abused children? Just as importantly, is there a need for more training in this field? Research into this problem leads to the hypothesis that Texas law enforcement agencies are severely deficient in the field of interviewing sexually abused children. There is a great need for more officers trained in this field, and the training these officers participate in must be much more intensive to be truly effective.

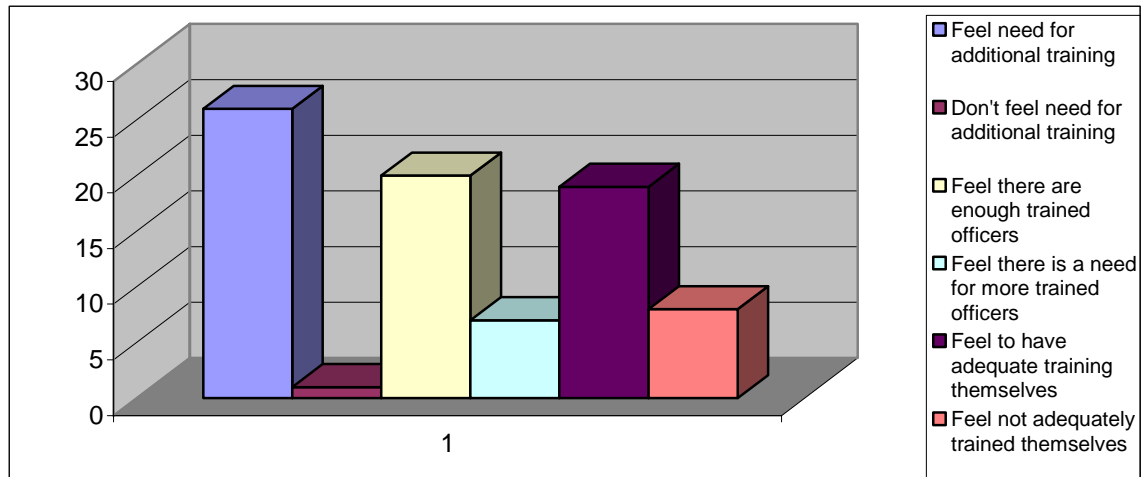
In order to take a more in-depth look at the current abilities of Texas police agencies in this field, a survey of 27 statewide agencies will be analyzed. (A copy of the survey is attached.) The agencies responding to the survey represent a geographical area covering all of the state of Texas. The size of these departments varies from 10 officers to more than 2,000 officers. The information obtained will be analyzed and divided into several categories: how many of the officers surveyed have interviewed sexually abused children, whether they felt their department has enough training in this field or if there was a need for additional training, and whether the officer felt he or she personally has adequate training in

this area. The information found in these responses supports the hypothesis that additional training and a greater number of trained officers are needed to handle the sensitive task of interviewing sexually abused children.

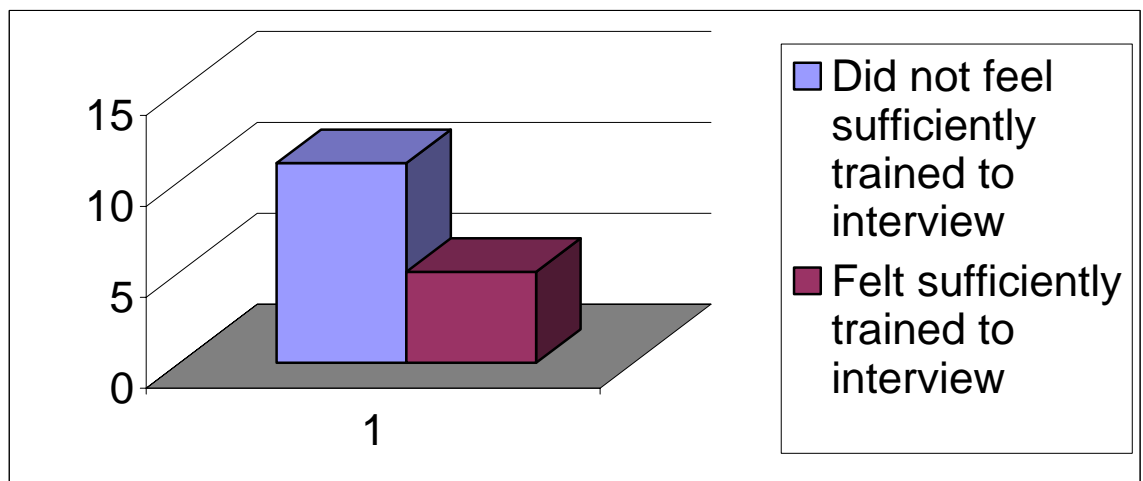
FINDINGS

Based on information provided by a survey of officers from 27 statewide agencies, officers in the state of Texas are in serious need of more training in the field of interviewing sexually abused children. Officers from departments of all sizes and regions agree that there is a major deficiency in the level and amount of training for this field. Most departments do not have enough trained officers to handle this job. Many of the officers surveyed do not feel that they themselves have an acceptable amount of training to conduct these interviews, though a significant number of these officers have already interviewed a sexually abused child.

Of the 27 officers surveyed, 26 believed that there was a need for additional training in the field of interviewing sexually abused children. 20 officers did not feel that there were enough sufficiently trained officers in their department to handle the task of interviewing these children. 19 of the 27 officers surveyed felt that they personally did not have adequate training in this area. These alarming results are represented in Figure1.



The information gathered from these surveys exposed another disturbing fact. Many of the officers charged with the responsibility of interviewing sexually abused children are not confident in the amount of training they have received, and feel more training is necessary to be qualified to perform this difficult job. Of the 16 officers that have interviewed sexually abused children, 11 feel that they lack sufficient training to be handling this task. This information is reflected in Figure2.



Given the responses of the 27 surveyed agencies, clearly the need for more and better training in the field of child abuse interviewing is overwhelming. The evidence found by researching current literature confirms this need. The information obtained in books and manuals dealing with this issue reflects the deficiencies in today's law enforcement community concerning interview training. This information reveals the unnecessary trauma that faulty interviewing techniques can cause a sexually abused child. Clearly, Texas police agencies must make proper training in this field a top priority.

Without this effort, these children may have to suffer further victimization if a flawed interview leads to a predator being set free. It must be the goal of every agency and officer to protect these children from such a fate. Thus, the law enforcement community must set higher standards for those given the difficult responsibility of interviewing a sexually abused child, and it must provide an adequate number of these interviewers to handle this job.

DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to address the problem of insufficient training in the field of interviewing sexually abused children in the Texas law enforcement community. The research was to answer the questions; are there enough adequately trained officers to interview these children, and is there a need for more sufficient training? It was hypothesized that research of current available literature

and a survey of 27 statewide agencies would prove that Texas law enforcement agencies are severely deficient in this field and would require better training and more trained officers.

In analyzing the results of this research, it becomes clear that the problem of insufficient training is very serious, and it must be addressed by police agencies in Texas. Clearly, a rigid set of standards must be put into effect to ensure that proper training is completed prior to an officer being deemed qualified to interview a sexually abused child.

Police agencies must provide an adequate number of these trained interviewers to meet the department's needs. Based on available literature and the opinions of the 27 officers surveyed, these policies are positive solutions that are not currently in place among Texas agencies.

The conclusions drawn from the findings of this research clearly support the hypothesis. The need for better training and more trained officers was proven to be a real and serious problem that must be addressed. If the law enforcement community will take a stand and make proper training mandatory for interviewers of sexually abused children, everyone involved stands to gain from this effort. The children will be protected from further trauma and victimization, and the criminal justice system will prove its effectiveness. Intensive training and a higher amount of trained interviewers will keep these sexual predators behind bars, thus saving innocent children and all of society from unnecessary and preventable harm.

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A P P E N D I X

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Law Enforcement Institute of Texas

SURVEY

1. Have you ever interviewed a sexually abused child? _____
2. If the answer to #1 was yes, was it as a patrol officer or investigator? _____
3. Do you as an individual officer feel there are enough adequately trained officers in your department to interview sexually abused children? _____ If the answer was yes, how many do you have if known _____?
4. Do you think there is a need for additional training in this area of law enforcement?

5. Do you feel you have adequate training in this field of law enforcement? _____
6. How many officers are in your department? _____
7. Your name _____ rank _____ department _____.

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

Additional comments or ideas:

Please return to:
Gary Warman
Humble Police Department