

Preface

During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, a significant problem arose. General concern regarding child sexual abuse dramatically increased because of aggressive media coverage of cases of alleged abuse at several child daycare centers potentially involving hundreds of children (e.g., McMartin, Fells Acres, and Kelly Michaels). Fears of the widespread abuse of children seemed to overpower the limited scope of professional's abilities to accurately understand children's ability to make accurate report about such matters. The public and many professionals become polarized. The arguments of one side took positions such as "children never lie about sexual abuse," or, on the other hand, "children are just too unreliable to serve as accurate witnesses." Of course, both of these positions are overly simplistic, but a lack of relevant research—or a lack of research integration—had failed to resolve these questions in the minds of the public or in the minds of many professionals.

But fortunately this is a problem where the need for scientific knowledge seems to have been at least partly answered. Well-known researchers such as Professors Elizabeth Loftus, Steven Ceci, Gail Goodman, Maggie Bruck, David Finkelhor, and James Wood as well as others drove a push for knowledge so strongly that the field has begun to coalesce around principles of memory, suggestibility, and sound forensic interviewing practices that answer the question, "How did these reports of abuse happen?"

If there is a set of problems that the field of psychology can be credited with improving, both dramatically and quickly, then this must be foremost among them. As the field figures out how to apply relevant scientific principles to very difficult assessment problems like child sexual abuse, specific recommendations emerge as "best-practices" or "guidelines" to reduce errors and mistakes. This does not mean that the assessment of sexual abuse will no longer improve or develop. Quite the contrary: The scientific push to understand forensic interviewing and event memory will likely encourage ever more study and refinement. But the field has come a long way from the interviewing practices used in the McMartin case, for example.

The purpose of this book is to gather some of the most notable results in the scientific pursuit of knowledge related to child sexual abuse assessment, and to allow the working professional to better understand the problems, demands, and practices that will comprise an effective method of assessing these children. We hope that this encourages the use of good practices which can only strengthen the pursuit of justice for all concerned.

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