

# Suggestibility and Interviewing Children

by Lori S. Holmes, M.A., L.I.S.W.

In recent years, there has been a vast amount of research conducted regarding the issue of suggestibility and the impact on child sexual abuse interviews. As with any "hot" topic, the issues can become confusing. The purpose of this article is to provide professionals with an understanding of how to assess what, if any, impact suggestibility may have on a particular child.

By human nature, adults have the potential of being suggestible, but it doesn't mean that we will *automatically* comply with a suggestion. It is no different with children. Suggestibility then, is only a matter of degree in which a child's encoding, storage, retrieval, and reporting of events may be impacted by a range of social and psychological factors. (Ceci and Bruck, 1993.)

Most often when the issue of suggestibility is raised, a child's age appears to be the foremost, if not the single factor considered. While the child's age is important, it *should not* be considered in isolation. Other factors such as the child's cognitive and social abilities, any motivations to lie or tell the truth, and the disposition of the interviewer all play a significant role in determining to what degree, if any, a child may be influenced by suggestion. Listed below are several factors that have been identified in the research as either likely to increase risk of suggestibility or reduce it.

*(continued on other side)*

## Fall Training Update

**Orientation for interagency team members (referents) in Hennepin County** is a three-hour session that includes: a tour of CornerHouse, background information, interview protocol, videotaped interview, and a team meeting demonstration. Other interested community members are welcome to attend the first half of the orientation session that does not involve confidential information (about 1-1/2 hours). There is no fee, but pre-registration is required.

Time & Dates: 8:30 a.m.- 11:30 a.m. October 16 & December 3

**For mandated reporters, "Effective Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse: A Pre-Assessment Model,"** teaches a brief, specific process for talking with a child about possible sexual abuse. Offered in a full-day (Tuition \$85) and half-day or evening (Tuition \$45) format. Both formats have similar topics and a participant manual. The full day provides more depth of content and practice opportunities.

Next Time & Date: One evening, 6:30-9:45 p.m. November 12

Both full day and half-day formats are available on-site for groups at a reduced rate. Call us about bringing this seminar to your organization or group for inservice training!

**Child Sexual Abuse Forensic Interview Training for child protection workers, law enforcement investigators, and prosecuting attorneys** is filled through the end of this year. Please contact us for additional information, or to register for 1997 dates.

1997 Dates (5-day):	January 6-10	February 3-7	March 10-14
Tuition: \$850	April 7-11	May 5-9	September 8-12
	October 6-10	November 3-7	December 8-12

Discounts are available for four or more interagency team members from the same geographical area who attend the training together. Three-day on-site forensic interview training sessions are scheduled in cooperation with the sponsoring group/s. We welcome your inquiries!

**For more information or to register,** contact Kristi Thomson at (612) 872-6225.

**Fall, 1996**

## CORNERHOUSE STAFF

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# Suggestibility and Interviewing Children *(continued from other side)*

FACTORS THAT INCREASE SUGGESTIBILITY*	FACTORS THAT REDUCE SUGGESTIBILITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Misleading information is repeated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information should come from the child and not the interviewer</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmentally inappropriate language is used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information requested is understandable and meaningful to the child.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intimidating or Coercive environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child is interviewed in a nonthreatening, nonsuggestible atmosphere.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intimidating or Coercive interviewer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The interviewer does not have a preconceived idea about what the child should say. (Test an Alternative Hypothesis). Interviewer is supportive and reassuring</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information requested is a peripheral detail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information requested is about the central aspects of an event.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant delay between event and reporting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child is told that the interviewer doesn't know what happened so they should answer only what they really remember.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child is repeatedly interviewed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child is told it's OK to say, "I don't know" and "I don't remember;" and to correct or disagree with the interviewer.</li> </ul>

\*Adapted from: "Suggestibility of the Child Witness: A Historical Review and Synthesis" by Stephen Ceci and Maggie Bruck; *Psychological Bulletin*, 1993, V113 N3.; Mindy F. Mitnick lecture materials from "Impact of Child Sex Abuse Allegations on Custody and Visitation Determinations.;" "Credibility of Child Witness: The Role of Communicative Competence" by Karen Saywitz, Rebecca Nathanson, and Lynn Snyder; from *Topics in Language Disorder*; Aspen Publishers, 1993. *The Child Witness* by Nancy Walker Perry and Lawrence S. Wrightsman; Sage Publishing, 1991. "Can We Believe What Children Say About Sexual Abuse" by John E.B. Myers; *The APSAC Advisor*, 1994, V7 N1; and "Accuracy of Children's Memories" by Debra Whitcomb; Education Development Center, Newton, Mass., 1993.

It is essential that professionals read and understand the current research regarding suggestibility and its impact on interviewing children regarding possible sexual abuse. This is not a static field and the information changes rapidly. The following are excellent resources on the topic of suggestibility:

- Ceci, Stephen and Bruck, Maggie. "Suggestibility of the Child Witness: A Historical Review and Synthesis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1993, Vol. 113, No. 3, pp. 403-439.
- Everson, Mark and Boat, Barbara. "Putting The Anatomical Doll Controversy In Perspective: An Examination Of The Major Uses And Crit Of The Dolls In Child Sexual Abuse Evaluations," *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 1994, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 113-129.
- Myers, John E.B. "Can We Believe What Children Say About Sexual Abuse," *The APSAC Advisor*, 1994, Vol. 7, No. 1.
- Saywitz, Karen; Nathanson, Rebecca; and Snyder, Lynn. "Credibility of Child Witness: The Role of Communicative Competence," in *Topics in Language Disorder*; Aspen Publishers, 1993.
- Saywitz, Karen; Goodman, Gail S.; Bussy, Kay; Steward, Margaret S. "Implications Of Developmental Research For Interviewing Children," *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 1993, Vol. 17, pp. 25-37.
- [Lori Holmes is the Training Coordinator and an Interview Specialist at CornerHouse. She is currently on maternity leave].



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