**Small Grant Award**

Assessing the quality of interviews with children alleging sexual abuse in Scotland

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**Background:**

Child sexual abuse remains a significant problem as evidenced by scientific reports (Fanslow et al., 2007; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005) and statistics provided by charitable organisations (Eighteen and Under; Taywise Consultation; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; Barnardo's; Stop It Now). Recent UK estimates suggest that 11% of boys and 21% of girls under the age of 13 years old will experience sexual abuse (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005). This UK estimate accords with other estimates of child abuse in developed countries. Children find it hard to disclose abuse to adults for many reasons including fear, denial, and shame and as many as 31% of abuse victims may never disclose abuse (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005). The problems stemming from child sexual abuse are manifold and long-lasting. For example, a follow-up study of teenagers in the UK who had been abused before the age of 7 years reported that re-victimisation, externalising problems, educational difficulties, health problems and a failure to thrive were common (Frothingham et al., 2000). Recent research also suggests that victims of child sexual abuse are twice as likely to become involved in abusive relationships later in life (Fanslow et al., 2007). It is difficult to estimate the true cost of child sexual abuse to society, but it is likely to be large.

One way to help reduce the consequences of child abuse and protect children is through successful policing. When child abuse is reported to the police there is frequently very little supporting physical evidence. Investigators must therefore rely on what children say when they are formally interviewed. Exactly what is said by children forms a very important body of evidence because it provides an account of what happened as well as investigative leads that can be followed up. Over 30 years of accumulated research on child interviewing shows clearly how interviews should, and should not, be conducted. The bottom line is that children should be allowed to provide an account of what happened in their own words and in a non-leading and non-suggestive manner. The most reliable information is obtained when interviewers use open-ended prompts for information as simple as, "tell me what happened," and "tell me more about that," and in doing so, interviewers are positioned to obtain the most accurate and reliable information possible (Lamb et al., 2008).

The Scottish Executive (2003) good-practice guidelines developed by Prof. Amina Memon for use by Social Workers and Police embody what is internationally considered to be the best way to interview children. However, there has been no systematic and detailed evaluation of the quality of interviews that are being conducted with children in Scotland to ensure that they adhere to good practice guidelines and are being conducted appropriately. We propose to undertake such an evaluation and believe our findings will have important implications for:

1. assessing the effectiveness and value of current training
2. identifying areas in which more training should be focused
3. provide baseline with which to measure the impact of future training initiatives

A similar initiative undertaken in 2000 by Prof. Michael Lamb (who is a collaborator of the principal applicant) resulted in an ongoing research and training program with strong collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners in Prof. Lamb's research site (Sandy County Police Department, Utah, USA).

**Project Proposal:**

A sample of forensic interviews with children in Scotland is required to directly assess the quality of interviews that are being conducted. The transcripts will be analysed according to methods developed by the US Government scientists at the National Institutes of Health. The lead researcher, Dr David La Rooy, has been trained in these methods during a 2-year Postdoctoral Fellowship and has a record of published and ongoing research in the area of investigative interviews with children. In short, attention will be paid to categorising the questions that children are asked in the interviews (e.g., open, closed, leading, suggestive), the responses of the children (e.g., number of details, contradictions), as well as the overall dynamics of the interview and how well they adhere to best practice recommended by the Scottish Executive (2003).

A sample of 100 interviews will provide sufficient data. Under the Memorandum of Understanding between Tayside Police and the University of Abertay Dundee it has been agreed that these transcripts will be made available to researchers in anonymous form (see attached letter of support from Graham Young). Interim ethical approval for this project has been provided by the Ethics Committee at the University of Abertay. Although it will be possible to complete the research in collaboration with Tayside alone, should this research proposal be successful we will be inviting other police forces in Scotland to collaborate. Regardless of participation all the research findings will be disseminated throughout Scotland and further afield.

**The impact of the research:**

The research conducted on child interviewing at the University of Abertay has already led to a number of positive outcomes:

* Police Trainers in the Grampian, Tayside, and Strathclyde jurisdictions in Scotland have made changes to the way they deliver training to address some of the concerns raised by researchers.
* At a Scottish government level, changes have also been made to interviewing guidelines currently being signed off by the Scottish Crown Office that emphasise an important yet neglected aspect of interviewing.
* The researchers have also developed Continual Professional Development training courses in collaboration with Tayside Police designed to raise standards and awareness. These courses, unlike existing courses that police take to learn about interviewing, include a pass/fail element and interviewer achievement is benchmarked to learning outcomes. These training programs are themselves becoming the focus of research intended to further validate their effectiveness for use.

**Publications:**

[**An overview of research and KE on interviewing techniques at University of Abertay Dundee**](https://web.archive.org/web/20130704132223/http%3A/www.sipr.ac.uk/downloads/AnnRep2011/Interviewing_Abertay.pdf) (SIPR Annual Report, 2011)