Bizarre & Fantastic Elements: A Forensic Interviewer’s Response, Part I

by Anne Lukas Miller

(Author’s Note: This is the first article in a three-part series. In Part I, Empowerment Statements are identified as one type of strange, ill-fitting or improbable claims made by children during sexual abuse disclosures. Parts II and III will identify and categorize several other possible explanations for the appearance of bizarre or fantastic elements. These categories are based on clinical experience and drawn from the theorized mechanisms identified in Everson’s 1997 publication, “Understanding Bizarre, Improbable and Fantastic Elements in Children’s Accounts of Abuse.” Strategies and techniques are also offered to assist interviewers in determining how to best respond to the appearance of bizarre or fantastic information.)

“Bizarre and fantastic elements” can be defined as any strange, ill-fitting, or improbable claims made by children during sexual abuse disclosures. There is not a large body of empirical data regarding the occurrence of fantastic elements; however, in 1996, Dalenberg examined over 600 interviews of three to 17-year-old children reporting sexual abuse and found an overall occurrence rate of about two percent. In this study, cases were divided into groups, based upon certainty that abuse occurred and severity of the abuse reported. Dalenberg found that fantastic elements were present at the highest rate within the group of cases that had been identified as those where abuse was both most certain and most severe. In 2002, when the data set from the 1996 study was revisited and expanded, it was found that reports of fantastic elements occurred most often in interviews involving four- to nine-year-old children.

In apparent contrast, Bruck, Ceci, and Hembrooke (2002) reported that their study yielded a greater frequency of improbable information in false, rather than true, narratives by children. It should be noted that this study involved only 16 children, and that it employed the intentional and repeated use of highly suggestive and leading interview techniques. It should also be noted that the study found implausible information in reports that were otherwise accurate, although the occurrence rate was lower than what was found by Dalenberg.

In a 1995 Frontline interview regarding child sexual abuse, co-author and researcher Stephen Ceci acknowledged that, “in true disclosures… where a child was really abused, you often get a combination of bizarre unbelievable details with plausible details.”

While fantastic elements may not be typical in child sexual abuse reports, they occur often enough to be recognized as an issue—and frequently, the issue is one of credibility. Historically, the appearance of improbable information has had a significantly negative impact on a child’s overall report. In 1989, Everson and Boat reported that improbable elements in a child’s disclosure were second only to recantation as the most common reason that child protection workers judged a child’s report of sexual abuse to be false. Dalenberg (1996) noted that when children offered implausible information, interviewers were less likely to be neutral and more likely to be skeptical or challenging in their responses. Yet it is important that interviewers keep an open mind when fantastic elements present in an interview. There are numerous feasible explanations that could account for such reports; accordingly, an immediate disbelieving response from an interviewer could be indicative of interviewer bias.

In 1997, Everson published an article that included an exhaustive list of mechanisms that might explain the occurrence of bizarre and fantastic elements in children’s reports of sexual abuse. The following discussion draws on Everson’s theorized mechanisms, as well as the author’s clinical experience, to identify some of the most common types of improbable elements seen in forensic interviews. Strategies and techniques are also offered to assist interviewers in determining how to best respond to the appearance of improbable information. The discussion will be presented in three segments, beginning with a widely familiar grouping of bizarre or fantastic—statements of Empowerment. Subsequent publications will address Developmental Issues, Reality Distortion, Exaggeration,
Empowerment Statements

Also referred to as “Mastery Fantasy,” this information generally focuses on assertive, aggressive or protective actions reportedly taken by the child against the alleged perpetrator. Children who have been sexually abused often experience a sense of helplessness or culpability. Clinical experience indicates that the latter can be exaggerated if a child has received personal safety messages that place unreasonable expectations on children to prevent abuse (e.g., implying that child should always be able to “say no and get away”). In an attempt to regain power and reduce anxiety, vulnerability or shame, children may report things that they think they should have done to protect themselves or someone else. During his Frontline interview, Ceci noted that in therapy, children may participate in “self empowerment training” to resolve psychological trauma through purposeful imagining of assertive acts. Allowing for the therapeutic value of this methodology, Ceci theorized that children may incorporate these fantasized actions into their reports as actual events. Empowerment statements can range from simple claims of getting away before anything happened (“She tried to touch me, but I ran”), to superhuman acts that injure or even kill the alleged perpetrator (“I pushed the car and it ran away”). It is often difficult for interviewers to determine what approach to take when children introduce seemingly improbable information. The clarification of fantastic elements generally requires further questioning; yet, questions about fantasy often result in further fantasy. As children who are asked for further detail may feel it is necessary to continue with their story. And because the objects involved in improbable information are often familiar, it is conceivable that children will provide additional information that elaborates on the fantastic element (e.g., what kind of car it was). Therefore, the suggested approach with empowerment statements is to offer the child a possible “out.” If the child describes an assertive or protective action against the alleged perpetrator and the interviewer suspects it is an attempt to master anxiety or helplessness, the interviewer can ask, “Is that something that happened, something you wish you could have done, or something else?”

Endnotes

1 Forensic Interviewer and Trainer at CornerHouse Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center in Minneapolis, MN. Ms. Lukas Miller has worked in the field of child maltreatment for over 20 years, and has conducted over 2500 forensic interviews with children, adolescents and vulnerable adults.

2 The examples used in this article are based on the author’s own clinical experience.

3 These categories are based on clinical experience and draw on the theorized mechanisms identified in Everson’s 1997 publication, “Understanding Bizarre, Improbable and Fantastic Elements in Children’s Accounts of Abuse.” Strategies and techniques are also offered to assist interviewers in determining how to best respond to the appearance of bizarre or fantastic information.)

Developmental Issues

Because children process interpret and communicate differently than adults, any number of misunderstandings may occur. Some children do not possess the vocabulary to describe an experience. Other children may not have the cognitive skills or life experience to comprehend an abusive act, so they construct explanations that make sense to them. These explanations may sound unreasonable to adults, particularly when children resort to “magical thinking.” Magical thinking occurs because developmentally immature children lack the ability to discern between logical and illogical causal explanations. For example, a child who did not see someone enter a room might explain that the person “flew in through the window,” simply because the child does not know enough to recognize the implausibility of such information. Even older children with more developmental maturity may engage in similar attempts to comprehend.

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Note: Some references are omitted for brevity.