

Child Abuse Knowledge Among Professionals and Advocates Is There a Decision-Making Bias?

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Understanding Child Abuse Allegations in Child Custody Cases

QUIZ



1) What Percentage of Child Abuse Cases are Substantiated or Founded In General?

10-15% 20-25% 35-40% 65-70% 80-85%?

2) What % of Divorce Cases Have Child Abuse Allegations?

10% 20% 35% 70% 85%?

3) What % of Child Custody Cases Have Allegations of Child Abuse?

10% 20% 35% 50% 75%?

4) What % of Child Abuse Cases in a Disputed Divorce are Founded/Substantiated According to Research Studies?

5-10% 15-20% 35-45% 60-70% 75-80%?

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Allegations Of Child Abuse

**CONFIRMED, FOUNDED, SUBSTANTIATED
(20-52%)**

PROBABLY TRUE

**UNSUBSTANTIATED, UNCONFIRMED, NOT
ABLE TO BE PROVEN (30-65%)**

PROBABLY NOT TRUE

UNFOUNDED (2-12%) - -

[Misperceived (6-10%),

False (2-5%)]

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Table 1. Groups that participated in the quiz

Groups	N	Category
1. Mental Health/Legal Conference	35	Other Professionals
2. Child Abuse Conference	41	Child Abuse professionals
3. Judges Training	37	Professionals
4. Sex Offender Treatment Conference A	22	Professionals
5. Domestic Violence Advocates Training	27	Advocates/volunteers
6. Military Advocates Training	32	Advocates/volunteers
7. Sex Offender Treatment Conference B	65	Professionals
8. Forensic Interviewers, Law Enforcement, Victim Advocates Training	20	Professionals/Advocates
9. Abused Victims with Disabilities Training	28	Child Abuse Professionals
10. Abused Victims with Disabilities Conference	43	Child Abuse Professionals
11. Trauma and Abuse Conference Abuse	45	Child Abuse Professionals
12. Domestic Violence Offenders and Victims Conference	48	Advocates/Other Professionals
Total	443	

N=443: on average performed at the chance levels;

No significant intergroup differences between professionals with formal education and victims' advocates.

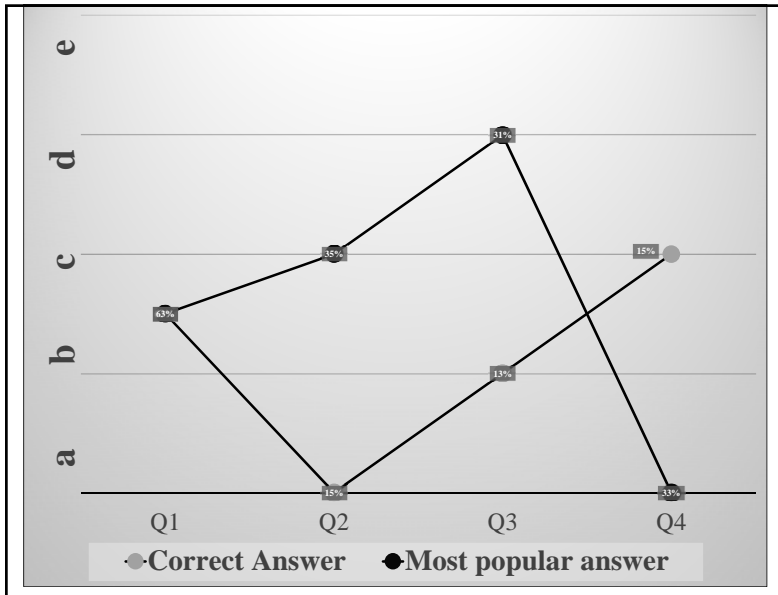
Almost half of the participants considerably underestimated the prevalence of substantiated child abuse claims in divorce cases.

Such underestimation of child abuse prevalence, when used as a criterion for decision-making, may lead to systematic increase in emphasis-on-specificity errors, meaning discounting abuse. in ¹² divorce cases. Based on these results and literature review, we argue that

Only two people in the entire sample of over 400 people answered all four questions correctly. Overall, only 22% of the sample answered two or more questions correctly; correspondingly, 95% answered two or less questions correctly, and 78% answered only one question correctly (usually question1). The median number of correctly answered questions was one.

Groups with the higher percentages of people that answered 2 or more questions correctly are those who attended the Child Abuse Conference (41%), Judges Training (27%), Sex Offender Treatment Conference A (27%), Mental Health/Legal Conference (26%), Forensic Interviewing Training (25%), and Abused Victims with Disabilities Training (25%).

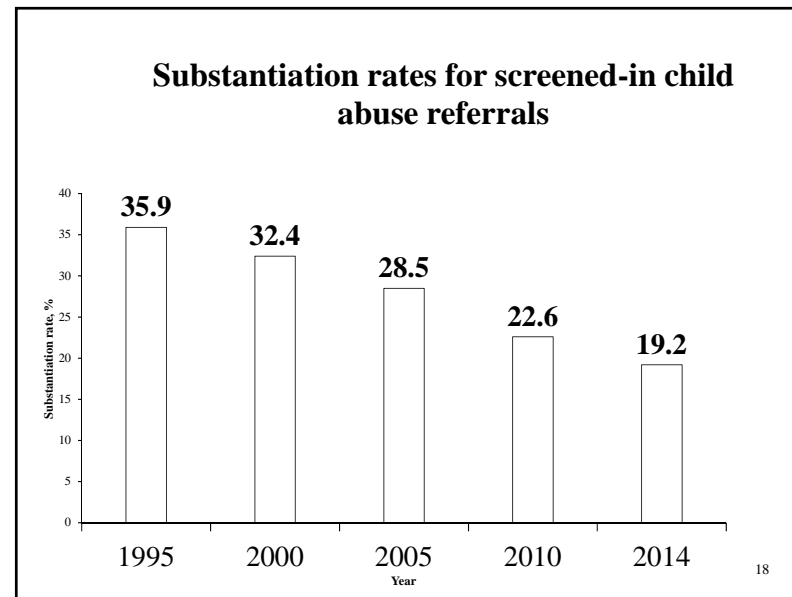
There were no significant differences in the levels of individual performance across groups.



CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

**MISINTERPRETING
UNSUBSTANTIATED CPS
REPORTS TO MEAN CHILD
WAS LYING OR SOMEONE
WAS COACHING THE CHILD**

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Trocme and Bala

- ◎ **Of 135,574 child maltreatment investigations in Canada in 1998**
 - > **42% substantiated**
 - > **23% remained suspected**
 - > **35% unsubstantiated**
 - **31% report made in good faith**
 - **4% report intentionally false**

This article and their subsequent research challenge some of the misperceptions about the frequency and characteristics of intentionally false allegations in child welfare investigations and their relationship to custody and access disputes.

Trocme and Bala, 2005 (Canada)

- **Huge sample 7,632 cases**
- **Found 4% rate of maliciously fabricated allegations of child abuse by children against a parent in all cases of child maltreatment.**
- **Of disputed child custody cases, 12% were of maliciously fabricated allegations of sexual and physical abuse and neglect occurring in a divorce context; non-custodial parents (usually fathers) bring 43% of all intentionally fabricated allegations, while custodial parents (usually mothers) bring 14%.**

Nico Trocme & Nicholas Bala (2005). False Allegations of Abuse and Neglect When Parents Separate. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29,1333-1345.

Bala & Schuman, 1999 (Canada)

- **False accusations**
 - ◆ **21% of accusations by fathers judged to be false**
 - ◆ **1.3% of accusations by mothers judged to be false**

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Although research has not found a higher incidence of false allegations of child abuse and domestic violence in the context of custody/visitation, officers of the court tend to be unreasonably suspicious of such claims. Too often, custody decisions are based on bad science, misinterpretation of fact, and evaluator bias. As a result, many abused victims and their children find themselves re-victimized through the abuser's misuse of the justice system after separation.

Hon. Sol Gothard, 2006; Leadership Council, 2006

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How prevalent are false allegations?

Estimates of false allegations coming into social services:
2-8%

Everson, M., & Boat, B. (1989). False allegations of sexual abuse by children and adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28, 230-235.

Goodwin, J., Sahd, D., & Rada, R. (1982). False accusations and false denials of incest: Clinical myths and clinical realities. In Goodwin (Ed), *Sexual abuse: Incest victims and their families*. Boston: John Wright.

Gomes-Schwartz, B., Horowitz, J, & Cardarelli, S. (1990). *Child sexual abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

Jones, D., & McGraw, J. (1987). Reliable and fictitious accounts of sexual abuse in children. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2, 27-45.

Thoennes, N., Cosby, F., & Pearson, J. (1988). *Child sexual abuse: A unified system response: Final report*. Washington DC: Department of Health and Human Services

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OVERVALUING “EXPERT” PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OVER EVIDENCE OF PAST BEHAVIOR AND REPORTS OF CURRENT BEHAVIOR

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Difficulties

- Preconceived ideas (divorce)
- Poor interviewing and investigation
- Lack of knowledge of child developmental issues
- Lack of understanding of victim dynamics
- Lack of understanding of offender behaviors and profiles
- BAD reporting

Investigation Issues

- **Open minded**
 - ◆ **Don't make presumptions**
- **Neutral in judgment**
- **Review prior information**
- **Anticipate problems and options**
- **BE SUPPORTIVE, NOT JUDGMENTAL**

How do you create openness to new information?

- **Abuse-proofing procedures.**
- **Encourage therapeutic discussions.**
- **Encourage open investigation of new reports**
- **Hire impartial experts, from different counties, different courts.**
- **Build in frequent review with multiple sources of input.**

From Joy Silberg, 2005

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**National Partnership to End Interpersonal
Violence Across the Lifespan (NPEIV)**

***International Summit on Violence, Abuse &
Trauma, – Sept., San Diego, CA***

***Assessing, Treating & Preventing Child,
Adolescent & Adult Trauma - April,
Honolulu, HI***