



# Police interviews with child sexual abuse victims: Patterns of reporting, avoidance and denial<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study investigated 27 sexually abused children's reports about abuse given in the context of police interviews. All abuse cases had been verified (with, e.g., photographs or video films), proving that abuse had occurred.

**Method:** The interviews with the children were analyzed regarding amount and type of information reported, and the frequency of denial and avoidance. Furthermore, children's reporting on different interview occasions was investigated.

**Results:** Children reported significantly more neutral information from the abusive acts *per se* than sexual information. The children were also highly avoidant and, on several occasions, denied that (documented) sexual acts had occurred. Furthermore, the second and third interviews generated twice as many (new) sexual details as the first interview. The children also produced more denials and avoidances at the first interview compared to subsequent interviews.

**Conclusions:** The present study indicates that sexually abused children may be highly resistant to reporting about the abuse in police interviews, and that two or three interviews may be needed to enable children to give complete and informative reports. It is of vital importance that professionals within the legal system be aware of this problem when conducting child interviews and when evaluating the reliability of child sexual abuse reports.

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## Introduction

Alleged child sexual abuse (CSA) cases are complicated in nature. The testimony of the child is often the only evidence at hand, and children's testimonies are often evaluated regarding their reliability. For example, the Supreme Court in Sweden recommends that the child's statement be regarded as reliable if it is clear, detailed and coherent (Gregow, 1996). It is also problematic that, in Sweden, only about two in ten alleged CSA cases reported to the police lead to prosecution (Diesen, 2001). Accordingly, there is an immense call for awareness and knowledge regarding children's pattern of reporting about CSA in police interviews, especially among professionals working in legal contexts (e.g., police investigators, prosecutors and judges). However, a rather limited amount of research has systematically investigated children's reporting about sexual abuse during, for example, police interviews (e.g., Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Jones & Krugman, 1986; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, & Orbach, 1997; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2007; Svedin & Back, 2003), partly due to the difficulties inherent in the research methods. For instance, there is seldom verification data proving that abuse actually occurred, and many factors need to be accounted for, such as relationship to the perpetrator, number of abuse occasions and severity of

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abuse. In the present study, I analyzed 27 children's testimonies. In these cases, the investigations included verification data (e.g., films and photographs) showing that abuse actually had occurred. Furthermore, I investigated interviews with children who had been subject to different types of abuse (e.g., vaginal intercourse and/or touching of the genitals), children who had been abused on one or several occasions, and children with different relationships to the perpetrator (e.g., known or unknown perpetrator). Access to verified abuse cases and to different case profiles allowed us to gain deeper insights into children's testimonies about sexual abuse given in the context of police interviews.

### *Children's reports on sexual abuse*

A few *case studies* have investigated children's reports on sexual abuse when the abuse is verified by documentation (e.g., films and photographs) (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Leander, Christianson, & Granhag, 2007; Leander, Christianson, & Granhag, 2008; Leander, Granhag, & Christianson, 2005; Orbach & Lamb, 1999; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003). These studies indicate that the testimonies provided by abused children often are incomplete and fragmentary. Children tend to omit sexual information, and some children deny being part of sexual acts, even when there is evidence that abuse did in fact occur (e.g., Svedin & Back, 2003).

As concerns research on children's memories of stressful events, a large number of studies indicate that children remember stressful events well over time (e.g., Fivush, 1993, 1998; Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney, & Rudy, 1991; Goodman, Hirschman, Hepps, & Rudy, 1991; Howe, Courage, & Peterson, 1996; Howe, 2000; Peterson & Whalen, 2001; see Christianson, 1992 for a review). Consequently, in reference to sexual abuse cases, it is important to discuss whether omission errors are due to lack of memory for the event or whether the child *consciously* omits the sexual information. Among the cognitive factors negatively associated with young children's ability to produce CSA reports are limited memory capacity (e.g., the child may be unable to create lasting memory representations for the abuse if it occurred before 3 years of age) (Howe & Courage, 1993; Kail, 1988; Schneider & Pressley, 1989), limited language capacity (Fivush, 1993; Howe & Courage, 1993; Ornstein, Larus, & Clubb, 1991), and limited knowledge about the sexual acts (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995). Young children's (i.e., preschoolers) limited knowledge of the severity of sexual abuse can either complicate their reports (e.g., they may believe it is something adults normally do) or facilitate them (e.g., they may not be aware of the potential negative consequences of a disclosure). In addition, young children do not necessarily experience the same level of shame as older children do (i.e., school children), because they do not have the same awareness of the taboo surrounding sexual abuse or of society's view that CSA is unacceptable and appalling (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan, 1991). Other factors complicating children's reporting on sexual abuse are guilt and feelings of responsibility. Some researchers have argued that younger children, owing to their increased egocentrism, are more prone to feeling responsible than are older children (Hazzard, Celano, Gould, Lawry, & Webb, 1995). However, older children may feel responsible, as they may believe that they could have prevented the abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Regarding age as a predictor of disclosure, some studies have indicated that younger children experience more difficulties in reporting sexual abuse than do older children (e.g., Smith et al., 2000; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b), while other studies have shown the opposite pattern (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Divergence in the outcomes of various studies is presumably related to the factors discussed above.

Fear of negative consequences, of not being believed and of threats are other factors that may make children unwilling to talk about abuse experiences (Sas & Cunningham, 1995). Sauzier (1989) found that children who showed a high reluctance to talk about sexual abuse also had the highest scores on fear (e.g., fear of losing the affection of the perpetrator, of being blamed or punished, and of being harmed). Sauzier argued that loyalty conflicts and fear of family reactions can explain children's unwillingness to report sexual abuse, and that children are more willing to disclose abuse sooner if they feel less loyal to the perpetrator (Sauzier, 1989). Several studies have shown that children experience more difficulties in disclosing abuse in cases of intrafamilial abuse than in cases of extrafamilial abuse (e.g., DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b). If the perpetrator is a family member, children may be afraid of breaking up the family, or of other forms of punishment as a consequence of their disclosure. In addition, fear of negative consequences for others (e.g., siblings and the non-abusing parent) may cause children to not disclose abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

### **The present study**

In the present study, I analyzed police interviews with 27 (22 girls and 5 boys) sexually abused children regarding the patterns of their testimonies. In all of the abuse cases, I had access to some type of documentation (e.g., film and photographs) showing that the abuse had actually occurred. Specifically, the study focuses on the amount and type of information reported by the children (e.g., neutral or sexual information), children's tendency to avoid and deny sexual information, and potential differences in reporting patterns across interview occasions. Children's reports were also analyzed and discussed with regard to factors such as type of abuse, frequency of abuse, relation to the perpetrator and the child's age. In line with previous research (e.g., Leander et al., 2005, 2007, 2008; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003), I predicted that the children would report more neutral information from the abuse compared to information of a sexual nature. In relation to this, I also predicted that the children would omit and deny information on sexual acts that I know (from documentation) have occurred. Another prediction was that the children would report more sexual information during the second and third interview than during the first. Children may need time to overcome complicating barriers (e.g., shame and guilt) and the interviewer

may need time to establish rapport with the children so they will dare to report about the abuse (e.g., Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004). Due to the paucity of previous research findings on how case-related factors (e.g., type and frequency of abuse, relationship to the perpetrator) actually affect children's reporting, I refrained from making any predictions regarding such factors.

## Method

### Material

In 2004, I sent out an enquiry to all criminal investigation departments in Sweden, asking for access to CSA investigations for research purposes. I requested material for which the abuse had been verified by documentation. Furthermore, I requested that the material include dialog interviews with the child/children, and interviews with the perpetrator. After half a year, I sent out a new reminder enquiry to the investigating departments with the same request as in the previous enquiry. In total, I collected about 50 police investigations from different Criminal Investigation Departments scattered across the country, and of these, 27 child interviews were included in the present study. The reasons for not including the other child interviews were either uncertain verification of abuse, lack of dialog interviews with the children, that the child and the perpetrator had not met each other in real life (i.e., Internet-related sexual abuse), or that the children were older than 18 years during the police interview. The final sample of children included in the study consisted of 5 boys and 22 girls, ranging in age from 5 to 17 years at the time of the police interview ( $M = 10.63$ ;  $SD = 3.18$ ). For 15 of the children, the retention interval (time elapsed between the assault and the first interview) varied between 1 and 3 days. For 10 other children, the retention interval was less than a year. For 1 child it was about 2 years and for another child 10 years. Eleven children were interviewed on 1 occasion, 6 on 2 occasions, and 10 on 3 occasions. To the knowledge of the present author, no specific interview protocol was used in any of the child interviews (i.e., it is not stated anywhere in the investigations, nor is it possible to determine based on the interviews whether a specific interview protocol was used). Usually the interviewers began with a free-recall question that was followed up by cued recall and recognition questions. All personal information (e.g., surname, personal identification number, address) was handled confidentially and measures have been taken to ensure that the individual victims cannot be identified from the manuscript.

### Relationship to the perpetrator, frequency and type of abuse

In 4 cases, the perpetrator was the child's biological father, in 3 cases it was the stepfather, in another 3 cases a relative (uncle), in 13 cases an acquaintance (e.g., friend of the parents, neighbor and/or babysitter), and in another 4 cases, the perpetrator was totally unknown to the child. Furthermore, 15 of the children had been abused on 1 or 2 occasions, 2 on more than 2 occasions but for less than a year, and 10 on several years (see Table 1). The abuse cases were grouped into different categories of abuse corresponding to the *type of sexual abuse* committed. Below the different categories are described, as well as the number of children included in them.

**Touching.** Eleven children (8 girls and 3 boys) had been exposed to touching of their genitals either by an acquaintance (6 cases), an unknown perpetrator (4 cases), or their stepfather (1 case). This category comprises cases in which the perpetrator touched the child on the vagina/anus using his fingers. The touching had occurred on 1 occasion for 10 of the children and on repeated occasions for 1 girl (the case with the stepfather).

**Masturbation.** This category includes 8 children (7 girls and 1 boy) and comprises abuse cases that were more severe than the "touching category." Thus, the type of abuse in this category is usually a combination of different abusive acts, involving, for instance, the child touching and masturbating the perpetrator (often involving ejaculation), and the perpetrator touching

**Table 1**

Characteristics of the children and the abuse (age during police interview, gender, frequency of abuse and relationship to the perpetrator).

Child/abuse characteristics	Type of abuse			Sum (n = 27)
	Touching (n = 11)	Masturbate (n = 8)	Sexual intercourse (n = 8)	
Age: 5–7 years	4	3	–	7
Age: 9–12 years	3	3	5	11
Age: 13–17 years	4	2	3	9
Gender: girls	8	7	7	22
Gender: boys	3	1	1	5
Frequency: several years	–	3	7	10
Frequency: less than a year	1	1	–	2
Frequency: one/a few occasions	10	4	1	15
Relationship: biological father/stepfather	1	3	3	7
Relationship: acquaintance/relative	6	5	5	16
Relationship: unknown	4	–	–	4

and masturbating the child's genitals. Three children had been abused for several years, 1 child for less than a year and 4 children on 1/few occasions (2 children were abused by their biological father, 1 child by the stepfather, 2 children by a relative and 3 children by an acquaintance).

*Sexual intercourse.* This category includes 8 children (7 girls and 1 boy) who had been subjected to vaginal, oral and/or anal intercourse. Seven children had been abused in this manner on repeated occasions for several years, and 1 girl had been forced to have vaginal intercourse on 1 occasion by an acquaintance. Three girls and 1 boy had been abused by an acquaintance, 1 girl by a relative, 1 girl by her stepfather, and 2 girls had been subjected to sexual intercourse by their biological father (see Table 1 for an overview of the abuse categories).

#### *Verification of the abuse*

In 23 of the 27 cases, the abuse was verified by films and/or photographs depicting the perpetrator sexually molesting the child. In all of these cases, it was the perpetrator himself who documented the abuse and saved it on his computer or in a photo album (in 1 case).

When documenting the abuse, the perpetrator either recorded it using a web camera, a film camera, or an automatic photographic camera. In all cases with video/photographic documentation, the police had found the documentation while searching the perpetrator's home. To the best of my knowledge, documentation of the abuse had not been spread over the Internet. However, in a few cases, the perpetrator had shown the pictures to a friend. In four cases, I did not have access to video or photographic documentation, however, I only included such cases here if: (a) the child's and the perpetrator's report were so consistent regarding several important details that the abuse must have occurred or (b) the child's and the perpetrator's report were in agreement and the reports were supported by objective witness testimony and the technical records. All cases resulted in guilty verdicts for the perpetrators. Consequently, there is no doubt that (different types of) sexual molestation did occur in all 27 cases included in the present study.

#### *Coding procedure*

The CSA cases were coded separately. The first part of the coding scheme focused on collecting background information on the child and the offense (e.g., age of the child, type of sexual abuse, frequency of abuse, relationship to the perpetrator, retention interval between abuse and interview, etc.). These items were coded on the basis of police interviews with the child, the perpetrator and witnesses, and/or the technical records (including, e.g., documentation of abuse and medical examination of the child). In the second part of the coding scheme, I coded the children's reports of abuse (i.e., the police interviews) in relation to the documentation of the abuse. The second part of the coding scheme was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the informative details the children reported from the abuse were counted and scored. Furthermore, every informative detail was divided into one of seven categories concerning the specific feature of information: (1) before the assault; (2) during the assault (sexual information); (3) during the assault (sensitive information); (4) during the assault (neutral information); (5) after the assault; (6) description of the child's own affects during abuse; and (7) description of the child's own physical sensations during abuse. As can be seen, information about the specific abuse was divided into three categories (i.e., 2, 3 and 4) depending on the nature of the information. Sexually explicit information (e.g., "I had his penis in my mouth") was coded as "sexual" (i.e., Category 2). Information associated with the sexual acts but that was not sexual in nature (e.g., "he took my panties off") was coded as "sensitive" (i.e., Category 3). Reporting about neutral information *during* abuse (e.g., "The toilet paper was behind me") was coded as "neutral" (i.e., Category 4). An informative detail was only coded once, thus, repeated information was not coded. "Yes" and "no" replies from the child were not coded as informative details, as such answers were responses to specific and leading questions. However, if the child answered with a "yes" or "no" but then added additional information, it was coded as an informative detail.

In the second phase of the coding scheme, I only coded information from the children that was related to the specific abuse occasion/occasions. Additional information (e.g., description of the perpetrators' appearance or locations) was not coded because (a) the interviewer's interest in these matters differed across interviews (e.g., some interviewers did not ask about such things), and (b) the focus of the present study was primarily on how children report about information specifically related to the abusive acts.

In phase two of the second part of the coding scheme, I coded the children's denials and expressions of avoidance when it came to reporting the abusive acts. This was accomplished by counting and grouping the children's expressions into the following categories: avoidance/omissions (Category 8) and denials (Category 9). Category 8 was coded by counting the number of occasions on which the interviewers asked the child for information (obviously referring to sexual acts) and the child failed to answer the question. Information was only scored as belonging to this category when the interviewer asked questions referring to information that could be verified by the documentation and when the child responded with statements such as "I don't know," "I don't remember," or "I don't want to talk about this." This category is based primarily on avoidance of the "entire" abuse (i.e., that abuse had occurred) and not on *vague details* of sexual acts. Category 9 was coded by counting the number of occasions on which the interviewer suggested that a sexual act had occurred and the child denied this. Information was only scored as belonging to this category when the interviewer asked questions referring

to information that could be verified by the documentation. Expressions of denial and avoidances/omissions were coded repeatedly (for examples from each category of the second part of the coding scheme, see Appendix A).

The informative details reported by the children were not only coded regarding type of information (e.g., sexual or neutral), but also regarding which type of question they were in response to. Three question types were coded and categorized: (a) free recall; (b) cued recall; and (c) recognition questions. *Free recall questions* refer to utterances that encouraged the children to freely report information, including statements such as “Tell me everything that happened.” *Cued recall questions* refer to open-ended questions (e.g., “What did you do when it happened?”) or questions where the interviewer used a cue (previously mentioned by the child) and paired it with an open-ended question (e.g., “You mentioned that something happened yesterday, tell me more about that?”). *Recognition questions* refer to questions that are either specific (“Was he angry or happy?”) or leading/suggestive (e.g., “Did he watch the porno movie before he did anything to you?”).

#### Inter-rater reliability

To assess the reliability of the coding procedure, 5 of the 27 interviews were randomly selected to be coded by a second independent coder. The coding of these interviews was then discussed between the two coders and the second coder received 10 additional cases (the first coder coded all 27 interviews). The inter-rater reliability was 0.84 for Category 1–9, and 0.90 for the question types. Disagreements were resolved through discussion between the two coders.

## Results

### The children's reporting during the police interviews

During the first interview, the 27 children reported a total of 851 details from the abuse, 136 of these concerned what had happened before the abuse and 51 what had happened after the abuse. Thus, the majority of the children reported more pre-than post-abuse details. Sixty-eight of the details concerned sexual information, 111 were sensitive details, and 423 were neutral details. Furthermore, 21 details concerned physical sensations, and 41 details described the child's own affections during the abuse (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

Consequently, the children reported a total of 602 details about what happened *during* the abuse, 11.2% of which were sexual, 18.4% sensitive, and 70.3% neutral. Thus, only about 1 in 10 details concerning the *course of the sexual abuse* actually described the sexual acts. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA conducted to investigate potential differences between the amount of information reported from the categories *neutral information*, *sensitive information*, and *sexual information* showed a statistically significant effect [Wilks' Lambda = .56,  $F(2,25) = 9.70$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .44]. Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that the children reported significantly more neutral than both sexual and sensitive information ( $p < .01$ ). However, the number of details reported about sexual and sensitive information did not differ significantly ( $p = .51$ ) (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

### Factors affecting children's reporting

**Age.** In order to investigate whether children's age affected their reporting, I collapsed the categories *sensitive* and *sexual* information into one variable. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *sexual/sensitive* information as the dependent variable and *child's age during interview* (three levels: 5–7 years; 9–12 years; and 13–17 years) as the independent variable was conducted. However, the analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .64$ ,  $p = .54$ ]. Thus, there was no significant difference between children in different age groups regarding their reporting about sexual and sensitive information. I also conducted the same analyses but with the number of *neutral* details reported as the dependent variable and *age during interview* (5–7 years, 9–12 years, and 13–17 years) as the independent variable. However, there was no difference between the different age groups' tendency to report neutral information [ $F(2,24) = 2.95$ ,  $p = .071$ ].

**Type of abuse.** A one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *sexual/sensitive* information as the dependent variable and *type of abuse* (touching, masturbation and sexual intercourse) as the independent variable was conducted. The analysis revealed no

**Table 2**

Type of information reported by the children during the first interview, means and standard deviations.

Type of information	M and SD
Before the abuse	5.04 (6.30)
During abuse sexual information	2.52 (5.02)
During abuse sensitive information	4.11 (3.78)
During abuse neutral information	15.67 (14.70)
After abuse	1.89 (2.76)
Physical sensations	.78 (2.04)
Own affects	1.52 (2.34)



**Table 3**

Potential factors affecting children's reporting. Means and standard deviations of reported sexual/sensitive details, neutral details, expressions of avoidance and denials.

Factors that may affect reporting	Sexual/sensitive information	Neutral information	Avoidance	Denials
<i>Children's age during interview</i>				
5–7 years ( <i>n</i> = 7)	5.14 (3.67)	24.43 (15.13)	6.29 (6.312)	3.00 (3.16)
9–12 years ( <i>n</i> = 11)	5.91 (7.84)	8.64 (13.44)	5.00 (4.75)	3.64 (3.69)
13–17 years ( <i>n</i> = 9)	8.67 (7.07)	17.44 (12.90)	6.44 (9.06)	3.78 (4.84)
<i>Type of abuse</i>				
Touching ( <i>n</i> = 11)	7.27 (6.01)	24.91 (14.29)*	2.82 (3.99)	1.64 (2.33)*
Masturbation ( <i>n</i> = 8)	5.63 (4.87)	12.38 (13.53)	8.13 (7.36)	3.63 (2.67)
Intercourse ( <i>n</i> = 8)	6.75 (9.38)	6.25 (8.97)*	7.63 (7.82)	6.00 (5.26)*
<i>Relationship to the perpetrator</i>				
Biological father/stepfather ( <i>n</i> = 7)	3.86 (5.52)	3.29 (4.15)**	5.57 (5.41)	4.57 (4.16)
Familiar ( <i>n</i> = 16)	7.75 (7.60)	17.25 (14.87)	6.19 (7.45)	3.19 (3.99)
Unknown ( <i>n</i> = 4)	7.00 (3.16)	31.00 (6.98)**	4.75 (6.29)	3.00 (3.37)
<i>Frequency of abuse</i>				
More than 6 months ( <i>n</i> = 12)	7.33 (7.96)	10.75 (12.12)	7.17 (7.51)	5.83 (4.34)**
One/a few occasions ( <i>n</i> = 15)	6.07 (5.65)	19.60 (15.77)	4.73 (5.82)	1.67 (2.13)**

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .13, p = .87$ ]. I also conducted the same analyses but with *neutral* details as the dependent variable and *type* of abuse as the independent variable. A significant effect was found [ $F(2,24) = 5.36, p < .05$ ]. Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that the children who had been exposed to touching ( $M = 24.91$ ) reported more neutral information than did the children exposed to sexual intercourse ( $M = 6.25$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). There were no differences between these abuse categories and the masturbation category ( $M = 12.38$ ).

*Relationship to the perpetrator.* A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted with *sexual/sensitive* information as the dependent variable and *relationship* to the perpetrator (three levels: biological father/stepfather, familiar (acquaintance and relative) and unknown perpetrator) as the independent variable. However, the analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .83, p = .449$ ]. I also conducted the same analyses but with *neutral* details as the dependent variable and *relationship* to the perpetrator (biological father/stepfather, familiar and unknown perpetrator) as the independent variable, and a significant effect was found [ $F(2,24) = 6.91, p < .01$ ]. Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that children who had been abused by their biological father/stepfather ( $M = 3.29$ ) reported less neutral information than did children abused by an unfamiliar perpetrator ( $M = 31$ ) ( $p < .01$ ). The category of children who had been abused by a familiar ( $M = 17.25$ ) did not differ, regarding amount of neutral information reported, from children abused by a father or unknown perpetrator.

*Frequency of abuse.* In order to investigate whether frequency of abuse affected the children's reporting about abusive acts, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. Amount of *sexual/sensitive* information served as the dependent variable and *frequency* of abuse (two levels: more than 6 months and one/a few occasions) served as the independent variable. No significant effect was found [ $F(1,25) = .23, p = .63$ ]. The same analysis was conducted, but with *neutral* details as the dependent variable and *frequency* of abuse (two levels: more than 6 months and one/a few occasions) as the independent variable. However, no significant effect was found [ $F(1,25) = 2.56, p = .12$ ] (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations).

#### Children's tendency to avoid and deny abuse-related information

The 27 children avoided talking about sexual information on 157 occasions during the first interview. Furthermore, they denied sexual abusive acts (that were documented and confirmed) on 95 occasions during the first interview.

*Age.* To investigate factors that may affect avoidance, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. Number of expressions of *avoidance* served as the dependent variable and *age during interview* (three levels: 5–7 years; 9–12 years; and 13–17 years) served as the independent variable. The analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .13, p = .88$ ]. Thus, there were no age differences in the children's tendency to avoid sexual information. In addition, I conducted a one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *number of denials* as the dependent variable and *age during interview* (three levels: 5–7 years; 9–12 years; and 13–17 years) as the independent variable. The analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .08, p = .92$ ]. Thus, age was not related to children's tendency to deny sexual acts.

*Type of abuse.* A one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *avoidance* as the dependent variable and *type* of abuse (touching, masturbation and sexual intercourse) as the independent variable was conducted. However, there was no significant

difference between different types of abusive acts and the tendency to avoid sexual information [ $F(2,24) = 2.08, p = .15$ ]. Additionally, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *number of denials* as the dependent variable and *type* of abuse as the independent variable was conducted. The analysis revealed a significant effect [ $F(2,24) = 3.55, p < .05$ ]. Bonferroni post hoc test showed that children who had been subjected to abuse including intercourse ( $M = 6.00$ ) were more likely to deny than were children in the touching category ( $M = 1.64$ ) ( $p < .05$ ).

*Relationship to the perpetrator.* In addition, I conducted a one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *avoidance* as the dependent variable and *relationship* to the perpetrator (3 levels: biological father/stepfather; familiar; and unknown perpetrator) as the independent variable. However, the analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .08, p = .93$ ]. In addition, I conducted a one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *number of denials* as the dependent variable and *relationship* to the perpetrator as the independent variable. However, the analysis revealed no significant effect [ $F(2,24) = .34, p = .72$ ]. Thus, relationship to the perpetrator affected neither avoidance nor denial of sexual information.

*Frequency of abuse.* In order to investigate whether frequency of abuse affected the children's avoidance of reporting about sexual abuse, I conducted a one-way between-subjects ANOVA. *Avoidance* served as the dependent variable and *frequency* of abuse (2 levels: more than 6 months and 1/a few occasions) served as the independent variable. However, frequency of abuse did not significantly affect the tendency to avoid sexual information [ $F(1,25) = .90, p = .35$ ]. Additionally, I conducted a one-way between-subjects ANOVA with *number of denials* as the dependent variable and *frequency* of abuse as the independent variable. A significant effect was found [ $F(1,30) = 10.68, p < .01$ ], indicating that children who had been abused during a time period of more than 6 months ( $M = 5.83$ ) were significantly more likely to deny during the first interview than were children who had been abused on a single/a few occasions ( $M = 1.67$ ) (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations).

#### *Children's reporting during different interview occasions*

Ten of the children in the present study (3 boys and 7 girls) had been interviewed on 3 occasions. In total, these children reported 45 sexual details during the first interview, 100 details during the second interview and 103 details during the third interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA conducted to investigate whether the number of sexual details reported during the first interview differed significantly from the number of sexual details reported during the second and third interviews showed no significant difference [ $F(2,18) = .54, p = .59$ , partial eta squared = .06]. I also investigated whether the *first* ( $M = 3.19, SD = 6.18$ ) and *second* ( $M = 7.00, SD = 10.34$ ) interview occasions differed regarding number of sexual details reported (i.e., for the children who had been interviewed on 2 or 3 occasions). To this end, a paired sample *t*-test was conducted. However, no significant difference was found regarding amount of information reported during the second and third interview [ $t(15) = -1.37, p = .19$ ].

In total, the children reported 25 sensitive details during the first interview, 79 during the second interview, and 58 during the third interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA conducted to investigate whether the number of sensitive details reported during the first interview differed significantly from the number of sensitive details reported during the second and third interviews showed no significant difference [ $F(2,18) = 1.45, p = .26$ , partial eta squared = .14]. In addition, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to investigate whether the number of sensitive details reported during the first interview ( $M = 2.63, SD = 2.47$ ) differed significantly from the number of sensitive details reported during the *second* interview ( $M = 5.88, SD = 6.15$ ) (i.e., based on the children who had been interviewed twice or on three occasions). The result was bordering on significance [ $t(15) = -1.91, p = .08$ ]. Thus, the data indicate that the children reported more sensitive information during the second interview compared to the first interview, although the difference was not significant.

Furthermore, the children reported 106 neutral details from the course of the actual sexual abuse during the *first* interview, 153 during the *second* interview, and 62 during the *third* interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether the number of neutral details reported during the first interview differed significantly from the number of neutral details reported during the second and third interviews. However, the analysis showed no significant difference [ $F(2,18) = .79, p = .47$ , partial eta squared = .08]. Additionally, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to investigate whether the number of neutral details reported during the first interview ( $M = 10.38, SD = 12.03$ ) differed significantly from the number of neutral details reported during the *second* interview ( $M = 11.44, SD = 19.30$ ) (i.e., based on the children who had been interviewed on two or three occasions). No significant effect was found [ $t(15) = -.21, p = .84$ ].

When collapsing all 7 categories regarding type of information reported, the children reported a total of 250 informative details during the first interview, 488 details during the second interview, and 308 details during the third interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA conducted to investigate whether the total number of informative details reported during the first interview differed significantly from the total number of details reported during the second and third interviews showed no significant difference [ $F(2,18) = .75, p = .49$ , partial eta squared = .076]. I also investigated whether the *first* ( $M = 26.19, SD = 19.26$ ) and *second* ( $M = 38.19, SD = 39.74$ ) interview occasion differed regarding number of details reported (i.e., for the children who had been interviewed on 2 or 3 occasions). A paired sample *t*-test was conducted, but no significant difference was found [ $t(15) = -1.08, p = .29$ ]. It should be noted that the above analyses are based on a small number of children (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations).

**Table 4**

Children's patterns of reporting during the first, second and third police interview, means and standard deviations (based on the ten children who had been interviewed on three occasions).

Children's reporting	Interview occasion		
	First interview	Second interview	Third interview
Sexual information	4.50 (7.50)	10.00 (12.17)	10.30 (19.29)
Sensitive information	2.50 (2.32)	7.90 (6.64)	5.80 (10.85)
Neutral information	10.60 (13.66)	15.30 (23.59)	6.20 (8.89)
Total information reported	25.00 (19.13)	48.80 (45.19)	30.80 (58.85)
Avoidance*	6.70 (7.83)	4.90 (4.28)	0.70 (1.25)
Denials	4.50 (4.01)	2.20 (2.49)	1.60 (3.50)

\*  $p < .05$ .

#### *Avoidances and denials during the different interview occasions*

The children made 67 expressions of avoidance during the first interview, 49 during the second interview, and 7 during the third interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA conducted to investigate potential differences in avoidance between the first, second, and third interview showed a statistically significant effect [ $F(2,18) = 3.73, p < .05$ , partial eta squared = .29]. Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that the children were significantly less avoidant during the third interview compared to the first and second interview ( $p < .05$  for both comparisons). Additionally, a paired samples  $t$ -test was conducted to investigate whether number of expressions of avoidance during the first interview ( $M = 5.50, SD = 6.63$ ) differed significantly from number of expressions of avoidance during the second interview ( $M = 4.06, SD = 3.68$ ) (i.e., based on the children who had been interviewed on two or three occasions). However, no significant effect was found [ $t(15) = .82, p = .43$ ].

The children made 45 denials regarding documented sexual acts during the first interview, 22 denials during the second interview, and 16 denials during the third interview. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether the number of denials during the first interview differed significantly from the number of denials during the second and third interviews. However, the analysis showed no significant difference [ $F(2,18) = 2.11, p = .15$ , partial eta squared = .19]. Additionally, a paired samples  $t$ -test was conducted to investigate whether the number of denials during the first interview ( $M = 4.19, SD = 4.37$ ) differed significantly from number of denials during the second interview ( $M = 1.94, SD = 2.26$ ) (i.e., based on the children who had been interviewed on 2 or 3 occasions). The result was bordering on significance [ $t(15) = 1.99, p = .06$ ]. Consequently, the children seemed to be more likely to deny during the first interview compared to the second interview, although the difference was not significant (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations).

#### *Interviewers' questions on different interview occasions*

A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences in the amount of sexual information reported in response to free recall on the different interview occasions (i.e., the first, second, and third interview). In sum, the children reported 2 sexual details in response to *free recall* at the first interview, 7 details at the second, and 10 details at the third. However, no significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .94,  $F(2,30) = 1.01, p = .38$ , partial eta squared = .06]. Additionally, a one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate significant differences in the amount of sexual information reported in response to *cued recall* at different interviews (the children reported 34 details at the first interview, 77 at the second, and 77 at the third). The analysis showed no significant result [Wilks' Lambda = .96,  $F(2,30) = .69, p = .51$ , partial eta squared = .04]. Furthermore, a one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate potential differences in the amount of sexual information reported in response to *recognition questions* on the different interview occasions (32 details were reported at the first interview, 28 at the second, and 16 at the third). However, no significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .95,  $F(2,30) = .73, p = .49$ , partial eta squared = .05].

A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was also conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences in the amount of sensitive information reported in response to *free recall* on the different interview occasions (the children reported 13 details at the first interview, 10 at the second, and no details at the third). A significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .71,  $F(2,30) = 6.02, p < .01$ , partial eta squared = .29], indicating that the children reported significantly more sensitive information in response to free recall at the first interview than at the third ( $p < .05$ ). Additionally, a one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate potential differences in the amount of sensitive information reported in response to *cued recall* on the different interview occasions (67 details were reported at the first interview, 59 at the second, and 46 at the third). No significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .99,  $F(2,30) = .19, p = .83$ , partial eta squared = .01]. A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences in the amount of sensitive information reported in response to *recognition questions* at the different interviews (the children reported 54 details at the first interview, 25 at the second, and 12 at the third). A significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .72,  $F(2,30) = 5.84, p < .01$ , partial eta squared = .28]. The children reported significantly more sensitive information in response to recognition questions at the first interview than at the third ( $p < .05$ ).

A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was also conducted to investigate significant differences in the amount of neutral information reported in response to *free recall* on the different interview occasions (25 details were reported at the first



**Table 5**

Type of questions that elicited different kinds of information from the children on the three interview occasions, means and standard deviations.

Type of questions	Sexual information	Sensitive information	Neutral information
<i>First interview</i>			
Free recall	.06 (.25)	.41 (.79)	.78 (1.66)
Cued recall	1.06 (2.72)	2.09 (2.19)	11.63 (11.20)
Recognition	1.00 (2.33)	1.69 (2.32)	5.28 (6.76)
<i>Second interview</i>			
Free recall	.22 (.66)	.31 (.93)	.97 (3.89)
Cued recall	2.41 (6.90)	1.84 (4.10)	4.19 (11.17)
Recognition	.88 (1.45)	.78 (1.64)	.56 (1.13)
<i>Third interview</i>			
Free recall	.31 (1.77)	.00	.00
Cued recall	2.41 (9.83)	1.44 (5.07)	1.75 (5.01)
Recognition	.50 (1.74)	.38 (1.45)	.25 (.84)

interview, 31 at the second, and no details at the third). A significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .75,  $F(2,30) = 4.89$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial eta squared = .25]. The children reported significantly more neutral information in response to free recall at the first interview than at the third ( $p < .05$ ). A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences in the amount of neutral information reported in response to *cued recall* at the different interviews (the children reported 372 details at the first, 134 at the second, and 56 at the third). A significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .63,  $F(2,30) = 8.72$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial eta squared = .37]. The children reported significantly more neutral information in response to cued recall at the first interview than at the second ( $p < .05$ ) and the third interview ( $p = .001$ ). A one-way within-subjects ANOVA was also conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences in the amount of neutral information reported in response to *recognition questions* at the different interviews (the children reported 169 details at the first interview, 18 at the second, and 8 at the third). A significant result was found [Wilks' Lambda = .59,  $F(2,30) = 10.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .41], indicating that the children reported significantly more neutral information in response to recognition questions at the first interview than at the second ( $p < .01$ ) and the third interview ( $p = .001$ ) (see Table 5 for means and standard deviations).

Note that, in the present study, no further analysis was made regarding the interviewers' question types. To limit the size and extent of this manuscript, an eventual manuscript will focus further on interviewing style and questioning.

## Discussion

The main aim of the present study was to examine how 27 sexually abused children reported about the abuse in the context of police interviews. All CSA cases in the present study included some form of documentation, verifying that abuse actually had occurred.

### Type of information reported

When the children in the present study were to report specifically about what happened during the course of the abuse (i.e., not about what happened before or after the abuse), the bulk of the information was *neutral* in nature. Only about 1 in 10 reported details that actually concerned *sexual* information and about 2 in 10 reported details concerning *sensitive* information. There may be several possible explanations for this finding. Perhaps there is more neutral information to report, compared to sexual and sensitive information, from a sexual abuse event (note that I have not coded descriptions of the perpetrator's appearance and/or detailed information about the location of abuse in the *neutral* category). However, when reading the interviews, it is obvious that the children preferred to talk about neutral information and did not want to report sexual/sensitive information, although they probably understood they were expected to report about such information. This assumption is also supported by the children's tendency to frequently deny that abuse has occurred and to avoid sexual information. Furthermore, abuse-related information is usually the most important information in police investigations, as the investigators need to identify the severity of the abuse in order to define the relevant crime. In relation to this, it should also be noted that it is rather unlikely that the children reported less sexual information because the interviewers asked more questions related to neutral information. Again, the core information that the children are to report about does in fact concern the sexual abuse. Additionally, researchers have argued that when interviewers have access to evidence (e.g., from medical examinations, photographs or confessions), they are even more eager to obtain details about abuse they already know has happened (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

One could also speculate as to whether repression might explain the paucity of sexual information reported by the children. However, repression and dissociation have been argued to be the most unlikely explanations for memory loss (Read & Lindsay, 1997). In addition, it could be expected that repression would also diminish the efficiency of remembering the information preceding and following the sexual abuse. However, this explanation should not be excluded, at least not in cases with children who have experienced long-term, severe abuse (Terr, 1991). Furthermore, other defensive mechanisms,

such as denial, may be a fully plausible explanation for the children's reporting patterns in the present study. A child who uses defense mechanisms such as denial may have difficulty reporting about abuse-related information in an interview (Svedin & Back, 2003). Another reasonable explanation for the finding that only one in ten event details actually concerned sexual information involves feelings of shame and guilt. Perhaps the children preferred focusing on less taboo information (i.e., neutral details) and experienced too many negative emotions when talking about the sexual details. It is also possible that the children were afraid of negative consequences, such as being punished or losing the affection of the perpetrator (e.g., Sauzier, 1989). In previous research (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Leander et al., 2005; Saywitz et al., 1991; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a), shame and guilt have been suggested as plausible explanations for children's omissions concerning sexual information.

There are reasons to believe that sexual information from an abusive event may be remembered as well as or even more distinctly than neutral information. In the research on children's memories of stressful events, a large number of studies have shown that children remember stressful and unique events well (e.g., Fivush, 1993, 1998; Goodman, Bottoms, et al., 1991; Goodman, Hirschman, et al., 1991; Howe et al., 1996; Howe, 2000; Peterson & Whalen, 2001). Research has also shown that central details from a stressful experience are better remembered than are peripheral details (see Christianson, 1992 for a review).

Considering previous research on children's memory of emotional events, and the fact that all children in the present study remembered information preceding and following the abusive act as well as a large number of neutral details, one may assume that the children deliberately omitted sexual information. Thus, it is plausible that the children actually remembered more sexual information than they reported during the police interview. This assumption is also supported by previous research, showing that children tend to omit and deny sexual information, both regarding "physical" sexual abuse (Leander et al., 2007; Svedin & Back, 2003) and less severe abuse, such as psychological sexual abuse (Leander et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the assumption that the children deliberately chose to not report about abuse may be supported by findings in the present study showing that the children omitted/avoided and denied sexual information (i.e., acts that were confirmed by documentation) on a total of 252 occasions during the first interview. In sum, the present findings, in line with the first prediction, strongly suggest that the sexually abused children had difficulties reporting about abuse-related information.

It is of great importance to highlight this finding as, at least in Sweden, there are recommendations that legal experts should consider the number of details in an account when judging its reliability (Gregow, 1996). The finding that children may in fact have more information to report in police interviews is also important knowledge for police investigators. Note that this knowledge does not imply that interviewers should press children harder to report. Instead, interviewers should consider that children may be hindered in their reporting about CSA, perhaps due to complicating emotional barriers (e.g., shame, guilt, and defensive mechanisms such as denial), and that the quality of the interview may be of importance in helping children dare to report sexual information. Clearly, more systematic research is needed to further investigate patterns of reporting among sexually abused children.

#### *Factors affecting children's reporting*

Age was not found to affect the children's reporting about sexual and sensitive information. Developmental factors have often been suggested to affect children's disclosure and reports negatively, particularly cognitive limitations such as lack of memory and limited language capacity (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; DiPietro et al., 1997; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994). The fact that all children in the present study were older than 5 years at the time of the interview (with a mean age of about 10 years) may have contributed to the lack of age differences in the present study. Many researchers have suggested that young children (preschoolers) have more difficulties disclosing CSA than do older children and adolescents (DiPietro et al., 1997; Gries et al., 1996; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). For example, Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) reported that children younger than 5 years were least likely to disclose abuse during a formal investigation, due to their limited cognitive, communicational, and emotional abilities. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that older children (i.e., older than 7 years of age) may feel more embarrassed about reporting sexual information compared to younger children, probably due to social and motivational factors (Saywitz et al., 1991). The relationship is complex, and previous research suggests, as do the present findings, that claims that older children are more capable and willing to report about abuse than younger children are may be inadequate (see also Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, & Horowitz, 2006; Hershkowitz et al., 2007).

Children's *relationship to the perpetrator* was not found to affect their reporting about abuse-related information. Previous research has shown that children exposed to extrafamilial abuse are more likely to disclose abuse than are children exposed to intrafamilial abuse (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2005, 2007; Sauzier, 1989; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b). Loyalty conflicts and fear of family reactions have been suggested as explanations for children's unwillingness to report intrafamilial abuse. However, it should be noted that several studies have failed to find any association between relationship to the perpetrator and CSA disclosure (e.g., Arata, 1994; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994). Leander et al. (2007) found that 6 of 8 children who had been abducted and sexually abused by an unknown perpetrator did not report any, or very few, sexual details at police interviews. Furthermore, the children were highly reluctant to admit that they had been sexually abused, although there was evidence (e.g., photographs) depicting the sexual abuse.

Furthermore, in the present study, *type and frequency* of abuse did not affect reporting about sexual information. However, results showed that children who had been subjected to severe sexual abuse (intercourse) were more prone to deny sexual

information than were children who had been subjected to less severe abuse (genital touching). In addition, children who had been abused for more than 6 months were more likely to deny than were children who had been abused on a few occasions. These findings are not surprising, as children who have suffered severe and long-lasting abuse may develop effective defense strategies (e.g., Svedin & Back, 2003; Terr, 1991), which may negatively affect reporting about abuse. Previous research has shown that children exposed to severe and long-lasting abuse are less likely to disclose the abuse than are children exposed to less severe abuse (Arata, 1994; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Quas, Goodman, & Jones, 2003). However, contradictory research findings have also been reported (e.g., London et al., 2007).

Results on reporting about neutral information showed that children who had experienced less severe sexual abuse reported more neutral details than did children who had experienced severe sexual abuse. Additionally, children who had been abused by an unfamiliar perpetrator reported more neutral information than did children who had been abused by their father/stepfather. As discussed above, previous research has shown that severe abuse and a close relationship to the perpetrator are negatively associated with reporting about the abuse (e.g., Arata, 1994; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2005, 2007; Quas et al., 2003; Sauzier, 1989; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b). However, the present results revealed somewhat ambiguous findings regarding the relationship between the external factors investigated and children's reporting. The children who had been subjected to severe abuse and abuse perpetrated by a family member reported less neutral information than did children who had been subjected to less severe abuse and abuse perpetrated by a stranger.

However, no such differences were found regarding reporting about sexual information.

Perhaps reporting about sexual information may be too emotional and difficult, *regardless* of the type and frequency of abuse, or the relationship to the perpetrator (note also that children who had suffered severe abuse were more likely to deny than were children who had suffered less severe abuse).

#### *The children's reporting at different interview occasions*

When investigating how the children in the present study reported about the abuse on different interview occasions, a rather interesting, although not significant, pattern emerged. The children were found to report twice as many (new) sexual details during the second and third interviews than they did during the first interview. In addition, the opposite pattern was found for avoidance and denial of sexual information. That is, the children were more likely to avoid and deny sexual information and they reported half as much abuse-related information during the first interview as compared to the subsequent interviews. This is an important finding of great practical relevance, suggesting that sexually abused children may need 2 or 3 interviews if they are to report abuse-related information. It could be argued that this finding is partly affected by the interviewers' interviewing style at the different interviews. However, when investigating whether there were any systematic differences in the type of questions (i.e., free recall, cued recall, and recognition questions) that elicited sexual and sensitive information on the different interview occasions, no significant differences were found between the first and second interviews. This finding indicates that the first and second interviews were similar regarding which type of questions elicited sexual and sensitive information from the children. Furthermore, for all children in the present material, the *first* interviews were long, *investigative* interviews (i.e., not just an initial meeting to gather preliminary information), where the interviewers in all cases were eager to obtain information about what had happened. It is more reasonable to assume that delayed reporting is based on the fact that children need time to establish rapport with the interviewer and to prepare themselves to dare to report about sexual abuse (Roberts et al., 2004). As one 10-year-old girl explained during the second interview, when she began talking about abuse she had totally denied during the first interview, "I was not ready then, I needed to get the courage, now I'm ready." It is likely that children have to overcome complicating emotional barriers (e.g., shame, guilt, fear of negative consequences, and use of defense mechanisms) and that time is needed to establish the degree comfort in the police interview required to overcome such barriers.

#### *Pre- and post-abuse information*

The children in the present study reported more information about what happened *before* the abuse took place compared to what happened *after* the abuse. This may be explained by the fact that high emotional arousal can result in a reduction in the attention resources available for processing the details of post-abuse information. In accordance with this, the lower memory performance for post-abuse information may also be due to children's attempts to cope with the sexual assault, thereby diminishing their efficiency in processing (encoding) the post-abuse information (cf. Christianson & Nilsson, 1984). Similar findings have also been reported in previous research among children who had been abducted and sexually abused by a stranger (Leander et al., 2007).

#### *Children's reports about physical sensations and affects*

The children in the present study were found to report rather few details about self-experienced affects during the event, and even fewer details about physical sensation. One could assume that sexual abuse experiences contain both physical sensations (e.g., pain, smell, taste) and affects (e.g., fear, sadness). These characteristics are also included as truth-indicators in reliability techniques such as *Reality Monitoring*, which was developed to differentiate between truthful and fabricated

statements (Johnson & Ray, 1981; Masip, Sporer, Garrido, & Herrero, 2005). In the present study, however, the children's reports contained a paucity of such information.

### Limitations

Unfortunately, it was not possible to code which type of information the interviewers' questions referred to (e.g., neutral, sexual, or sensitive information). This is because the interviewers' questions often refer *implicitly* to a specific type of information, and thus the context of the question (e.g., previous questions asked) must be accounted for. For example, a question that is neutrally formulated by the interviewer may actually refer to sexual and sensitive acts that occurred. Thus, it is not plausible to draw conclusions about which information the interviewers' questions referred to on the different interview occasions. However, it is evident that the interviewers in all cases were very eager to obtain information about the *crime* (i.e., the sexual abuse), and therefore focused on the sexual information. Furthermore, it should be noted that the number of children included in the study is relatively small, and thus caution must be used in generalizing the results. However, one strength of the present study is that the sample is independent in that the investigations came from different police authorities scattered all around the country, and with different case characteristics. Furthermore, "scientific case studies" such as the present one (for a discussion on scientific cases studies, see Bidrose & Goodman, 2000), where the authors have access to verification data, make important contributions to the research on children's testimonies. These studies are somewhat similar to experimental research in that they provide control of what has happened (i.e., the verification data), at the same time as they provide abuse cases with children who have actually be subjected to abuse (including abuse-related factors such as shame, guilt, fear and loyalty).

### Conclusions and practical implications

Alleged CSA cases are complicated in nature. The testimony of the child and the alleged perpetrator is frequently the only evidence at hand, and children's testimonies are often evaluated with regard to their reliability. Furthermore, in Sweden only about 2 in 10 alleged CSA cases reported to the police lead to prosecution (Diesen, 2001). Accordingly, there is an immense call for awareness and knowledge regarding children's patterns of reporting about CSA. In the present study, 27 children's CSA testimonies (including verification data showing that abuse had occurred) were analyzed. This allowed us to gain deeper insights into children's testimonies about sexual abuse given in the context of police interviews. The present results showed that the bulk of the information provided by the children about the sexual abuse *per se* consisted of details about neutral information, and only 1 in 10 details actually concerned sexual information. Furthermore, the children in the present study were highly avoidant and frequently denied sexual abusive acts (i.e., verified acts). The present study together with previous research (e.g., Leander et al., 2005, 2007, 2008; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003) indicates that many sexually abused children are reluctant to report about the sexual abuse, perhaps due to complicating emotional factors such as shame, guilt, fear of negative consequences, and use of defense mechanisms such as denial. It is of great importance to highlight the finding about children's fragmentary reports, as the detail criterion is one of the most important reliability criteria in the Swedish Courts (recommendations from the Swedish Supreme Court) (Gregow, 1996). The detail criterion needs to be scientifically supported, and until this has been done it must be used with caution. What this study adds to previous research is knowledge of the substantial increase in information given in repeated interviews, that is, the children were found to report twice as much (new) sexual information at the second and third interviews as compared with the first interview. An opposite pattern was found for avoidances and denials, in that children were more likely to avoid and deny during the first interview than during subsequent interviews. This finding strongly suggests that although sexually abused children may be reluctant to report about sexual information, being interviewed on more than 1 occasion may help them relate such information.

To conclude, it is of vital importance that experts in the legal context are aware of children's difficulties to report about sexual abuse, so that they can both (a) conduct high-quality interviews with children, with the awareness that more than one interview is important in helping children report about abuse, and (b) handle evaluations of the reliability of children's statement with caution.

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## Appendix A. The coding scheme

Coding of the children's informative details:

Information on the course of events (Category 1–7);

- (1) *Before the assault* (e.g., “He said he wanted to show me something on the computer”).
- (2) *Sexual information* (e.g., “I had to take his penis in my mouth”).
- (3) *Sensitive information* (e.g., “he took my panties off”).
- (4) *Neutral information* (e.g., “I was staring at the painting behind his back”).



- (5) *After the assault* (e.g., “he gave me ice cream when he was finished”).
- (6) *Affects* (e.g., “I felt sad and started to cry”).
- (7) *Physical sensations* (e.g., “Yes, there was a terrible pain”).  
Coding of children’s willingness/unwillingness to report
- (8) *Avoidance/omissions* was coded when the child avoided/omitted sexual information (only concerning information that was verified).
- (9) *Denials* were coded when the child denied that sexual acts had occurred when they in fact had occurred (only concerning information that was verified).