

## Do Children Lie About Sexual Abuse?

1. Sexually abused children have been known to deny, minimize, “forget”, and confuse, but they rarely lie. Research by Lucy Berliner (University of Washington) and colleagues in Seattle has matched children’s statements by sexual offenders and found that not only were the children’s statements accurate, but they often were found to be understated accounts of the abuse suffered.
2. The reporting of sexual abuse is a developmental phenomenon. Children don’t automatically report the way adults do. Their reports vary at different ages. For example, a very young child might not have the vocabulary or concept to express an abusive act correctly. “He peed in my mouth” is technically incorrect, yet graphically descriptive. The manner in which children store and retrieve material also changes as they grow. For example, a child who is recalling details from incidents that occurred when he was four is attempting recall from a very different cognitive arrangement and even more different from an adult’s way of thinking! These differences and inconsistencies might initially appear as “lies” but they are not.
3. A well-documented phenomenon is the child’s suppression of his or her story right after a child has reported it; this has been described and documented by Suzanne Sgroi, M.D. This phenomenon of admission and then denial can make an adult wonder if their story is true; it is important to know and accept this aspect of a child’s reporting.
4. Although with extensive prompting or interrogating children can be moved to recant or alter details about their stories, most often they rework details they are least clear about, but usually remain adamant about central details.
5. Children who have suffered multiple abuse encounters often present conflicting data, sometimes combining information from years of abuse into one or two accounts with apparently inconsistent details. The more often a child has been abused, the more emotionally damaged he or she is. It often is precisely these children who give us clear, specific, consistent data that will stand up in court
6. The criminal justice system has certain rules necessary for its functioning. Some of these rules don’t fit a child very well, nor do they take into account the normal differences between a child’s and an adult’s cognitive structure and memory function. Only when a child’s statements can fit criteria of reliability and consistency can they be successful in criminal court. While a child’s inconsistencies may on the surface seem like lying, they often are normal for his or her age and developmental stage.

7. The support of the child protection system by believing the child and his or her attorney, is critical to protect the child from the angry repercussions of accusers. If the system fails and the child is not protected, the best way for a victimized child to cope might be to deny one's allegations and go back to life the way it was. Sadly, along with the risk of further abuse comes the reality that the protection system no longer works either.
8. Just because charges of alleged abuse have been dropped and children have recanted certain statements, this does not indicate that children lie about sexual abuse. While controversy rages about whether to believe certain children, the children themselves continue to feel misunderstood and mistreated, heightening their sense of being victims. The most important thing that you can do for a child who is surviving sexual abuse is to listen and believe the child and protect the child from further acts of abuse.