



USE OF ANATOMICAL DOLLS IN PLAY AND ART THERAPY WITH SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN

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The use of anatomical dolls in child sexual abuse cases has been controversial. Traditionally, anatomical dolls have been used in two areas: (a) to aid in the disclosure of child sexual abuse, and (b) to aid in the judicial process of proving that the child has been sexually abused. Professionals disagree as to the legitimacy of their use in court (Coolbear, 1992; Lie & Inman, 1991; White, 1988; Yates & Terr, 1988). As a diagnostic tool, the dolls have been met with resistance because of the difficulty in interpreting play behavior with the dolls. In a survey of articles pertaining to the use of anatomical dolls, papers were found to fall into the following categories: (a) normal play development with anatomical dolls, (b) anatomical dolls' use among professionals, (c) "how to" articles pertaining to use of dolls, (d) use of dolls as evidentiary tools in court, and (e) comparative studies of abused and non-abused children's play with anatomical dolls. No articles pertaining to the treatment phase of child sexual abuse and anatomical dolls were found.

Literature Review

A survey of current literature on normal play development and comparative studies with the dolls follows.

A basic question is, what constitutes "normal" play with anatomical dolls? Kendall-Tackett (1992b) interviewed 201 professionals who work with child sexual abuse victims and anatomical dolls and found

that there was vast disagreement among them as to how to interpret specific behaviors with the dolls.

One reason the dolls remain controversial is because of concerns that the dolls induce children to act out in sexual ways that they might not have otherwise. Are the dolls too suggestive to be useful as an assessment tool? Several studies have been initiated that study normal play development with anatomical dolls. Sivan, Schor, Koepl and Noble (1988) observed 144 children 3 to 8 years old in a playroom with the dolls under varying conditions. Their study revealed that these non-referred children found the dolls no more interesting than other toys. Little aggression and no explicit sexual activity were observed. Dawson, Vaughan and Wagner's study (1992) agreed with this outcome. Their study of 22 non-abused children 3 to 6 years old revealed no instances in which the children acted out or described sexual intercourse or fondling. There were few instances of sexual aggression displayed by the children when exposed to the dolls, although aggressive, non-sexual responses to the dolls occurred more frequently. There was a high incidence of sexual exploratory play in these non-referred children.

A study by Everson and Boat (1990) examined the incidence of demonstrations of sexual intercourse with the dolls in a study of 223 non-abused children 2 to 5 years old. Higher rates of explicit sexual play were associated with being older, poor, black and male. The results are interpreted to mean that the anatomical dolls themselves are not overly sugges-

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tive, but are useful in assessing the child's exposure and knowledge of sexuality.

This study was supported by a study of 91 children 3 to 6 years old who were observed playing with anatomically correct dolls in an unstructured play setting (Glaser & Collins, 1989). Differences from other dolls were clearly noticed, but most of the children incorporated the dolls into imaginative play and did not appear traumatized by the dolls. The conclusions drawn from this study were that the absence of sexualized play does not exclude abuse and that explicit sexual play may be indicative of knowledge rather than experience.

A survey of mothers of non-abused 3 to 5 year olds (Boat, Everson & Holland, 1990) revealed that none of the mothers saw any alarming behaviors 2 weeks after their children had been exposed to anatomical dolls.

Also in the area of suggestibility, an interesting study by Goodman and Aman (1990) attempted to ascertain whether the dolls would foster false reports of abuse. The 80 children 2 to 5 years old in the study were videotaped interacting with a male confederate and were later interviewed to test the accuracy of their recollection of what happened. There were four groups compared: Children were interviewed with anatomically correct dolls, with regular dolls, with visual cues or without visual cues. The children were asked very specific and intentionally misleading questions about their interaction with the confederate, such as "He took your clothes off, didn't he?" or "Did he touch your private parts?" Anatomically correct dolls did not foster false reports of abuse. Although 3-year-olds were more suggestible than 5-year-olds, they were never able to provide spontaneous elaborations that would indicate that sexual abuse occurred. The 3-year-old children's errors were largely nods of the head, which may suggest that the child did not understand the question.

In general, studies of non-abused children in structured or unstructured play with anatomical dolls reveal that the dolls do not appear to be overly suggestive, although they do invite exploratory play. The dolls may reveal what a child knows about sexuality. The dolls themselves do not appear to be traumatizing to the child.

A number of studies have been undertaken that compare doll play of children who have been referred for sexual abuse and those who have not been abused. A study by Jampole and Weber (1987) compared behaviors of two groups of children (sexually abused

and non-abused) with anatomically correct dolls. The findings demonstrated that significantly more children who had been sexually abused demonstrated sexual behaviors with the dolls in comparison with the non-abused group.

August and Forman (1989) compared 16 sexually abused girls from 5 to 8 years old to 16 non-abused girls. In this study the girls were observed playing alone with the anatomical dolls and then telling a story to an adult. Sexually abused children displayed more sexual behavior when alone with the dolls and more avoidant behavior when with the adult.

Whereas these studies appear to be in agreement that sexually abused children will demonstrate more sexualized play than their non-abused counterparts, other studies also recognize that sexualized play alone is not enough to make a determination about whether or not abuse has occurred.

Realmuto and Wescoe's (1992) study revealed that anatomically correct dolls used alone are inadequate in providing enough information for professionals to accurately assess the abuse status of children. This study compared structured interviews using anatomical dolls with 13 subjects, 4 of whom were sexually abused, 5 non-clinic controls, and 4 not-known-to-be-abused psychiatric controls. Professional raters who viewed videotapes of the interview were not in agreement with each other about whether a child was sexually abused or not.

Cohn's (1991) study compared 35 abused children 2 to 6 years old with an equal number of non-abused controls. Raters unaware of the child's abuse status completed behavioral checklists. The study pointed out that careful interpretation of sexualized play with dolls is needed and that sexual abuse could not be diagnosed solely on the basis of doll play. A recommendation was made that professionals must rely on supporting verbal and physical evidence before making a determination of sexual abuse.

Kenyon-Jump, Burnette and Robertson's (1991) study also compared sexually abused with non-abused children in their play with anatomical dolls. This well-designed study found no significant difference in the two groups on sexual behavior with the dolls, although they did find significant differences when behaviors with suspicious sexual implication were combined with explicit sexual behaviors.

For children who have been sexually abused, anatomical dolls may be useful in helping the child disclose. A study by Leventhal, Hamilton, Rekedal, Tebano-Micci and Eyster (1989) found that when ana-

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