OMICS Group Conferences
Accelerating Scientific Discovery

2nd International Conference on
Forensic Research & Technology

October 7-9, 2013 Las Vegas, USA

Competence, credibility, and reliability of children's forensic reports: A research potpourri

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Abstract

There is perhaps no greater challenge to child protection and law enforcement professionals than the investigation of child abuse cases where both false positives and false negatives may have devastating consequences, with innocent defendants losing their liberty or guilty pedophiles remaining free to victimize other children. In view of the enormity of these undesirable consequences, practitioners need to be mindful of both the sensitivity and specificity of their assessment procedures. Although this is true in all cases, it is particularly true of those involving allegations of child sexual abuse, in which a child's allegation of abusive activities is countered by a defendant's denial that such activities took place. These cases often are complicated by the young age of the child complainant and delays of months or years between the alleged events and their investigation (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Wright, 2008). In some cases, defendants argue that abuse allegations emerged due to erroneous beliefs or even malicious intentions of their estranged spouse during the course of a custody battle. Some cases involve suggestive interviewing practices in which the reliability of the allegations may be of concern. Other cases involve excellent best-practice forensic interview methods, but nevertheless raise concerns about the alleged earlier influence of parents, peers, or therapists on children's reports.

Against this high stakes and thorny backdrop, the field of forensic developmental psychology has emerged over the past two decades to address theoretical and applied issues related to competence, reliability, and credibility of children's testimony. In this talk, I will provide participants with a broad review of the developmental literature regarding factors that promote and hinder children's testimony. I will tie the research finding into my extensive experience as an expert witness in child abuse cases.

Biography

Kamala London Newton earned her Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Wyoming in 2001. She completed her Postdoctoral fellowship from Johns Hopkins Medical School in 2005. She is currently an Associate Professor of psychology in the University of Toledo. Her research interest includes forensic developmental psychology, autobiographical memory and suggestibility in children and disclosure of child maltreatment etc.