When Faith Hurts:
Overcoming Spirituality-Based Blocks and Problems Before, During, and After the Forensic Interview
(Part 2 of 2)

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In part one of this article, readers received an overview of the spiritual injuries caused by maltreatment as well as some of the blocks these injuries may pose during a forensic interview. Part two of this article offers suggestions for overcoming these blocks before, during, and after the forensic interview.

Before the forensic interview
Look for clues - Prior to conducting a forensic interview, the investigative team should closely scrutinize the report triggering the investigation and/or interview. In scrutinizing the report, look for clues suggesting there may be a spirituality-based block. For example, the child’s initial disclosure may reflect his or her spirituality through statements such as “I think God is mad at me.”

In addition to the child’s previous statements, examine the setting in which the alleged abuse took place as well as any indication of a possible perpetrator. If the setting was inside a religious institution or the possible perpetrator is a member of the clergy or is otherwise associated with a religious institution, the chances for a spirituality-based block are greater. Even if the alleged perpetrator is not associated with the faith community and the abuse did not take place inside a religious institution, there may be other clues in the initial report suggesting the possibility of a spirituality-based block. For example, if the child attends a school associated with a faith tradition it is likely that prayer and other religious practices are a significant part of the child’s daily experience. Many times, particularly in small communities, the investigative team may know something of the child’s religious practices. The team, for example, may know if a given child attends a particular church or participates in other religious activities.

Select an appropriate setting for the interview - If at all possible, the child should be interviewed in a child-friendly center or another child-friendly facility. In some jurisdictions, it may be necessary to conduct an emergency or preliminary interview at a child’s school, day care or home. Be cognizant, though, that if the child has a spirituality-based block, and the setting for the interview is rooted in a faith tradition, overcoming the block may be more difficult. For example, a child believing God is angry with her over the abuse may have a more difficult time disclosing abuse in a church-affiliated school or even a home filled with religious symbols.

To illustrate this concern, consider this statement from a young victim: “When daddy does sex to me I feel sad... My Mister Jesus he just watched and he didn’t make it stop.”

For a child with this potential block, that is, concerned that Jesus “watched” the abuse and failed to intervene, it may be particularly difficult to be interviewed in a classroom or home with a picture of Jesus prominently displayed. Such an image may reinforce the child’s apparent belief that Jesus failed to protect the child in the past—and may fail to protect her in the future. For the same reason, it may be wise for the interviewer to avoid wearing a cross necklace or other religious ornament during the interview.

Research uncommon religious practices - If the report pertains to an uncommon religious practice, such as the case discussed in part one of this article in which a child may consume poison or be bitten by poisonous snakes, the interviewer may want to conduct some preliminary research or otherwise find out as much as possible about this practice prior to the interview. In this way, the interviewer is less likely to act shocked at potential revelations during the interview or to otherwise signal his/her ignorance of a practice that, to the child, is likely quite normal.

During the interview
Be alert for signs of a spiritual block - In some instances, the child may boldly say or do something in the forensic interview that reveals a potential spiritual block to disclosure. In one interview, for example, a young girl boldly asked the interviewer “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”

In other instances, the dynamics of the abuse itself may alert the interviewer to the potentiality of a spiritual block. Consider, for example, the plight of a young girl who was molested repeatedly after being required to recite her bedtime prayers. To such a girl, the feeling that God could not, or would not protect her from harm was particularly pronounced. To this feeling was added shame when her father inquired “Why are you such a whore that you make me do this after we have prayed?”

Offer reassurance - One of the block removing techniques identified by CornerHouse and taught in both the CornerHouse and Finding Words forensic interviewing courses is to offer a child “reassurance.” This can be as simple as reminding the child “you’re not in any trouble with me,” “this is a safe place,” or perhaps
to go as far as saying “you know, I talk to lots of boys (or girls). No matter what happened, it’s not your fault.”

Avoid minimizing the importance of spirituality. Given the importance of spiritual healing to many child abuse victims, it is imperative that the interviewer avoid minimizing the importance of the child’s spirituality. If an interviewer is uncomfortable with a child’s religious practices or expressions of faith and in some way communicates these feelings to the child, the child may shut down. Though it is unlikely that interviewers would intentionally demean a child’s spirituality, this may be done unwittingly. In one case, for example, the interviewer was closing the interview by giving the child some personal safety messages. Specifically, the child was asked who she could tell if she was touched inappropriately. The child responded “I can tell Jesus.” An interviewer searching for a more practical answer might easily ask “who can you tell on Earth?” Such a question might frustrate a child who believes that Jesus is still on the earth. A better response would simply be to ask “who else can you tell?”

Assume the child that someone will help him/her address spiritual questions. If a child asks the forensic interviewer a religious question (i.e. “Am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?”), the interviewer must in some way acknowledge the question. Until the child’s question is acknowledged, if not fully addressed, it may be difficult to continue the interview.

At the same time, it is important not to delve too deeply when responding to a child’s spiritual question. Though well meaning, an interviewer may not fully appreciate important nuances in a child’s question. A better approach is to ask the question back to the child (i.e. “what makes you wonder about being a virgin in God’s eyes?”) and thus obtain more information as to the source of this block. When asked the question back, the child may disclose that her father explained that her biological reaction during the abuse meant she “enjoyed” the encounter and thus would be condemned in the church for having lost her virginity. Perhaps the child is worried about a religious doctrine impressing upon her the command to remain a virgin until married. Obtaining details of the source of the block will assist the interviewer, and the team, in addressing the child’s concern.

If the child insists on an answer, the interviewer may want to inform the child that she has asked an important question and that he will make sure someone sits down with the child and fully answer the question. Again, an interviewer attempting to answer difficult spiritual questions may unwittingly offend the child by failing to understand nuances of her faith tradition. Moreover, many spiritual questions overlap with mental health issues that need to be explored in greater depth by a well-trained mental health professional.

After the interview

Once the interview is complete, the forensic interviewer must bring to the attention of the multi-disciplinary team the spiritual questions, concerns or blocks raised during the interview. The team must develop a plan to address the child’s spiritual injury just as the team would develop a plan to address the physical and emotional damage done to the child. When selecting a therapist, for example, seek a therapist with specific knowledge and experience in counseling child abuse victims and who shares the child’s faith tradition or is otherwise familiar enough with the child’s faith tradition to be sensitive in addressing the child’s spiritual needs. It may also be helpful to have one or more members of the faith community on the multi-disciplinary team who can recommend spiritual resources that may assist the child. The team should also consider the value of spirituality in helping the child cope with the rigor of testifying or of separation from family. As mentioned earlier, many victims rebel against the authority of the church, but nonetheless pray regularly or report having spiritual experiences. If the child has a positive relationship with a pastor or some other member of the faith tradition, the team may want to consider utilizing this individual as a support person for the child at trial and to assist the child in praying or otherwise accessing God as part of her recovery.

Conclusion

Spirituality is deeply rooted in many if not most aspects of our society. It is, therefore, not surprising that child abuse often causes lasting damage to a child’s sense of spirituality. Unfortunately, the child protection community has largely focused on addressing only the child’s physical and emotional damage—leaving many victims to struggle alone with the reality of God and the reality of their abuse.

For these children, and for our profession, we can do better.

1 Director, NDAAs Child Abuse Programs (National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse and National Child Protection Training Center at Winona State University). The author thanks Kerri Trom, paralegal student from Winona State University, for her research assistance.
3 For an excellent overview of the history of Children’s Advocacy Centers and the strong research supporting this model, see Nancy Chandler, Children’s Advocacy Centers: Making a Difference One Child at a Time, 28 HAMLINE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC LAW & POLICY 315 (2006).
5 See note 23 and accompanying text to Part I of this article.
6 This is a case that was called into our National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse.
7 DIANE LANGBERGER, The Spiritual Impact of Abuse, available in the “articles” section of the following web site: http://www.netgrace.org.
8 See generally, DIANE MANDT LANGBERG, PH.D, ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 131 (1999).
9 See note 23 and accompanying text to Part I of this article.
10 For an overview of the CornerHouse and Finding Words interviewing programs, see Victor I. Vith, Unto the Third Generation: A Call to End Child Abuse in the United States Within 120 Years (Revised and Expanded), 28 HAMLINE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC LAW & POLICY 1, 21-29 (2006).
11 According to the Bible, Jesus promises that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20 (NIV).
12 For suggestions on selecting a counselor that may assist in addressing the child’s spiritual injury, see DIANE MANDT LANGBERG, PH.D, ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE 191-196 (1999).