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TO DISCOVER THE TRUTH

When kids tell tall tales the consequences can be grave

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Jim Amormino was stunned. "In 28 years in law enforcement, I have never had a 4-year-old make up a story like this." The Orange County (Calif.) Sheriff's Department spokesman was referring to an [incident](#) last month where a "spiky-haired man with a dragon tattoo" reportedly tried to snatch a kid playing in a park. Eight sheriff's cars and a helicopter later, the victim admitted that the man she described was a TV character. She made the whole thing up to get back at her mother for leaving her alone in the playground.

Last March OCSD deputies fanned out in another dragnet when a 12-year old Aliso Viejo girl reported that a man tried to abduct her at knifepoint. Hundreds of leads were checked before the girl admitted that she lied to justify missing her school bus. Amormino admitted that on average his agency received one such a report a month, usually from kids who are trying to get out of trouble.

"He grabbed my hair and then he started pulling me. And that's when I screamed. I tried to go away, and then my friends were trying to help me, and that's when he started choking me." After spending eight months in jail, Eric Nordmark went to trial in January 2004 for sexually assaulting three Garden Grove (Calif.) teens. But on the second day one of his accusers tearfully recanted. They made it all up. Their motive? To avoid being punished for coming home late.

In March 2006 a 12-year old Buena Park elementary school student told police that she was sexually assaulted in a school restroom. An examination revealed some minor injuries. The girl gave a detailed description of the event and even helped prepare a composite sketch of the assailant. Days later she admitted making the whole thing up. Why? Who knows?

Sometimes kids are encouraged to lie. In January 2006, after spending seven months in San Bernardino County (Calif.) jail, Christopher Fitzsimmons was released when DNA tests proved that he did not rape the 4-year old girl who accused him of assaulting her in a park. Defense investigators discovered that the girl's mother, an acquaintance of Fitzsimmons, had accused others of raping her daughter, including two *after* his arrest.

In 2005 Kyle Sapp publicly apologized. Two decades earlier he was one of dozens of children who swore that the owner and employees of a Manhattan Beach (Calif.)

preschool forced them to commit numerous sex acts. None of it was true. Police and psychologists were sure that something happened, so the kids told them what they wanted to hear. "I felt everyone knew I was lying. But my parents said, 'You're doing fine. Don't worry.' And everyone was saying how proud they were of me."

Fortunately, that case fell apart and the only two defendants who went to trial were acquitted. But other endings haven't been so tidy. Consider the case of John Stoll, freed in May 2004 after serving *eighteen years* for allegedly leading a cabal of Bakersfield (Calif.) child molesters. The last of forty-six defendants in a string of put-up cases, Stoll's luck turned during two tearful, in-court recantations, including one by a 26-year old man whose false testimony as a child *sent his own mother to prison for six years*.

Or how about the Wenatchee (Washington) child sex ring? In 1995 *forty-three* adults were arrested for sexually abusing *sixty* children. Eighteen were convicted, some on *thousands of counts*. Most were poor, rural people; several were mentally handicapped. But all the stories were lies, implanted by police and psychologists who isolated the children in a juvenile facility and pressured them to talk. Years later one remembered being told that "my parents did things to me and to my sisters...When I disagreed and said they were wrong, they said I was lying. I had to remember. I had to talk." Some defendants served several years in prison before being exonerated. In 2001 the city and county were ruled negligent and forced to pay compensation. Awards went as high as \$3 million.

Eager to resolve immediate problems, to cover up being late for school or to get rid of a pesky detective or psychologist, children may not realize the harm their lies can cause. Young people are particularly susceptible to manipulation and pressure. Unsophisticated, dependent and eager to please, they don't realize that authority figures may not have their best interests at heart. And whatever they say can always be taken back, right?

Wrong. Consider the case of [three West Memphis \(Ark.\) teens](#) who were accused of murdering three Cub Scouts in 1993. Under relentless interrogation, one of the accused, a developmentally disabled youth, confessed and implicated two friends. Although there was no physical evidence connecting them with the brutal crimes, his confession -- which he quickly recanted -- led to their convictions. They're still in prison. (DNA recently tied a victim's father and the father's friend to the scene. A Federal habeas hearing is pending. For another example check out the blog entry on the Stephanie Crow case.)

Criminal investigators shoulder a tremendous burden. Their job, as I frequently admonish my students, is not to "collect evidence", or "collect evidence beyond a

reasonable doubt”, or any such simplistic formulation. *It’s to discover the truth.* And *that’s* a distinction well worth remembering.