

Write the truth and show the pain of child sexual abuse

Daniel Pollack & Elisa Reiter, April 22, 2021



As professionals who deal with maltreatment cases in a variety of forums, we write about child sexual abuse. Our audience includes attorneys, social workers, health and education professionals, and sometimes the general public. There is an unspoken dilemma that always confronts us: How explicit should our language be?

Should we, for the sake of civility, deliberately sidestep explicit quotes from transcripts, and police or child protective service reports? Or, should we include such quotes so that the audience will ingest the raw words of the pained child victim? Our approach is to never sugarcoat the actual transgression. The world of child sexual abuse should not be home to euphemisms and evasive communication. Doing so only leads to equivocation and deception.

For instance, in the March 2021 case of [Saunders v. State](#), Germaine Saunders was charged with two counts of aggravated sexual assault of a child. The child was his stepdaughter, who was 8 years old at the time of the assault. A jury found Saunders guilty, assessing his punishment at 66 years. The very terms used for the charges are horrifying. The child victim was 11 years old at the time of the trial. Her testimony, recounted in footnotes of the opinion, was that her stepfather

. . . repeatedly put ‘his thing’ — which she explained was on the front part of his body and looked ‘circular’ and ‘sort of like a unicorn horn but different in a way’ — inside her ‘butthole’ and ‘coochie’ which were the parts that a girl uses to use the bathroom. She explained that appellant put Vaseline on ‘his thing’ and then on her; then put ‘his thing’ inside her and would ‘just go back and forth’.

There may be uncertainty in the field as to how graphic on-the-record accounts of child abuse should be. In Saunders, the child victim’s words are both horrifying, yet age appropriate. Sadly, her best analogy to depict her stepfather’s penis was a “unicorn horn.” We believe we should err on the side of direct accounts, no matter how brutal the witness’ words may be. Sanitizing these words, appalling to a jury as they may have been, might have meant that Germaine Saunders did not receive the full measure of justice due him.

When writing for a publication for those who are not in the business of assessing, prosecuting and defending such cases, we may be asked to quiet the storm engendered by graphic words. We do not. Words matter. The raw expression of pain experienced by a child abuse victim must be heard, no matter how unprepared to hear such words the listener may be.

It is one thing to preserve the innocence of a child. It is wholly different to spare adults from the reality of child sexual abuse. When the child victims of despicable acts do not themselves use appeasing language, we should honor and use their original words.

Child sexual abuse is not generic. It is horribly, exquisitely customized for every victim, and the emotional scars last a lifetime. Softening its effects by not citing the child’s actual language is not simply concealing the truth. It’s a lie.

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