

Emotional children's testimonies are judged as more credible

March 31 2014

A new study from the University of Gothenburg shows that aspiring lawyers assess child complainants as more credible and truthful if they communicate their statement in an emotional manner. Thus, there is a risk that children that behave in a neutral manner may be perceived as less credible in court.

In an experimental legal psychology study, two young actors (one girl and one boy) portrayed victims in a mock-[police](#) investigation. They were questioned by the police about how they had been harassed by older schoolmates. The police interviews were videotaped in two versions: In one version the children appeared in a neutral manner but in the other version, the children showed clear signs of distress, as they sobbed and hesitated before answering the police officers' questions.

The films were later shown and assessed by law students that were familiar with the Supreme Court's criteria for how to assess the credibility of testimonies.

The results show that the children, despite giving the exact same testimonies, were perceived as more credible and truthful when expressing emotions than when behaving in a more neutral manner. The reason for these differences was that the law students had stereotypical beliefs that child victims should appear emotional. The [law students](#) also felt greater compassion for the emotional children.

'This is problematic since many children don't display strong negative

emotions when questioned by police,' says Sara Landström, researcher in legal psychology at the Department of Psychology. 'There is a risk that these children will be considered less credible in court.'

Since witnesses and technical evidence are often lacking in cases involving child abuse, courts are often forced to rely solely on the victim's own testimony 'It is therefore very important that courts assess the credibility of a testimony based on what [children](#) say and not on how they say it,' says Sara Landström.

More information: The study is presented in an article titled Children's Testimony and the Emotional Victim Effect, which was published in the British journal *Legal and Criminological Psychology* in December.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: Emotional children's testimonies are judged as more credible (2014, March 31) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-emotional-children-testimonies-credible.html>

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