

Peculiarities of Conducting Forensic Psychological Examinations of Sexually Abused Children

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Peculiarities of conducting forensic psychological examinations of children affected by sexual violence are considered. The authors emphasize the specifics of the psychological condition of a child, his/her age and personal characteristics that may affect the ability to understand and resist unlawful actions. The role of forensic examination in identifying qualifying signs of a crime, assessing reliability of testimonies and preventing re-traumatisation is defined. Video recordings of interrogations are analysed in terms of their significance as a source of psychological information. The importance of educational and preventive work among children is emphasized.

Keywords: forensic psychological examination; sexual violence; children; psycho-emotional state; qualifying signs; video interrogation; traumatisation; prevention; social competence; interdisciplinary approach.

Особливості проведення судово-психологічних експертиз щодо дітей, які зазнали сексуального насильства

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Розглянуто особливості проведення судово-психологічних експертиз щодо дітей, які постраждали від сексуального насильства. Акцентовано увагу на специфіці психологічного стану дитини, її вікових і особистісних характеристиках, що можуть впливати на здатність до усвідомлення неправомірних дій та опору ним. Визначено роль експертизи у визначенні кваліфікаційних ознак злочину, оцінюванні достовірності показань і попередженні повторної травматизації. Проаналізовано значення відеозаписів допитів як джерела психологічної інформації. Підкреслено важливість освітньо-профілактичної роботи з дітьми.

Ключові слова: судово-психологічна експертиза; сексуальне насильство; діти; психоемоційний стан; кваліфікаційні ознаки; відеодопит; травматизація; профілактика; соціальні компетенції; міждисциплінарний підхід.

Crimes pertaining to sexual violence and exploitation of children are among the most dangerous forms of offences. This

is because they cause severe, often irreversible harm to their physical, mental and emotional health. Such actions not



only infringe on fundamental rights of the child, but also leave a lasting mark on his/her consciousness, which has the potential to affect all aspects of his/her future life.

Specialists in law, psychology and psychiatry emphasize that a child who has experienced violence often unconsciously carries his/her traumatic experience into adulthood. This can manifest as destructive behaviour patterns, difficulties in forming trusting relationships, low self-esteem and a sense of chronic danger [1].

Statistics indicate that among the most prevalent consequences of such harm are: development of addiction (alcoholism, drug addiction), predisposition to aggressive behaviour, including domestic violence, as well as depressive states, which may lead to suicidal thoughts or actions in some cases.

That is why efficient and comprehensive strategies to combat violence against children must encompass all its forms: physical, psychological and sexual violence, as well as neglect or disregard for the child's needs. At the same time, particular focus should also be given to the issues of sexual violence and exploitation. These forms of abuse have specific development mechanisms, are highly concealed and have profound consequences for a child's psycho-emotional development.

There exist considerable gaps in both knowledge and practical approaches to protecting the most vulnerable categories of children: young children, boys, intersex persons and those who identify as non-binary. These groups are often overlooked by traditional protection

programmes, which puts them at additional risk.

Globally, specialists estimate that up to 1 billion children between the ages of 2 and 17 have been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or overlooked [2].

Combating sexual violence and exploitation of children is the subject of ongoing scientific study both in Ukraine and worldwide. Despite the large amount of research on this issue, most of it only covers certain aspects without offering a comprehensive, systematic approach to resolving the problem. Specifically, research papers commonly examine legal mechanisms for protecting children, often ignoring interdisciplinary links that cover a range of psychological, social, pedagogical and cultural factors.

Simultaneously, many important psychological and sociological aspects of sexual violence against children remain insufficiently studied. This underlines the importance of multidisciplinary theoretical and applied studies that would enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of this phenomenon, its consequences for victims, and to develop efficient models of forensic psychological examination of children affected by violence, as well as the ones related to prevention, rehabilitation and legal response. This approach should incorporate both legal assessment and analysis of social environment, institutional backing, cultural narratives and technological challenges affecting the dynamics of sexual violence and exploitation of children.

Investigating criminal proceedings initiated on the grounds of sexual vio-



lence is a highly challenging task requiring advanced professional training, sensitivity and an interdisciplinary approach. The peculiar nature of such crimes creates significant obstacles to collecting evidence and establishing the truth objectively.

One of the key issues is the time gap between the moment the tort occurs — often repeatedly—and when the victim approaches law enforcement agencies. This period of time can result in the loss of potential evidence, particularly physical traces of a crime. It can also make it difficult to establish the circumstances of an incident due to the absence of eyewitnesses. The only source of information is participants' testimonies that often contradict each other or convey opposite meanings.

The high risk of the victim changing his/her testimony adds complexity, especially in the case of a child. This may happen under the influence of the suspect, their relatives, or other people with power or authority over the child. Under such circumstances, law enforcement agencies are left with no choice but to rely on psychological aspects that are crucial for qualifying a crime. Specifically, it is essential to assess the child's understanding of the content and nature of actions taken against him/her, his/her ability to resist, and to understand his/her motivation and behavioural responses, which may seem illogical or contradictory to adults.

In this context, forensic psychological examination is of paramount importance since it enables a more in-depth analysis of the child's psycho-emotional state, his/her ability to give truthful tes-

timony, and the level of psychological influence exerted by adults, and other important factors. Such forensic examination is not only a tool for collecting evidence, but also a means of safeguarding the rights of a child who has suffered from sexual violence. In the system of Ukrainian law, expert opinion is one of the weighty sources of evidence [3].

Law enforcement agencies actively employ specialized expert means to effectively solve a wide range of tasks involving the investigation of sexual crimes against children, especially in the establishment of psychological grounds for legal qualification of an act. In particular, it involves conducting a forensic psychological examination or a multidisciplinary forensic psychological and psychiatric examination, allowing for a deeper assessment of the psycho-emotional state of the affected child, his/her ability to understand the nature of actions taken against him/her, as well as the level of influence exerted on him/her by adults.

Such examinations play a key role in identifying qualifying signs of a crime, particularly in sensitive cases where there is no obvious physical evidence or witnesses. They help investigators to reasonably assess a child's testimony and understand his/her reactions and behavioural patterns, which may be confusing for adults but are critical to establishing the truth [4]. At the same time, we encounter numerous instances of inappropriate behaviour during interrogations of children, where the child's psychological traits are either not considered or considered insufficiently [5, 6].



One of the main functions of a forensic psychological examination is to establish what constitutes normal behaviour for a child in a violent situation, and to assess his/her ability to understand the nature of the actions being committed against his/her will and his/her ability to resist. Another essential aspect is the analysis of the child's individual traits that may contribute to getting into a situation of sexual violence. Such factors encompass: excessive obedience, non-confrontational behaviour, recognition of adult authority, hesitancy, performing duties inappropriate for his/her age, poor social competence and insufficient knowledge of sexual matters.

These features highlight the importance of educational work with children, which aims to cultivate basic knowledge about personal boundaries, rights, and protection mechanisms. Educational programs should take into account the age and psychological traits of children, providing them with accessible information about safety and inviolability.

When investigating crimes against sexual freedom and inviolability of a child, forensic and psychological examination also carries probative value. It allows the investigation and the court to obtain objective information about the psycho-emotional state of a victim, his/her response to events, the level of traumatisatation and potential influence exerted by the suspect or his/her environment. Particularly noteworthy is the analysis of video recordings of children's interrogations (surveys) which enables forensic experts to evaluate non-verbal

signals, emotional responsiveness and logic of the narrative. It is crucial for judicial assessment of testimonies.

Such forensic examinations must be conducted in compliance with ethical standards, in a safe environment, with the involvement of specialists who have experience working with children. It is important to ensure that the process does not cause further psychological trauma, but rather contributes to the child's recovery and his/her ability to adapt to normal life.

Information obtained during forensic psychological examinations complements the current body of scientific knowledge in the field of developmental and crisis psychology and provides greater clarity on the factors contributing to circumstances in which a child is exposed to sexual violence. These data are fundamental to the investigation of crimes against sexual inviolability of minors and also reveal a range of issues associated with the procedure of interrogating children within criminal proceedings.

Among individual psychological factors that may increase a child's risk of sexual violence, it is worth highlighting character traits and personality traits that belong to the so-called 'inhibitory' spectrum. These include: excessive obedience; a tendency to unquestioningly accept adult authority; non-confrontational behaviour; hesitancy; a willingness to perform age-inappropriate duties (e.g., caring for younger children or running the household); a low level of social skill development; and insufficient awareness of sexual development and safety issues.



These features highlight the importance of systematic educational and awareness-raising work with children, which aims to cultivate basic knowledge about personal boundaries, rights, and protection mechanisms. Sexual violence prevention should start from an early age, covering both formal education and informal programs that take into account age and cultural factors.

Conducting forensic psychological examinations with direct examination of child victims provides investigators and judicial authorities with valuable information about the psychologically consistent behaviour of a child in a situation of violence. This paves the way for identifying qualifying signs of a crime, and also contributes to understanding the child's inner state, his/her reactions, level of trauma and needs for support. The importance of this approach lies in its significance not only for the legal assessment of an incident, but also for the proper rehabilitation and psychological recovery of a victim.

The analysis of video recordings of interrogations or interviews with children conducted as part of forensic psychological examinations holds a significant role. This analysis allows the court to objectively assess reliability of testimonies, considering non-verbal signals, emotional responsiveness and overall psycho-emotional state of a child. This is especially crucial in cases where testimony is the only evidence available, and in situations where there is a risk of the suspect or his/her environment exerting influence on a child.

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