

**The validity and reliability of the General Child  
Assessment model as pre-forensic screening  
instrument for children between three and five  
years old**

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**. The validity and reliability of the General Child Assessment model  
as pre-forensic screening instrument for children between three  
and five years old**

by

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**MAGISTER**

in

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## ABSTRACT

The validity and reliability of the General Child Assessment model as pre-forensic screening instrument for children between three and five years old

**Key terms:** Child sexual abuse; young children; pre-forensic screening instrument; forensic investigations; the General Child Assessment Model

The forensic assessment of young children is a difficult and often daunting task for professionals working in the field of child sexual abuse. A forensic assessment with pre-school children requires that the professional have knowledge of various aspects of the children themselves and the disclosure of abuse, and remain as neutral and objective as possible while conducting the assessment. Literature indicates that the knowledge of the child's social, behavioural and developmental level is essential in order to conduct a developmental sensitive forensic interview. Although the term "pre-forensic screening" is relatively new in the field of forensics, Hewitt (1999) and Carnes (2006) refer to "pre-screening" and "developmental, behavioural and social assessment", respectively.

The study examined the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening technique specifically for children aged 3-5 years.

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to explore the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument with professionals working in the clinical as well as forensic field.

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals trained in the general child assessment model. The interviews focused on the professionals' use of the model in general, the value they attached to the model, its usefulness as a pre-forensic screening instrument with children aged 3-5 years, strengths and limitations of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument, and practical recommendations for using the model in the forensic context.

The data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed and divided into themes and subthemes, which were further described and linked with relevant literature. It became clear that the use of this assessment model had value in the therapeutic as well as forensic context.

The model was described as an important and valuable part of the forensic process as it provides a holistic view of the child in context. The strengths and limitations of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument were also explored and the participants made practical recommendations to optimise the use of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument. In addition, a case study was used to evaluate the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

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## OPSOMMING

Die geldigheid en betroubaarheid van die Algemene kinderassessering as pre-forensiese siftingstoets vir kinders drie tot vyf jaar.

**Sleuteltermes:** Seksuele misbruik van kinders; die jong kind; pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument; forensiese ondersoek; die Algemene Kinderassessering Model

Die forensiese assessering van jong kinders is 'n moeilike en dikwels uitdagende taak vir professionele mense wat in die veld van seksuele misbruik van kinders werk. 'n Forensiese assessering met voorskoolse kinders vereis dat die professionele persoon kennis dra van verskeie aspekte van die kinders self, asook die aanmelding van misbruik, en so neutraal en objektief moontlik bly gedurende die assessering. Die literatuur dui aan dat kennis van die kind se sosiale, gedrags- en ontwikkelings vlak uiters belangrik is om 'n ontwikkeling-sensitiewe forensiese onderhoud te voer. Alhoewel die term "pre-forensiese assessering" relatief nuttig is in die forensiese veld, verwys Hewitt (1999) en Carnes (2006) na "pre-screening" en "developmental, behavioural and social assessment", onderskeidelik.

Die studie het die bruikbaarheid van die "General Child Assessment Model" as 'n pre-forensiese siftingstechniek spesifiek vir kinders tussen 3 en 5-jarige ouderdom ondersoek.

Die navorser het 'n kwalitatiewe benadering handhaaf om die nut van die model as pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument te ondersoek met professionele mense wat in die kliniese asook die forensiese veld werk.

Sewe semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude is met professionele mense wat in die model opgelei is, gevoer. Die fokus van die onderhoude was op hulle algemene gebruik van die model, die waarde wat hulle aan die model heg, die model se bruikbaarheid as 'n pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument met kinders tussen 3 en 5 jaar oud, sterk- en swakpunte van die model as pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument, en praktiese aanbevelings vir die gebruik van die model in die forensiese konteks.

Die data van die onderhoude is ontleed en in temas en sub-temas verdeel, wat dan verder beskryf en aan relevante literatuur verbind is. Dit het duidelik geword dat die gebruik van die model waardevol is in die terapeutiese sowel as die forensiese konteks. Die respondent

het die model as 'n belangrike en waardevolle deel van die forensiese proses beskryf omdat dit 'n holistiese beeld/oorsig van die kind in konteks bied. Die sterk- en swakpunte van die model as 'n pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument is ook ondersoek en die respondente het praktiese aanbevelings gemaak om die gebruik van die model as siftingsinstrument te optimaliseer. Verder is 'n gevallestudie ook gebruik om die nut en bruikbaarheid van die model as pre-forensiese siftingsinstrument te evalueer.

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## **FOREWORD**

This article format has been chosen in accordance with regulations A.7.2.3 as stipulated in the yearbook of the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus, 2011) for the degree MSW: Forensic Practice. This article will comply with the requirements of CARSA.

This article counts 60 credits out of a total of 188 credits of the MSW in Forensic Practice.

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## INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

CARSA is a national journal that promotes academic and professional discourse amongst professionals involved in child-care work in South Africa. It publishes high quality, peer-evaluated, applied, multidisciplinary articles focusing on the theoretical, empirical and methodological issues related to child abuse in the light of the current political, cultural and intellectual topics in South Africa. Authors of articles submitted for review will remain anonymous. The comments of the reviewers and peer evaluators should be constructive and helpful and designed to aid the authors to produce articles that can be published. The authors may then use these comments to revise their articles. However, the final decision on whether or not to publish an article rests with the editor. There should be an interval of at least two issues between articles published by the same author.

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The submitted articles should always conform to CARSA's house style. As the journal develops, it is envisaged that it will contain full-length articles, shorter debates, book reviews and software reviews. The following information is provided regarding the length of articles:

- full-length articles should not exceed a word count of 8000 (tables excluded)
- shorter articles (in the form of shorter debates) should not exceed a word count of 3000 (tables excluded)
- book reviews should not exceed a word count of 1000
- software reviews should not exceed a word count of 3000

Tables, figures, illustrations and references are excluded from the word count. Book reviews and software reviews will be initiated by the editor and review editors. They will commission individuals to do the reviews. Prospective authors are expected to abide by language guidelines regarding issues of gender and race and disability.

Empirical research should adhere to acceptable standards of descriptive and inferential statistics and empirical data should be manipulated statistically using an acceptable statistical

program such as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) or SAS. The inferences regarding qualitative analysis should also be accompanied by an explanation of the techniques used or should utilise statistical packages such as SQR.NUD.IST which are recognised for this type of analysis.

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(A) MS Windows, Word (B) WordPerfect (C) Plain ASCII File format.

Figures, maps, and photographs should be submitted on disk in any standard format.

Authors should submit their work to [SAPSAC](#).

Authors who are unable to submit their work electronically should despatch three copies [to the postal address](#). Before submission, articles should have been corrected for errors, edited and should be accurate.

*It is the responsibility of the author that articles should be language and technically edited, before submission.*

## **Style**

Main headings should be typed in upper case and begin at the left margin. No indentation is allowed. Dates should be written as follows: 9 January, 2000. Bold, italics and underscore should be formatted as such in the original document. The recommended style for reference purposes is the abbreviated Harvard technique, for example, "Child abuse is rising (Author 1999:10)" OR "According to Author (1999:10), child abuse is rising". In the case of legal articles, footnotes will be allowed.

To work toward uniformity in the alphabetical bibliography at the end of an article, the following examples of format are given:

### **Books:**

Kuehnle, K. 1996. Assessing allegations of child sexual abuse. Sarasota: Professional Resource Press.

### **Articles:**

Collings, SJ & Payne, MF. 1991. Attribution of causal and moral responsibility to victims of father-daughter incest: an exploratory examination of five factors. *Child Abuse and Neglect* (15)4:513-521.

Where applicable, contributors should indicate sources of funding. It is the duty of the author to clear copyright on empirical, visual or written data. Simultaneous submission to other electronic or printed journals is not allowed.

### **Non-sexist language**

Gender specific nouns and pronouns should not be used to refer to people of both sexes. The guidelines on sexist, racist and other discriminatory language should be observed. The following is intended to assist contributors to refrain from sexist language by suggesting non-sexist alternatives.

**Sexist:** Each respondent was asked whether he wanted to participate. The child should have enough time to familiarise himself with the test.

---

## DECLARATION AND PREFACE

With this declaration I, Minette du Plessis, state that this article entitled "The General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for the young child is my own work. I also declare that all the sources that were used or quoted by me by means of standard referral techniques are indicated and acknowledged.

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**Signature**

---

**Date**

# SECTION 1

## The validity and reliability of the General Child Assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for children three to five years

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### ABSTRACT

This research explored the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as pre-forensic screening instrument for children between the ages 3 -5 years. Seven professionals trained and experienced in the application of the model participated.

Results identified specific limitations that need to be addressed and provided sound evidence of the usefulness of this particular assessment model as well as the need for thorough training and provided clear indications of how model needs to be adjusted to the young child.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Recent epidemiological studies show that child sexual abuse is more frequent than previously thought (O'Donohue, Benuto & Fanetti 2010:148). In 1989 Finkelhor (cited in Vieth 2005:1) found that the median age at the time of abuse was 9.6 years for girls and 9.9 years for boys. Child sexual abuse, however occurs at all ages and some experts contend that the average sexually abused victim is only three years old (Vieth, 2005:1). Such cases often cause frustration within the profession, especially with young children, when sexual abuse is

suspected because of certain behavioural indicators, but substantiating verbalization is lacking.

Data from the National Clearhouse on Child Abuse and Neglect, indicates that the highest substantiation rates for all types of child abuse are from children between the ages of 0 and 6 years. Regarding child sexual abuse, however, the younger the child, the lower the level of substantiated abuse (Vieth, 2005:1).

## **2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In the course of their work psychologists and social workers are confronted with cases involving allegations of sexual abuse of children. Such cases often raise frustration within the profession, especially with reference to young children, where there are suspicions of sexual abuse due to certain behavioural indicators but a lack of substantiating verbalization.

In practice, the psychologist or social worker is faced with the challenging task to conduct a forensic assessment with these young children in order to either corroborate or refute the suspicion of abuse. The challenges of conducting a forensic assessment with children between the ages of three and five years (for the purpose of this study) are multifaceted.

Fouche and Joubert (2008:42) indicate that the phenomenon of sexual abuse is marked by many dynamics, including the disclosure process, which makes working in this field challenging. Fieldman and Crespi (2002:1) state that there is no consensus on the disclosure of sexual abuse. Some researchers regard disclosure of sexual abuse as a distinct event and others refer to it as an evolving process during which the child may recant previous statements. Lamb, Herschkowitz, Orbach and Esplin (2008:233) emphasise that young children are less likely than older children to make allegations of sexual abuse when formally interviewed. Furthermore, the likelihood of disclosure increases with age and decreases when the alleged perpetrator is a close family member, especially when the child is young (Keuhnle & Connell, 2009:309; Lamb et al, 2008:233).

Another challenge is that not all children respond to the initial forensic interviews due to their emotional status, poor mastery of speech or language skills, or their censure (Hewitt, 1999:214). In such cases, a psychosocial assessment of the child would be of great importance as it obtains information about the child's overall cognitive, social, emotional, and speech and language development, attention span, and level of cooperation. In

combination with the child's history this information is then used as background against in which the forensic interviewer takes into account the child's specific needs and challenges to understand what the child is saying (Hewitt, 1999:214).

Hewitt (1999:149) emphasises that young children are embedded in their context and stresses the importance of taking into account their past. Consequently, without a clear history of "the child's development, previous experiences, and exposure to trauma-causing experiences, children's interview information can be misinterpreted" (Hewitt, 1999:149). Laraque, DeMattia and Low (2006:1142) point out that the child's cognitive abilities, development and trauma history play a significant role during the forensic investigation. A child must be assessed in order to determine the child's ability on a mental as well as physical level to be interviewed forensically at the time of presentation (Laraque et al, 2006:1142).

The psychologist or social worker should also be as neutral and objective during the forensic assessment with the child in order to be unbiased and to support the search for alternative explanations for the findings or allegations (Faller, 2007:4-6; Laraque et al, 2006:1142; Poole & Lamb, 1998:106-108). Young children cannot always provide sufficient/adequate information and professionals should not obtain too much information beforehand since that could affect their neutrality.

Dr Renee Potgieter developed the general child assessment model (RP model) specifically to assess different aspects of the child in order to gain a holistic understanding of the child's functioning and experiences. In the course of the assessment, while taking into account the child's age, different aspects of the child are assessed with reference to language development, motor and perceptual development, relationship with significant others in the child's life, perception and experience of the school system, emotional development, possible exposure to trauma, temperament, and emotional and behavioural problems (Du Plessis, 1999: 2-3).

The General Child Assessment is a blind assessment where only the child's name and age are known prior to the assessment in order to maintain objectivity. Potgieter (2002:17) states that if "any indication is given by the child of possible sexual or physical abuse during the first assessment or in cases where feedback from the carer after the assessment indicates possible sexual abuse, a forensic assessment is arranged".

In practice, the researcher receives numerous referrals from social workers for further forensic investigation after the general child assessment has been completed with the child. The initial assessment raised concern regarding possible exposure to sexual abuse by virtue of the verbal and/or non-verbal information provided by the child during the assessment. Therefore the General Child Assessment according to the RP model is used as an instrument for pre-forensic screening, which then serves as a mandate for further forensic investigation or not.

The literature review raised the following research question:

- What is the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument with children 3 to 5 years old?

### **3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic assessment instrument. To achieve the purpose, the objectives of the study were to

- Explore the usefulness of the General Child Assessment model as a pre-forensic assessment instrument
- Explore and describe the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

### **4 THEORETICAL STATEMENT**

In this study, the theoretical statement or assumption was that the RP General Child Assessment Model is a useful pre-forensic screening instrument in children from 3 to 5 years old.

### **5 LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review forms an integral part of the research process, as it can provide a framework to determine the importance of the particular research (Patton 1990:163). Fouche (2005:117) points out that a literature review also acquaints the researcher with existing

knowledge on the subject in order to discuss the proposed study in relation to the current literature.

The literature reviewed provided additional insight into the research question. The researcher reviewed national and international literature on the forensic assessment of children suspected of having been sexually abused. Dr Renee Potgieter's (1993) model of general child assessment (M dissertation) formed a significant part of the literature study in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the development of the model. The literature review included books, journals, dissertations, and the EBSCO Host as well as other Internet websites.

## 6 TERMINOLOGY

### 6.1 Child sexual abuse

There is no consensus on a definition of child sexual abuse. The American Psychological Association (APA) (2012:1) defines child sexual abuse as follows: *“The central characteristic of any abuse is the dominant position of an adult that allows him or her to force or coerce a child into sexual activity. Child sexual abuse may include fondling a child's genitals, masturbation, oral-genital contact, digital penetration, and vaginal and anal intercourse. Child sexual abuse is not solely restricted to physical contact; such abuse could include noncontact abuse, such as exposure, voyeurism, and child pornography. Abuse by peers also occurs.”*

According to the British Psychological Society (2007:7), sexual abuse *“involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative (e.g. rape, buggery or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at or in the production of pornographic materials or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways”*.

Sanders (2006:25) defines child sexual abuse as *“the involvement of of dependant children and adolescents in sexual activities with an adult ort any other person older or bigger where there is a difference in age, size or power in which the child is used as a sexual object for the*

*gratification of the older person's needs or desires and to which the child is unable to give informed consent due to the imbalance of power or any mental or physical disability*".

## **6.2 The young child (3-5 years)**

Piaget classifies the young child with referral to this particular study between the age of 3-5 years as in the preoperational stage of cognitive development, which is marked by rapid growth in representational or symbolic and mental activity. It is also marked as the beginning of the development of logical thinking (Cook & Cook 2009:13).

Children between 3 and 5 years old are in transition, which means that they are in the process of acquiring interviewing skills due to their cognitive as well as language (linguistic) development (Hewitt,1999:149), which has unique challenges with regard to forensic assessments in the field of child sexual abuse.

## **6.3 Pre-forensic screening instrument**

The term "pre-forensic screening" is relatively new in the field of forensic investigations. Hewitt (1999:145) refers to it as the screening of the child's overall development (emotional and cognitive) which may assist the professional to determine each child's unique pattern of growth and to shape the interview according to the child's skill level. The term "pre-forensic screening" may also refer to a developmental, social and behavioural assessment within the context of the extended forensic interview (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson & Orgassa 2001:238, Carnes, Laska & Shadoin 2001:34-35; Hewitt 1999:149).

For the purpose of this study, the pre-screening instrument refers to a specific assessment model in which the young child's development as well as emotional functioning is assessed within the broader context of his/her functioning and to screen for possible exposure to trauma-related experiences, including child sexual abuse.

## **6.4 The General Child Assessment Model**

The General Child Assessment Model is an assessment model that assesses different aspects of the child with reference to language development, motor and perceptual development, relationship with significant others in the child's life, perception and experience of the school system, emotional development, possible exposure to trauma, temperament, as well as emotional and behavioural functioning (Du Plessis 1999:2-3).

The General Child Assessment Model consists of different phases with specific techniques used to optimise the child's ability to provide information about various experiences in various systems in the child's world.

## **7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The term "pre-forensic screening" is new and the use of the model is presently not widely known among psychologists and social workers in South Africa. This fact together with time constraints consequently restricted the researcher to limiting the study to a small group of professionals who had experience in the use of the general child assessment model for pre-screening young children.

## **8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Van Wyk (s.a:4) defines a research design as "the overall plan for connecting the conceptual research problems to the pertinent (and achievable) empirical research. Thus, the research design articulates what data is required, what methods are going to be used to collect and analyse this data, and how all of this is going to answer your research question." The study utilised a qualitative and exploratory paradigm. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006:1), qualitative research allows the researcher "to use multiple methods, to focus on context, is emergent rather than tightly prefigured, and is fundamentally interpretive".

Exploratory research aims to gain insight into a relatively new area of interest (Fouche 2005:106). Davis(2006) states that in the social sciences exploratory research is wedded to the notion of exploration and the researcher as explorer. Stebbins (2001:30) indicates that exploration might be thought of as a perspective, "a state of mind, a special personal orientation" toward approaching and carrying out social inquiry. Exploratory research studies what has not been studied before and attempts to identify new knowledge, new understandings, new meaning as well as to explore factors related to the topic. Exploratory research investigates the phenomenon, variable or population of interest and is regarded as discovery research in which the researcher discovers new meaning and new understanding (Brink & Wood 1998:312).

This study was regarded as exploratory because it explored and emphasised the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for the young

child (3-5 years) as part of a thorough forensic investigation as it is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of forensic investigations.

## **8.1 Participants**

The researcher used psychologists as well as social workers trained in using the General Child Assessment model in order to explore their experiences and perceptions of the usefulness of the assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument. In order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the usefulness of this model within the forensic context, the researcher conducted interviews with Ms Louise Aucamp, trainee of the general child assessment model, and Dr du Plessis, who conducted a study on the validity of this assessment model.

Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select the participants for the semi-structured interviews. Strydom (2005:201) points out that purposive sampling is “based entirely on the judgement of the researcher”, therefore the researcher selected the participants on the basis of their experience in using the General Child Assessment Model with young children. This would provide rich detailed information that could be used to explore the usefulness of this assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

## **8.2 Data collection**

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. Greeff (2005:294) defines semi-structured interviews as “a set of predetermined questions on an interview schedule, but the interviewer is guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it”. The benefit of this form of interview is that it is flexible and allows the researcher to follow up on particular aspects that may emerge during the interviews, which then enables the participant to provide clarification and/or elaboration. The participants were seen as the experts and were allowed “maximum opportunity” to share their insight and experiences (Greeff 2005:296). The researcher used pre-determined questions centred on appropriate content in order to explore and describe the usefulness of this assessment model in the forensic context.

## **8.3 Procedures**

Ms Louise Aucamp, who trains professionals in the General Child Assessment model, and Dr Pieter du Plessis, who conducted a study on the validity of the model, provided the researcher with lists of possible participants in the field of psychology and social work.

The researcher contacted the participants telephonically to request their participation and inform them of the purpose and objectives of the study. Then the researcher arranged tentative dates, times and venues for the interviews.

## 8.4 Data analysis

The researcher combined the data collection and analysis. According to Smit (1998:2), the “overlapping of data collection and analysis improves both the quality of the data collected and the analysis providing that the researcher does not allow initial interpretations to bias further data collection”.

Data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Creswell’s (2003:20) spiral of data analysis. Marshall and Rossman’s process of data analysis was used in combination with Creswell’s method. The qualitative data was analysed according to categories, themes or patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:1).

The emerging themes were coded and correlated with relevant literature. The researcher concluded with a research report “in which you link the gathered data with your findings” (Marshall & Rossman 2006:1; De Vos et al 2005:339).

## 8.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethics deals with matters of right and wrong. *Collins English Dictionary* (1991:533) defines ethics as “a social, religious, or civil code of behaviour considered correct, esp.g that of a particular group, profession, or individual”.

In this study the researcher respected the participants’ right to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and proper feedback on the findings of the study (Du Toit, 2006; Sarantakos 2005:233; De Vos et al 2005:58-66). Informed consent means that the prospective research participants “must be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in research and must give their consent to participate” (Trochim 2006:1). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants and all relevant information regarding the study was given to them in writing.

The identity of the participants was kept anonymous and the researcher took all the necessary steps to ensure confidentiality. Proper feedback regarding the findings of this

study will be given after the study is completed. The findings of this study will be presented in an article format, portraying accuracy and objectivity (De Vos et al 2005:65).

## **9 DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE**

In practice, psychologists and social workers are faced with the daunting task of conducting a forensic assessment with these young children in order to either corroborate or refute the suspected abuse. Conducting a forensic assessment with children between the ages of 3 and 5 years presents multifaceted challenges. A forensic assessment with pre-school children requires that the professional have knowledge of various aspects of the children themselves and the disclosure of abuse, and remain as neutral and objective as possible while conducting the assessment.

Regarding the young child, Hewitt (1999:15) states “the way in which young children perceive, store and express abuse is shaped by their stage of development. It is essential to have a thorough understanding of these shifting stages throughout the pre-school years if we are to effectively assess allegations of abuse.” Thus, knowledge and understanding of the child’s developmental level and the implications for the forensic assessment are paramount before conducting forensic interviews with the child.

Knowledge of the disclosure of sexual abuse is fundamental in forensic investigations. Fouche and Joubert (2008:42) indicate that the phenomenon of sexual abuse is marked by many dynamics, including the disclosure process, which makes working in this field challenging. Fieldman and Crespi (2002:1) point out that there is no consensus on the disclosure of sexual abuse. Some researchers regard disclosure of sexual abuse as a distinct event and others refer to it as an evolving process during which the child may recant previous statements. Lamb, Herschkowitz, Orbach and Esplin (2008:233) emphasise that young children are less likely than older children to make allegations of sexual abuse when formally interviewed. Furthermore, the likelihood of disclosure increases with age and decreases when the alleged perpetrator is a close family member, especially when the child is young (Lamb et. al. 2008:233; Keuhnle & Connell 2009:309).

In order to be unbiased and to support the search for alternative explanations for the findings or allegations, the psychologist or social worker should be as neutral and objective as possible during the forensic assessment (Faller 2007:4-6; Laraque, DeMattia & Low

2006:1142; Poole & Lamb 1998:106-108). Young children cannot always provide sufficient/adequate information, which could jeopardise the professional's objectivity and neutrality, should too much prior information be obtained from the primary caregiver and/or other organisations and professionals involved.

According to the American Professional Society on Abused Children (APSAC) (2002:5), it is acceptable to gather information about the allegations before conducting forensic interviews. Cronch, Viljoen and Hansen (2005:198) point out that although this information could be useful in orientating the interviewer and clarifying the child's information, caution must be taken as it could increase interviewer bias and lead to suggestive and leading questioning. Blind interviewing, however, can lead to higher disclosure rates which could be attributed to increased attentiveness and patience on behalf of the interviewer which increases rapport between the interviewer and the child. It is recommended that interviews should be blind as far as possible as this also leads to higher perceived objectivity in court.

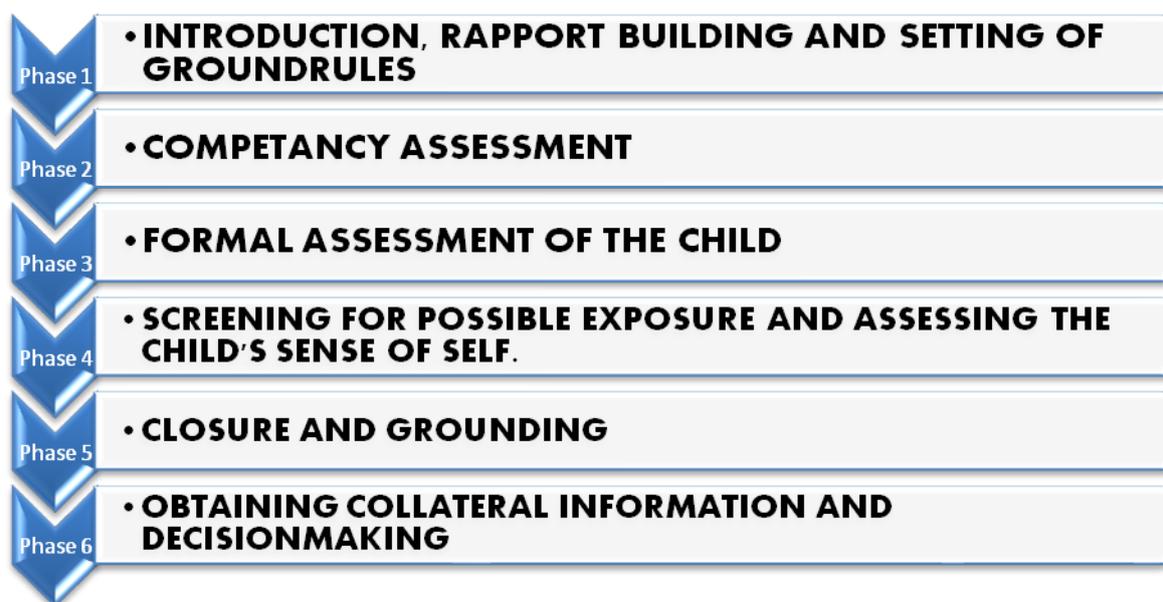
This study focused on child assessment according to the RP general child assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument in order to gain an understanding of and insight into the young child's social, emotional, linguistic as well as cognitive development and its assistance in the disclosure of sexual abuse as well as promoting the role of the professional conducting the forensic investigation.

## **9.1 The general child assessment model**

The general child assessment model was developed specifically to assess different aspects of the child in order to gain a holistic understanding of the child's functioning and experience. In the course of the assessment, while taking into account the child's age, different aspects of the child are assessed with reference to language development, motor and perceptual development, relationship with significant others in the child's life, perception and experience of the school system, emotional development, possible exposure to trauma, temperament, as well as emotional and behavioural functioning (Du Plessis, 1999:2-3). The RP model also creates an opportunity to evaluate/assess the child's attachment (bonding) pattern with the primary caregiver(s) in order to determine the existence or lack of a secure attachment. The type of attachment pattern cannot be determined in the course of the assessment, however, but must be explored and determined by means of further interactional analysis.

The complete assessment model consists of twelve investigative methods that the assessor uses in respect of themes that continually recur, followed by an interview with the parents and/or primary caregiver. The assessments are done with the child from start to finish before any information is collected from other collateral sources with reference to the parents, school etc (Du Plessis 1999:4). The purpose of conducting a “history-free” assessment is to maintain the assessor’s objectivity (Potgieter 1993:73).

**FIGURE 1: THE PHASES OF THE GENERAL CHILD ASSESSMENT MODEL (RP MODEL).**



Phases of the assessment model

The phases of the general child assessment model focus on the less threatening activities for the purpose of building rapport with the child. Rapport-building during assessment and/or interviewing with the child is crucial as it establishes a level of comfort within the child which can increase the likelihood of the child providing abuse-related information at a later stage of the interview, especially in the light of children’s reluctance to disclose abuse information (Tredoux et al 2005:235; Perona, Bottoms & Sorenos 2006:95; Collins, Lincoln & Frank 2002:5; Muller 2001:10). The model consists of six phases which, in turn, involve different steps. The phased model thus proceeds in chronological order during which various techniques are used at particular times (Potgieter, 1993:73).

**Phase 1: Introduction, building rapport, and establishing ground rules**

The general child assessment begins by exploring the child's perception of the purpose for the assessment in order to gain an understanding of the child's perception as well as to evaluate any misperceptions the child might have. The assessor is also given an opportunity to identify and correct any outside parties' influence and/or contamination attempts. After exploring the child's perception of the reason for being assessed, the assessor explains his or her work to the child in a child-friendly and appropriate manner (APSAC 2002:3).

As part of the initial phase of the general child assessment, ground rules are discussed with the child. Ground rules are important in the forensic context (National Children Advocacy Center 2006:8). Pool and Lamb (1998:126) point out that it is "often recommended that the interview begin with a brief discussion of ground rules, including the child's right to clarification". Tredoux et al (2005:235) view the discussion of the ground rules as "critical child's information".

**Phase 2: Competency assessment**

Competency assessment refers to an assessment to determine the child's ability to remember and report events as well as the child's understanding of truth and lie. The competency assessment is important as "it may demonstrate the child's competency and increase the credibility of the child's statement" (Cronch et al 2005:200). Huble, Flood and Hansen (2010:454) hold that with regard to truth/lie discussion with young children, an elaborate discussion is likely to be more helpful in encouraging truthfulness.

In the specific age group (3-5years), the child's understanding of these two concepts is tested through the use of concrete examples. Hewitt (1999:159) stresses that the preschool child can recognize truth or deceit when given a concrete example, but has difficulty explaining abstract ideas of truth and justice. In this regard, APSAC (2002:9) states that interviewers "must rely on age appropriate techniques and use concrete rather than abstract examples in assessing the young child". The moral consequences of lying are also questioned during the testing. It is also important to obtain a verbal agreement from the child to tell the truth throughout the assessment. It should be noted, however, that although the concept of lie (lying) only crystallises at the age of 10 years, exploring the truth-lie concept is still important. At the same time, the role of the forensic assessor nevertheless necessitates approaching the child's information critically despite the agreement to tell the truth.

Attention is also given to the assessment of the young child's ability to provide accurate information about events known to have occurred. Saywitz, Loyn and Goodman (2011:334) emphasise that research has "demonstrated the benefits of practice exercises prior to the substantive portion of the interview to create a template for later questioning patterns".

According to APSAC (2002:9), the child's ability to provide information during free narrative is also an indicator of the child's competency. During the initial phase of the general child assessment (RP) model, the child would be questioned about a neutral memorable event; for example, telling the assessor about everything that happened at school today - since the start of school until coming to the assessor. During the conversational interaction with the child, the assessor can use the free narrative to do a developmental screening with regard to the child's ability to provide narrative accounts, the child's ability to understand and respond to questions as well as the child's language development. Although topics for conversation with very young children are likely more limited, the young child's ability to provide narrative description should be encouraged and assessed (NCAC 2002:6).

The developmental assessment enables the interviewer to undertake the general child assessment as well as later forensic interviewing, using developmentally appropriate language, which enables the interviewer to use words, sentence structure and complex questions that mirror the child's communication style (APSAC 2002:9; Saywitz et al 2011:346).

### **Phase 3: Formal assessment of the child**

Phase 3 is conducted in six steps as follows:

#### ***Step 3.1 Developmental assessment and screening of the child's perceptual abilities and development***

With pre-school children, certain of their cognitive abilities need to be assessed in order to identify aspects that might influence information obtained during the general child assessment with specific reference to abuse-related information.

Carnes, Laska and Shadoin (2006:8) describe the two primary goals of the developmental assessment as "to determine the child's capacity for giving specific credible accounts of events and to begin to learn about the domains that challenge our ability to enter the child's

world (the child's affect/expressive capabilities and the ways in which the child perceives connections between events, people and places)".

The developmental assessment of the child should focus on obtaining information about the following areas: knowledge of basic facts of life (date of birth, age, address); speech and language; basic concepts like first, last, inside, outside (spatial orientation); knowledge of quantities and colours; vocabulary, and knowledge of feelings (Carnes 2001:8; Carnes et al 2006:8; NCAC 2006:8).

The general child assessment can be seen as an important part of the developmental assessment, with specific reference to cognitive screening as the assessor focuses on the assessment of certain cognitive abilities, particularly perceptual abilities (visual discrimination, spatial orientation, visual memory sequencing, etc), body concept, gender role, self-representation skills, and language development. Children's understanding of and ability to identify basic emotions are also assessed by using concrete emotional faces which include the four basic emotional expressions of happy, sad, angry and scared. The children's ability to identify basic emotions can assist them in expressing their own emotions, how they perceive significant individuals in their life, or in the case of disclosure of abuse-related information to assess their emotional experiences of the alleged abuse. Valuable information regarding the child's development may also be obtained by using specific questionnaires, background information about the child's developmental history, relationships with significant others, possible trauma-related behavioural indicators, etcetera with the parent and/or primary caregiver.

### ***Step 3.2 Exploration of significant systems in the child's life (school, peer group interaction and significant others)***

Social assessment in the context of the extended forensic evaluation refers to the exploration of the child's self-understanding, self-esteem, perception of others in his or her environment which includes exploration of the alleged offender(s) as well as non offenders (Carnes et al 2001:238-239, 2006:34).

This step focuses on exploration of the significant systems in the child's world, including the school, peer group, and primary family.

Other significant persons in the child's world can also be further explored in this step. The child's interview consists of various baseline questions. The structured interview with the child focuses on information that is given on a conscious level. This information may be a version of the child's reality (thus the child's experience of reality) and/or a reflection of the child's need. In order to confirm or refute the foregoing, it is essential that the assessor continually weigh up the information obtained during the interview with the child against information that is given by projective techniques - thus at an unconscious level (Potgieter 1993:77-78).

The general child assessment model can be used as an assessment instrument to acquire an in-depth understanding of the child's social interactions, perceptions and emotional experiences of significant individuals.

Using the general child assessment model, the structured interview starts with the supposedly less threatening system, the school, and moves progressively to the family system. Through the use of structured questions the child is encouraged to talk about school, friends and teachers. This is a means of rapport building and learning about the child's language and personal style (Carnes et al 2006:8-9; Carnes et al 2001:242).

Although the general child assessment is history free, it would be of great value to obtain a list of significant people in the child's life (including the name[s] of the alleged perpetrator[s], if known) from the pre-schooler's primary caregiver to explore during the pre-forensic screenings, as the child may not spontaneously mention/bring up the alleged perpetrator during the assessment because of discomfort. It is essential, however, that the primary caregiver simply compile a list of significant individuals with no indication of the person's status as suspect. This is important to promote objectivity throughout the general child assessment. Exploration of all the significant individuals in the child's life and not only the alleged perpetrator promotes objectivity.

During the forensic interview with the young child, the assessor may want to have additional information such as, say, the child's names for the caretakers, body parts, as well as care-giving routines in order to complete a thorough assessment (NCAC 2006:7).

### ***Step 3.3 Incorporation of various projection techniques***

After the baseline questions, various projection techniques are used. The aim of the projection techniques is to obtain information on a sub-conscious level in order to validate and substantiate the information obtained during the baseline questioning. For the purpose of the study, projection techniques refer to the techniques used to obtain information regarding the child's attachment with primary caregivers, interaction with significant others, emotional needs, as well as perception of self and others. The projection techniques create opportunities for the child to express his or her needs, perceptions and experiences. Broschk (2003:7) describes the use of projection techniques as "to project or propel his/her beliefs, needs, desires and attitudes on to paper by means of expression or by telling a story by referring to his/her own reference framework".

In order to validate the absence or presence of a particular theme, Klepsch and Logie (1982:11) emphasises that "since no one technique can adequately assess a child's personality, perception, values and attitudes, a multiple measure approach should be used".

In order to assess continual themes, the following techniques are used: the family projection cards; human figure drawing; the kinetic family drawing; the bird's nest drawing; the Moon trip and three wishes; the island, and the river technique.

### ***Step 3.4 Human Figure Drawing and the Kinetic Family Drawing***

The Human Figure Drawing and the Kinetic Family Drawing are used as projective drawing techniques during the pre-forensic screening. Projective drawing techniques "are based on the premise that children project into their drawings important clinical information that trained clinicians can decipher" (Murrie, Martindale & Epstein 2009:404).

The mandate for using the Draw a Person (DAP) projection technique during the social-emotional assessment is that the child may provide important information regarding their psychosocial adjustment, including their communication of their conflicts, fears, family interactions, needs, attachment and overall emotional functioning (Merrell 1999:187; Brems, 1993).

The use of the kinetic family drawing may assist the interviewer to obtain information of the child's perception and emotional experiences with regard to their primary family. Through the process of drawing the child may provide important information about their perspectives

and experience of family dynamics, emotional relationships, interactions and the child's place in the family (Merrell 1999:191).

When using the child's drawings, the assessor must take care not to interpret but to explore the perception and meaning the child attributes to the specific drawing. In the general child assessment model, exploration of the child's human figure drawing as well as the kinetic family drawing is done with the use of several structured questions after the child has had the opportunity to freely provide information about the particular pictures being drawn.

### ***Step 3.5 Family projection cards***

The family projection cards are incorporated after the exploration of the child's human figure drawing and kinetic family drawing. The family projection cards consist of thirteen black and white A4 cards which portray different family relations and interactions. In order to limit contamination of the child's responses, the cards have minimal detail and portrayal of emotions is also limited (Potgieter 1993:79).

These projection cards create an opportunity for the child to identify with family relations in his/her primary family and assist the professional to obtain information regarding the child's experiences and perception of family relationships.

### ***Step 3.6 Assessment of attachment, unfulfilled needs, and relationships with significant others***

The child's attachment pattern, possible unmet needs and significant relationships in the child's life are also assessed during the pre-forensic screening. Bacon and Richardson (2001:377-378) and Sheller (2007:120) stress the importance of attachment in human development.

Due to the negative impact child sexual abuse has on the child's attachment pattern with primary caregiver(s), it is deemed important to assess the child's projection of their attachment with the primary caregiver(s) as well possible unmet needs. Bacon and Richardson (2001:381) state that attachment theory "conceptualizes child abuse as producing insecure attachments. There is however little evidence so far that sexual abuse can be specifically linked to any one insecure attachment pattern."

Potgieter (1993:82) makes use of the bird's nest drawing in order to assess attachment. The bird's nest visually and emotionally conveys the experience of attachment as well as metaphorical concepts of safety and protection. The bird's nest drawing elicits projective material similar to a family drawing but with more emotional distance, and thus would be less threatening to the client and less likely to mobilize defences (Sheller 2007:120). Caution must be exercised in making definite conclusions about a child's attachment pattern by only using the projection techniques, as the type of attachment pattern can only be substantiated by the use of interactional analysis.

The use of projective questions can also produce some unconscious material that can be used to corroborate or refute hypotheses that are formed during the process of assessment (Cohen 2001:580; Brems 1993:135). Common projective questions include the three wishes and rocket trip to the moon, island technique as well as animal projection technique (Webb 2011:93; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan 2008:87; Cohen 2001:580; Brems 1993:135; Potgieter 1993:82-83). These projective questions are also used in the general child assessment (RP) model.

Potgieter (1993:69) also includes incomplete sentences as part of the general assessment model. Reynolds (2003:162) states that sentence completion "should normally be used as part of a comprehensive battery of tests if the emotional status of the subject is being evaluated. Hypotheses generated by the sentence completion can be explored for support or nonsupport in other more objective data (and vice versa)."

Incomplete sentences can provide valuable information regarding the child's perceptions and experience of various aspects in their world (Potgieter 1993:90). It should be noted, however, that young children might find this projection technique challenging hence it might need to be adjusted to the child's level of understanding and interpreting.

#### ***Phase 4: Screening for possible sexual abuse and assessment of child's self-perception***

This phase consists of the use of self-projection cards (Potgieter 1993:83-84). The twenty-six (26) projection cards depict two children in different situations. The child might identify with one or more of these children, which might provide insightful information about the child's perception of self, the child's needs, temperament, gender role identification as well interaction with significant others.

The self-projection cards can also be used fully as a method of screening with regard to the child's discomfort with sexual stimuli and/or alleged exposure to inappropriate sexual activities and/or stimuli. These projection cards can promote verbal disclosure of alleged sexual abuse. It should be noted, however, that the information obtained through the use of the self-projection cards should not be used in isolation but, if there is any concern over possible exposure to inappropriate sexual activities and/or stimuli, should be confirmed or refuted with a formal forensic interview as well collateral information.

***Phase 5: Closure and grounding***

The aim of this phase is to provide opportunities for the child to give any further information which he or she might think necessary. This phase also gives the professional the opportunity to clarify any aspects with the child, if necessary. The professional also grounds or contains the child especially with regard to trauma-related information that was obtained verbally and/or non-verbally. Pearson and Nolan (1995:iv) describe emotional release as practical processes and/or techniques that "clear" trauma, release muscles, free repressed emotions and therefore energy, and allow the child to move into a happier state. The use of a gross motor activity in the grounding of the child is recommended.

***Phase 6: Obtaining collateral information and decision making***

The final phase of the assessment is to obtain collateral information from the questionnaires given to the child's parent(s) and/or primary caregiver(s). The aim of the questionnaires is to obtain information regarding to the child's developmental history; the child's behaviour and how the primary caregiver responds to the behaviour indicated; the interaction between primary caregiver and child, and the child's emotional wellbeing (Potgieter, 1993:92-93)

According to Webb (2011:65-66), obtaining the child's developmental history serves many purposes as it a) provides a template against which to measure the course of the child's emotional and physical development; b) gives a sense of the family environment into which the child was born and developed; c) provides a sense of the manner in which the primary caregiver(s) convey information regarding the specific child, and d) provides information about the primary caregiver-child interaction and relationship.

A trauma questionnaire is also given to the primary caregiver(s) in order to obtain information about behaviour indicators which could be identified and linked to exposure to abuse-related incidents.

The use of the questionnaires is also important to obtain information which can corroborate or dispute the information obtained during the general child assessment. An interview session with the primary caregiver is recommended in order to clarify certain aspects of the child's information as well as information given through the questionnaires. The foregoing contributes to forming a holistic picture and various hypotheses that should be explored further with forensic interviews. If the child "gives any indication of possible sexual or physical abuse during the first assessment or in cases where feedback from the carer after the assessment indicates possible sexual abuse, a forensic assessment is arranged" (Potgieter 2002:17).

## **9.2 Challenges in assessing the young child**

Assessing young children can be a daunting task due to various developmental challenges. In this regard Walker (2002:156) states that one of the crucial tasks in conducting forensic assessments of children is to determine any factors that could impinge on their ability to comprehend, recall accurately and report past events. In addition, the professional conducting the forensic assessment needs to be well grounded in child development as well as literature on memory and suggestibility, in order to determine these factors (Walker 2002:156).

Laraque, DeMattia and Low (2006:1142) concur and point out that the child's cognitive abilities, development, and trauma history play a significant role during the forensic investigation. A child must be assessed in order to determine the child's ability on a mental as well as physical level to be interviewed forensically at the time of presentation.

Children within the ages 3 to 5 are in transition, which means that they are in the process of acquiring interviewing skills due to their cognitive as well as language (linguistic) development. The fact that the child is in the process of acquiring the skills needs to be taken into account during the forensic interview as the child's skills in communicating as well as understanding the specific questioning differs greatly from older children and adults.

Louw (2005:1) states that, in itself, the child's competency to communicate effectively within the forensic context is not only a function of the child but is also related to the skills of the interviewer – thus necessitating a thorough knowledge base of the child's language development in order to obtain optimal functioning.

Louw (2005:21) describes the young child's vocabulary development as limited, which might influence the child's ability to describe certain events. This might be due to the child's lack of the vocabulary as well as their lack of comprehension of certain words which falls into their developmental level. The danger in this is that the interviewer might use words and terms that the child might not understand and/or fully comprehend. For this reason, it is vital that the interviewer be thoroughly familiar with the relevant child's linguistic development, particularly vocabulary. Young children cannot abstract well and cannot articulate the relationship between various elements (Netthaworn 2009:14; Hewitt 1999:147). Nevertheless, they can start to talk about their abuse experience but their thinking and understanding thereof is different from that of adults (Netthaworn 2009:14; Hewitt 1999:147).

The child in this age group might also leave out important information during the interviewing process due to certain deficiencies in their language development. The child's narrative account of certain events might also be incoherent due to the fact that children first use centring and only later use linking. Young children's descriptions of particular events are also known to provide less detailed information. Consequently, their verbalisation of events could be less specific (Louw, 2005:20).

Young children may also have difficulty retrieving memories on command in a verbal form (Goodman & Melinder 2007:7). The child's ability to retrieve information within the context of the assessment needs to be assessed in order to conduct a child-sensitive forensic interview. Children are also embedded within a specific context, which refers to their background, developmental history and current status. Consequently, without a clear history of the child's development, previous experiences, and exposure to trauma-causing experiences, children's interview information can be misinterpreted (Hewitt 1999:149).

The pre-forensic assessment creates an opportunity for the professional to assess the child in relation to different systems in his world, including exploration of possible exposure to trauma-causing experiences. This information is not only obtained from the child but also

from the primary caregivers through the use of specific questionnaires in order to obtain a full history on the child's development as well as emotional and social functioning. This can assist the interviewer to use the information obtained during the pre-forensic assessment to determine the child's unique growth pattern and allow the interview to be shaped around the child's skill level and emotional functioning.

### 9.3 Pre-forensic screening

The term "pre-forensic assessment" is relatively new in the field of forensic investigation and is referred to as screening and developmental, social and behavioural assessment within the context of the extended forensic interview (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson & Orgassa 2001:238, Carnes, Laska & Shadoin 2001:34-35; Hewitt 1999:149). Hewitt (1999:149) refers to the term "pre-screening" which may assist the professional to determine each child's unique pattern of growth and to shape the interview according to the child's skill level.

In the context of this study, pre-forensic screening means profiling the child's abilities and development in order to allow the forensic interviewer to best adapt the forensic interviews to the child's developmental level. The focus of pre-forensic screening is to obtain an overall understanding of the child's emotional, social, behavioural and developmental functioning. The intention is to obtain a holistic understanding of the child in his context. Information obtained from the pre-forensic screening supports further decisions about further forensic interviews or not.

Hewitt (1999:149) cautions that without a clear understanding of the child's development, the child's interview information can be misinterpreted. Hewitt (1999:150) points out that the following skills emerge in children aged 3 to 5 and need to be pre-screened before a forensic assessment:

- language - vocabulary, articulation
- concepts like *who*, *where*, *when*
- attention span
- representational play
- truth or lie understanding

- real and imaginary thinking
- memory of past events
- use of symbols
- remembering (retrieving) and forgetting concepts.

In the context of forensic investigations, the aim of the pre-forensic screening is to:

- Develop developmental-sensitive interviews with the child in the pre-operational phase
- Understand the limitations of the young child's disclosure information regarding the alleged sexual abuse
- Be able to understand and explain contradictions in the child's disclosure of sexual abuse
- Understand the possible impact of the child's cognitive development on the absence of verbal disclosure of sexual abuse, and to know how to deal with it.

## **10 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

This section discusses the respondents' profile and their perceptions of the use of the assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument

Semi-structured interviews were held with professionals trained in the use of the general child assessment (RP) model. The participants consisted of one play therapist, one psychologist, and five social workers. One social worker only used the model in a therapeutic context and referred cases where any information regarding sexual abuse was obtained or where there was any suspicion of sexual abuse. The other social workers used the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument as part of a thorough forensic investigation. The play therapist used the model in the therapeutic context and also as a screening instrument for alleged sexual abuse. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Afrikaans.

**Question 1: What is your opinion on the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for children 3-5 years?**

The following theme emerged:

*The General Child Assessment Model is a useful screening instrument for children 3-5 years.*

The effective assessment of child sexual abuse begins with a psychological assessment with the child before the formal forensic interviewing (Goodyear-Brown 2011:145). Accordingly, the researcher explored the usefulness of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument with children aged 3-5 years.

One respondent indicated that the model helps the professional to focus the child's attention on specific aspects, which in turn can promote and support the child's memory: "*Die assessering maak dit moontlik om vir die terapeut om sekere vrae te peil en die kind se aandag op spesifiekhede te fokus, wat geheue kan bewerkstellig of aanhelp.*" [The assessment model makes it possible for the therapist to explore certain questions and focus the child's attention on specifics, which can jog or arouse memory.]

The specific nature of the assessment helps to obtain more detailed information from the child which the therapist may explore further: "*Omdat dit op spesifiekheid fokus, help dit ook om meer detail inligting navore te bring wat die terapeut verder kan lei om funnel vrae oor daardie onderwerp te vra om meer inligting in te win.*" [Since it focuses on specifics, it also helps to bring more detail to the fore which can lead the therapist to ask more funnel questions about that topic and so obtain more information.]

Another respondent indicated that the general child assessment supports rapport building with the child in preparation for a forensic interview: "*Dit dien as basis vir opbou van 'n verhouding met kind ter voorbereiding van 'n forensiese onderhoudvoering.*" [It serves as a basis for building a relationship with the child in preparation for a forensic interview.]

With regard to the above, the developmental evaluation as well as the establishment of a precedent for narrative responses helps to set the context of the evaluation as well as gives an opportunity to build rapport with the child (Connell 2009:460).

Another respondent indicated that this model provides information that is important when investigating possible sexual abuse: "*Die algemene kinderassessering bied daardie inligting wat noodsaaklik is om te hê wanneer kind ondersoek word vir 'n moontlike seksuele misdryf.*" [The general child assessment model offers that information that is essential to have when a child is investigated for possible sexual abuse.]

The respondents were of the opinion that the general child assessment model can assist the therapist in obtaining relevant information with regard to the child's experiences and perception of different systems in their world.

Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:3) support the above, stating that the results of the general child assessment give a holistic view of the child's relationships and circumstances within the family.

Another valuable contribution of the general child assessment in terms of a pre-forensic screening instrument is that it can determine whether the child would be able to be interviewed forensically.

This supports Laraque et al's (2006:1142) statement that an assessment of the child is important in order to determine if a child is able to be interviewed at the time of the presentation.

## **Question 2: Can the general child assessment model be considered leading?**

The following theme emerged:

The General Child Assessment Model is not regarded as leading

Suggestive questioning and leading techniques should be avoided during the forensic assessment in order to minimize contamination of the child's information and/or to guide the child to respond in a particular way (Malloy & Quas 2009:273; Laraque et al 2006:1143; Spies 2006:218; Poole & Lamb 1998:109). Due to the emphasis on avoiding leading techniques and questions in the forensic context, the respondents were asked whether they consider the model as leading.

One respondent indicated that the general child assessment model was not leading because she had found from practical experience that children project what is part of their world at the time: "*Die model is nie leidend nie, vanuit praktykervaring sien kinders in die projeksies dit wat deel is van hulle leefwêreld.*" [The model is not leading. In my experience, the children see what is part of their life-world in the projections.]

Another stated with specific reference to the projection cards that it cannot be leading as some children project the healthiest, neutral interactions that form part of their experiences:

*“Die projeksie kaarte is glad nie leidend nie, daar is kinders wat die meeste gesondste neutrale interaksies projekteer want dit is deel van hulle ervaringswêreld.”* [The projection cards are not leading at all. There are children who project the healthiest neutral interactions because that is part of their world.]

Others stated that some children would not disclose information of a sexual nature during the assessment while other children would: *“Sommige kinders sal geen bekentenis maak van ’n seksuele aard tydens kinderassessment nie en ander wel spontaan (al het dit later uitgewys dat kind wel seksueel misbruik was in beide gevalle).”* [Some children will make no acknowledgement of a sexual nature during the child assessment, while others will do so spontaneously (even though it was found later that in both cases the child had, in fact, been sexually abused).]

These responses support Hall, Matthews and Pearce (cited in Faller 2007:14 &15) who found that sexual abuse seems to be associated with a more sexualized view of interpersonal relationships in general. Friedrich and Share (cited in Faller 2007:16) found that sexually abused children provided the largest number of stories that had a sexualized theme in response to a stimuli picture card.

Gully (cited in Faller 2007:15) found that sexually abused children respond ambiguously to stimulus picture with stories that reflect increased negative feelings and also expectations of sexual abuse. Du Plessis (1999:5) states that the methods of the model are theoretically based on the principle that if a person is unexpectedly confronted with something that he interprets as similar to an early stimulus that caused him trauma, he reacts to it before he is capable of rationally censoring his response. Du Plessis emphasises further that the censor mechanism is less developed in children, which therefore results in this response more readily occurring in children. Consequently, the child involved will not project information during the assessment that does not form part of his life-world and experiences.

One respondent was of the opinion that some of the baseline questions might be considered leading as the therapist assumes that a certain interaction between a person and the child takes place: *“Sekere basislyn vrae soos “wat doen jy en pappa saam wat lekker is?” kan moontlik as leidend beskou word, aangesien daar aangeneem word dat die kind iets lekker met die pa doen.”* [Certain baseline questions, like ‘What do you and daddy do together that

is nice?’ could possibly be regarded as leading since that would assume that the child does something nice with daddy.]

Two of the respondents distinguished between the confusion between leading questions and structured questions. One respondent indicated that therapists who work in a more unstructured way might perceive some aspects of the general child assessment model as leading: “*Die wat ongestruktureerd werk, dink struktuur is leidend, wat nie noodwendig so is nie.*” [Those who work in an unstructured way consider structure as leading, which is not necessarily so.]

Another indicated that professionals must distinguish between structured and unstructured before classifying the assessment model as leading: “*’n Mens moet tussen gestruktureerd en ongestruktureerd onderskei voordat mens die model as leidend beskou.*” [One must distinguish between structured and unstructured before regarding the model as leading.]

In regard to the use of semi-structured interviews, Phillips and Goss (2010:426) state that although this provides the interviewer with a set of questions it allows variation from the questions in order to allow more flexibility and to obtain more information on the subject of interest.

Malloy and Quas (2009:273) state that the main limitation of free-recall prompts is that very young children do not provide enough information or information about key details of interest to the interviewer. They add that interviewers must often move to more focused questions in order to target specific areas of importance.

Another respondent indicated that the model is leading in regard to the structure that must be used during the assessment, but not leading with reference to the content.

Saywitz, Lyon and Goodman (2011:340) state that unstructured interviews are ill advised, even when the interviewer is well trained, as it is difficult to abide by best practice recommendations without following a structured or semistructured format.

This is where the baseline questions of this particular model may be helpful in eliciting valuable information regarding the interaction as emotional experience about different systems (school, peer groups and family) through the use of semi-structured questions, as the young child often has difficulty in giving enough information during free call exploration.

**Question 3: What would you regard as the strengths of the model as a pre-screening instrument?**

The following sub themes emerged:

*Sub theme 1: The use of this assessment model promotes objectivity and neutrality*

*Sub theme 2: The use of this model as a pre-forensic screening instrument helps to prepare for a developmental-sensitive forensic interview*

*Sub theme 3: Other strengths with regard to in the use of the General Child Assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument*

The strength of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument was explored. The responses with regard to the strength of the assessment model follow.

*Sub theme 1: The use of this model as a pre-forensic screening instrument promotes objectivity and neutrality*

Malchiodi (2003:169 &170) states that the goal of the forensic assessment is to provide information that is objective, developmentally sensitive, comprehensive and forensically defensible. The forensic investigator also needs to have a neutral stance, refrain from interviewing bias, and be an advocate for facts and a truth seeker (Wakefield 2006:58; Malchiodi 2003:169 &170).

Four of the respondents indicated that the use of this particular assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument can promote objectivity.

Two of the respondents indicated that the model promotes objectivity in the forensic context through the use of a history-free assessment. One stated that the model is holistic in that it focuses on all the important systems in the child's world before the assessor concentrates on a specific person. The investigation process is thus accountable in respect of objectivity: *“Die assesseringsmodel is holisties; dit fokus op alle sisteme voordat daar spesifieke fokus op een spesifieke persoon plaasvind. Die ondersoekproses is verantwoordbaar ten opsigte van objektiwiteit.”* [The model is holistic; it focuses on all systems before honing in on one particular person. The system is accountable when it comes to objectivity.]

According to one respondent, the use of blind assessment promotes objectivity as the assessor is not contaminated by external sources of information prior to the assessment of the child: “*Die gebruik van ’n blinde assessering bevorder objektiwiteit aangesien ’n mens nie gekontamineer word met inligting van eksterne bronne voor die tyd nie.*” [Using a blind assessment promotes objectivity as one is not contaminated by information from outside sources beforehand.]

Another respondent pointed out that the use of the model with specific reference to the history-free assessment prevents bias because the assessor has no preconceived ideas: “*Jy is nie biased nie, jy gaan blind in die assessering, sonder ’n geskiedenis, dit ondersteun jou rol binne die forensiese ondersoek. Jy is dan nie biased nie, jy is objektief en het nie vooropgestelde idees nie.*” [You are not biased because you go into the assessment blindly, without a history, and that supports your role in the forensic investigation. You have no bias then; you are objective and have no preconceived ideas.]

Another respondent stated that the use of the model promotes objectivity and neutrality in that the assessment model is not leading or suggestive in nature, is history free, and focuses on all the systems in the child’s world: “*Dit bevorder objektiwiteit en neutraliteit - dis nie leidend nie en plaas nie suggesties nie. Dit skep ’n holistiese prentjie van die kind se leefwereld, dit kyk na almal.*” [It promotes objectivity and neutrality; is not leading or suggestive. It creates a holistic picture of the child’s life-world; it looks at everyone.]

One respondent also indicated that as a pre-forensic screening instrument the model promotes objectivity because it provides information in order to explore alternative hypotheses. “*Dit bevorder ook objektiwiteit aangesien dit inligting oor almal insamel wat jou kan help om alternatiewe hipoteses te toets.*” [It also promotes objectivity as it collects information about everyone, which can help you with testing alternative hypotheses.]

These findings support Westcott, Davies and Bull (2002:11) who point out that objectivity “is reflected in the way adults explore alternative explanations for a child’s behaviour and statements”.

*Sub theme 2: The use of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument helps to prepare for a developmental-sensitive forensic interview*

Hewitt (1999:163) states that pre-screening of children for their competence in interviewing skills before presenting them with an interviewing format can help to tailor interviews to the child's capability and therefore ensure the most accurate assessment of the child's experiences.

Two of the respondents indicated that the model can assist the assessor to do a developmental-sensitive forensic assessment. One stated that the use of the model helps the assessor to develop a developmental-sensitive interview during the formal forensic assessment: *“Die waarde van die assesseringmodel lê daarin dat dit help om ‘n developmental sensitive onderhoud tydens die forensiese assessering te voer. ’n Mens raak bewus van die kind se vlak van taalontwikkeling en kan dus jou vraagstelling aanpas ’n mens raak bewus van die kinders se aandagspan, hoe hulle ongemak hanteer en hulle algehele vlak van ontwikkeling. Dit kan help om die forensiese assessering aan te pas om die kind te akkommodeer.”* [The value of the model is that it helps to conduct a development-sensitive interview during the forensic investigation. You become aware of the children's level of language development and can adapt your questioning; you become aware of the children's attention span, how they handle discomfort, and their level of development. This helps to adjust the forensic assessment to accommodate the child.]

Maschi, Bradley and Ward (2009:388) support the above when they state that children develop at different rates and stress the importance of a thorough developmental assessment, which includes establishing rapport, assessing the child's expressive and receptive language skills as well as the child's terminology for body parts. This information helps the interviewer to address the child's specific needs in the forensic interview. This concurs with Huble et al (2010:461) who state that a child's verbal skills must be determined in order to use developmental appropriate language.

Another respondent stated that the model assists in screening the child in a developmental-sensitive way: *“Dit help met ‘n ontwikkelings sensitiewe screening sodat ‘n mens weet waartoe die kind instaat is.”* [It helps with a developmental-sensitive screening so that one knows what the child is capable of.]

One of the respondents also indicated that the model can be used to screen the child's competency skills and to assess the child's ability to give information through a free narrative response: *“Die assessering kan gebruik word vir competency testing en die kind se*

*vermoë om inligting deur middel van 'n vrye narratief deur te gee. Dit vorm die basis van 'n forensiese ondersoek.*" [The assessment can be used to test competency and the child's ability to give information by means of a free narrative. This forms the basis of a forensic investigation.]

These findings concur with Hewitt (1999:214) who points out that not all children respond to initial interviews and require additional assessment. A psychosocial assessment focuses on establishing a good data of the status of the child, the child's cognitive, social and emotional development, information on the child's speech and language development, attention span as well as the child's level of co-operation. Hewitt adds further that this information together with a thorough history can help the assessor to develop an individually focused interview and to help understand what the child is saying.

*Sub theme 3: Other strengths with regard to the use of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument*

During exploration of the strengths of the model with regard to a pre-forensic assessment model, various other positive aspects were identified. One respondent stated that the use of the model might elicit a spontaneous disclosure of sexual abuse: *"Dit mag ook spontane bekentenis van seksuele aard by kind ontlok wat help met verdere ondersoekproses."* [It might also elicit a spontaneous disclosure of a sexual nature from the child, which then helps with further investigation.]

Another stated that the model can help the interviewer to screen the child's skills and/or gain an overview of how this might influence the child's disclosure. In addition, it might also give an indication of how the child handles discomfort and whether a forensic assessment can be done or not: *"Dit kan gebruik word om 'n screening te kry van vaardighede en oorsig om te sien hoe dit die kind se verklaring kan beïnvloed, soos bv kind kleure kan onderskei, transitional skills en ook om te bepaal hoe die kind ongemak hanteer en bepaal of mens dan 'n forensies kan doen of nie - dus die kind se hanteringsmeganismes."* [It can be used to obtain a screening of skills and overview to see how this might influence the child's statements, such as whether the child can differentiate colours; transitional skills, and also to observe how the child handles discomfort, and the feasibility of a forensic interview – to see what the child's coping mechanisms are.]

Two of the respondents indicated that the use of the model can be considered as cost effective: *“Dit is koste effektief deurdat kind nie vir herhaalde sessies gebring moet word voordat daar by gevolgtrekking uitgekom word nie – veral vir ouers van lae-inkomste groepe is dit ’n groot pluspunt. ’n Ongestruktureerde werkswyse kan boonop baie duur wees, waar die kinderassessering meer koste effektief is as gevolg van die gefokusde en gestruktureerde aard van die kinderassessering.”* [It is cost effective because the child does not need to be brought for repeated sessions before a conclusion can be reached. That is a big plus, especially for parents in lower-income groups. In addition, an unstructured approach can be very expensive. The focused and structured nature of the child assessment model thus makes this model more cost effective.]

**Question 4: What would you regard as the limitations of the model as a pre-screening instrument?**

The following theme emerged:

*The model has certain limitations that need to be taken into account when using it as a pre-forensic screening instrument*

The limitations of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument were explored. One of the respondents indicated that she could not identify any limitations with regard to the use of this model as a pre-forensic screening instrument: *“Dis moeilik, ek kan niks negatiefs in die kinderassessering vind nie.”* [It is difficult. I cannot find anything negative in the child assessment model.]

Three of the respondents pointed out that if a professional person makes decisions about further forensic interviews or not on the findings of the general child assessment alone that could be regarded as a weakness. One respondent indicated that a significant limitation of the model is the lack of enough screening techniques for possible abuse: *“Ek dink die kinderassessering faal ons so klein bietjie, kinders wat seksueel misbruik is, val deur die krake omdat daar nie genoeg screeningstegnieke is nie. As dit nie binne die kind se belewenis inval nie, dan val die kind deur die krake.”* [I think the model fails us a little. Children who have been sexually abused fall through the cracks because there are not enough screening techniques. If it does not fall within the child’s experience, then the child falls through the cracks.]

Another stated that the use of just the outcomes of the model alone in deciding on further forensic assessment or not is a major limitation: *“As pre-forensiese instrument wat daarop uit is om te bepaal of daar rede is vir kommer en agv daarvan dan eers ‘n forensiese proses te volg – dit is vir my negatief indien dit as sulks gebruik word, want soms kan daar tydens algemene kinderassessering geen inligting na vore kom wat op kommer dui met betrekking tot seksuele misbruik nie en mag daar dan verkeerdelik geïnterpreteer word dat verdere ondersoek nie nodig is nie”*. [As a pre-forensic instrument that is intended to determine whether there is reason for concern and as a result of that only then to follow a forensic process – that is something negative in my view if that is how it is used because sometimes no information comes out during the assessment that gives cause for concern in regard to sexual abuse. Consequently, it could be wrongly interpreted that no further forensic investigation is necessary.]

In this regard Meyers (cited in Potgieter, 2002:10) states that there are no psychological tests that can tell whether a child was sexually abused. This, then, emphasises the importance of taking all possible information into consideration in order to make a well thought-through decision about the child.

Another respondent indicated that the projection cards could be problematic within the legal system due to the lack of substantiating literature: *“Die gebruik van die projeksiekaarte kan ‘n probleem wees aangesien daar gebreksame literatuur tot foundering van wat gedoen is, bestaan, dus bestaan daar nie literatuur-gefundeerde navorsing oor die projeksie kaarte nie”*. [The use of projection cards can be a problem seeing that there is a lack of literature to confirm what is being done, and there is no supporting research on the projection cards.]

Poole and Lamb (1998:109) maintain that within the forensic context the interviewer should use techniques that have survived empirical scrutiny in laboratory or in field research.

Three of the respondents indicated that the duration of the assessment is not suitable for young children. One respondent stated that the model does not take the child’s age into consideration with regard to the length of the assessment: *“Nuwe navorsing bevestig dat die assesseringsduurte aangepas moet word na gelang van die kind se ouderdom. Die algemene kinderassessering maak nie hiervoor voorsiening nie.”* [Recent research confirms that the length of the child assessment should be adjusted according to the child’s age. The general child assessment model does not make provision for this.]

Another stated that the structure in terms of the length of the assessment could be problematic for the young child, especially in instances where the child is severely traumatized: “*Vir sekere kinders, jong kinders, uiters getraumatiseerde kinders en kinders met spesiale behoeftes gaan die struktuur van die assessering nie werk nie. Twee ure aaneenlopende assessering gaan nie werk nie en moet dit aangepas word.*” [For some children, young children, severely traumatized children, and children with special needs, the structure of the assessment will not work. Two consecutive hours of assessment will not work and this must be adjusted.]

Another respondent indicated that it would be useful to divide the length of the assessment into two or three sessions: “*Twee ure aaneen is te lank vir jong kinders, dit is waardevol om dit eerder op te breek in twee of drie sessies.*” [Two hours is too long for young children, it would be valuable to rather break it up into two or three sessions instead.]

Two of the respondents indicated that some of the techniques as well as questions could be too difficult for the young child to understand: “*Nie al die tegnieke is ouderdomsgepas vir die heel kleintjies nie, want dit is te abstrak vir hulle; dit is dan gevaarlik om op grond daarvan afleidings te maak.*” [Not all the techniques are age suitable for the little ones because they are too abstract for them. It is dangerous to then make assumptions based on them.] Another stated: “*Die vrae is te veel en te ingewikkeld, nie konkreet genoeg vir die kleintjies nie, ‘n mens moet dit aanpas* [There are too many questions and they are too complicated and not concrete enough for the little ones. You have to adapt them.]

### **Question 5: Should the model be used as a pre-forensic screening instrument, as part of the forensic investigation?**

The following theme emerged:

*The general child assessment model should be used as a pre-forensic screening instrument.*

Despite some limitations of the model, all the respondents indicated that the model should be used as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

One respondent stated that it is important to use the model before the formal forensic assessment as it provides important information regarding the child’s relationships and interactions with significant others as well as the child’s level of functioning: “*Dit is vir my noodsaaklik voordat ‘n forensiese ondersoek geloods word aangesien dit belangrike*

*inligting bied met betrekking tot die kinders se verhoudings en interaksies met ander persone in hulle lewe, en inligting bied ten opsigte van die kinders se algemene funksionering.*” [I find the assessment absolutely essential before conducting a forensic investigation because it presents important information in respect of the children’s relationships and interaction with other people in their life, and also information about the children’s general functioning.]

Another respondent indicated that although the use of the model is strongly recommended as a pre-forensic screening instrument, the limitations with regard to the lack of enough screening techniques for sexual abuse need to be taken into consideration: *“Ek dink definitief die kinderassessering moet gebruik word as ‘n pre-forensiese assessering maar mens moet onthou dat daar nie genoeg screeningtegnieke vir misbruik is nie.*” [I definitely think the model must be used as a pre-forensic assessment, but one must remember that there are not enough screening techniques for abuse.]

According to the respondents, professionals need to use this particular model as a pre-forensic screening instrument as it provides a lot of information for the court: *“Dit stel jou in staat om ’n baie volledige forensiese assessering te kan doen veral omdat die hof belang stel in feite.*” [It enables you to make a full forensic assessment, particularly because the court is interested in facts.]

*“Die inligting wat bekom kan word kan verdere inligting wat met forensiese assessering verkry word versterk, of binne konteks plaas of kan dit beter geïnterpreteer word.*” [The information obtained can supplement or reinforce information in the forensic investigation, put it in context, or facilitate better interpretation.]

Furthermore, the use of this assessment model is important in terms of the cognitive screening as it can provide a clear picture of the child’s development in terms of spatial orientation and other important skills necessary for forensic purposes: *“Verder is die assessering ook baie bruikbaar in terme van kognitiewe screening as daar byvoorbeeld later in die forensiese vraelyste kom rondom ruimtelike oriëntering kan die terapeut terugval na die voor-forensies om vas te stel of daardie ontwikkeling reeds by die kind neergelê is.*” [Moreover, the assessment is very useful in terms of cognitive screening if, for example, questions in respect of spatial orientation arise later in the forensic process. The therapist can then refer back to the pre-forensic assessment to see whether that development is already found in the child.]

This study thus recommends the use of the general child assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument. At the same time, however, the strengths as well as limitations of this assessment model with regard to the field of forensic investigations should be kept in mind.

**Question 6: What practical recommendations would you make with reference to the use of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument?**

The following subthemes emerged:

*Subtheme 1: The importance of training in the effective use and interpretation of the assessment model*

*Subtheme 2: The model can aid in decision making during the forensic process*

*Subtheme 3: The need for further research on the particular model*

*Subtheme 4: The need for adaptation of the structure of the model for the young child*

*Subtheme 5: The importance of completing a history-free assessment*

As part of the exploration of the model, the respondents were also asked to make some practical recommendations for its use as a pre-forensic screening instrument. The respondents made the following recommendations:

*Subtheme 1: Training in the effective use and interpretation of the model*

Two of the respondents highlighted the importance of proper training in the use of this assessment model as a pre-forensic instrument. One respondent stated that training in the correct administration of the model and interpretation of the findings is important: “*Die regte opleiding in terme van die afneem van die algemene kinderassessering sowel as die interpretasie van die bevindinge is van groot belang.*” [The right training in conducting the general child assessment as well as the interpretation of the findings is extremely important.]

Another respondent also stressed the importance of experience in the administration of the general child assessment: “*Dit moet slegs gedoen word deur ervare terapeute wat baie assesserings al gedoen het.*” [It must only be done by experienced therapists who have already done many assessments.]

This concurs with Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:5), who emphasise that the competence of

the person using the model has a significant impact on the satisfactory functioning of the model in practice. They add further that the accuracy with which the model functions, depends especially on the methods used to achieve a particular objective as well as the competence of the person using the methods.

This underlines the importance of training in the use of the model.

*Subtheme 2: The model can aid in decision making during the forensic process*

Three of the respondents indicated that this assessment model must be used as part of a forensic investigation and not in isolation to decide whether abuse took place or not. One respondent indicated that the assessment model should not be seen as the only source of information and stressed the importance of collateral information in decision making: *“Die kinderassessering moet nooit gesien word as die enigste bron van inligting en slegs die inligting wat daaruit bekom is/nie bekom is nie, gebruik word om aanbevelings te maak nie sonder om ander kollaterale te konsulteer en ander metodes ook te benut nie, byvoorbeeld ’n IA [Interaksionele Analise]”*. [The child assessment must never be regarded as the only source of information nor should only the information provided by it be used to make recommendations without, for example, consulting other collateral sources and using other methods, such as interactional analysis (IA).]

Another respondent also stressed the importance of collateral sources in the decision whether to conduct a forensic investigation or not: *“’n Mens kan nie net op grond van kinderassessering sê ’n forensies of nie. Ons doen die kinderassessering blind en neem die mediese ondersoek en die ouers se inligting ook in ag. Kontekstuele inligting is baie belangrik.”* [One cannot simply rely on the child assessment to decide on forensic investigation or not. We do the assessment blindly. The medical examination and the parents’ information must also be taken into account. Contextual information is extremely important.]

The third respondent indicated that the reason the child might not project or disclose any abuse-related information might be due to the fact that the techniques did not trigger the child’s abuse experience: *“Dit is nie te sê die kind is nie misbruik nie, maar dit beteken net dat dit wat gedoen is nie die kind se misbruik getrigger het nie.”* [That is not to say the child has not been abused. It simply means that what was done did not trigger the child’s abuse.]

Another respondent warned about the incorrect interpretation of the child's information and/or behaviour: “*n Mens moet pasop vir die verkeerde interpretasie van die kind se gedrag en/of inligting.*” [One must be careful about a wrong interpretation of the child's behaviour and/or information.]

A central point that emerged was that the general child assessment must be seen as part of a more comprehensive forensic assessment procedure and cannot be used in isolation to make decisions regarding further investigations or not. The respondents stressed the value of all sources of information.

### *Subtheme 3: The need for further research on the model*

One of the respondents indicated the need for further research with particular reference to the projection cards developed by Dr Potgieter. The respondent stated that there is a vacuum in terms of literature substantiating the use of the projection cards, particularly in terms of the law: “*Die gebrek aan literatuur vir die projeskie kaarte is n groot leemte van die model aangesien dit vir hofdoeleindes nie teoreties gefundeer is nie.*” [The lack of literature on projection cards is a big drawback of the model because it is not theoretically based for court purposes.] This concides with Poole and Lamb (1998:108) who stress the importance of the use of techniques within the forensic context that have survived empirical scrutiny in laboratory or field research. Davidson (2002:463 & 464) stresses that there is an urgent need for empirically validated interviewing techniques that work for all ages. This made further research with regard to the projection cards of this assessment model of the utmost importance.

Another respondent indicated a need for more screening instruments in respect of screening for the presence of sexual abuse: “*Die kinderassessering moet gebruik word, maar aanpassing rondom die seksuele goed, die screening tegnieke moet aangepas word.*” [The child assessment must be used, but adaptations need to made around the sexual things and the screening methods must be adapted.]

### *Subtheme 4: The need for adaptation of the structure of the model for the young child*

In terms of the structure of the general child assessment model, three of the respondents indicated that the length of the assessment model might be problematic for young children.

One respondent stated that the primary focus must be on the child and then on the structure and process that needs to be followed. Moreover, the interviewer should adapt some of the techniques to the child's level: *“Daar moet, in ander woorde, ruimte gelaat word vir buigbaarheid in die proses. Vir klein kinders kan dit beter wees as die assessering oor drie ure op verskillende dae versprei kan word.”* [In other words, allowance must be made for flexibility in the process. For small children, it might be better if the assessment could be spread over three hours on different days.]

Another respondent indicated that a two-hour assessment with the young child can be problematic and that the pre-forensic assessment must be extended: *“Vir die 3-4 jariges is ’n twee-ure aanmekeer assessering moeilik, ’n mens moet dit opbreek in sessies, dit meer ‘extended’ maak.”* [A solid two-hour assessment with 3-4 year-olds is difficult. A person must break it up into sessions; make it more extended.]

One of the respondents stated that the length of this assessment model must be adapted in the case of small children because it is too long: *“Dit moet vir die kleintjies aangepas word want die tydsduur is te lank.”* [It must be adapted for the little ones because it takes too long.]

Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:7) concur with this indicating that the relationship between the assessor and the child is characterised by the fact that the assessor communicates with the child at his/her level. Adaptation of the model in order to address the relevant child's developmental level is therefore extremely important and the child's age must be taken into account.

#### *Subtheme 5 The importance of completing a history-free assessment*

Regarding the use of the model in the forensic context, four of the respondents indicated that a history-free assessment must be done.

According to one respondent, in the case of the small child, the interviewer should nevertheless obtain more information, excluding abuse-related information, from the primary caregiver: *“Daar word aanbeveel dat beperkte inligting in die geval van kleiner kinders verkry word, soos byvoorbeeld name van betekenisvolle sisteme of individue in die kinders se leefwêreld, die kinders se naam vir ’n bepaalde persoon, die kinders se benaming vir hulle genitaliee asook inligting ten opsigte van die kinders se taalontwikkeling.”* [Obtaining

limited information in the case of smaller children is to be recommended, such as the names of significant systems or individuals in the children's life-world, their name for a particular person, what they call their genitals, and information about their language development.]

One respondent stressed the importance of the history-free assessment as follows:

*“Dit moet op ’n objektiewe wyse geskied; dit wil sê, met weinig voorafinligting van die saak.”* [It must be done in an objective way; that is to say, with very little prior information about the case.]

Another respondent stated that a history-free assessment must be completed but stressed the importance of taking contextual information into consideration: *“Ons doen ’n blinde assessering maar ’n mens moet ook kontekstuele inligting in ag neem.”* [We do a ‘blind’ assessment, but a person must also take contextual information into account.]

This supports Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:3), who emphasise that the relevant assessment is done history free, which implies that the assessor completes the assessment without any prior knowledge other than the age and name of the child.

Although the use of a history-free assessment is recommended, it could prove problematic in the case of the young child. Accordingly, it is further recommended that limited information (excluding abuse-related information) should be acquired.

#### **EVALUATION OF THE GENERAL CHILD ASSESSMENT AS PRE-FORENSIC SCREENING INSTRUMENT THROUGH THE USE OF A CASE STUDY**

##### **Case study: Jade**

The minor child aged 3<sup>1/2</sup> years was brought to the paediatrician for a medical examination by her biological mother. This followed after Jade allegedly disclosed information with regard to alleged sexually inappropriate activities between her and a younger boy at the pre-primary school. The paediatrician referred the child to the particular psychologist for a forensic assessment. A history-free assessment was done with Jade, using the general child assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

**Background information**

Jade is the only child born out of the relationship between her biological parents. The family live together and during the day Jade is in a pre-primary school while her parents are at work. During the collateral interview, the mother indicated that she never suspected the minor child to be exposed to any inappropriate sexual activities at school and were surprised by Jades disclosure of sexual interaction with her peer group. The biological mother indicated, however, that Jade did occasionally exhibit some sexual behaviour which she regarded as age appropriate.

No further information with regard to the above mentioned was obtained in order to conduct a history free assessment with Jade. Due to Jade's age, names of significant individuals in her world as well as her own names for her genitals were obtained from her biological mother and father before the formal assessment.

The general child assessment model was used as a pre-forensic screening instrument as part of the forensic process.

**Investigation Process**

The investigation process consisted of three phases:

***Phase 1: Use of the general child assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument***

The undersigned psychologist started the forensic assessment with a pre-forensic assessment using the general child assessment [RP] model. Due to the child's age and developmental level, the assessment was conducted in two sessions of an hour each. Both Jade's biological parents accompanied her to the undersigned psychologist's office. They were given a general child assessment questionnaire to fill in while the psychologist assessed Jade.

In the first session the psychologist concentrated on phase one, which focused on introduction, building rapport and establishing ground rules, as well as phase two, which focused on the competency assessment of the child. Jade's language skills and her self-representational skills were assessed. Jade's ability to relay information by means of a free narrative was also assessed. After completion of these phases, phase 3, which consists of the formal assessment of Jade, started.

During this phase significant systems in Jade's life, referring to the school, peer group and significant others, were explored. During the exploration of the school system Jade projected an ambivalent emotional experience with regard to the school as well as her peer group. No information about alleged sexual abuse was given during the exploration of these systems. The child's interaction and emotional experience of her biological mother and father was also explored during the first session. Jade projected an overall positive emotional experience and interaction with both her biological parents.

Jade's mother accompanied her to the second assessment session as her father was out of town on work-related business. The biological father left four days before Jade's second session. During the second session the psychologist made use of various projective techniques in order to obtain information regarding the child's attachment with her primary care givers, the child's sense of self and others, as well as screening for possible trauma (Potgieter,2002:33). At the beginning of the interview, Jade spontaneously gave information with regard to alleged inappropriate sexual interaction between her and another boy named Sam. This was further explored by the use of line drawing. With regard to the use of line drawings, Faller (2007:34) states that this can be useful during the forensic interview as it avoids challenges that genitals on drawings are leading or could further traumatize the child.

During this exploration Jade verbalized that "*Sam vat met sy hand aan my piepie*" [Sam touches my piepie with his hand]. The minor child indicated that this happened at school, that he allegedly touched her genitals with his hand and that she had her clothes on at the time. She also indicated that the alleged incident happened more than once.

Jade made a spontaneous verbalization with regard to the alleged sexual interaction: "*Sam maak so boggom want hy is stout*" [Sam makes nonsense because he is naughty]. Jade was not able to give any further information about the alleged behaviour in order to understand it further.

After exploration of the above, the psychologist proceeded with the projection techniques. Concerns were raised with regard to the child's attachment pattern with her biological parents as a theme of threat, death and abandonment was projected during the use of the the bird's nest drawing. This was also supported by the child's projections on the self-projection cards (card 8 & 13).

According to Potgieter (1993:86 & 88), the aim of projection cards 8 and 13 is to obtain information of how the children perceive and experience their relationship with the father and mother figure.

During self-projection card 10, which aims to explore the presence of separation anxiety and the parent and child's reaction to the separation anxiety (Potgieter 1993:87), Jade spontaneously verbalized: "*Sy staan by mamma en dan kom die slegte pappa en dan vat hy aan Jade en dan gaan Jade dood.*" [She is standing by her mother and then the bad daddy comes and touches Jade and then Jade dies]. During further exploration of the fore-mentioned, the child verbalized: "*Dis die slegte pappa en dan maak hy ons lyfies elke dag seer.*" [It is the bad daddy and he hurts our bodies every day.] Jade did not want to give any further information with regard to the above.

During self-projection card 12, which aims to obtain information with regard to discipline methods used and the child's reaction to it (Potgieter 1993:87), Jade verbalised: "*Pappa is die slegte, hy maak haar seer ... iemand het aan haar piepie gevat ...dis pappa Raymond wat aan haar piepie vat.*" [Daddy is bad, he hurts her ... someone touched her piepie ... it is daddy Raymond who touches her piepie.] It was significant that although the aim of the projection cards was not to screen for the presence of alleged trauma, Jade projected her own trauma experience through these particular projection cards. This concurs with Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:4 & 7) who state that the particular assessment model draws on the child's memory and authentic emotional experiences and that the child might react to a stimulus which triggers his own trauma experiences.

The child's information regarding the alleged sexual abuse by her biological father was supported by the information projected in cards 20 to 22. These cards aim to screen for possible exposure to sexual trauma. Jade projected on card 20: "*Pappa Raymond praat boggom ... Jade se hart is seer.*" [Daddy Raymond talks nonsense ..... Jade's heart is sore.] Jade showed significant discomfort in that she broke contact with the psychologist and refused to give any further information.

During card 22 Jade verbalised: "*Ek moet pappa se piepie kyk.*" [I must look at daddy's peepee.] The alleged abuse information was further explored with the use of line drawings (no anatomical details) where Jade provided more contextual information as well as sensory information.

A follow-up forensic interview was scheduled during which the abuse-related information was further explored. During the exploration the child provided information regarding alleged digital penetration, oral genital context as well as exploitation by her biological father. Jade was also capable of demonstrating the alleged abuse with neutral dolls (no anatomical details). With reference to dolls, Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat and Everson (1996:1257) state that with the use of anatomically detailed dolls children might provide briefer and less detail, which would suggest that the use of anatomical dolls might tend to inhibit rather than facilitate informativeness. This motivated the psychologist to only use neutral dolls.

After completion of the forensic interview with Jade, collateral information was obtained from her biological parents and the school. It became apparent that the boy Jade had indicated during the initial disclosure was only 2 years old and that they had limited contact in the school situation.

The biological father was referred for a full psychological assessment and the case was reported to the South African Police Services. From the particular case study it was evident that the general child assessment model provided a base from which the child was evaluated holistically in order to explore not only the abuse-related system but also all the relevant systems in the child's life. Due to the holistic nature of this model the child was able to provide alleged abuse-related information in other systems.

## **11 DISCUSSION OF CASE STUDY**

The assessment of young children within the context of forensic investigations is a challenging and daunting task. Hewitt (1999:149) refers to the pre-screening of particular developmental aspects of the child in order to conduct a child-centred forensic interview. Carnes (2006:7 & 8) refers to the developmental, behavioural and social assessment that forms an integral part of the assessment and provides significant information about the child's development in various dimensions in extended forensic interviewing that is valuable for the forensic assessment.

During the interviews, the respondents emphasised the value of the model in both the therapeutic and forensic context. This supported Du Plessis and Potgieter's (1999:3) as well as Potgieter's (1993:45) findings.

In terms of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for young children, the respondents indicated that its use can prepare the children for the forensic interview; obtain information valuable to the forensic interview from the child, and focus the child on particular specifics that can bring particular information to the fore.

All the respondents were of the opinion that the model should be used as a pre-forensic screening instrument. At the same time, it is essential to be aware of the strengths as well as the weaknesses that the model could have in the forensic context. Regarding the leading nature of the model, most of the respondents did not consider the model leading in the forensic context. One respondent was of the opinion, however, that in terms of the baseline questions the model could be regarded as leading. With regard to the leading nature of the model, Du Plessis and Potgieter (1999:7) state that this model is viewed as a specialised interviewing method with the child, and emphasise the avoidance of suggestive and leading questions in order to prevent contamination of information. Du Plessis and Potgieter therefore do not regard the model as leading, but as an attempt to enable the child to provide maximum information on verbal and non-verbal level.

The respondents further stated that training in conducting and interpretation of the model is of the utmost importance. They emphasised the importance of using the model as part of a forensic investigation and strongly discouraged making decisions solely on the basis of the results of the model.

The findings emphasise the adaptation of the assessment structure in the case of young children as well as further research on the projection cards in order to make them literature based.

The use of a history-free assessment promotes objectivity and neutrality when the assessor has limited information about the child and thus provides first-hand information from the child before the adult perspective and information is obtained.

The findings of the study will guide the professional responsible for assessing the sexually abused child in the use of the general child assessment (RP) model as a pre-forensic screening instrument.

## 12 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the usefulness of the general child assessment (RP) model as a pre-forensic screening instrument with children aged 3 to 5 years. This was accomplished by obtaining professionals' experience and perceptions of the usefulness of this assessment model as a pre-forensic screening instrument with children aged between 3 and 5 years.

The study concluded that the professionals clearly regarded the general child assessment (RP) model as a valuable contribution to a thorough forensic investigation as it creates an opportunity to obtain a holistic view of the child in context. It was also concluded that the model must be used in practice as a pre-forensic screening instrument, especially with children aged 3 to 5 years.

The literature review emphasised the value of the model and revealed the need for more extensive research and publications on the value and importance of the use of this model within the forensic context.

The findings and recommendations of the study should assist psychologists, therapists and social workers in the daunting and growing field of sexual abuse of young children. It is further hoped that the findings and recommendations benefit and facilitate the development and effective implementation of legislation to curtail, if not eliminate, this problem in South Africa and elsewhere.

## 13 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that further research be undertaken on the following topics:

- The scientific value and accuracy of the projection cards developed by Dr R Potgieter for the purpose of defending and supporting the use of the model in court by means of research
- The use and extension of the general child assessment (RP) model with specific reference to developing and adding literature-based screening techniques for sexual abuse

- The use of the general child assessment (RP) model as a pre-forensic screening instrument as part of a full forensic investigation process
- The experience and perceptions of professionals trained in the model of its value as a pre-forensic screening instrument

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# **SECTION 2: ADDENDUMS**

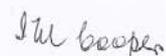
## ADDENDUM A: LANGUAGE EDITING

53 Glover Avenue  
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15 November 2012

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that I have critically and professionally edited Minette Emmerich's master's dissertation, **The General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for the young child.**

  
lauma Madeleine Cooper

192-290-4

## ADDENDUM B: THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINED IN THE GENERAL CHILD ASSESSMENT MODEL

- Question 1:           What is your opinion on the usefulness of the General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for children 3-5 years?
- Question 2:           Can the general child assessment model be considered leading?
- Question 3:           What would you regard as the strengths of the model as a pre-screening instrument?
- Question 4:           The model has certain limitations that need to be taken into account when using it as a pre-forensic screening instrument
- Question 5:           Should the model be used as a pre-forensic screening instrument, as part of the forensic investigation?
- Question 6:           What practical recommendations would you make with reference to the use of the model as a pre-forensic screening instrument?

## ADDENDUM C: DECLARATION AND PREFACE

### DECLARATION AND PREFACE

With this declaration I, Minette du Plessis, state that this article entitled "The General Child Assessment Model as a pre-forensic screening instrument for the young child" is my own work. I also declare that all the sources that were used or quoted by me by means of standard referral techniques are indicated and acknowledged.



Signature



Date