The assessment of drawings from children who have been maltreated: a systematic review

Veltman M W, Browne K D

Authors' objectives
To ascertain whether the drawings from maltreated children would be able to provide unique identifiers of the maltreatment suffered.

Searching
MEDLINE (from 1966 to 1999) and PsycLIT (from 1887 to 1999) were searched using the terms documented in the report. A personal bibliography was also handsearched for further studies. Only English language publications were considered.

Study selection

Study designs of evaluations included in the review
All study designs were included, although studies reliant on self-report of maltreatment or abuse were excluded.

Specific interventions included in the review
All types of drawing techniques appear to have been eligible for inclusion. The review included 15 different drawing techniques: Human Figure Drawings, Draw-a-Person, Kinetic Family Drawings, free drawings, House-Tree-Person drawings, Draw-a-Man, Family Drawing, picture of the perpetrator, picture of the inside of your own body, picture of a dream, picture of a self portrait, picture of 'what had happened', Favourite Kind of Day Drawing and Draw-a-Tree.

Reference standard test against which the new test was compared
No specific reference standard was used. Most of the studies used groups of known or alleged victims of abuse and compared their drawings with those from non-abused children, disturbed children, children from violent homes, and children with behavioural or learning difficulties, or with known norms of child development.

Participants included in the review
The participants were maltreated children of school age. The studies included physically and sexually abused and neglected children aged up to 20 years.

Outcomes assessed in the review
All outcomes appear to have been eligible for the review. Most of the studies assessed the ability of the particular drawing test to discriminate between maltreated and non-maltreated children.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors did not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
The data were extracted by one author and checked by a second.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
A narrative synthesis of the studies was undertaken.
How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies in terms of drawing technique, scoring mechanism and sample groups, were highlighted within the report.

Results of the review
Twenty-three studies were included: 18 case-control studies (2,456 participants), four case series (198 participants) and one case report (1 participant).

Fourteen studies used drawing techniques to assess child sexual maltreatment. Several of the studies advised caution when using drawings in this context due to the potential for false-positives and false-negatives. There was, however, some evidence that children who spontaneously produce drawings containing genitalia might need further investigation.

Ten studies were concerned with physical maltreatment and some statistically significant differences were found between maltreated and control participants. It was found that physically abused children were more likely to distort the bodies they draw, show a lack of detail, have poor body image and sexual identification, and include more traumatic indicators, more aggression and more inclement weather.

Only three studies overall found no significant differences at all between the maltreated and control groups.

Authors' conclusions
The evidence as to the value of children's drawings for the identification of possible maltreatment was deemed to be inconclusive. However, drawings were found to be useful in easing recall of important events and in 'breaking the ice' between a child and a professional.

CRD commentary
This review had broadly defined inclusion criteria for the participants, study design and outcomes. Any drawing technique that was used in the assessment of maltreated children was eligible for inclusion in the review; only one technique had been specifically designed for the identification of physical child maltreatment. No reference standard was available but the status of the children had, in most cases, already been determined through clinical investigation. A limited range of information sources was searched and only material published in English was eligible for inclusion, thus research may have been missed. The validity of the studies was not formally assessed. Two reviewers were involved in the data extraction process, which helps to minimise bias.

The studies were outlined in tabular format and, given the obvious heterogeneity between them, the narrative summary appears to have been appropriate. The authors appropriately cautioned the use and interpretation of drawing techniques in the assessment of maltreated children given the limitations in the evidence.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors stated that caution should be exercised in the use and interpretation of children's drawings.

Research: The authors stated that further large-scale controlled studies may be necessary to indicate whether drawings have a real use in the identification of child maltreatment.

Bibliographic details

Indexing Status
Subject indexing assigned by CRD
MeSH
Art Therapy; Child Abuse /diagnosis

AccessionNumber
12002006322

Date bibliographic record published
30/11/2004

Date abstract record published
30/11/2004

Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.