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I20 Fantasy-Reality Confusion: Normal Development or Mental Illness? The Case of the “Slender Man Stabbing”

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have gained knowledge of a criminal case involving juveniles accused of attempted murder that features several forensic mental health elements. Furthermore, attendees will understand the difference between normal developmentally appropriate fantasy and impaired reality-testing, as well as the epidemiology of childhood psychiatric illness that may present with delusions.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by: (1) presenting a review of the literature regarding the ability to discern reality from fantasy in the course of normal childhood development; and, (2) examining childhood psychiatric illness associated with delusions. These concepts will be related to a nationally known criminal case by exploring relevant forensic mental health issues, such as determinations for juvenile offenders to be tried as adults as well as defense strategies (e.g., the insanity defense and mitigation).

On a Saturday morning in May, 2014, three 12-year-old girls were playing hide-and-seek in a forested park. By the afternoon, one of the girls would be fighting for her life in emergency surgery. A bicyclist had discovered her after she crawled through the forest, having been stabbed 19 times, allegedly by her two playmates. The two girls were arrested the same day, walking near an interstate and carrying bags packed with food, water, and other items, including a bloody kitchen knife. Reportedly, they were on their way to find the mythical mansion of “The Slender Man,” a fictional character invented on the internet in 2009. The preteen girls allegedly attempted to murder their friend to prove their loyalty to Slender Man, so as to become his servants and be imbued with supernatural powers. The girls were charged with first-degree attempted murder, which in their state triggers an automatic trial in adult court for any person older than ten years of age.

There are myriad theoretical- and research-based models for normal cognitive development. One of the most prominent of these is Piaget’s schema-based cognitive development theory. Cognitive development is the construct used to understand the developing child’s ability to differentiate reality from fantasy. Recent research suggests that differentiation between fantasy and reality occurs incrementally, at varying rates based on many factors, and begins at an age much younger than commonly believed. This normal development is in contrast to abnormal psychiatric presentations in children, such as the exceedingly rare childhood-onset schizophrenia, which in pre-adolescents has a prevalence of less than 1 case per 10,000.

A sophisticated understanding of and the ability to discern between developmentally normal fantasy and pathologically impaired reality-testing in children is critical in cases such as the one discussed. For the forensic mental health professional, these concepts are relevant to a range of legal issues, including the determination of criminal culpability and mitigating factors. Moreover, the research findings disrupt several commonly held beliefs among lay people as well as professionals. Given the above, the need for experts in childhood development to be involved in such cases cannot be overstated.

Juvenile, Murder, Mental Health