

Are Children's UFO Experiences Valid ?

By Per Andersen

Analysis shows that children are especially subject to the phenomenon 'false memory'. This is of decisive importance in the evaluation of children's UFO sightings.

We all know it, all of a sudden we seem to become forgetful. It can be a name, a phone number or simply something else we can't remember. This lapse of memory is also something that SUFOI comes up against when interviewing UFO witnesses. This is why we put great stress on interviewing witnesses as soon after the event as possible.

Witnesses reports can often be affected by the way we ask the questions. This is called 'leading questions'.

Here we'll take a look at the phenomenon known as 'false memory'. The theory of false memory has been known for decades and can be described as *"remembering complex visual pictures without ever having seen them"*. False memory is not an abnormal psychological phenomenon; it can occur to all of us in one degree or another and is probably more prevalent than we believe.

An example

The New York Times published in 1993 an example of false memory, which involved a four year-old child. The example is rather interesting, not only with reference to children as UFO witnesses, but also in connection with children's statements or assertions in general.

The child in question was asked once a week through a period of 11 weeks about the following fictitious story: *"You have been at the hospital because you have had your finger caught in a mouse trap. Did this ever happen to you."*

In the beginning the answers develop as follows.

First week: *"No I've never been to the hospital."*

Second week: *"Yes i cried."*

Third week: *"Yes my mother took me to the hospital."*

Fourth week: *"Yes"* (as he was pointing to his finger).

This continued until the 11th week when he answered:

"Yes. My father, mother and brother took me to the hospital in our car. At the hospital I got a little bandage and it was right here" (as he was pointing to his index finger).

Then the interviewer asked the boy how it had happened. The boy answered:

"I looked and then I didn't see what I had done and then somehow it got in... the mouse trap was in our house because there was a mouse in the house... the mouse trap was in the cellar next to the fire wood... I played a game

called operation and I went down to the cellar and said to dad 'I want lunch' and then it come in the mouse trap... my dad was in the cellar to pick up the wood... [my brother] pushed me into the mouse trap... it happened yesterday...the mouse was in the house yesterday...I got my finger in it yesterday and was at the hospital yesterday."

The consequences

The story above shows very clearly that you have to be especially careful with the phenomenon 'false memory' concerning the testimonies of children. This also applies for children who believe they have seen UFO's. SUFOI regularly gets requests involving children's sightings, so it has definite relevance to our work.

With children's sightings as with other sightings it is a rule rather than exception that SUFOI doesn't get to interview the child till after a period of time, in which the child has been exposed to influence from the parents and other people in the circle of acquaintances.

In cases with minors is it hard to exclude the possibility that the child could have been under influence which led to 'false memory'. Perhaps not in the same degree as in the case mentioned above but still enough so that it cannot be taken for face value.

The question is therefore whether SUFOI and other UFO organisations shouldn't overlook the UFO sightings coming from children? A fixed age limit is not easy to define but should not stop us from trying to bring in such a principle.

SUFOI will discuss this question in the time to come and would like to hear readers' opinions on the subject.

'False memory' in children also put the light on something else, namely in the cases where testimony from minors lead to convictions for incest. The children are being questioned and examined by educationalists and psychologists - intensively over a period of time.