“Draw the drapes when the sun comes in,” read Amelia Bedelia. She looked up. The sun was coming in. Amelia Bedelia looked at the list again. “Draw the drapes? That’s what it says. I’m not much of a hand at drawing, but I’ll try.” So Amelia Bedelia sat right down and she drew those drapes.

The Amelia Bedelia series have been favorite children’s books for almost forty years. Geared toward children four to eight years old, these books have the good-intentioned maid, Amelia Bedelia, responding literally to work requests by her employers, such as drawing (a picture of) the drapes, dressing the chicken (in clothes), stringing the beans (on a string of thread), and so forth. Younger children love the series so much because silly as she is, Amelia Bedelia thinks like them: literally and concretely.

Cognitively unable to expand their reasoning to incorporate the more general meaning of a word, younger children—like Amelia Bedelia—will often interpret a question or command in the most narrow and literal sense of that word. For instance, when a younger child is asked a question such as “where do you live,” she might very well respond “in an apartment,” as opposed to listing a specific state or street, because that is literally where that child lives. On the other hand, if that same child who lives in an apartment is asked a question with a reference to her living in a house or being at her house, she might very well respond “no” to the entire question, regardless of what else the question asks, because she cannot expand her understanding to include “house” as a general term for place of residence.

These details may seem minute to an adult, but they can be critical in the mind of a child. For any child abuse professional involved in the investigation or prosecution of an allegation of child abuse, understanding basic child development and monitoring word usage and expectations accordingly can make the difference in whether or not the judge and jury view the child as a competent and credible witness.

Child development is a complex topic that cannot be reduced to a two-page article; this “primer” is only an introduction to the subject. Its purpose is to provide a basic overview of the main cognitive and behavioral characteristics seen in the average child by chronological age and to serve as guidelines that can be easily remembered.

Naturally, every child develops at a different pace. Consequently, it is important to remember that while a child may chronologically fit within a certain age category, additional factors need to be considered in determining developmental level, such as the nature of abuse, socio-economic status, cultural issues, mental or emotional delays, and so forth.

**Toddlers (18-36 months)**

Toddlers have a limited vocabulary of 500-3,000 words and are only able to form three to four word sentences. They have no understanding of pronouns (he, she) and only a
basic grasp of prepositions (in, on, off, out, away). Most toddlers can count, but they do so from memory, without a true understanding of what the numbers represent. Cognitively, children in this age range are very egocentric and concrete in their thinking, and believe that adults are omniscient. This means that they view everything from their own perspective, they assume that everyone else sees, acts, and feels the same way they do, and they believe adults already know everything, which precludes (in their mind) the need to explain an event in detail.

As a result, a toddler who is a victim or witness to an event may have a very clear picture of what occurred, as it related to him or her, but may have difficulty expressing thoughts or providing detail, and is completely unable to draw conclusions based on what was witnessed. Nonetheless, toddlers are able to relate their experiences, in detail, when specifically and appropriately questioned.5

Pre-Schoolers (3-6)6
By pre-school age, children have a vocabulary of 13,000-21,000 words, which may at times appear equivalent to an adult level. This is a serious misconception, however, as pre-schoolers often use words without fully understanding their meaning. By this age, children have learned the use of most prepositions (up/down, ahead/behind, beside) and some basic possessive pronouns (mine, his, ours), and have started to master adjectives. But while a pre-schooler may understand both intellectually and linguistically that an adult is bigger than a child, or that the stranger was away from the house, that same child will probably not yet have developed the abstract thinking required to measure and quantify how much bigger or how far away.

Children in this age range continue to be egocentric and concrete in their thinking. Pre-school children are still unable to see things from another’s perspective, and they reason based on specifics that they can visualize and that have importance to them, as opposed to generalities and abstract concepts (i.e. “Mom and Dad” instead of “family” or “gun” instead of “weapon”). When questioned, pre-schoolers can generally express who, what, where, and sometimes how, but not when or how many. They are also able to provide a fair amount of detail about a situation, though children in this age range continue to have trouble with temporal order, and so may appear inconsistent when relating a story simply because they rarely follow a beginning-middle-end approach.

Early Elementary (7-9)7
By early elementary age, children start logical thinking, which means that rather than accepting what they see as true, they begin to apply their personal knowledge and experience to a particular situation to determine whether it makes sense or not.8 Similarly, temporal concepts greatly improve in this age range, as early elementary children start to understand the idea of the passage of time, as well as day, date and time as a concept as opposed to a number.

Children generally master adverbs (before/after; forwards/backwards) during this age. But they are just beginning to understand the difference in articles (“the” as opposed to “a”) and to differentiate between contrast verbs (tell and ask, bring and take, come and go). This is also the age when map drawing skills develop.

In essence, most early elementary aged children have acquired the basic cognitive and linguistic concepts necessary to sufficiently communicate an abusive event and can
emulate adult speech patterns. Therefore, it is easy to forget that children in this age range are still not fully developed cognitively, emotionally, or linguistically.

**Preteens (10-12)**

The preteen years mark the beginning of abstract thinking. Children in this age range learn to extend their reasoning beyond their personal experiences and knowledge and start to view the world outside of an absolute black-white/right-wrong perspective. Interpretative ability develops during the preteen years, as does the ability to recognize cause and effect sequences.

Preteens have a full comprehension of pronouns, including the ability to identify a pronoun placed before a noun (“When he walked into the room, John saw the book”). Preteens are able to answer who, what, where, and when questions, but still may have problems with why questions. Children in this age range also have a basic understanding of the purpose and methodology of the legal system.

But even though abstract thinking generally starts during this age period, preteens are still developing this method of reasoning and are not able to make all intellectual leaps, such as inferring a motive or reasoning hypothetically.

**Teenagers (13+)**

By the time children reach their teenage years, their developmental level is fairly close to that of an adult, though the ability to describe, narrate, and inform about a past event in an adult-satisfactory way is still developing through the late teens. Most teenagers are able to reason hypothetically and to make inferences based on behavior and situations. As a result, teenagers can generally answer “why” questions.

By this age range, children have a full comprehension of passive voice and are starting to use tag questions (“Jane saw you, didn’t she?”), but can still be tripped up by double negatives or long, complex questions.

The difficulty with teenage witnesses is that even though they are functioning almost at an adult cognitive and linguistic level, the teenage years are a time of turbulent emotional development. In addition, teenagers revert to an almost pre-school age type of egocentrism because they are so fully self-absorbed in how everything affects them. They also understand the concepts of guilt and shame, and unfortunately, juries often attribute more responsibility for abuse to older children.

**Conclusion**

The median age of a child sexual abuse victim in criminal court is 13. Nonetheless, child abuse professionals see victims as young as newborns, as well as older victims who have been abused for many years before disclosing. While the majority of children can and do make reliable, credible witnesses, it is unrealistic to expect children to describe their abuse in an adult-like manner when they are not adequately developed either cognitively or linguistically to do so. The responsibility to obtain sufficient evidence to prosecute an allegation of abuse lies with child abuse professionals, not with the child. However, by understanding child development, child abuse professionals can assist children in relating their experiences to the best of their ability, and thereby provide them with a sense of empowerment and closure.
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6 This section is a compilation of information gathered from the following sources: Hewitt, supra note 4; Karen J. Saywitz & Gails S. Goodman, Interviewing Children In and Out of Court, The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment (John Briere et al., eds. 1996); Walker, A Few Facts About Children's Language Skills, supra note 4; Perry & Wrightsman, supra note 4.
7 This section is a compilation of information gathered from the following sources: Hewitt, supra note 4; Perry & Wrightsman, supra note 4; Walker, A Few Facts About Children's Language Skills, supra note 4.
8 Children's perceptions of Santa Claus present a great example of this shift in thinking. Younger children believe there is a Santa because that is what they are told and what they see (in the mall, etc.), so it must be true. Early elementary aged children begin to question the idea of Santa because, through logical thinking, they start to wonder how Santa can really get around the entire world in one night, or how he can carry all those presents in one sled, and so forth.
9 This section is a compilation of information gathered from the following sources: Perry & Wrightsman, supra note 4; Walker, A Few Facts About Children's Language Skills, supra note 4; Debra Whitcomb, Techniques for Improving Children's Testimony (1992).
10 This section is a compilation of information gathered from the following sources: L. Matthew Dugan, III, et al., The Credibility of Children as Witnesses in Simulated Child Sexual Abuse Trial, in Perspectives on Children's Testimony 71 (Stephen Ceci et al. eds., 1989): Perry & Wrightsman, supra note 4; Walker, A Few Facts About Children's Language Skills, supra note 4.