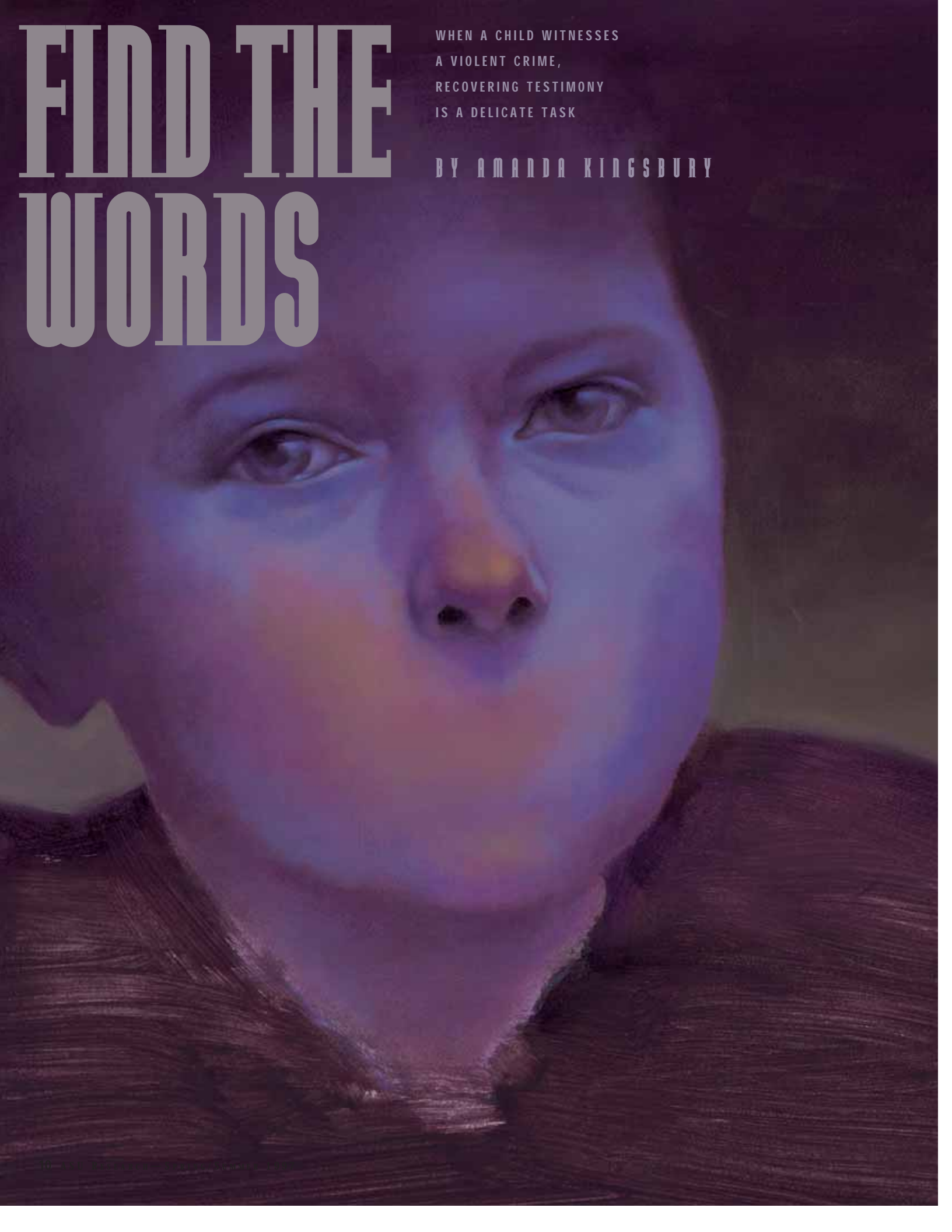


FIND THE WORDS

WHEN A CHILD WITNESSES
A VIOLENT CRIME,
RECOVERING TESTIMONY
IS A DELICATE TASK

BY AMANDA KINGSBURY



"I need to know as very best you can tell me . . . what happened to Jessica?"

Tascha Boychuk spoke gently to the fidgety 6-year-old boy on the overstuffed couch, cushioned snugly between a white teddy bear and a throw pillow. Covering his nose with a tissue, Tony replied matter-of-factly: "Her got murdered."

He was straightforward, almost journalistic, as he described how his 3-year-old sister died: Jessica kept touching the TV, even though Brad, their mother's boyfriend, told her to stop. So Brad got angry and punched her in the stomach. "Eight times right here," Tony said, pretending to jab himself in the gut. "Eight times he punched her in the belly. He's in jail but his name is Brad and he did the same thing to me. . .but I never died."

Boychuk interviewed Tony to get the facts Phoenix detectives needed to investigate their case against Jessica's alleged killer. Since 1994, the ASU assistant nursing professor has conducted interviews with more than 80 children who have witnessed murders. Police use the videotaped interviews as evidence to charge suspects.

Boychuk also interviews children who've been sexually and physically abused. In 11 years, she's talked to almost 1,700 children. The Phoenix Police Department Sex Crimes Division gave her a "Decade of Service" award in 1996.

Her work has helped police solve cases and salvage witnesses. Detectives respect her experience and expertise. In a particular 1995 murder case in Goodyear, Ariz., a man killed his wife while their son possibly watched. After dismembering the woman and disposing of her body (her severed hand was found in a dumpster), the man left the state, taking his son with him. Boychuk and Detective

Frederick Funk flew to the new location to interview the boy.

Funk was happy to let Boychuk do the talking.

"If it were just me going there, I wouldn't have been able to talk to the kid," Funk explains. "I can go in and talk to the bad guy, but when you talk to children, there's a certain type of experience you need to have."

Before being promoted to full-time professor, Boychuk directed forensic services at the Child Advocacy Center in Phoenix. There, she conducted her first interview with a child murder witness.

The 4-year-old boy saw his dad kill his little sister by hitting her over the head, Boychuk says. Then the father allegedly put the boy and dead child in a truck, and drove them to a canyon, where he burned and buried the sister's body. The boy so thoroughly described the events to Boychuk that detectives were able to find the little girl's teeth.

Boychuk remembers being more nervous at that interview than at her first one with a sex abuse victim. "I lacked experience in the area," she says. "And you're never sure how fragile a child might be. I didn't want to add to the trauma."

A search for guidance turned up only two published articles on the subject. Yet the number of children witnessing severe violence has grown dramatically in the last decade, she says. So Boychuk started doing her own research. She became interested in how children recount the events they witness and how they resolve their grief as time passes. She wondered: Did the conventional interview model for child abuse victims also work for kids who witness homicides?

Boychuk's research develops general guidelines for interviewers or investigators who talk to child murder witnesses. Detective Don Newcomer of the Phoenix Police Department says that interviewing children takes special skill and insight.

"Children give stories in fragments," he says. "They have the information; it's just developing a technique or understanding how to open the locked door. Sometimes they'll come right out and tell you, other times it's really frustrating."

Boychuk began her research by documenting interviews with 58 Arizona children, who range in age from 4 to 16. Their young eyes have witnessed unimaginable horrors: a mother's body dismembered, a foster sibling kicked repeatedly down the stairs for not clapping her hands to music. In one of the worst cases, a 6-year-old watched as both his parents were shot and killed.

Boychuk is surprised at what they have seen. "When I first began to conceptualize this research, I thought I'd be working mostly with kids who witnessed gang violence," she says.

"But I've found that over 90 percent of the children have witnessed a homicide within the context of family violence, whether it's the death of a sibling, a parent, or a caretaker."



JOHN C. PHILLIPS PHOTO

Tascha Boychuk

**AT RIGHT IS
AN EXCERPT OF
AN INTERVIEW
TASCHA BOYCHUK
CONDUCTED WITH
A 4-YEAR-OLD
PHOENIX BOY.
THE YOUNGSTER
WITNESSED HIS
FATHER BEAT
HIS MOTHER
TO DEATH.**

Like Tony, most children aloofly and concretely describe the murders they witness. They remember the finest details: the smell of a burning cigarette or scent of the killer's cologne, the sound of running water as the murderer cleans up the body. Boychuk has found that, amazingly, children can recite conversations that occurred prior to the victim's death.

For example, take the case of the Phoenix boy who saw both his parents get shot. He told Boychuk: "My mom said 'Please' to Jesus, and then she said, 'Please, Donnie, I'll give you your money back. Please, Donnie, I'll pay you your money.' And then he said, 'Shut up!' and he killed her."

"I think that's too cognitively complex for children to make up," Boychuk says. "We've known for a while that child sex abuse victims could do that."

But this has implications for those of us who interview child homicide witnesses. If the child hasn't spontaneously offered what was said, then we need to ask what was said."

Boychuk usually interviews children within 48 hours of the murders they witness, the longest span being two weeks after the crime. It is important that interviewers talk to children as soon as possible, she says. First, talking helps begin the healing process for the child. Second, the interviewer can assess whether the child needs immediate help. Most children don't get counseling during the aftermath, Boychuk says. Grieving family and friends often concentrate on funeral arrangements and unintentionally neglect the child.

The **asu** researcher says the "asap Rule" also limits the chance for people to "contaminate" the witness. Even detectives can do more harm than good. They can scare children into clamming up with their cold, direct, factual questions ("Did you see who killed your father?"). Plus, Yes-No questions force children to rely on recognition memory rather than free recall, which is more accurate, Boychuk says.

"Yes-No questioning limits the child with respect to what they need to tell you for their own mental health, and also limits the opportunity to get valuable information," she says.

Interviewers also should consider where they talk to children. In one California case, a psychologist/police consultant took a child witness back to the murder scene, where the blood was still fresh, Boychuk says. Traumatized, the child ended up saying, "I wasn't home." Cold, sterile interrogation rooms also intimidate children, though more detectives are moving to child treatment centers.

Boychuk interviews children in a friendly room at the Child Advocacy Center. She

starts by talking about fun stuff: a pretty bow in a child's hair, a duck-duck-goose game at school. Then she subtly shifts the discussion and says, "I understand something may have happened to your (mother, sister, father)." She uses broad statements to avoid leading the child. As with sexual abuse cases, it is important not to plant ideas.

Statements can easily be tainted. One major rule Boychuk says interviewers should follow: Never assume to know the meaning of verbs used by a child. For example, a child says, "Bill killed mommy." The interviewer, knowing the child's mother died from a gunshot wound, may then say, "Bill shot mommy?" The verb exchange contaminates the statement, limits the narrative and perhaps even confuses the child, Boychuk says. Instead, the interviewer should ask: "How was mommy killed?"

The ideal interview will elicit a narrative account of the event.

For sexual abuse victims, one interview is usually sufficient for investigators to get what they need. But child homicide witnesses, staggered by the trauma, present in haphazard pieces. Boychuk says they might require more and shorter interviews.

"The level of violence is usually so severe, and then there's generally so much chaos that follows as the paramedics arrive and police descend upon the place," she says. "Sometimes, the child is left with the body for a period of time. All that leads to so many

BOYCHUK

Well, I know your name is Tommy.
How old are you?

TOMMY

Four. I want those blocks.

BOYCHUK

Later we can play with the blocks.
Right now, we're going to sit and talk
for a while. So you are four.
You're a big guy, aren't you?

TOMMY

Yeah. What we gonna talk about?

BOYCHUK

Tommy, what I do is talk to boys who
saw something happen to their mommy.
I heard something happened to your
mommy. Tell me about your mommy.

TOMMY

My daddy runned away. He left my mommy.

BOYCHUK

Your daddy ran away. How come?

TOMMY

He hit her in the face and I cried.

BOYCHUK

Where were you when daddy hit mommy
in the face?

TOMMY

In the seat belt. He hit her with his hand
like this. . .and then her had blood on her
face. He smacked her hard.

BOYCHUK

He smacked her hard?

TOMMY

Yeah. We was in my daddy's truck
and he drove away and I was crying.

BOYCHUK

Did mommy say anything?

TOMMY

Mommy said, "I'm sorry," and her hair
was messed up because he punched her
like this! (Tommy punches his teddy bear
in the head with his fist.)

different sounds, smells, thoughts, and images
that the child may be overwhelmed."

Some children obsess about the red
flashing lights and wailing sirens of the police
and ambulance. Interviewers might need to
ask for that information outright, because it
could anchor the child and interfere with the
interview, Boychuk says.

Drawings can sometimes draw out a
description of events. After listening to sparse
information from one boy, Boychuk asked
him to draw his living room, where police
found his mother's body. But the child
insisted he could not draw, so Boychuk had
police fax her a picture of the living room.
She cut out the furniture pieces, gave them
to the boy along with a blank sheet of paper,
and asked him to reconstruct the living room.
He did so perfectly, then began talking about
what he had seen.

Drawings serve two purposes: They let
interviewers gauge the accuracy of a child's
memory. Second, they prompt disclosure. But
drawings should not be used interpretively,
Boychuk says, ("Because the sun is in the
left-hand corner, we assume that means
something"), only as visual aids.

One problem Boychuk
didn't expect to find was that
child homicide witnesses,
like sex abuse victims,
blend incidents.

Sex abuse and domestic
violence tend to be chronic, so children have
trouble separating each event. With sex abuse
victims, interviewers use cue questions: "Tell
me about the last time. Tell me about a time
you remember clearly." Boychuk says inter-
viewers need cue questions to help child
homicide witnesses target a particular
episode: "Tell me about the last time you saw
your mother."

This past year, Boychuk began doing
follow-up interviews with the children in her
sample. She will begin a third round this fall,
and a final round of interviews in 1998,
when she expects to complete her study. Her
follow-up questions gauge the children's
recall ability, determine who and what helped
them the most, analyze their concepts of death,
and see what sort of relationships they have
created with the deceased.

Boychuk is discovering that the children
maintain bonds with the murdered parent,
caretaker, or sibling, a model of grief first
proposed in 1996 by researchers Kass,
Silverman and Nickman in their book,

Continuing Bonds. For example, a 4-year-old
interviewed by Boychuk reported seeing his
dead sister on the playground. Other children
keep meaningful objects, such as clothes or
books that had belonged to the deceased.
Others participate in mourning rituals, such as
visiting the gravesite.

Yet when it comes to grief, Americans
are taught to get over it and move on,
Boychuk says.

"There's little social validity for the child
who maintains connections to the deceased,"
she says. The kid's way of coping may not be
symptomatic of a psychological disorder,
but may in fact be healthy. Mental health
professionals currently develop tie-breaking
rituals for children, when they should perhaps
consider facilitating changed, rather than
severed, relationships, Boychuk says.

Her research on children's mental health
can also help teachers and caretakers.
Caretakers should not be afraid to let the kids
talk about their feelings, Boychuk says.
Teachers should note that the children
might have problems concentrating because
they experience intrusive, vivid flashbacks.
Most kids' academic performance declines
following the incident, she adds.

"Teachers may need to be aware of the
tasks they give these types of kids and the
time frame they allot," Boychuk says.
"The children may need extra time."

Police, often known for their gruff
demeanors, admire the ASU professor's
nurturing way with kids. Sometimes it takes
more than a perfect interview to do the trick.
It takes patience, compassion, and under-
standing. Things that research guidelines
cannot provide.

"Children have to be
extra comfortable
with the individual,
and that happens
with Tascha,"

says Sgt. Carl Richardson
of the Phoenix Police Homicide Division.
"She can take a child into an interview room
and within a couple of minutes, there are no
barriers between them. The child totally
opens up."

Support for Boychuk's work is provided
by the Thunderbird Youth Fund. For more
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