

SUPREME COURT OF CONNECTICUT

State v. John M., 285 Conn. 822

942 A.2d 323 (2008) · No. No. 17398 · Decided March 11, 2008

SUMMARY

The Connecticut Supreme Court affirmed the Appellate Court's judgment upholding the defendant's convictions for sexual assault and risk of injury to a child. The court addressed whether the trial court improperly excluded evidence concerning the alleged coaching of the victim by the defendant's former wife and the former wife's alleged animus toward the defendant. It concluded that the record was inadequate to review the coaching claim and that any evidentiary errors were harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Connecticut
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Palmer, J.; Borden, J.; Norcott, J.; Katz, J.; Vertefeuille, J.
JURISDICTION	Connecticut
DECIDED	March 11, 2008
DOCKET	No. 17398
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The defendant appealed from his criminal convictions, and the Appellate Court rejected his claim that the trial court's exclusion of evidence deprived him of his constitutional right to present a defense. The Supreme Court of Connecticut granted certification limited to whether the evidentiary rulings denied the defendant a fair trial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Evidentiary rulings concerning relevance are reviewed for abuse of discretion. Constitutional evidentiary error is reviewed for harmlessness beyond a reasonable doubt; nonconstitutional evidentiary error is harmless when the appellate court has fair assurance that it did not substantially affect the verdict.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Connecticut Supreme Court opinion; precedential
PARTIES	John M. v. State of Connecticut

TOPICS

evidence

relevance

sixth amendment

harmless error

standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

evidence

criminal procedure

constitutional criminal procedure

appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the exclusion of testimony concerning M.'s alleged history of sexual abuse deprived the defendant of his constitutional right to present a defense.
2. Whether the exclusion of testimony concerning M.'s alleged animus toward the defendant deprived the defendant of a fair trial.
3. Whether any error in excluding either category of evidence was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.

HOLDINGS

1. The record was inadequate to review the defendant's claim because he made no factual proffer detailing M.'s alleged statements concerning her own abuse. Even assuming the claim could be reviewed and that the testimony should have been admitted, any error was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.
2. The court need not decide whether the trial court improperly excluded testimony concerning M.'s belief that the defendant would return to her because any error was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.
3. The constitutional right to present a defense does not entitle a criminal defendant to introduce every item of evidence he wishes; relevant evidence may be introduced subject to ordinary evidentiary rules, and irrelevant evidence may be excluded.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A defendant is, however, bound by the rules of evidence in presenting a defense.” (285 Conn. 822)

“The federal constitution require[s] that criminal defendants be afforded a meaningful opportunity to present a complete defense.” (285 Conn. 822)

“We therefore affirm the judgment of the Appellate Court.” (285 Conn. 822)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The defendant was accused by his daughter, R., of repeated sexual abuse occurring over approximately eight years. R. disclosed the abuse to her mother, M., after the defendant left the family to live with another woman. The defendant denied the allegations and sought to present evidence that M. had coached R. or had a motive to induce her to fabricate the allegations. The trial court excluded testimony concerning M.'s own history of sexual abuse and her belief that the defendant would return to her, while the state presented corroborating testimony and physical and circumstantial evidence.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

After a bench trial, the defendant was convicted of four counts of first-degree sexual assault, three counts of second-degree sexual assault, and two counts of risk of injury to a child. The Appellate Court affirmed, concluding that the trial court did not abuse its discretion by excluding testimony concerning the alleged coaching of the victim by the defendant's former wife and her alleged animus toward the defendant. The Supreme Court affirmed the Appellate Court, holding that the record was inadequate to review the coaching claim and that any evidentiary error on either claim was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. John M., 87 Conn. App. 301, 865 A.2d 450 (2005)
- State v. John M., 273 Conn. 916, 871 A.2d 372 (2005)
- State v. Tutson, 278 Conn. 715, 748-49, 899 A.2d 598 (2006)
- State v. Randolph, 284 Conn. 328, 363, 377, 933 A.2d 1158 (2007)
- People v. Patterson, 192 Ill. 2d 93, 113, 735 N.E.2d 616 (2000)