

# The suggestibility of child witnesses



Karpinski and Scullin's (2009) study tests whether theory of mind and executive functioning affects children's inclination to adopt the view asserted by misleading questions under pressured interviews. In addition, effects of age ranging from three to five as a factor of suggestibility was investigated. The procedures required 80 preschoolers, over four sessions, to witness a video and live show prior to a theory of mind test, performance on executive function tasks and a Video Suggestibility Scale for Children (VSSC) to rank them based on assents to misleading questions (Yield), changing of answer after feedback (Shift) and total affirmative answers given after feedback in Shift (Yield 2). The results showed that children performed better in theory of mind and executive tasks functions with increasing age, making them less suggestible. This suggests that older children, by understanding the theory of mind, comprehending that the interviewer might have an existing false belief, and thus avoids assenting. Through the VSSC, lower Yield 2 scores correlated with poorer executive functioning, which was observed in younger children. Additionally, pressure from the interviewer has shown a higher suggestibility in children. However, the study only studied children from ages three to five, limiting the age group to a smaller range and did not include older children into the study. Moreover, executive functions and theory of mind are not the sole factors of individual differences in children that play a part in suggestibility.

Allwood, C. M., Granhag, P. A., & Jonsson, A. (2006). Child witnesses' metamemory realism. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 47(6), 461-470.

The study conducted was to determine the degree of acceptance of confidence judgments to children's answers regarding a video about a

kidnapping event. This was investigated using a sample of 80 children, from 11 to 12 years old. Four confidence scales, the numeric scale, picture scale, line scale and written scale were used. Frequency judgments of the children were also acquired. Prior training was provided to ensure that the children understood the probability scale. Results were that participants show overconfidence over all four confidence scales after calibration. No significant effect was found whether any of the confidence scales had affected the confidence judgment. However, a significant difference was found by comparing genders, with girls being better calibrated than boys to confidence scales, and the girls had a significantly lower frequency judgment than boys. However, both genders had a higher frequency judgment than the number of questions they actually had answered correctly. Lastly, by comparing the results obtained from adults who watched the same video in another study by Allwood et al. (2003), it showed that children were more overconfident than adults. However, this comparison to another study cannot promise that the conditions undertaken were exactly the same. The study should extend its age range of children to younger children, who are still developing, though it is not known whether they would comprehend the different confidence scales to render it effective to children that age.

Warren, A. R., & McGough, L. S. (1996). Research on children's suggestibility: Implications for the investigative interview. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23(2), 269-303.

This review contains consolidated result from various researches to report the best conditions under which children's recount of experiences would be reliable to use in court. This targets eliminating the possibility of children's

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suggestibility. By using the role of the interviewer, the timing of the interview and the process, it emphasizes on points which interviewers should take note of. Specifically, interviewers should not hold any bias, nor ask misleading questions. This should also be coupled with a non-biased response and building ground rules such as the acceptance of ' unsure' as a response. Repetition of questions are not encouraged, though it may require several sessions before details are noted. As for interviews, delays would result in more errors in recalling, especially in children. Video recorded interviews are welcomed, serving as evidence in court for reliability and a source for children to remember previous interviews. For the interview process, guidelines do include the necessity of building rapport with the child and allow free-recall of events, as they give higher accuracy of memory. One method widely encouraged is the cognitive interview. Though anatomically correct dolls are not endorsed, age-appropriate language can be used to encourage the child to indicate abused body parts. Lastly, the interview should be done in stress free environment. Though these information would greatly help interviewers, the best formula is to allow states to train specialists in interviewing children or building specific protocol for other interviewers to follow.

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Quas, J. A., Goodman, G. S., Ghetti, S. & Redlich, A. D. (2000). Questioning the child witness: What can we conclude from the research thus far? *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 1(3), 223-249.

The study review conducted a summary of researches and their association to investigating child witnesses. First, the articles reported differences in development between younger and older children. It was found that younger children are more suggestible due to poorer recall. However, preschoolers are proficient in script memory, although it is limited to repeated events. Also, though children can recall memory, they have difficulty putting the memory into a logical structure. This is limited by their source memory. The relationship between stress and memory has not been significantly proven, but children who are more distressed may have a lower recall due to a third factor, such as attention. Trauma, especially repeated ones, are not found to hinder memory. Another idea to factor in is general knowledge, where knowledge consistent to what the child knows is encoded in memory easily. Next, suggestibility was discussed. It was revealed that free-recall allows children to give accurate memories, given that no false information was given prior to recall. However, when false information was given repeatedly, children's suggestibility increased. Thirdly, individual differences in children was reviewed. It concluded that other than age, internal characteristics of the child can affect the quality of the information elicited. Suggestibility has been related to dual representation, source memory and imaginativeness of the child. Though much has been concluded from previous studies, there are certain areas which have not been researched or little research have been done on those areas.

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Lyon, T. D., & Saywitz, K. J. (2006). From post-mortem to preventive medicine: Next steps for research on child witness. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(4), 833-861.

The current paper looks into future researches that can be done regarding the suggestibility of child witnesses. It proposes to researchers not to only keep abreast of current researches but also develop new models. The study agrees source monitoring training can be conducted to decrease suggestibility in younger children. Due to reluctance of some children to admit to abuse, research can look into factors affecting such victims and methods to allay the symptoms. Also, researches should encompass older children, other than preschoolers. Moreover, laboratory results should be brought out into the field to test its validity. Through combination of field and laboratory work, methods can be refined to bring about better policies. Additionally, recantation, an important topic in child witnesses, is a subject yet to be researched. Similarly, sequencing of recall in children and the extent of display or description of emotions when interviewed can be researched. A lucrative area can be to discover methods to allow both therapy and legal proceedings to coexist simultaneously without increasing suggestibility. Lastly, the paper suggests that instead of looking to sexual abuse cases, researchers should acknowledge that there are large proportions of non-sexual cases that can be looked into. However, authors should note that these researches must be applied to the field in order to be rendered effective. It requires policymakers and researchers to come together to allow such cooperation. Through such partnerships, interview processes can be improved to reduce suggestibility.