

# To Tell The Truth

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FPG investigator  
Jennifer Schaaf  
looks for factors  
that help predict  
the accuracy  
of children's  
memories

**W**HAT HAPPENS when a defendant's guilt or innocence hinges solely on a child's testimony? Defendants argue that children's memories are too unreliable to be the basis for a verdict. Child

rights advocates counter that since child sex abuse is rarely witnessed and frequently leaves no physical evidence that victim testimony is vital. A study from FPG researcher Jennifer Schaaf provides new insights into understanding when children's memories are more likely to be accurate. Her findings were published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

There are two major concerns about children's ability to report the truth in forensic situations. First, are they able to resist misleading information? And second, how hesitant are they to reveal negative experiences? To better predict which children tend to be vulnerable to these factors, Schaaf examined their relationship to specific traits among children. She studied 42 three-year-old and 40 five-year-old children.



## Susceptibility to being Misled

Repetitive questioning is both a common technique used to elicit information and an unintentional byproduct of interviews by multiple people (e.g., social workers, police, lawyers). Whether used intentionally or not, repetitive questioning poses a challenge. On the one hand, asking about the same alleged event repeatedly may increase the possibility of creating false reports in children who have not suffered abuse. However, not repeating questions may decrease the likelihood that children who have been victims of abuse will provide complete information.

Schaaf's research shows that interviewers may be able to predict which children might be more prone to suggestibility.



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As in previous research, age was a factor in suggestibility. For example, when the event was true, children, regardless of age, agreed after only one or two questions. However, when the event was false, younger children agreed before older children. On average, it took repeating the question three times for younger children and six times for older children, for children to say it happened.

However, it turns out that age alone does not tell the whole story. Schaaf identified several factors that also were significant.

- **Parent/Child Relationships:** Children who felt more secure were more likely to resist false suggestion. This relation was mediated by children's behavior problems. Secure children have more positive thoughts about themselves and those around them. In a secure parent-child relationship children feel safe and secure when the parent is present; turn to the parent during times of distress or fear; and rely on the parent as a "secure base" from which to explore the world.
- **Behavior:** There was a direct link between behavior problems and memory inaccuracies. Children's behavior was determined using the Child Behavior Checklist, a widely used measure in the psychology field. Children with scores that suggested greater behavior difficulties were less likely to resist suggestion. Behavior problems measured by this scale include hyperactivity, aggressiveness, withdrawal, anxiety, and depression.
- **Inhibitory Skills:** Poor inhibition skills may impede a child's ability to deny false events and make a child more prone to suggestibility. These are the skills that, for example, prevent a child from sticking her finger in the frosting of the cake before it has been cut. Self-control is important in a child's ability to size up and monitor a situation before acting. In the case of the study, it relates to the ability to go against what the questioner is saying. Children have to avoid a natural instinct to agree with their conversational partner.

## Hesitant to Discuss Negative Experiences

Studies show that children may be hesitant to discuss true events that are embarrassing or that they think will get themselves or a loved one in trouble. This finding was borne out in Schaaf's research. Children, regardless of age, were less likely to confirm true events when they were negative. Interestingly, the way they responded varied. The older group of children answered "I don't know" to more of the questions about negative true events, while the younger group made up an answer.

Because children often say "I don't know," researchers took a closer look at this response. It turns out that children who used "do not know" more often, provided more accurate information as a whole.

Regarding false events, both age groups were more likely to agree that positive false events were in fact true (i.e. "Did you help your mom with dinner last night?") than negative false events (i.e. "Did someone pull your pants down at the store?"). Children as young as three and five do not want to talk about embarrassing things.

Researchers also were concerned about the effect the gender of the interviewer might have on a child's answers. For adults, evidence suggests that both women and men are more forthright regarding sensitive information with women. One study of children showed boys responded similarly to both men and women, whereas girls provided more information to female interviewers.

Contrary to these previous findings, this study found gender had no effect on the accuracy of children's responses. It did affect how much information children provided. Boys provided more information to male interviewers, but this information was not necessarily true. Girls provided equal amounts of information to both male and female interviewers. But in the most relevant types of events in court cases—false negative events and true negative events—girls and boys provided equally truthful answers to both male and female interviewers.

## Recommendations

The findings suggest that there is no one correct way to interview young children and that ultimately such interviews will need to be individualized based on each child's characteristics. Future research is needed to yield a better understanding of how children should be interviewed differently. ■

### To Learn More

Schaaf, J. M., Alexander, K. W., & Goodman, G. S. (2008). Children's false memory and true disclosure in the face of repeated questions. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 100(3), 157-185.



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