

Children as Witnesses: Remembering, Reporting, and Reliability

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Keywords

children, eyewitness testimony, forensic interviewing, memory, suggestibility

Abstract

Children's ability to provide detailed and accurate testimony about their experiences has been of interest to developmental and applied cognitive scientists for several decades. In this review, we consider how the contributions of both the child and the interviewer must be considered in tandem when evaluating the reliability of the child's testimony. We consider important aspects of children's cognitive and social development that underpin their contributions in forensic interviews as well as interviewer behavior that might enhance or undermine the quality of children's testimony. We outline important emerging (and continuing) issues for researchers working in this area. Researchers around the globe recognize that young people can be reliable witnesses although, as with adults, their ability to do so is influenced by the convergence of a number of different factors, the most important of which are the ways in which they are questioned about their experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When forensic interviewers question children about their experiences, they are faced with myriad challenges, including the need to balance investigative needs against children's developmental capacities and vulnerabilities and evidence-based investigative practice against typical conversational conventions; the often-limited availability of corroborating information, additional witnesses, or hard evidence; and significant delays between the alleged events, the child's disclosure about them, and the scheduling of the interview. At the same time, the interview poses significant challenges for the child because the expectations and dynamics of this unusual interaction stand in stark contrast to those of everyday conversations with adults. Specifically, the adult is naive about what occurred, the child is the expert regarding the event and is thus expected to lead the conversation, the child is interacting with an unfamiliar adult in an unfamiliar environment, and the child is expected to talk about topics that are not typically the focus of conversations. Further, the child often lacks the

requisite understanding and vocabulary yet is expected to provide more detailed descriptions than would be characteristic of their narrative exchanges while not fully recognizing the importance of accuracy and the significant outcomes that depend in part on what they do (or do not) say (Lamb & Brown 2006).

The information gathered in forensic interviews informs decisions about whether criminal charges will be laid and, in some countries, about care and protection (e.g., about custodial placements). In many jurisdictions, the interview is electronically recorded and played in court in lieu of the child testifying in person (although they typically must be available for cross-examination) (Walsh et al. 2016). This makes it imperative that forensic practitioners and judicial actors draw upon the available research and scholarship on children's capacities and vulnerabilities when recalling and reporting past events as well as the interviewing strategies and techniques that may enhance or undermine the reliability of the information elicited.

Scholarship exploring children's eyewitness testimony developed in the wake of highly publicized cases in which teachers and day-care providers were accused of sexually abusing children (Brown & Lamb 2015). Lengthy trials ensued, and verdicts were reached, subsequently challenged, and frequently overturned (Schreiber et al. 2006), motivating developmental scientists to understand better how well children can recall and report events, how potentially contaminating influences can affect their reports, and what techniques might enhance the accuracy of children's eyewitness testimony. The resulting research employed a variety of paradigms, including laboratory- and field-based approaches. Some researchers staged events for the children to experience and filmed them as they occurred, thereby establishing an objective record to verify whether what the children later reported actually happened. In these studies, the researchers could manipulate variables and ascertain which of them influenced children's recall and could assess not just how much the children remembered but also how accurate their memories were (e.g., Brown et al. 2013). Other researchers asked children (or their parents/caregivers) to nominate previously experienced events for their children to talk about and then compared what the children said happened with what the parent or caregiver said. In such studies, the adult's recollection was taken as a proxy for an accurate record, although, of course, adults make mistakes when they remember too (e.g., Friedman et al. 2011). Some studies have taken advantage of naturally occurring events in the child's life (e.g., a medical procedure or a natural disaster) for which there might be some kind of objective record (Fivush et al. 2004), while yet other researchers have examined forensic or investigative interviews with children whose maltreatment was suspected and used factors such as whether there was corroborating evidence (e.g., videotapes, a suspect confession, medical evidence, another witness) as indicators of whether the event likely happened (Lamb et al. 1997, 2003). These studies cannot typically verify the accuracy of specific details reported but can capture the complexity of the contexts in which maltreatment is typically described. Some scholars focused on identifying factors that might undermine the veracity of children's testimony, whereas others examined those that enhanced it. Taken together, the research established an evidence base for those eliciting and evaluating children's eyewitness accounts about how to promote complete and accurate testimony while avoiding strategies that risk compromising children's evidence (Lamb et al. 2018).

Although tremendous strides have been made over the past four decades, we still have much to learn and many questions to answer. Perennial challenges for scholars concern how to ethically approximate the complexity of child maltreatment in conditions that allow identification and exploration of the myriad individual and contextual variables that likely shape what children remember and report. A further dilemma for those seeking to generalize from the research is the extent to which the findings of group-based studies apply to the specific case before them (the so-called G2i problem; Faigman et al. 2014), especially in light of the high degrees of variability

typically observed within and across age groups. Nonetheless, as described in this review, the accumulation of research has supported a number of general principles that may assist interviewers and triers of fact assessing the likely reliability of specific children's evidence. Drawing from developmental and cognitive psychological theories and data, the research reviewed here has been specifically applied to the investigation of child abuse (and predominantly sexual abuse), although the conclusions are relevant for any context where children's accounts form the basis of understanding their development, needs, experiences, or well-being (Malloy & Stolzenberg 2019). For example, how well children can recall and describe events (and interviewing strategies that optimize their capacity) are relevant to criminal contexts beyond child maltreatment (e.g., where children have witnessed a crime or are suspects). Children's reported thoughts, feelings, and memories are relevant in clinical contexts (e.g., developmental, mental, and physical health assessments), educational settings (e.g., assessments of children's recall and comprehension of learning material), family court settings, and research studies.

Children's testimony is the product of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the child and the interviewer (Brown & Lamb 2015). In the following sections, we review individual and age-related characteristics affecting how children remember and report events and then discuss how interviewers profoundly shape what children report through their questioning strategies. An exhaustive explanation and review of each of these factors is beyond the scope of this article, and we encourage interested readers to seek more focused reviews for further details. We finish by highlighting some emerging (and continuing) issues for the field to address.

2. WHAT CHILDREN BRING TO THE INTERVIEW

2.1. Children's Memory Development

At the heart of children's testimonial capacity are memory processes. Thus, to shape our expectations of what a given child might be able to recount about their experience we must take into account the various stages of memory formation—attending to and encoding experience, storing and connecting the information to other knowledge and memories, and retrieving and reporting information—and consider how such processes develop across childhood. Indicators of episodic memory recall (recall about a specific event, in contrast to semantic memory of what an event was about) have been observed in early infancy (Bauer 2014), with the sophistication of what children can recall increasing dramatically across early childhood and beyond (Guo et al. 2024, Reese 2009). Generally speaking, children's memory performance increases with age—older children tend to provide more detailed reports (Brown et al. 2015, Jack et al. 2014) and are less suggestible than younger children (Ceci & Bruck 1995). Similar age differences in accuracy are typically observed when children are prompted to report specific details, but not when children are asked very broad, open-ended questions (Lamb et al. 2018). The improvement in children's memory performance with age likely reflects concomitant developments of children's representational capacity, source monitoring, knowledge, information processing, and strategy use, alongside greater experience in talking about the past with others (Lamb et al. 2018, Slonecker et al. 2023).

2.2. Script Development

During early childhood, children come to develop general event representations or scripts for repeated events (Hudson et al. 1992), which characterize the common elements or framework of such recurring events. Script memories can both help and hinder children's testimony. On the one hand, scripts free up cognitive processing capacity because children do not need to consider all of the elements that, by default, are likely to have happened and instead can focus on recalling what was distinctive or unique. Furthermore, script memory can provide valuable retrieval cues

by prompting children to think about particular (expected or common) elements during a given occurrence. For example, if “birthday cake” is an element of a child’s script for a birthday party, then knowing that a birthday cake was likely present, the child can think about what type of cake it was, which may, in turn, prompt retrieval of other related details. On the other hand, drawing upon script memories may contribute to error in a child’s account if they reconstruct their memory of the event by including an element that is typically a part of the experience but was not on this specific occasion (e.g., the child reports eating birthday cake at the party when in fact the children ate ice cream, and there was no cake).

2.3. Source Monitoring

For many children who have been maltreated, the abuse has occurred on multiple occasions across an extended period of time. Children may therefore rely upon their script representation of abusive incidents when asked about the abuse, reporting a generic account of what typically happened without the details that distinguished particular episodes (Brubacher et al. 2011a, 2013), despite such detail being critical to criminal investigations and prosecutions. Children may struggle to distinguish details that varied across similar events, link them to a particular instance, or blend instances together, leading to inaccuracies with respect to a particular instance, although all reported details may be accurate (Price et al. 2016, Woiwod et al. 2019). Attributing details incorrectly to an episode, or blending elements of different episodes together, likely reflects failures in source monitoring—that is, in the ability to identify where our knowledge came from or how we know what we know (Johnson et al. 1993). Source monitoring improves across childhood (Brubacher et al. 2011b), although adults, too, may sometimes experience source-monitoring difficulties. There is some evidence that asking open-ended questions, explicitly probing the source of children’s knowledge (at least with older children), using children’s own labels to distinguish events, and instructing children to ignore information obtained from other sources all effectively reduce source-monitoring errors (Brubacher et al. 2013, Brubacher et al. 2018, Lindsay & Johnson 1989, Roberts & Powell 2001).

2.4. Knowledge and Memory

Children’s knowledge influences how they interpret or understand the events that happen to and around them and subsequently how those events are integrated into extant knowledge systems and memory networks (Haden 2013). Children’s understanding of an event may also influence how well they recall it—indeed, studies have shown that when children have expertise in a topic, they can outperform adults when recalling information about it (e.g., Bjorklund 1987, Chi 1978) and that when children have prior knowledge about an event, they are better able to recall it later than are children who have less knowledge (McGuigan & Salmon 2004, Sutherland et al. 2003). As discussed above, however, knowledge can be a double-edged sword—children may draw upon script knowledge or use knowledge as a retrieval cue and therefore erroneously report related but not experienced information about a specific incident under investigation (Otgaar et al. 2012).

2.5. Information Processing and Memory

Children’s executive functions, information processing abilities, and processing speed also increase through childhood (McAuley & White 2011, Müller & Kerns 2015), leading to greater efficiency in interpreting questions, searching semantic and episodic memory networks, retrieving the requisite information, and formulating responses. Children become more proficient at spontaneously using effective strategies for learning and retrieval of information through middle childhood, with associated benefits in the amount and accuracy of their recall (Roebbers 2022).

2.6. Language and Memory

Beyond their first words, children rapidly acquire the tools of conversation, increasing their vocabulary and understanding of syntax and grammar. Language development is not the sole province of early childhood, however, with development continuing through middle childhood and well into adolescence (Scaff & Cristia 2024). Researchers have recently highlighted how subtle differences or deficits in language comprehension and use may create ambiguity and diminish the accuracy of children's testimony. For example, children may respond in unexpected ways to indirect questions (e.g., "do you know. . .?" or "do you remember. . .?"), providing ambiguous or unelaborated responses (Evans et al. 2017). They may struggle with the use of pronouns to replace a person's name, especially if other questions are asked in the interim (Ruiz-Earle et al. 2024). They may misunderstand questions or provide ambiguous referents when describing touch (Sullivan et al. 2022b), sexual body parts (Burrows et al. 2017, Szojka et al. 2023), or other information describing the mechanics of the abuse (Sullivan et al. 2022a). They may misinterpret questions using the word "time" (e.g., "tell me about the time when. . .") as requests for temporal information (Friend et al. 2022, McWilliams et al. 2023) and struggle to provide accurate information about temporal aspects of the event (Friedman et al. 2011, Orbach & Lamb 2007).

2.7. Children as Conversational Partners

Children also learn how to engage in conversation with others from the earliest emergence of language. Scaffolded by their more competent (typically adult) conversational partners, children learn how to talk about the past in ways that captivate and inform their listeners. The sociocultural theory of autobiographical memory (Nelson 2014) emphasizes the social function of memory and the importance of early adult-child conversational exchanges in helping children to understand the world around them, narrative conventions, and their connections with others (Salmon & Reese 2016). In addition to aiding children's autobiographical memory development, early parent-child conversations (largely studied by examining the way mothers reminisce about shared events with their child) play a key role in children's cognitive and emotional development (Fivush & Salmon 2023, Garnett et al. 2023). Children's ability to construct a coherent narrative about their experiences affects how well adults are able to understand what occurred on the basis of their testimony and also contributes to the longevity of the memory (Morris et al. 2010). Memory retention is of great importance in the forensic domain given the substantial delays that are common between disclosures, investigative interviews, and court hearings.

Children's social and emotional development also play a role in how well they are able to participate effectively in forensic interviews. As discussed above, the structure and dynamics of forensic interviews are at odds with everyday conversational conventions (Zajac & Brown 2018). On the one hand, older children, perhaps by virtue of their greater conversational experience, may be better equipped to recognize and respond to the expectations of the interviewer. On the other hand, although some children may come to an interview ready and willing to talk at length about what has happened, others may be reluctant or anxious and fail to disclose abuse during the interview (Lamb et al. 2025). Some researchers have proposed that adolescents are often reluctant participants in forensic interviews, particularly when there was no spontaneous disclosure before the interview or the child was viewed by law enforcement as a willing participant in the abuse, as may be the case when youths are trafficked (Nogalska et al. 2023, Quas et al. 2025). Children's emotional reaction to the maltreatment and their skills with emotion regulation and meaning-making may also affect how well they can recount their experiences (Lev-Wiesel et al. 2019, McElvaney 2025).

2.8. Children's Suggestibility

A pressing question for investigators and triers of fact is how likely it is that a child's testimony has been contaminated by suggestive influences. Suggestibility occurs when a child's response to a question is influenced or altered by the style of questioning or pressure (real or implied) to respond in a certain way, or because they have encountered information (accurate or inaccurate) about the event prior to questioning that they have subsequently reported as being part of the initial experience. Suggestibility may reflect social processes (e.g., wanting to be compliant, feeling coerced or bowing to authority, assuming another person knows better) or cognitive pressures (e.g., filling in memory gaps with plausible information encountered after the event). Suggestibility may be limited to children's responding during questioning—in these instances, children may agree with or acquiesce to the suggested information but not alter their memory. Suggestive influences may, however, lead to the original memory being overwritten, with the new or suggested information integrating into the memory and then being reported at a later date, even in the absence of suggestive questioning.

Young children are particularly susceptible to suggestive influences, especially from adults and those they trust, but even older children (and adults) can be swayed by them (Ceci & Bruck 1995, Ceci et al. 2007). The impact of suggestive techniques is greater when there is more than one suggestive influence or factor [e.g., persistent and repeated leading questioning, suggestions that plausible events occurred, provision of motivation to tell (such as "you'll feel better"), encouragement to provide particular responses, reference to other people's accounts (e.g., "Sally said it happened to you, too"), reference to stereotypes (e.g., "the bad man"), and providing inaccurate information or suggestive questioning prior to an interview] (Bruck & Ceci 1999; Garven et al. 2000; Garven et al. 1998; Leichtman & Ceci 1995; Poole & Lindsay 1995, 2001). Children's responding may also be shaped by misleading gestures or the nonverbal cues that accompany questions (Almerigogna et al. 2008, Kirk et al. 2015, Meyer et al. 2023). For example, an interviewer's tone, gesture, and facial expression may convey information about expected responses or selectively reinforce responding (or nonresponding), as might repetition of questions.

Exposure to suggestion can lead children to make false reports of entire events that never occurred (Pezdek & Hodge 1999, Strange et al. 2006), although the majority of the experimental research has focused on how children come to report false details about an event that did actually happen [e.g., reporting forensically relevant (e.g., genital) touch while dressing in a costume with the adult's help and associated nonsexual touching; Brown et al. 2007]. Children may be vulnerable to suggestion even when they are not directly exposed to leading questions. For example, researchers have shown that children who overhear conversations between adults may incorporate the information they heard and present it as if they experienced it directly (for a review, see Principe & London 2022).

Children's reports may comprise both true and false details, and to date the field has yet to provide a sufficiently sensitive and reliable method of distinguishing between the two, despite initial enthusiasm about criterion-based content analysis (Lamb et al. 1997). Importantly, suggestibility (and its consequence, memory contamination) is not inevitable, and in the studies cited above, a substantial proportion of children were able to resist the various suggestive influences, refute misleading suggestions, and describe the target experiences accurately.

2.9. Individual Differences in Children's Eyewitness Testimony

As noted earlier, variability in performance within studies is a hallmark of children's eyewitness testimony. Age is useful as a broad indicator of children's capacities and vulnerabilities and likely

serves as a proxy for the interaction of a variety of cognitive and social skills underpinning the remembering and reporting processes. Researchers have been interested in identifying individual characteristics affecting the quality of children's testimony or their susceptibility to suggestion, exploring a variety of social and cognitive factors. Reviews indicate variability in the factors that have been examined and the extent to which they consistently or substantially predict accurate or inaccurate recall (e.g., Gudjonsson 1987, Klemfuss & Olaguez 2020, Perez et al. 2022, Scullin & Ceci 2001). Within typical ranges of intellectual ability, studies have differed with respect to whether children's accurate recall or suggestibility was positively, negatively, or not associated with IQ.

2.10. Eyewitness Testimony and Children with Intellectual Developmental Disorders or Autism Spectrum Disorder

A small number of studies have examined eyewitness testimony in children with intellectual developmental disorders (IDDs) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Findings have varied, reflecting differences in methodology, the definition and measurement of disorder, interviewing strategies, and memory stimuli. Generally speaking, however, children with mild levels of intellectual delay perform as well as typically developing children matched for mental age or developmental level (although less well than children of the same chronological age), whereas children with more severe levels of impairment are less capable than children matched for mental age (e.g., Brown et al. 2012b, 2015; Henry & Gudjonsson 2003; Henry et al. 2011). The studies have all shown that children with IDD are capable of providing useful and accurate information about their experiences (Brown et al. 2017, Hershkowitz 2018). Studies of children with ASD have predominantly compared their performance to children of the same chronological age. They have typically shown that children with ASD report fewer details than typically developing children (e.g., Almeida et al. 2019a, Bruck et al. 2007, Henry et al. 2020), although some studies show equivalence (e.g., Almeida et al. 2019b, 2025), but are no less accurate (Almeida et al. 2019a, Bruck et al. 2007) nor more suggestible (Bruck et al. 2007).

Above, we discuss some of the abilities and characteristics of children that may influence how well they remember and talk about what they know. In conjunction with these features, the way that children are interviewed profoundly affects what children describe as their experience and how they do so. In the next section, we discuss what interviewers contribute to children's testimony.

3. WHAT INTERVIEWERS BRING TO THE INTERVIEW

Using lessons learned from studies of children's testimony, a number of formal interview protocols have been developed to guide interviewers in following developmentally sensitive and evidence-based practice (e.g., Newlin et al. 2015). A number of best-practice guidelines have also been compiled [e.g., "Achieving Best Evidence" guidelines published by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice in the United Kingdom (Ministry of Justice 2022) and the "Forensic Interviewing of Children" guidelines, published by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC Taskforce 2023)].

3.1. Principles and Components of Forensic Interviewing Protocols

Despite differences between protocols with respect to the specific features or chronology of interviewing phases described, the guidelines and protocols converge on a number of important components and principles (Lamb et al. 2018, Newlin et al. 2015). The importance of establishing rapport and introducing the context for the interview (including the conversational rules that are important for children to follow) is widely acknowledged. The importance of using a broad, open-ended style of prompting throughout the interview and minimizing the use of closed, multichoice,

or leading questions has been clearly established, as has the utility of having a short practice interview about a nonrelated event prior to discussion of the possible incident under investigation. Questions still remain, however, about the safety and productivity of introducing complementary tools or techniques (e.g., encouraging the child to draw or using body diagrams, timelines, and other visual aids), especially in conjunction with an optimal questioning style (Brown & Lamb 2019, 2022). How to ensure that interviewers maintain adherence to protocols and consistently demonstrate best practice is also an important focus for researchers. In this section, we consider what has been learned about how to effectively prepare children to participate in forensic interviews and optimal questioning strategies for eliciting detailed, coherent, and accurate narratives from children, as well as ways to maintain good practice beyond training.

3.2. The Importance of Rapport

Forensic interviewers may need to assist children in overcoming motivational barriers to talking about their experiences. Children may be reluctant for a variety of reasons, including feelings of guilt or shame, concerns for the consequences that might ensue from their disclosure, and/or negative or nonsupportive reactions from the initial disclosure recipient or caregivers, and may display poor engagement from the outset of the interview (for a review, see Lamb et al. 2025). Interviewers are thus advised to spend time establishing rapport with children at the outset of the interview and be attentive to disruptions in rapport throughout (Lamb et al. 2018; Saywitz et al. 2015, 2019). Establishing rapport provides a supportive context within which children can talk about potentially difficult, traumatic, embarrassing, or distressing events. When interviewers offer noncontingent support through the interview, children's reports are more accurate and children are more able to resist suggestive questions (Saywitz et al. 2019). Supportive interviewer behavior is also associated with greater rates of disclosure from reluctant children interviewed about suspected abuse (Blasbalg et al. 2021, Hershkowitz & Lamb 2020). Recent research on supportive interviewing and rapport building has underlined the importance of recognizing and responding to children's expressions of emotion during the interview; doing so is associated with enhanced informativeness about the incidents under investigation (Karni-Visel et al. 2019, 2022, 2023).

Importantly, the way in which interviewers talk to children when establishing rapport can affect children's responsivity when the conversation turns to the allegations under investigation. Specifically, when interviewers adopt a more open style of questioning during the presubstantive phase of the interview, children are more responsive to those kinds of questions when talking about the event under investigation (Brown et al. 2013, Roberts et al. 2004, Sternberg et al. 1997).

3.3. Interview Ground Rules

Many interview protocols include a set of conversational ground rules to help orient children to the gravity of their task as an informant and establish expectations about their responding. The most common rules (say "I don't know," "I don't understand," or "that's not right" when appropriate in response to questions that they do not have the information for, cannot comprehend, or that contain inaccurate information, respectively) address children's tendencies to answer unanswerable (e.g., Waterman et al. 2000, 2004) or misleading (Bruck & Ceci 1999) questions. Introducing ground rules may reduce children's guessing or acquiescence, particularly if they have the opportunity to practice them (e.g., Brubacher et al. 2015, Brubacher & Brown 2025). Children appear to increasingly benefit from ground rule instruction with age, although even at the end of childhood, they do not perform perfectly, and adults too may fail to respond appropriately (i.e., as the ground rules would mandate) when faced with unanswerable questions (Ali et al. 2020). Studies show that adherence tends to be inconsistent in relation to the different rules (Brown et al. 2019,

Dickinson et al. 2015) and different ways of assessing their understanding of the rules (Dickinson et al. 2015, McWilliams et al. 2021). Although ground rules are universally included in interviewing protocols worldwide, there is surprisingly little evidence regarding their overall effectiveness, whether developmental adaptations might be helpful, and how interviewers can best communicate the ground rules and ensure that children comply with them throughout the interview.

3.4. Narrative Practice Interview

Another component of effectively preparing children to lead the process of remembering and reporting their experiences is to provide the opportunity to practice narrating a past event, ideally a neutral event unrelated to the event under investigation (Anderson et al. 2014, Brown et al. 2013, Price et al. 2013, Whiting & Price 2017). A practice interview allows the interviewer and the child to settle into their roles as naive listener (interviewer) and expert (child) and provides the opportunity for the interviewer to introduce the style of questioning and level of detail they will pursue when investigating the alleged events. Studies show children gain the most benefit from a practice interview when open-ended prompts are used (Brown et al. 2013, Price et al. 2013, Yi & Lamb 2018). Importantly, a well-conducted practice narrative also prepares the interviewer for best practice—increasing their use of open-ended prompts (Price et al. 2013). Researchers have also shown that practice narratives are most effective when they are about unique or specific events rather than everyday events or things children like to do (Brown et al. 2013, Brubacher et al. 2011b, Henderson et al. 2024, Whiting & Price 2017).

3.5. Interviewer Questions

The most critical predictor of the quality (amount, accuracy, and coherence) of children's testimony is the way in which they are questioned (Lamb et al. 2018). Decades of research support the superiority of open-ended questions that prompt recall-based recollecting over closed (yes/no) or option-posing questions that prompt recognition memory (Lamb et al. 2018). When children are asked broad, open-ended prompts (sometimes referred to as invitations) such as "Tell me everything you can remember about what happened," they are given the opportunity to lead their own retrieval and reporting process. Responses to invitation prompts tend to be longer, more detailed, and more accurate, although children may also be more likely to be nonresponsive to these prompts than to more focused ones (e.g., Wolfman et al. 2016). Children may also fail to report forensically important details when given very broad prompts, necessitating follow-up with more focused but still open prompts. Prompts that ask children to elaborate upon previously reported information with a more focused invitation (termed cued invitations, e.g., "Tell me more about the gross touching" when the child had previously reported "He just kept doing the gross touching") are particularly effective, perhaps because they scaffold the child's retrieval and reporting by signaling what the interviewer is interested in hearing more about (Brown et al. 2013).

Nonetheless, even with such follow-up invitations, children's responses may be sparse or omit key details, and interviewers may need to ask even more focused questions (e.g., directive or "wh-" prompts that ask for specific categories of information, such as location, temporal details, and descriptions of people). Such questions still activate recall memory but direct the child's attention to a particular aspect of the event, thereby changing the interview dynamic from child-led to interviewer-led. Children are very familiar with such focused questions because they are favored by teachers and parents, and two key problems may arise. First, children may provide very brief responses, limited to the specific information requested, reverting to their typical role as junior partners in adult-child conversations who rely on the adults for further input or direction. Second, the very nature of the interrogative may cue the category of information expected (e.g., asking a

“where” question prompts the child to name a place, “who” a person, “what color” a color word, and so forth), and if children are unable to retrieve that specific information (due to memory failure or because it was never encoded in the first place), they may instead guess or draw upon inferences or other sources of (general) information in order to comply with the request. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that children’s accuracy when responding to “wh-” questions tends to be lower than when they are simply asked to tell everything they can remember (although their accuracy rates may still be impressively high) (Brown et al. 2013).

Interviewers may also sometimes ask children a closed question to clarify information, elicit important details, or establish the scope of the interview (e.g., some protocols follow the child’s initial free recall with a question to assess the range and scope of offending, such as “Did that happen one time or more than one time?” or “Has anything else like that ever happened?”). Researchers have cautioned judicious use of such questions because they are recognition-based and make it very easy for children to (possibly carelessly) choose a response from those stated or implied (e.g., “more than one” or “one,” “yes,” or “no,” in the examples provided above). Some protocols recommend that when specific information is important but has not been provided in response to more open prompts, the practice of pairing a closed with an open prompt may limit the impact of the closed question on children’s responding behavior and encourage elaboration that is provided by the child rather than elicited by a series of questions from the interviewer (e.g., “Did he say anything?” followed by “Tell me everything you can remember about that”) (Lamb et al. 2018). Empirical research on the effects of such pairing remains to be undertaken, however.

As discussed above, suggestive questioning is particularly problematic for children. Suggestive questions imply a particular response or introduce information into the interview that the child has not thus far volunteered. Although tag questions (“He hit you, didn’t he?”) are often viewed as the prototypical suggestive questions, suggestive questions can in fact be framed in many, sometimes not obvious, ways. For example, asking a child to tell everything about what a person said to them, when the child has not mentioned any verbal exchange, is suggestive, although the prompt may be communicated in a (narrow) open-ended format (“What did he say?”). When children are asked leading and misleading questions, their responses are likely to be more inaccurate than those elicited by open prompts (Brown et al. 2013), although inaccuracy is not inevitable; many children may accurately refute the suggested information (Leichtman & Ceci 1995) or provide accurate responses to suggestive questions.

3.6. Developmental Differences in Responses to Questions

Developmental differences in children’s responding to various types of questions are often observed, both within typically developing samples and when considering children with developmental delays (Brown et al. 2012b, 2015). Field and laboratory studies have shown that very young children and those with intellectual disabilities may require more scaffolding from interviewers and benefit from more frequent use of focused (“wh-”) recall questions (Brown et al. 2017, Hershkowitz et al. 2012). This does not mean that invitations are ineffective or problematic with these groups of children, however. Studies show that they are able to provide relevant and accurate responses to such questions (and therefore, just as with older or typically developing children, should be given the chance to do so), but they provide proportionately more of their accounts in response to more focused questions. Whether this is because interviewers use more of them as a matter of course (thereby limiting the children’s opportunity to respond to invitations) or because they change their questioning strategy in response to the perceived ineffectiveness of broader invitations has yet to be established.

More generally, it is important to recognize that, although responses to invitations are on average longer, more detailed, and more accurate than responses to closed, focused, or suggestive

questions, some responses to invitations are brief and some are inaccurate, just as many responses to focused, closed, or suggestive questions are accurate. Interviewers and researchers cannot assume that the type of question uniquely determines the informativeness of the response. On balance, however, open-ended prompting provides children with the optimal conditions within which to search and retrieve their memories, describe them free from interviewer input, and thus help elicit the most reliable testimony.

3.7. Interviewer Aids

Interviewers sometimes may supplement verbal questioning by employing tools or nonverbal aids to assist children in communicating about what occurred (Wolfman et al. 2018). For example, children may be asked to draw and tell what happened, use dolls and other props to demonstrate what happened, indicate where touch occurred on a body diagram, sketch the scene of events, or place events on a timeline. The specific mechanisms by which nonverbal aids may support children's recall and communication have not been identified, but may include increasing a child's sense of comfort, helping them to structure their reports, providing self-directed recall cues, reducing stress, or overcoming motivational or vocabulary limitations.

Early studies of drawing suggested that providing children with this opportunity might increase the amount of information they reported without introducing error (e.g., Butler et al. 1995), but more recent studies have either failed to find this effect (MacLeod et al. 2016, Salmon et al. 2012) or observed increases in errors [when children were not specifically instructed to draw the event (MacLeod et al. 2016) and when drawing was combined with suggestive questioning (Bruck et al. 2000)].

Experimental studies with dolls have shown that, although their introduction may sometimes be associated with the production of accurate details that were previously unreported, they are often also associated with the production of inaccurate information (Bruck et al. 1995). Field studies suggest that introducing dolls may sometimes elicit additional details (Thierry et al. 2005) and sometimes may not (Lamb et al. 1996), but it also may elicit inconsistencies and fantastical details (Thierry et al. 2005). A consensus has emerged that dolls pose a risk to children's reliability because they (a) may invite exploratory or play behavior that could be misinterpreted as communication about the event, (b) may exceed young children's abilities by demanding that they see the doll as a symbol representing themselves or someone else (and set aside a doll's usual identity as a plaything), and (c) are likely to elicit information that is unreliable (Poole et al. 2011).

Research with body diagrams suggests that in some contexts they may facilitate elaboration or clarification of previously reported touches (Teoh et al. 2010) or the reporting of new information (Bruck et al. 2016). However, in other contexts, they may have no effect on children's testimony (Salmon et al. 2012) or may elicit inaccurate information, including entirely false reports of touch (e.g., Brown et al. 2007, 2012a; Bruck et al. 2016).

Only two published studies have tested whether providing children with a timeline aids their reporting of events. Gosse & Roberts (2014) found that older (7-to-8-year-old) but not younger (5-to-6-year-old) children could accurately indicate the temporal placement of parent-nominated events on a timeline, whereas Zhang et al. (2019) found that timelines increased children's inaccuracy when recalling repeated events.

Unfortunately, the majority of experimental studies assessing the impact of including aids when interviewing children have examined the effect of their introduction alongside either highly constrained interview protocols or a set of specific (and often misleading) questions that do not mirror how children might actually be interviewed in forensic interview contexts (e.g., Salmon et al. 2012). More research in realistic contexts is thus needed to clarify how the use of various aids or tools for different purposes (e.g., for rapport building as opposed to recall and communication) might

affect forensic interview practice. To date, however, there is no evidence that the use of any tools is beneficial or necessary when an experienced interviewer conducts an open-ended interview consistent with established practices outlined in an evidence-based protocol that the interviewer has been trained to follow (Lamb et al. 2018).

3.8. Interviewer Adherence to Recommended Practice and the Development of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Investigative Interview Protocol

Reviews of interviewing quality in a number of countries have shown that interviewers struggle to consistently adhere to good practice guidance or protocols (e.g., Baugerud et al. 2020, Wolfman et al. 2016). Structured interview protocols were developed in response to these observations in an attempt to provide interviewers with a clear structure to follow: preparing children to talk about what happened to them and eliciting their accounts using an approach that gives priority to the use of broad, open-ended prompting (invitations and cued invitations) through the entirety of the interview (Lamb et al. 2018). For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Investigative Interview Protocol has been the focus of much field and laboratory work in the years since its development (Benia et al. 2015). Initially focused on supporting the cognitive demands children face in retrieving and reporting their memories, the protocol has recently been revised to include strategies for interviewers to employ that address the socioemotional demands of the interview (Hershkowitz et al. 2017). Decades of research have shown the protocol to be an effective way of supporting interviewers by translating the science of children's testimony into practice and, in doing so, improving the amount, coherence, and reliability of the evidence obtained (Lamb et al. 2018). Simply training with an evidence-based protocol is insufficient to ensure that practice remains optimal over time, however (Lamb 2016). Regular supervision and objective evaluation of interviewing practice appear to be critical parts of maintaining high-quality interview practices.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH ISSUES

Researchers, often in fruitful partnership with practitioners, have made great strides over the past forty-odd years in elucidating children's capacities and vulnerabilities when asked to recall and describe past events, alongside identifying interviewer behavior that might enhance or undermine their ability to do so. While much has been learned, there remain many outstanding issues to address (see Talwar et al. 2025). We turn now to a brief discussion of emerging (and continuing) areas for research that would move the field forward by building on the foundations described above.

4.1. Teleforensic Interviewing

In numerous countries, systemic challenges prevent many children from being interviewed in a timely manner following informal disclosures of maltreatment or when there are suspicions that maltreatment may have occurred. The relative concentration of interviewers in urban centers relative to rural or remote areas may mean that children cannot easily access interview facilities and that the available interviewers are working in isolation from teams and resources that might support their practice and provide access to supervision or professional development opportunities. When particular expertise is called for (e.g., because a child has developmental or cultural needs), it may not be readily or uniformly available (Brown et al. 2021, Dickinson et al. 2021). Teleforensic interviewing may offer a useful alternative to traditional face-to-face interviewing in such circumstances, allowing children to talk in their native language, with a person from the

same cultural group, or with someone whose expertise matches their needs. Very little research (only three published studies) has been conducted on the utility of teleforensic interviewing, but it would appear to be a promising alternative. The limited research to date suggests that children are at least as responsive (sometimes more so) when interviewed in a teleforensic context rather than face-to-face, with no reductions in accuracy nor increases in suggestibility (Dickinson et al. 2021, Doherty-Sneddon & McAuley 2000, Hamilton et al. 2017). More research is needed, however, to establish teleforensic interviewing as an evidence-based practice.

4.2. Evaluating Children's Testimony

A number of issues relating to the evaluation of children's testimony demand more research in the future. First, it remains unclear why some children come to make claims about events that never occurred while others remain impervious to the suggestive influences exerted on them. Laboratory-based studies of children's false memories have examined some of the ways in which children might come to falsely assert that they had experienced something when they had not (e.g., Leichtman & Ceci 1995, Otgaar & Candel 2011), and in these studies a substantial proportion of the children generated false reports of the events in question. Perhaps more impressive, however, are the children who resist suggestion. Some work has focused on identifying the factors that create vulnerability to suggestion (Klemfuss & Olaguez 2020), but as discussed above, we still lack a more comprehensive model that accounts for the cumulative and interactional effects of child, event, and interview characteristics on children's testimony. Second, many children do not disclose their maltreatment for a considerable period of time (see the reviews in Lamb et al. 2025) and may even deny that abuse has occurred, with retrospective studies suggesting that many fail to report the abuse at all, even during forensic interviews at the time or when they were adults (Azzopardi et al. 2019, Hartman et al. 2023).

Three issues are of relevance here. First, we need to identify safe ways to increase children's motivation to disclose when they fail to do so during a forensic interview and there is evidence to suggest maltreatment is highly likely to have occurred (including the advisability of more than one interview) (Blasbalg et al. 2021, Hershkowitz et al. 2021). Second, when adults report childhood maltreatment, or children do so after substantial delays, we need more research to guide our appraisals of how accurate their reports are likely to be (Strange & Hayne 2013). Third, how well are interviewers and parents able to identify the accuracy of children's claims (and denials)? Disclosure recipients' responses to children's disclosures affect children's subsequent adjustment, well-being, and testimony (Salmon & Reese 2016), so mistaken perceptions of (in)accuracy could have significant consequences. Investigator (e.g., police officers, social workers) perceptions may influence whether a case progresses or is discarded, while jurors' perceptions may influence decision-making and adjudication (Johnson et al. 2023). Most research suggests that adults are poor at lie detection and the evaluation of children's testimony (Johnson et al. 2023). Although some researchers have explored ways of detecting true from false statements, none have yet emerged as sufficiently sensitive or specific to be applied to an individual's testimony (Gongola et al. 2017, Lamb et al. 1997).

4.3. Disclosure Recipients

Disclosure recipients play many important roles. How they react to children's disclosures has important consequences for the child's emotional development and well-being (Salmon & Reese 2016), for whether they continue to disclose or recant (Lamb et al. 2025, Wallis & Woodworth 2021), and for the integrity of later statements given during formal care-and-protection or criminal investigations (Principe & London 2022). Despite the accumulation of evidence about which interviewing strategies help or hinder children's reliability and our increased knowledge about

the impact of disclosure recipients' reactions on children's adjustment, this evidence has yet to be translated into guidance for those who first hear from children about their experiences. We also know little about how various recipients might respond to the disclosure, the impact it would have on them, the kinds of resources that would be valued, and whether this differs according to their relationship with the child (e.g., peer versus parent versus teacher). Research exploring these questions would complement work that more directly focuses on children's testimony.

4.4. Working Effectively with Communication Assistants and Translators

Acknowledging that many victims of maltreatment may have comorbid developmental and communicative difficulties (Brown et al. 2012b, 2015) and that the way children are questioned in court is often developmentally inappropriate, many jurisdictions around the world have allowed for the inclusion of communication assistants (sometimes called intermediaries) in the courtroom. More research is needed to explore how these participants can effectively support children through an investigation and trial and the impact of having a communication assistant involved on the child's testimony, credibility, and trial outcomes. Similarly, many children are interviewed with the assistance of translators when their first language is not that of the local jurisdiction. We are in urgent need of research that addresses how interviewers might work effectively with translators and what kind of training translators might need to ensure that they communicate subtly different questions accurately ("Tell me what happened" as opposed to "Tell me if that happened") in light of the evidence summarized above about the impact on informativeness and accuracy of different types of questions.

4.5. Generalizability and Diversity of Research Samples

How well we can generalize the findings from laboratory-based studies to the real world remains a pressing issue. We thus encourage researchers to complement highly controlled studies parsing the effects of individual variables on children's testimony with studies that approximate the complexity of factors that come together when children must talk about maltreatment. This research needs to elucidate developmental differences in children's and adolescents' capacities and tendencies while including more diverse and representative samples so that we can better understand any cultural differences in memory, reporting, and interviewing. The diversity should also include children with known histories of maltreatment (e.g., Henderson et al. 2024) to illuminate how their experiences of abuse may affect how they remember and report past events. The diversity should also extend to victims of other forms of abuse, including those that are increasingly problematic in contemporary society (e.g., victims of online abuse or trafficking; Korkman & Joleby 2025, Quas et al. 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

When children are interviewed about suspected maltreatment, they face the challenge of interacting with an unfamiliar person, in an unfamiliar formal environment, while talking about topics that may be difficult or distressing to recall or describe and that are not usually the focus of public discourse. Their ability to engage in the process, recall high levels of detail about the events in question, and describe them to the interviewer in a way that will be easily digested by investigators and triers-of-fact relies in large part on how the interviewer conducts the conversation. In this review, we describe how children's cognitive, social, and developmental capacities and vulnerabilities and the way in which they are prepared for the interview interact with the interviewers' questioning styles. We canvass decades of research to summarize child and interviewer contributions and highlight key areas for future (and continued) research. We leave readers with this central

message: When children are interviewed in a developmentally sensitive manner, after being prepared for the interview through sensitively structured rapport building, practice talking about the past, and the clear explanation of important ground rules, they are remarkably capable of providing accurate and detailed accounts of their experiences. They are most likely to do so when provided with consistent opportunities, throughout the entire interview, to deploy their own retrieval processes because interviewers ask broad, open-ended questions, well-framed cued invitations, and open-ended follow-up questions. Some children (especially very young children and those with developmental delays) may require more scaffolding by interviewers using more focused recall questions, but they are still able to provide crucial details about experienced events accurately. Judgments about the veracity of children's testimony must take into account the characteristics of the child, the event, and, most importantly, how the child's testimony was elicited.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. In forensic interviews, children are required to recall and report their experiences in ways that are at odds with how they interact with adults in everyday conversations.
2. Children become more proficient at remembering and reporting things that happened to them as they get older—likely reflecting increased experience in talking about the past and greater aptitude with important cognitive and social skills that underpin memory and narrative processes.
3. Children, as with adults, are vulnerable to suggestive influences from others that may lead to them reporting inaccurate information. The risk of their testimony becoming contaminated increases if they are exposed to many sources of pressure or misinformation.
4. Neurodiverse children are able to provide detailed and accurate testimony when interviewed in a developmentally sensitive way and can do so in response to very broad open-ended prompts (e.g., "Tell me everything that you can remember") but may require additional scaffolding through more focused recall questions (e.g., "wh-" questions).
5. Forensic interviewers provide the best context for children to talk about what happened when they include important preparation components (e.g., introducing the rules of the conversation and practicing talking about a unique nonrelevant event) and encourage and support rapport between the interviewer and the child throughout the interview.
6. Children give the most accurate, detailed, and coherent testimony when interviewed with predominantly open-ended questions that allow them to follow their own retrieval processes. Open invitations (e.g., "Tell me anything else you can remember") and cued invitations (e.g., using the child's previous report to encourage further elaboration, such as "Tell me more about the special cuddles" when the child has previously described having special cuddles) are particularly effective (and more so than more focused recall prompts or closed questions).
7. Using other kinds of tools or aids in an interview (e.g., drawing, body diagrams, dolls) may not assist children and may increase the risk of the child reporting inaccurate information.
8. Evidence-based protocols and continued supervision and support are important for maintaining good interviewing practice over time.

FUTURE ISSUES

1. Is teleforensic interviewing effective for eliciting children's testimony?
2. What cognitive and social abilities reliably predict (a) children's capacity to give accurate testimony and (b) their susceptibility to suggestive influences, and do these change across development?
3. What are the hallmarks of accurate and inaccurate testimony? How can we evaluate the likelihood of delayed disclosures of abuse being true?
4. What are safe ways of motivating and supporting children who are reluctant to disclose abuse (when it has occurred) to talk about what happened?
5. How do disclosure recipients react to a child's disclosure (including how they question children about what happened), and what impact does that have on the child's well-being and subsequent testimony? Is their behavior likely to change depending on whether abuse is disclosed or suspected? What resources and support would be useful for disclosure recipients to prepare them for such a conversation and to know what to do next?
6. How can interviewers work effectively with communication assistants and translators?
7. How generalizable are findings from laboratory studies to child abuse investigations? How well do extant findings generalize to understudied populations (e.g., culturally diverse groups, adolescents, children with developmental differences) and other types of abuse and exploitation (e.g., online abuse or trafficking)?

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