A Research-to-Practice Summary:
Children’s recantation of adult wrongdoing: An experimental investigation

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ARTICLE:

SUMMARY:

Purpose:
Conduct the first experimental study of children’s recantation of adult wrongdoing to shed light on:
- How often children recant true allegations of adult wrongdoing after disclosing
- Factors that predict recantation of true allegations

Note: two factors of particular interest based on prior research – caregiver supportiveness and children’s age

Subjects:
73 children fully participated:
- Ages 6-7 – 38
- Ages 8-9 - 35

Design:
- Children participated in a 15 minute “health and safety event”:
- Children were told a box labeled “Do Not Touch” should not be there and should have been taken to a local school. They were put aside after children were told they were fragile and should not be played with.
- Children visited three stations
  - Temperature check
  - Care of Cuts
Dangers

- In Dangers presentation, the experimenter took three dolls from the “Do Not Touch” box which were relevant to the Danger presentation, and told the child “I know we are not supposed to touch them, but I think it will be okay as long as we are very careful with them since they are fragile”. The child was given two puppets, and the experimenter took one (this one was set to break). When this puppet broke, the experimenter said, “Oh no! I broke it! We shouldn’t have touched these puppets when we were told not to. I will just put them away and maybe nobody will notice. Let’s have this be our secret and not tell anybody that the fireman puppet broke. I might get into trouble if anyone finds out I broke the puppet!”

- A different person interviewed the children immediately following the event using a modified version of the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. This interview included some suggestive questions, and if the child did not disclose about the broken puppet, then the puppet was shown to the child who was asked what happened (introduction of evidence)

- Children were given a Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-IV (PPVT-4) to assess for verbal abilities

- Children’s mothers were coached to be either supportive (you did a great job of telling the truth) or non-supportive condition (you are getting her in a lot of trouble – need to fix it if anyone else talks to you)

- Child was then interviewed by a different person after mothers had communicated the above to their kids. This interviewer used the same approach as in Interview 1, but told the child they had lost the notes from Interview 1 so they needed to find out exactly what had happened during the event.

Findings:
1. Recantation was not related to any demographic variables
2. Children’s verbal ability was equivalent across the various conditions and not related to recantation
3. Timing of children’s disclosure about broken puppet:
   a. Free Recall – 20.5%
   b. Focused Questions – 38.4%
   c. Suggestive Questions – 31.5%
4. 23.3% of the children recanted their prior disclosure about the broken puppet during Interview 2
   a. None of the children in the supportive caregiver condition recanted
   b. 46% of the children in the non-supportive caregiver condition recanted
5. No significant age differences were found related to recantation