

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN INTERVIEW INSTRUCTIONS

Research Guides Our Practice

Forty years of research guides our practice as forensic interviewers, and the way interviews are conducted is constantly being tweaked as new research becomes available. An area of research, that is seeing increased scrutiny, is the administration and use of interview instructions in the forensic interview.



A 2019 article examined three of the four common interview instructions delivered by interviewers to children: Saying “*I don’t know*” when a child was unsure of the correct response; correcting the interviewer if he or she repeated something incorrectly; and telling the truth. A fourth instruction “Tell me if you don’t understand” is also frequently administered in forensic interviews. The researchers found that many children demonstrated proficiency with rules following simple instructions while others required additional opportunities for practice. Even children who were able to demonstrate their understanding of the instructions utilized the rules infrequently.

Another important finding was that children might be able to understand or utilize one guideline but could struggle with another. The children’s developmental level was significantly related to both these skills.

Ages and Developmental Abilities Differ Among Children

For children to understand and utilize interview instructions they must: recognize that others can have false beliefs; be able to monitor their own knowledge state (metacognition); be able to take another person’s perspective; and have increasingly sufficient executive function.



This raises questions concerning the developmental appropriateness of communicating interview instructions to younger children or those with delayed or atypical development. Issues to consider when administering interview instructions are:

- Dynamics in a forensic interview are different from typical family and classroom interactions with adults, so children may have difficulty effectively applying the ground rules even if they understand the concepts.
- Proficiency with different rules may emerge at different developmental stages with evidence that children’s understanding, use of, and benefit from instructions varies with development.
- A single form of each ground rule is typically presented without accommodation for the age, cognitive-processing ability or information-processing ability, or developmental status of the children concerned.

- Children with varying abilities can experience language delays and are more likely to find the instruction incomprehensible due to the instructions being lengthy and presented using complex sentences.

Discussion

- There are developmental differences in children’s abilities to understand and apply interview instructions.
- The understanding of one instruction does not mean another instruction is understood.
- Successful performance during the practice element of administering interview instructions does not uniformly translate to more accurate responses (in other words, just because a child understands the interview instructions, there may still be challenges with accuracy of recall)
- Development level was a stronger predictor of how well children recounted experiences, than how well children did in practicing the instructions.
- The implication is that younger children (and presumably also children with intellectual disabilities) might fail to apply ground rules -- not because they do not remember them or cannot respond to them in simple practice trials, but because they cannot recognize the relevance of single practice questions.
- There is a disconnect for how children are trained to use the instructions and the context in which the rules are meant to be applied. The degree of similarity between practice examples and test problems affects how well children transfer learning to new problems.
- It could be more effective to teach the broader principle of “*you don’t have to try to answer the questions*” instead of specific examples of each instruction.
- Instructions differ conceptually and require different skills and understanding.
- A “one size fits all” approach to selecting and presenting different ground rules is unlikely to create an optimal context for children of different developmental levels.



How to Apply During Forensic Interviews

1. Vary the way of administering and practicing the rules, dependent on children’s age and development.
2. Just because children can effectively practice the instructions does not mean they will utilize the instructions when recalling information.
3. Make practice questions applicable to the types of information you are wanting and are related to information children shared in rapport.
4. Consider giving children more than one practice with each instruction.
5. Remind children throughout the interview of the instructions (as needed).



Additional References

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