

Telling the truth

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A very British tradition. Credit:Paul Albertella from Flickr Creative Commons

(Medical Xpress) -- A new study shows that children as young as three or four years old can talk informatively and accurately about experiences – including incidents of abuse – if they are interviewed by specialists who understand children’s strengths and weaknesses. Its findings, published today in the journal *Child Development*, may prompt a review of current practice by police and social workers.

The research – carried out by psychologists at the University of Cambridge, University of Haifa, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the USA, and the Israeli Child Investigation Unit – challenges accepted thinking. It has long been believed that young [children](#) are incapable of providing useful information about their experiences for a variety of reasons, including their limited memory and communication abilities, and their egocentric inability to recognise that listeners do not have the same knowledge of past events that they have.

“In the light of this recent research, we need to rethink the way in which we approach young witnesses,” said Michael Lamb, Professor of Psychology at Cambridge University. “All too often we under-estimate children’s abilities to remember and describe their experiences – and the consequences of this are very grave. Young children are often the only possible sources of information about abuse, and if we do not interview them, we will not be able to protect them or other possible victims.”

According to the NSPCC, as many as one in seven children in the UK are abused, emotionally, physically and sexually, although only a tiny proportion of those responsible for this abuse are ever tried in a court of law. The reasons for this are many, including beliefs in the superiority of non-punitive interventions, children’s unwillingness to testify, and failures to obtain information of sufficient quality from the young victims.

“When very young children are involved in distressing incidents of abuse, often made more complex by both delayed reporting and confusions among multiple instances of maltreatment, the interviewing process becomes even more emotionally charged. There is an understandable impulse among professionals to ‘help’ the child along with leading questions and to avoid ‘making things worse’ by going back over them in detail,” said Lamb.

Investigators and other professionals often claim that young children under the age of five or six years do not have the cognitive skills needed to answer questions competently and so should not be questioned formally about sexual or physical abuse. This results in incomplete understanding of the abuse, and typically ensures that criminal processes will not be initiated. Many perpetrators of abuse are thus never confronted, treated, or arrested and go on to abuse again. Their victims suffer untold damage.

The quality of interviewing plays a vital role in all investigations. In a recent example that came before the UK Court of Appeal, Judge Sir Nicholas Wall harshly criticised the quality of the official interview conducted by police officers investigating alleged incidents of abuse involving a child aged four and a half. He stated that the interview ignored much of the guidance available to officers and showed “(1) an inadequate establishment of rapport; (2) absolutely no free narrative recall by the child; (3) an abundance of leading questions, and (4) no closure”.

In their study of nearly 300 three- to six-year-old alleged victims of abuse, Michael Lamb and Carmit Katz of Cambridge University, Irit Hershkowitz of the University of Haifa, Yael Orbach of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the US and Dvora Horowitz from the Israeli Child Investigation Unit analysed transcripts of interviews to see how preschoolers understand and respond to questions about their experiences.

Their findings suggest that children as young as three years old can give an accurate account of events, if interviewed in a sensitive manner by interviewers who understand the types of questions that are most likely to elicit reliable information from young children.

“Our study involved preschool children in Israel who were all suspected victims of abuse. It showed that young children were able to take part in extended interviews, answering up to 84 questions in a single interview session, if they were adequately prepared for questioning and the questions themselves were appropriately framed,” said Lamb.

The Israeli children interviewed had reported being sexually or physically abused. They were interviewed using a structured interview guide designed by Lamb and colleagues when he worked at the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

before 2004. This Protocol incorporates the findings of research on children's abilities, and has been adopted by a number of agencies around the world because it has been shown to produce better quality interviews than any other technique to have been studied.

Interviewers in Israel have been required to follow the Protocol since 1996. Some aspects of the Protocol have been incorporated into UK guidelines for those interviewing young children but interviewers here do not routinely follow it.

Children's testimonies are often vital to effective investigation because victims may be the only available sources of information. The study of the Israeli children showed that the children correctly addressed the topic raised by the interviewer in response to 63 per cent of the questions while they provided new information in response to 43 per cent.

“One of the factors that we looked at is free recall – when children are asked to search their own memories, rather than simply acquiesce to what interviewers thought might have happened,” said Lamb.

“Interestingly, children provided remarkable amounts of free recall information in response to open prompts which did not direct them – questions such as ‘what happened?’ However, the youngest children did best when asked questions that narrowed their memory searches – such as ‘where did he touch you?’. The ability to provide on-topic responses and provide new details appeared to increase gradually with age.”

The study showed clearly that young children should not be dismissed as “egocentric” or incompetent witnesses, unable to understanding the need to provide full details to listeners who do not know what happened. Rather, they seem to have many of the cognitive, verbal, and communicative skills needed to engage in complex conversations with adults.

“Children can understand many forms of questions addressed to them, interpret the intention of interviewers correctly, remember their experiences, and share many details. Impressively, their skills are evident in a personal and unfamiliar context – such as forensic investigation – that is very demanding, cognitively and emotionally. It is up to interviewers to create the conditions in which children can perform most effectively,” said Lamb.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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