

# Young child just as reliable a witness as an adult

6 November 2015

The eyewitness account of a young child is no less reliable than that of an adult. Depending on the material 'to be recalled', older children and adults produce more false memories than young children do. Forensic psychologist Henry Otgaar discovered this during his research project 'Shifting Memories: Reversing Developmental Trends in Memory Illusions in (non)Maltreated Populations', which he is carrying out at Maastricht University with financial support from a Veni grant of the Talent Scheme. The article will be published shortly in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Henry Otgaar investigated a counterintuitive hypothesis: it is not [young children](#), but [older children](#) and adults who are the most sensitive to false memories. This goes against what is generally thought. After all, young children have a limitless fantasy, as a result of which they would find it difficult to separate fact from fiction. More difficult than adults you would expect, certainly in the case of 4 to 6-year-olds who have been victim of physical and sexual abuse. It is generally considered that such young witnesses will exhibit a higher degree of unreliability in their statements, for example in court – at least, higher than for older children and adults. But is that truly the case?

Otgaar used between 70 and 80 study subjects for each experiment: children aged 4 to 12 years and adults. He tested the participants' memories by showing them videos and then asking them to state exactly what they had seen on answer cards. For example, after a film about a bank robbery, one of the possible answers would be 'weapon', even though none was present in the film. Participants gave an eyewitness account and were questioned verbally. Eyewitness accounts of young children were found to be no less reliable than those of adults.

Sometimes older children and adults cling to false memories longer than young children do. In fact, the sensitivity for suggestion – the 'feeding' of non-

existent memories – does not always decrease with age. The researchers discovered that although false memory information was more clearly apparent among young children, these false memories could be manipulated and 'removed'. Older children and [adults](#) were found to stick more obstinately by what they thought they had seen. This knowledge could be vitally important in the courtroom: the testimony of an adult should not necessarily be valued more than that of a child.

## Forensic context

Otgaar: 'Our results are in line with the increasing bulk of research results from which it is apparent that younger children sometimes perform better than older children. They distinguish strange sounds better and are more inventive in coming up with alternative ways of using tools than [older people](#). This is probably because the acquisition of new knowledge leads to a decreased flexibility in the adoption of new ideas.'

An important conclusion in the forensic context is that a child's age is no longer a predictor of its reliability as an eyewitness. In many criminal cases, experts have often incorrectly assumed that young children in particular are more inclined to produce '[false memories](#)' spontaneously or under pressure during an interrogation.

Provided by Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

APA citation: Young child just as reliable a witness as an adult (2015, November 6) retrieved 15 June 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-young-child-reliable-witness-adult.html>

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