

What is source monitoring and why is it relevant to forensic interviews of children?

by [Dr. Dan Swerdlow-Freed](#) on April 29, 2018

What is source monitoring?

"*Source monitoring* refers to the set of processes involved in making attributions about the origins of memories, knowledge and beliefs" (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993, (p. 3). Memory source monitoring addresses the question – how do we know what we know? Is our knowledge based on direct experience or did it derive from another source? (For example, did I lock the front door or only imagine locking it? Did I see the accident or hear about it from a news report?)

What does research on source monitoring indicate?

Gabrielle Principe conducted a series of studies (Principe, Cherson, DiPuppo, & Schindewolf, 2012) that demonstrated preschool and young children will repeat information they overheard from peers and parents (i.e., rumors) about target events that the child did not directly experience.

In a study of preschool-aged children, (Principe & Ceci, 2002) most children reported *seeing* a target event that they only heard about from another child. In this study, children were divided into three groups: (a) Children that participated in and witnessed a target event; (b) Classmates that did not witness the target event but heard about it from group (a) children; and, (c) Children who neither witnessed the target event or discussed it with the group (a) children. The proportion of children in group (b) that reported seeing the target event was almost as large as the children in group (a) that reported experiencing it. Furthermore, this similarity was not primarily due to children in group (b) being exposed to a few suggestive questions. According to the researchers, this demonstrated that the children's interactions with one another (i.e., their natural conversations) was a significant influence on the fictitious reports among the children in group (b).

Principe & Schindewolf (2012) identified four reasons that young children are vulnerable to repeating information they overhear from others but do not actually experience, when constructing event reports.

"First, young children's difficulty keeping track of the source of their memories... may put them at increased risk for mistakenly attributing events relayed by others as their own actual experiences. Second, young children are somewhat dependent on others to help them figure out how to represent and recount their experiences. Such collaboration benefits children's construals of novel events and narrations of existing memories... but it might also lead to problematic distortions in memory when others incorrectly frame legally relevant events. Consider, for instance, a father who frames sexual abuse as a special game or a mother in a custody dispute who says, "Daddy hurts you when he gives you a bath, doesn't he?" Third, younger preschoolers do not yet realize that others can have memories that are false; rather they believe that the mind literally copies experience and that everyone therefore has only true

memories... This tendency usually is not problematic in the real world but it can be in legal situations. To illustrate, when a child hears from a friend that she saw Santa put presents under the Christmas tree or that their teacher Mr. Bob does bad things, both claims are unquestionably believed. Finally, young children rarely receive feedback on what a false memory feels like. Adults do, for example, when they remember parking their car on the second level of the garage but find it on the first. Children, in contrast, get away with all sorts of memory errors, such as claiming to have spent the afternoon with an invisible friend" (p. 207).

The findings of another study (Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006) showed that not only will preschoolers and young children report events that they heard about but did not experience, but their reports will be embellished with details that make the fictitious reports plausible – " ... the children who reported seeing the target event produced more elaborate narratives than those who reported only hearing about it. This suggests that when thoughts or images of a nonexperienced event are recalled with rich details, children might be inclined to regard that event as witnessed rather than as something heard about or imagined" (p. 247).

A study by different researchers showed that young children's memory reports can be adversely influenced by exposure to very limited misleading information from their mother (Poole & Lindsay, 2001). In this study, children experienced a science demonstration and were subsequently read a story by their mothers that included information about activities that did and did not occur during the demonstration, including a fictitious touch event described in a single sentence. When subsequently interviewed, almost 40% of the five-year-old children answered 'yes' when asked if they experienced the fictitious touch, and 92% of the five- and six-years-old who said 'yes' to these questions provided details describing touches that never happened. Finally, the youngest subjects, three- to six-year-olds, had difficulty correctly identifying the source of their knowledge about the touches that never happened.

Knowing about an event is not necessarily the same as remembering an event

These studies make clear there is a difference between 'knowing' about an event and having 'memory' of an event. Some children who know (i.e., have heard) about an event will talk as if they remember it. Children who accurately report their experiences can provide relevant details about them. However, children who have overheard others talk about an event or who have been exposed to misleading information may also report experiencing an event, and their reports may contain rich details that make the narrative sound plausible. Furthermore, as other research has discovered, it is not necessary for children to be exposed to every detail or idea that becomes part of a false report. "Today, it is well known that young children's error rates soar during interviews when words embedded in focused questions trigger memories acquired from sources other than target events, such as conversations with parents or peers" (Principe, Greenhoot, & Ceci, 2014, cited in Poole, 2016, p. 17).

For more information about [this topic](#) or to schedule a consultation appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at 248.539.7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.

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