

# How do children talk about the events they experience?

by [Daniel H. Swerdlow-Freed, Ph.D.](#) on June 8, 2020 in [Forensic Interviewing of Children](#)

Over the past three decades dozens of research studies have identified the optimal forensic interview techniques to use when questioning children about allegations of physical and sexual abuse. These studies have culminated in a set of best-practices which, if carefully followed, can assist children to provide reliable narrative accounts of their experiences. Recently, a team of nationally known experts distilled these findings into 15 principles that characterize children's narrative reports to help explain how children talk about events (Brubacher, Peterson, La Rooy, Dickinson, & Poole, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to briefly summarize the first five principles.

## **Principle 1: Children describe past events from the time they can talk**

Around the second year of life children start to verbally encode their experiences. As language skills develop, children become able to report their experiences. While some early memories can be recalled for several years, most gradually fade, and are eventually lost.



Young children may not be accurate when dating when an event occurred, especially if it occurred prior to four years of age (based on the parent's account). As children get older and are re-interviewed about the same event, they tend to date it as having occurred at a later period in life.

This suggests that when adults report childhood memories the same dynamic may occur – events may have occurred earlier than the adult reports.

## **Principle 2: The delayed reports of children who were preverbal during the event are sparse and/or riddled with errors**

Children are generally unable to access and report memories of events before they have developed the linguistic skills to do so. In other words, children can remember events they have the language skills to describe. Limited language skills, even if age-appropriate, undermines the ability to describe an experienced event.

As linguistic skills develop, children become better at describing their experiences after a short delay and even after delays of several months or a few years. Although

not all details will be accurately reported during subsequent interviews, children's reports become more coherent and detailed as they grow older.

Delayed reports from children who had poor linguistic skills when an event was experienced will generally provide narratives with few details and many errors. Asking these children to report specific details about their experiences increases the likelihood of compromising their accuracy and making the child appear unreliable.

### **Principle 3: Children report in piecemeal fashion across open-ended prompts**

Forensic interview guidelines instruct interviewers to prioritize open-ended questions that allow children to report experienced events in their own words. These prompts should be used repeatedly because children typically report only one or a few details in response to each inquiry. Asking successive open-ended questions invites the child to add details as the conversation proceeds.



It also may not be apparent when a child has reported everything stored in memory. Children also say, "That's all," or "I can't remember" to indicate they are done talking, even though they may have information not yet reported.

For these and other reasons, it is productive to ask successive open-ended questions and use other techniques that are designed to cue memory and invite children to provide more information about the topic under discussion.

### **Principle 4: Children maintain accuracy across a series of differently-worded open-ended prompts**

One reason that children's reports may differ from one report to another is because they are asked different questions, which elicit different details. What happens, however, when children are asked a series of open-ended questions that allow them to select which details to report?

One finding is that the details children report is mostly but not completely accurate. Sometimes details will be reversed, sometimes suggested information will intrude into a report, and sometimes unrelated events will be incorporated into a narrative.

Another finding is that error rates tend to be stable, even when children are repeatedly asked open-ended questions. In other words, asking a series of open-ended prompts, even when children say they no longer remember anything else, does not seriously compromise accuracy. This suggests that children typically answer open-ended questions by reporting what is recalled from memory and do not construe open-ended questions as encouragement to guess or to make up answers.

### **Principle 5: All age groups sometimes drift off topic during conversation**

Compared to adults, young children have much shorter attention spans and are more likely to lose focus or to become distracted during a conversation. It is not uncommon for forensic interviews to run 30 or more minutes, which often exceeds the attention span of preschoolers and young children.

As interviews proceed, children's reports can drift off topic for different reasons – lapse of attention, misunderstanding the topic of interest, or an unrelated thought intrudes that captures the child's attention. It can be confusing when a child's report abruptly changes and necessitates determining what prompted the change. If a child's attention drifts off topic and this is not recognized, it can result in asking questions about unrelated or unreal issues, which can develop into fabricated stories.

Experienced interviewers recognize when children drift off topic and use strategies to re-focus children's attention. They also continuously monitor for topic drift and know to carefully inquire when the topic of conversation abruptly shifts.

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, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.

### **Reference**

Brubacher, S.P., Peterson, C., La Rooy, D., Dickson, J.J., & Poole, D.A. (2019). How children talk about events: Implications for eliciting and analyzing eyewitness reports. *Developmental Review*, 51, 70-89.