

# How does delay affect memory

By Daniel H. Swerdlow-Freed, Ph.D. July 12, 2021

Allegations of child physical or child sexual abuse can be impacted by delay at three separate points in time: between the first incident of abuse and its disclosure, between disclosure and the forensic interview, and between the forensic interview and the child's testimony at trial.

The time intervals between these periods can extend to weeks, months, or years. What are some factors that influence delay on memory during prolonged intervals?



## The child's age

The age of the child when the abuse happened is one factor that can affect memory retrieval. If the abuse occurred during the first few years of life, during the period of infantile or childhood amnesia, the memory trace of the event(s) may have been poorly encoded and may be difficult to retrieve at a later point in time.

As research has shown, older children and adults have limited ability to retrieve organized or detailed memories of events that occurred in their earliest years.

## The stability of the memory trace

Poor encoding is also likely to occur when a child was not paying adequate attention to what was happening while the abusive behavior was taking place. For example, if a child was watching television or playing a game, the child may not have noticed the touching enough to be made uncomfortable by it.

Events that were barely noticed at the time are less likely to create a strong memory trace and may be difficult or impossible to retrieve after lengthy delays.

## The child's level of knowledge

Another factor involves children's level of knowledge at the time of the incident. If a child is too young to realize what is taking place, the behavior may not be perceived negatively.

Toddlers and young children may not understand that being massaged or stroked on certain body parts is probably sexual and, therefore, it may not be memorable.



Touch experiences that were not personally meaningful, salient, or distinctive may not have captured a child's attention and led to a strong memory trace of the event that can be accurately recalled later in life.

Notwithstanding these factors, it is also well-established that children are generally able to recall details of past experiences, provided that they are questioned in a developmentally-sensitive fashion and their event reports are not adversely influenced by post-event information.

In general, younger children's reports tend to be shorter and contain fewer details when compared to older children's reports, regardless of the length of delay.

For children and adults, the number of details that are remembered decreases over time. In the period immediately following an event, forgetting is most rapid and the rate of forgetting slows as time goes on.

Following initial rapid decline memory details stabilize. Central or core details tend to be better remembered compared to peripheral or tangential details.

Children that are interviewed closer in time to the alleged event(s) tend to report more details in comparison to children that are interviewed after lengthy delays between the abuse and its disclosure.

Incidents that are highly distinctive or unique, obvious, or salient, and personally meaningful tend to be better remembered in comparison to less apparent or less understandable events.

In sum, many children possess the ability to accurately describe their experiences in response to open-ended questions, even after lengthy delays. The quantity of information that most children recall typically decreases shortly after an event but eventually stabilizes. Older children tend to remember more details in comparison to younger children, and children of all ages tend to better remember central or core details versus peripheral or less salient details.

For more information about this topic or to schedule a consultation appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at 248.539.7777. Our office is conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334-3171.

## **Reference**

Goodman-Delahunty, J., Nolan, M.A., & Van Gijn-Grosvenor, E.L. (2017). *Empirical guidance on the effects of child sexual abuse on memory and complainants' evidence*. Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/policy-and-research/our-research/published-research/the-effects-of-child-sexual-abuse-on-memory-and-co>