



## Children's suggestibility research: Things to know before interviewing a child



Amelia Courtney Hritz\*, Caisa Elizabeth Royer, Rebecca K. Helm, Kayla A. Burd, Karen Ojeda, Stephen J. Ceci

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Children's testimony is often the only evidence of alleged abuse. Thus, the importance of conducting forensic interviews that are free from bias and misleading information is immense, as these could lead to false reports. In the current paper, we review unexpected findings in children's suggestibility that illustrate the difficulty in distinguishing between false and accurate reports. We explore situations in which a younger person's memory account may be more accurate than that of an adult, when a single suggestive interview may be as detrimental as multiple interviews, and when children can make inaccurate reports spontaneously. We conclude with recommendations for interviewers to decrease false reporting by both children and adults.

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### Investigación acerca de la sugestionabilidad infantil: lo que se debe saber antes de entrevistar a un niño

#### RESUMEN

El testimonio de los niños es a menudo la única evidencia de un supuesto abuso. Por lo tanto, la importancia de la realización de entrevistas forenses que estén libres de prejuicios y de información engañosa es inmensa, ya que podrían dar lugar a informes falsos. En el presente trabajo se revisan los hallazgos inesperados en la investigación sobre de la sugestionabilidad infantil que ilustra la dificultad de diferenciar los informes falsos de los verdaderos. Se analizan casos en donde las declaraciones de memoria de una persona más joven pueden ser más precisas que las de un adulto, cuando una sola entrevista sugerida puede ser tan perjudicial como múltiples entrevistas y cuando los niños pueden hacer declaraciones inexactas de forma espontánea. Concluimos con unas recomendaciones a los entrevistadores para que reduzcan las declaraciones falsas de niños y adultos.

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#### Palabras clave:

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During the investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases, children are often the key witnesses (and may be the only eye-witness) to alleged crimes. In particular, their verbal testimony may be the only evidence of abuse that is presented in court as

physical evidence of abuse is often limited or non-existent. However, prior research has shown that children's testimony may be inaccurate due to a susceptibility to false memory, in particular false memory resulting from suggestion (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Ceci & Friedman, 2000). Because the child's testimony is so important and may be the only evidence of the alleged abuse, the quality of this evidence must be protected from contamination by suggestive interviewing. Proper interviewing techniques must be utilized to safeguard children's testimony from the effect of misinformation

\* Corresponding author. Cornell University. Department of Human Development. Ithaca, NY, USA.

E-mail address: [ach34@cornell.edu](mailto:ach34@cornell.edu) (A.C. Hritz).

and suggestibility, as these could lead to false reports. In the current paper, we review unexpected findings in children's suggestibility research and make recommendations for interviewers to decrease false reporting by both children and adults.

Before getting to this, however, we define some terms. By false report we are referring to claims made by a child that are factually inaccurate, but the inaccuracy can be due to conscious lies on the part of the child or to unconscious assimilation of false suggestions and pressures made by those (usually adults) who have access to the child. The difference between these two forms of false report is that the one due to lying can potentially be remediated—by persuading the child to tell the truth; however, a false report that is the result of a child incorporating an interviewer's false suggestion is theoretically irremediable. Once the suggestion gets implanted in the memory trace, it is forever altered and no amount of remedial interviewing can undo the damage.

The other term we define is the concept of suggestibility. The most common definition is that proposed by [Ceci and Bruck \(1993\)](#): “suggestibility concerns the degree to which children's encoding, storage, retrieval, and reporting of events can be influenced by a range of social and psychological factors” (p. 404). Note that the inclusion of the word “reporting” extends suggestibility to socio-cultural factors that are non-cognitive, such as pressure on a child to misreport an experience even though memory processes themselves (encoding, storage, and retrieval) are uncontaminated.

### Suggestibility Does Not Always Decrease with Age

Recent literature on developmental trends in suggestion and false memory has provided insight into the differing ways in which children and adults are susceptible to memory distortion. This is important when reviewing testimony. For example, there may be a case in which a child and an adult (or two children of different ages) give contradictory testimony and it is not always true that the older person's versions of events are more accurate. In order to evaluate which testimony is most reliable (accurate), it is necessary to understand the types of memory distortion that may have taken place and how this can differentially affect the reliability of children and adults' testimony.

Chronological age has emerged as a powerful predictor of suggestibility: studies have shown that susceptibility to false memory and misleading suggestions decrease with age (see [Ceci & Bruck, 1995](#); [Ceci & Friedman, 2000](#); [Ceci, Kulkofsky, Klemfuss, Sweeney, & Bruck, 2007](#)), so that young children are most susceptible to both misleading suggestions ([Ackil & Zaragoza, 1995](#); [Bjorklund et al., 2000](#); [Bruck & Ceci, 1999](#)) and false memories ([Ackerman, 1994](#); [Reyna & Kiernan, 1994](#)). However, as we explain below, recent research has shown that there is much variability within age groups. There are some conditions under which there are no developmental effects or even “reverse developmental effects,” which are conditions where older children and even adults are more susceptible to suggestion than younger children ([Brainerd, Reyna, & Ceci, 2008](#); [Otgaar, Howe, Peters, Sauerland, & Raymaekers, 2013](#)). For example, [Principe, Guiliano, and Root \(2008\)](#) showed that, because older children are more likely than younger children to draw inferences, they are more likely to falsely report inferences about the causes of ambiguous events and mistake them for actual experiences. In this study, 5- to 6-year-olds reported more false inferences than did 3-year-olds. Likewise, [Ornstein et al. \(1998\)](#) found that when asked to recall the details of an examination by a pediatrician that excluded some commonly-occurring medical procedures (e.g., the pediatrician did not listen to the child's heart with a stethoscope as is normally done during a doctor's visit), 6-year-olds were subsequently more likely than 4-year-olds to wrongly recall expected-but-non-experienced medical procedures.

Reverse developmental trends are most likely to occur in situations involving “meaning connection” and semantic association ([Brainerd et al., 2008](#)). Younger children may be less suggestible in situations where older children possess more meaning-connectedness knowledge, providing an opportunity for a suggestion to interact with such knowledge. The role of knowledge-representation in false memory has been shown to exist in studies using categorized word lists, such as the Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) paradigm ([Brainerd et al., 2008](#)). In the DRM paradigm, children and adults are given a list of words that are semantically related (e.g., cake, pie, honey, candy, sugar, taste, sour, chocolate). After the completion of the list, they are asked to record all of the words they can remember. Studies using the DRM paradigm have found that it is more likely that adults will falsely remember a non-presented but related word (e.g., sweet). This may occur because *sweet* is semantically activated by hearing the other words on the list. Younger children often lack the semantic knowledge to activate *sweet* in the context of the related words; therefore, they are less likely to falsely recall hearing it (for a review, see [Brainerd et al., 2008](#); [Brainerd, Reyna, & Zember, 2011](#)).

Recently, the DRM paradigm has been used to develop a greater understanding of age trends in false memory, for example [Khanna and Cortese \(2009\)](#) found that there is no age increase in false memory for phonological (as opposed to semantic) lists. Thus, adults are not more likely to falsely recall a word that rhymes with the ones they heard. In addition, there is a greater increase in false memories with age for words evoking negative emotions (e.g., cold, hurt, sick) than for words evoking positive emotions (e.g., baby, love, hug; [Brainerd, Holliday, Reyna, Yang, & Toglia, 2010](#)). Furthermore, when children are instructed to forget a previous word list and focus on the subsequent list, the rates of remembering words not presented in the first list decreases ([Howe, 2005](#)). This benefit of directed forgetting is not shown in adults.

Reverse developmental trends in suggestibility have been shown in cases of eyewitness identification of an innocent, but familiar, subject. An experiment by [Ross et al. \(2006\)](#) showed children aged 5 to 11 a video depicting either a female teacher reading a story to children (the control condition) or a male teacher reading a story to children (the suggestion condition). All the children were then shown a female teacher entering a cafeteria and having her wallet stolen by a man whom the children had not seen before. Later, the children were asked to identify the thief from a lineup of four innocent faces and the male teacher who was reading the story in the suggestion condition (the real thief was not in the line up). For children who had seen the male teacher reading the story, the probability of falsely identifying this male teacher increased from 0.18 for five-year-olds to 0.64 for 11-year-olds. Although the male teacher was familiar to both the 11-year-olds and the five-year-olds, the 11-year-olds were more vulnerable to suggestion based on “conscious inference” (for a definition, see [Read, Tollestrup, Hammersley, McFazden, & Christensen, 1990](#); [Ross, Ceci, Dunning, & Toglia, 1994](#)), meaning significantly more 11-year-olds falsely believed they had seen the teacher steal the wallet because he was familiar to them but they forgot the reason why he was familiar.

Similar research on eyewitness identification has also found adults to be less accurate witnesses than children when exposed to misinformation ([Royer, 2014](#)). In this study, participants were shown a video of a crime and then asked to make an identification from a lineup in which the real perpetrator was not present. After a short delay, participants were shown two photographs and asked to again identify the perpetrator. Participants were randomly shown two of the following: the real thief, a completely unfamiliar face, and the suspect they'd chosen from the first lineup. Adults were less likely than children to correctly identify the real perpetrator during the second session. Additionally, adults were more likely to show commitment to their original choice by reidentifying

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