



## Comfort drawing during investigative interviews: Evidence of the safety of a popular practice<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study evaluated the impact of comfort drawing (allowing children to draw during interviews) on the quality of children's eyewitness reports.

**Methods:** Children ( $N=219$ , 5 to 12 years) who had participated in an earlier memory study returned 1 or 2 years later, experienced a new event, and described these events during phased, investigative-style interviews. Interviewers delivered the same prompts to children in the no drawing and drawing conditions but provided paper and markers in the drawing condition, invited these children to draw, and periodically asked if they would like to make another picture.

**Results:** Most children in the drawing condition were interested in using the materials, and measures of eyewitness performance were sensitive to differences in cognitive ability (i.e., age) and task difficulty (i.e., delay between the remote event and interview). Comfort drawing had no overall impact as evidenced by nonsignificant main effects of condition across 20 performance measures, although more of the younger children reported experienced touching in the drawing than no drawing condition.

**Conclusions:** The children successfully divided attention between voluntary drawing and conversations about past events. Importantly, comfort drawing did not impair the amount of information recalled, the accuracy of children's answers, or even the extent to which interviewers needed to prompt for answers. Due to the large number of analyses, the benefit of drawing for younger, touched children requires replication.

**Practice Implications:** Comfort drawing poses no documented risks for typically-developing school-aged children, but the practice remains untested for younger children and those with cognitive impairments.

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### Introduction

Following a series of high-profile abuse cases in the 1980s, findings from studies of children's eyewitness testimony prompted the development of best-practice standards that direct how professionals should interview children about suspected abuse (Poole & Dickinson, 2013). But despite widespread consensus on some issues, there is considerable variability in the specific recommendations that appear across interviewing protocols (cf. Anderson et al., 2010; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008) and even more variability in the ways interviewers translate advice into practice. Some of this variability stems from the fact that researchers (and, therefore, best-practice standards) have not sufficiently addressed

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children's emotional needs, so some investigators feel justified in using untested strategies. The current study examined one of these strategies: comfort drawing, which is the practice of allowing children to draw during forensic interviews.

Although there are no data on how often interviewers provide drawing materials to children, comfort drawing appears in videotapes from communities across the United States and is routinely used during interstate child pornography investigations. Proponents argue that drawing facilitates children's testimony by creating a more supportive environment and diffusing the stress of an interview. For example, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation child/adolescent forensic interviewer Catherine S. Connell told us that coloring has always been instrumental in her interviews because it "seems to make the atmosphere less stressful when a victim and/or interviewer can look down at the paper and crayons as opposed to staring at each other waiting for a question or answer" (February 15, 2013, used with permission). On the other hand, there is concern that coloring will divert children's attention and deplete the cognitive resources that promote accurate accounts of events (e.g., [U.K. Ministry of Justice, 2007](#)).

We initiated the current study at the request of prosecutors who discovered that interviewers in their jurisdictions were allowing children to play with markers or crayons during sexual abuse interviews. Although there was research on the impact of directed drawing (i.e., asking children to draw target events; see [Pipe & Salmon, 2009](#), for a review), we found no study that had evaluated the benefits and risks of using a familiar activity such as drawing simply to create a less stressful interview environment. At the time, we were conducting a multisite study that exposed children to a target event and, with the cooperation of their parents, misinformation about some event details ([Poole & Dickinson, 2011](#)). To respond to prosecutors' concerns, we invited families to return to our laboratories (approximately 1 or 2 years after their initial sessions), staged a new event to permit questioning about a recent event in addition to the long-ago (i.e., remote) event, and assigned each child to one of two versions of a phased interviewing protocol: with or without comfort drawing.

The literature on children's memory and attention explains why there are competing hypotheses about the impact of comfort drawing on children's testimony: Social support and distractions act in opposite directions, with interviewer support improving performance while a competing task usually (but not always) impairs it. Specifically, a supportive interviewing style has a positive impact on children's free recall performance and helps them resist misleading suggestions (as long as supportive and unsupportive styles are sufficiently different; [Bottoms, Quas, & Davis, 2007](#); [Hershkowitz et al., 2007](#)), and these benefits are greater for children who are most physiologically reactive ([Quas, Bauer, & Boyce, 2004](#); [Quas & Lench, 2007](#)). However, multitasking typically impairs children's and adults' performance on cognitive tasks (e.g., [Anderson, Bucks, & Bayliss, 2011](#); but see [Ciaramelli, Ghetti, & Borsotti, 2009](#)). Therefore, it is possible that comfort drawing could improve the quality of children's autobiographical reports (e.g., if drawing was stress-reducing but not very distracting), impair performance (e.g., if stress levels were not strongly affected but drawing reduced attention to interviewers' questions), or have no impact (e.g., if drawing did not change the emotional tone of interviews and was so familiar that it did not tax cognitive resources).

The possibility that children might be able to navigate answering questions while drawing is suggested by research on another favorite activity: watching television. Even preschool children easily divide attention between ongoing play and programming, and they are skilled at monitoring soundtrack features that signal when something interesting will occur ([Anderson & Levin, 1976](#); [Anderson, Lorch, Field, & Sanders, 1981](#); [Calvert, Huston, Watkins, & Wright, 1982](#)). If this ability to multitask generalizes to other situations involving highly familiar tasks, then drawing might not interfere with children's ability to answer developmentally appropriate questions. After all, drawing is neither a particularly gripping activity (that is, it should not "lock in" children's attention) nor one that requires significant cognitive resources (as evidenced by the fact that children chat effortlessly while drawing). Conversely, young children find some question forms challenging (e.g., yes-no questions, [Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999](#)), so it is possible that even minor distractions could derail accuracy when interviewers ask about specific event features.

The lack of research on comfort drawing, along with the possibility that drawing could affect performance differently for different types of questions, led us to cast a wide net and code 20 variables that reflected children's performance throughout the interview. We included a measure of engagement in the interview before interviewers raised the first target topic (because early behavior could influence perceptions of children's maturity and credibility); the success of topic introduction for the remote event; and measures that tapped different memory skills, including free-recall (i.e., responses to open-ended invitations), recognition (i.e., responses to yes-no questions), and source-monitoring ability (i.e., the ability to report whether knowledge of an event originated from personal experience or another source). We also looked at children's ability to report a set of forensically relevant details and how frequently interviewers needed to prompt for answers in the no drawing and drawing conditions.

Because existing research did not allow us to hypothesize whether comfort drawing would benefit, hinder, or have no impact on eyewitness testimony, we recruited a large sample ( $N=219$ ) to increase our chances of detecting modest differences between conditions. This sample also allowed us to look separately at the performance of younger children and children with inhibited temperaments. To measure the latter variable, we asked parents to rate how behaviorally inhibited their children were using the Behavioral Inhibition Questionnaire. Behavioral inhibition to the unfamiliar is a well-researched construct associated with traits/behaviors that have important consequences for eyewitness performance, including anxiety, hesitancy to approach strangers, little spontaneous speech, and the need for more prompting to encourage responses ([Bishop, Spence, & McDonald, 2003](#)). Because the physiological pathways involved in reactions to highly stressful experiences are mirrored at lower levels of stress among inhibited children ([Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1987](#)), behavioral inhibition scores allowed us to explore the effects of comfort drawing on a group of children who adjust slowly to novel situations.

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