



The effect of multipart prompts on children's testimonies in sexual abuse investigations

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current study aimed to explore the frequency and effects of multipart prompts on the testimonies of children who were alleged victims of sexual abuse and were interviewed using the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Investigative Protocol. The effects of the multipart prompts were studied by considering the type of prompt given to the children and examining the richness of the children's testimonies (e.g., the number of words and the number of forensic details) and the ways the children contended with these prompts (e.g., which demand they answered, whether they signaled misunderstanding).

Method: 71 Israeli children aged 4–9 years were interviewed after a complaint of single incident of sexual abuse by a perpetrator who was not a family member. All of the interviews that met the specified criteria and were conducted within a specified period were included in this study. Two raters identified simple versus multipart prompts and analyzed the children's responses.

Results: The results clearly showed that multipart prompts were used in most interviews, regardless of the child's age. An average of 5.58 multipart prompts per interview was given. The effects of the multipart prompts were destructive and harmed the length and the richness of the children's testimonies. Children of all ages failed to signal their lack of understanding of multipart prompts, and 24% of their responses were unintelligible. When the children did produce a relevant and substantive answer, they primarily responded to the last demand in the multipart prompt and rarely provided an answer to both demands.

Conclusions: The study clearly indicates that even well-trained investigative interviewers present inappropriate multipart prompts to children. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge about the adverse effect that multipart prompts have on children's narratives, indicating that children of all ages provided poorer testimonies in response to multipart prompts. The systematic knowledge accumulated in both laboratory and field studies indicates that it is necessary to eliminate the use of multipart prompts by updating existing practical guidelines and training courses.

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Introduction

Most researchers agree that the quality of prompts used by interviewers affects the quality of children's reports of experienced events (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Korkman, Santtila, Drzewiecki, & Sandnabba, 2008; Perry et al., 1995; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999; Walker, 1993). In addition to the substantial consensus related

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to the supremacy of open-ended prompts over closed prompts, there is also some empirical evidence suggesting that in addition to the type of prompt addressed to the children, the format of the prompt, such as, simple or multipart, also affects the quality of the information children provide. The current study provides an applied examination of the prompt format's effects on the information children provide in the course of sexual abuse investigative interviews.

Multipart prompts in lab studies

A multipart prompt is one that simultaneously poses two or more demands for information. The negative dynamics involved in interviews that use multipart prompts seem to compromise the accuracy of the information children provide in response to such prompts. Using experimental designs in which children were randomly assigned to participate in interviews using multipart prompts versus simple prompts, researchers asked children of various ages to provide accounts of staged events they had experienced (Carter et al., 1996; Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999; Perry et al., 1995; Saywitz et al., 1999).

In all studies, the children who were interviewed using simple prompts provided more accurate information compared with their counterparts who were interviewed using multipart prompts. This effect was apparent regardless of age and was equally observed for children aged 3–4 years (Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999), 5–7 years (Carter et al., 1996), and for older children and adolescents 19 years old (Perry et al., 2001). In one study, the advantage of simple prompts was evident even after a 2-week delay (Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999); single prompts allowed children to be more accurate and more resistant to suggestion than the children who were interviewed using multipart prompts.

Interestingly, although the children apparently failed to process multipart prompts in these studies, they responded to all prompts (Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999), they rarely claimed a lack of understanding (Carter et al., 1996), and they even rated the prompts as “easy” despite the fact that they provided wrong answers (Perry et al., 2001). Researchers have explained this pattern by stating that at times, the children were not aware that they did not understand the referred prompts, either because of insufficient metacognitive skills (Perry et al., 2001) or because of social and communicative dynamics, such as their need to be observed as a competent interviewee (Geiselman, Saywitz, & Bornstein, 1993; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996). The ability to recognize the difficulty of a certain prompt and to use various strategies to cope with misunderstanding develops with age (Markman, 1977, 1979). However, there is also evidence suggesting that when children are warned that some prompts might be difficult, and especially when they are trained to indicate any difficulty understanding, they respond more competently (Saywitz et al., 1999). Poole and Lamb (1998) pointed to the possibility that when a prompt includes more than one demand, children may repeat some or all of what the interviewer just said, leading interviewers to wrongly conclude that the child was confirming their statement.

Consequently, multipart prompts can seriously hamper communication in interviews conducted within a legal context (Saywitz & Goodman, 1996). In addition, it seems that when there is a communication breakdown, children may fail to or avoid informing the interviewer and would rather try to answer the prompt.

Multipart prompts in field studies

Despite systematic and clear results from laboratory studies, and despite experts' recommendations that interviewers avoid using multipart prompts when interviewing children in the field (Geiselman et al., 1993; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996), 2 studies that analyzed interviews of alleged sexual abuse victims conducted by child care authorities in the United States revealed that multipart prompts were used frequently. Walker and Hunt (1998) reported that in a sample of 36 interviews with children aged 3–13, on average 86% of the prompts used in each interview were multipart. Furthermore, multipart prompts were used regardless of the age and developmental level of the children being interviewed.

Similarly, in their analysis of 42 similar interviews, Warren, Woodall, Hunt, and Perry (1996) found that children were asked on average 28 multipart prompts per interview with a mean of 2.33 demands in each multipart prompt, and some of the prompts consisted of as many as 9 different demands. Warren et al. also explored the children's responses to multipart prompts and reported that approximately half of the multipart prompts were followed by an answer, although the answers were often unclear or uninterpretable; particularly when yes/no prompts were involved (for example, when a “no” response follows the multipart prompt: “Don't you remember? Did someone wake up and see all this happening?”), it was difficult to tell which demand the child was answering (Did he not remember? Did no one wake up? Did no one see it happening?).

A recent study by Korkman et al. (2008) has strengthened our understanding of the adverse effects of multipart prompts. In 43 interviews conducted with children aged 3–8 years by mental health professional interviewers, 8.2% of the first 30 utterances directed toward the children were multipart prompts. The children's responses to multipart prompts were characterized by fewer judicial details than the children's responses to simple prompts.

The current study

The present study extends the examination of forensic interviews with children to further examine the effects of the prompt format on the length of children's answers and the amount of central and peripheral forensic information they conveyed. All of these explorations relate to the type of prompt (recall, recognition) the children were given, an issue that has been proven significant to the study of children's responses. The current study also identified the different ways in which

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