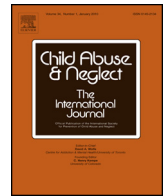


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Child Abuse & Neglect



Full Length Article

Sexual abuse and preschoolers: Forensic details in regard of question types



Karine Gagnon, Mireille Cyr*

Department of Psychology, University of Montreal, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The present study looks into the association between the types of questions used by interviewers and the number of details obtained among preschoolers during an investigative interview. An innovative aspect of this study concerns the analysis of question subtypes (eg. open-ended directive and closed-ended). Analysis of variance were carried out on 55 NICHD interview protocols conducted among children aged three to five years old who disclosed an episode of sexual abuse. Findings reveal that interviewers' style is in accordance with best practices in conducting investigative interviews with children allegedly victims of sexual abuse. As expected, there are more details in answers: 1) provided by older children compared to younger counterparts; 2) following invitations compared to all other question types. However, the analysis of question subtypes has shown that answers given to an open-ended question using cues (cued invitations or directive open-ended) obtained more details concerning the incident compared to the absence of cues (general invitations). These findings support the fact that children as young as three years old are able to produce informative responses when questioned appropriately about the CSA incident and propose reconsidering the types of question that should mainly be used with them. Findings suggest that the use of open-ended questions, using a cue previously mentioned in the testimony of the child, helps provide a detailed account during an investigative interview conducted among preschoolers allegedly victims of sexual abuse.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The challenge of interviewing young children

Since the child is generally the only witness during an episode of sexual abuse, the investigative interview carried out with the child is often the only reliable way to collect information in order to determine if the allegations are deemed well-founded. In this context, the accuracy and the number of details obtained from the child's recollection of events are crucial. Many controlled and field studies have examined these variables (Brown et al., 2013; Goodman & Melinder, 2007; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011) and there is an existing consensus in the literature concerning the best practices in investigative interviews designed for alleged victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lyon, 2010; Saywitz & Camparo, 2009; Thakkar, Jaffe, & Vander Linden, 2015). Namely, open-ended questions have shown to

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Montreal, Pavillon Marie-Victorin, C. P. 6128, succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, H3C 3J7, Canada.

E-mail address: mireille.cyr@umontreal.ca (M. Cyr).

yield more detailed, accurate and coherent reports compared to close-ended and suggestive questions among preschool and school-aged children, even though young children's performance on these three variables is generally poorer than older counterparts (Feltis, Powell, Snow, & Hughes-Scholes, 2010; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Orbach, Katz, & Horowitz, 2012; Lamb et al., 2003; Orbach et al., 2000; Lyon, 2014; Snow, Powell, & Murfett, 2009). However, it seems difficult for the interviewers to maintain best practices especially with young children, as observed in two recent Canadian studies who reported the overuse of closed-ended questions and underuse of open-ended questions (Luther, Snook, Barron, & Lamb, 2014; Roberts & Cameron, 2015). Other studies also observed that the use of directive questions is clearly superior to more open invitations (Andrews, Lamb, & Lyon, 2015; Yi, Lamb, & Jo, 2014). Closed-ended questions limit the spontaneous recollection of events from the child, as well as decrease the quantity of information reported (Lyon, 2014; Snow et al., 2009). In addition, this type of question increases children's suggestibility, making them more likely to provide an answer even when they do not know the answer or understand the question (Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999; Walker, 2013; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2000). Furthermore, interviewers may present difficulties in adapting to the child's developmental state (Marchant, 2013; Olafson & Kenniston, 2008; Walker, 2013). They often use multiple choice or suggestive questions when interviewing preschoolers and they do not use simple language as recommended (i.e. questions may be too long and complicated, ambiguous references are made about people, etc.) (Korkman, Santtila, Drzewiecki, & Kenneth Sandnabba, 2008; Powell & Snow, 2007). The present study aims to verify the types of questions that are mainly used by interviewers when they are conducting investigative interviews in the context of sexual abuse among preschoolers, and identify the questions that are most likely to produce a quality answer, as measured by a higher number of details obtained.

1.2. Preschoolers' ability to testify

Many studies have revealed that preschoolers are less likely to disclose an episode of abuse and when they do, the number of details obtained from the child is lower and the overall report is less coherent and complex than the report provided by older counterparts (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Lamb et al., 2003, 2008; Orbach & Lamb, 2007). Yet, when preschoolers disclose an episode during an investigative interview, more than 80% of them do so through open-ended questions (Lamb et al., 2008). Research has shown that CSA as young as three years old are able to provide a short and accurate testimony of the abuse they have experienced (Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2003, 2008; Marchant, 2013; Walker, 2013). Among children aged three to five years old, open-ended and directive questions (particularly: who, what, where) should be favoured over "yes/no" questions, since they yield more accurate answers (Peterson et al., 1999; Walker, 2013; Waterman et al., 2000). However, in response to open-ended questions, very young children generally provide a shorter report, thereby increasing the challenges associated with the investigation (Marchant, 2013).

1.3. Types of questions and details provided

Researchers have created different categories of questions used by interviewers to look at the associations between the number of details provided, the type of questions used and the age of children. Consequently, definitions of question types vary among authors. However, the following broad definitions encompass the differences between articles cited in this section. Open-ended questions (e.g., invitations and open directive questions) allow the child to provide an elaborate and spontaneous response using free recall memory, while closed-ended questions (e.g., closed directive and option-posing questions) aim to find specific information provided with a few words only and using recognition memory. Suggestive questions are classified separately because they undermine the accuracy of the response, so they need to be avoided. See further definitions and examples in Table 1.

1.3.1. Open-ended questions: invitations. A few studies conducted among CSA with samples of school and preschool aged children indicate that the production of details increases with age for all types of questions, but open-ended questions, such as invitations, generally help provide better reports of events (Feltis et al., 2010; Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2003; Snow et al., 2009). This type of questions generated almost half of details in a sample of CSA aged four to eight years old (Lamb et al., 2003). At four years old, the use of invitations seems preferable to other types of questions, since they provide a greater amount of information (Lamb et al., 2003). This result was replicated by Hershkowitz et al. (2012) among a sample of CSA closer to the preschool age (three to six-year-old). The effectiveness of invitations was however age differentiated: invitations were superior to any other type of questions only for children aged five and six. Authors suggest that there may be a developmental threshold starting at five years old in order to obtain a detailed description of events following invitations, which contradicts in part Lamb et al.'s (2003) findings that pointed to this association in children as young as four years old.

1.3.2. Differences between types of invitations. There are three subtypes of open-ended invitation questions: general invitations, cued invitations and time segmentation invitations (see Table 1). Lamb et al. (2003) have looked at the associations between the subtypes of invitations and the number of details obtained, namely as it concerns the testimony of preschoolers who have been victims of sexual abuse. Results indicate that children aged four years old provided fewer details than older counterparts following general invitations, and the number of details obtained through cued invitations increased with age.

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