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Children's Memory for Conversations After a 1-Year Delay

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Forensic professionals frequently ask children to recount the occurrence and the content of allegation-relevant conversations during maltreatment investigations. However, little is known about children's conversation memory, especially after long delays that often characterize forensic investigations. Participants included 77 9-year-olds. When children were 8 years old, they participated in two to-be-remembered conversations: a target conversation and an initial interview regarding the target conversation. Memory for both conversations was examined 1 year later. After a year, children remembered the topic of the target conversation, but gist recall of statements was limited. Additionally, children demonstrated a yes-bias when answering yes/no questions about conversation statements. Virtually none of the children recalled participating in the initial interview. Our results suggest that after 1 year, children may remember the topic of seminal conversations, but memory for conversational statements may be sparse and unreliable. Furthermore, children may not recall engaging in peripheral conversations (such as interviews) after extended delays.

General Audience Summary

Children involved in maltreatment investigations discuss abuse with a variety of people in both formal and informal settings. Forensic interviewers and attorneys typically question children about prior conversations related to the maltreatment allegations. However, little is known about children's memory for conversations in which they actively participated, especially after long delays that often characterize forensic investigations. Seventy-seven children participated in two to-be-remembered conversations: a target conversation with a storyteller and an initial interview for the target conversation. Children's memory for both conversations was examined one year later during a follow-up interview. Children were eight years old when the conversations occurred, and nine years old during the 1-year follow-up interview. Following the 1-year delay, children accurately remembered the general topic of the target conversation, but they rarely remembered specific statements that were uttered. Virtually no children remembered talking to the initial interviewer. Additionally, when asked whether certain statements were said during the target conversation, children were inclined to agree that statements were said, even when they were not said during the target conversation. Our results suggest that after one year, children may remember the topic of seminal conversations, but memory for conversational statements may be sparse and unreliable. Furthermore, children may not recall engaging in peripheral conversations (such as interviews) after extended delays.

Keywords: Conversation memory, Child witnesses, Child maltreatment, Eyewitness testimony

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In almost any child maltreatment investigation, children's conversations with their alleged perpetrators and with their disclosure recipients are evaluated. Because conversations can exert a powerful influence on children's event reports (Principe & Schindewolf, 2012) and on children's maltreatment allegations (Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011), examining the content of allegation-relevant conversations is essential to understanding abuse dynamics, for testing alternative hypotheses, and for conducting reliability assessments of children's testimony (Lyon & Stolzenberg, 2014; National Children's Advocacy Center, 2016). Forensic interviewers and attorneys routinely ask children to recount allegation-relevant conversations and often inquire about specific statements that may have been said (Ahern & Lamb, 2016; Hershowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2013; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014).

However, there is a dearth of research examining the reliability of children's conversation memory, especially after long delays. Maltreatment investigations often are lengthy and delayed disclosure of abuse is common (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005). Allegation-relevant conversations often occur months or years before formal investigations where children are asked to recount these interactions. Although children often reliably report details from highly stressful experiences (Peterson, 2012) and staged events (London, Bruck, & Melynk, 2009; Price & Connolly, 2013) months after they occur, whether children accurately recount conversations from the distant past is unknown. The primary impetus of the current study was to examine: (a) children's recollection for the occurrence of conversations, and (b) children's recall and recognition memory for conversational statements after a 1-year delay.

Davis and Friedman (2007) called memory for conversation the "orphan child of eyewitness memory researchers" to emphasize the neglect of research in this area. A handful of studies have examined adults' memory for conversations with another adult (Stafford, Burggraf, & Sharkey, 1987; Stafford & Daly, 1984) or with a child (Bruck, Ceci, & Francoeur, 1999; Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Hershkowitz, & Horowitz, 2000; Warren & Woodall, 1999). Although children's memory for individual sentences and short stories has been examined (e.g., Greenhoot, Beyer, & Curtis, 2014; Reyna & Kiernan, 1994), children's memory for conversations is arguably distinct from children's memory for passively perceived verbal stimuli and is deserving of its own investigation (Davis & Friedman, 2007; Davis, Kemmelmeier, & Follette, 2005; Duke, Lee, & Pager, 2007).

Conversations are cognitively demanding in requiring that participants attend to and interpret often fragmented statements declared by their conversational partner, in combination with tone and body language, while simultaneously preparing responses that adhere to conversational maxims (Grice, 1975). The dyadic nature of conversations requires encoding, storing, and retrieving not only statements, but also the declarant of each remark. Additionally, the repetitiveness of daily discourse might make sourcing memories for specific statements difficult. Consequently, memory for conversations might be especially vulnerable to erroneous encoding, rapid decay, and source monitoring errors (Davis & Friedman, 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Duke et al., 2007). Moreover, children might not understand interviewer and attorney prompts inquiring about conversations (Evans, Stolzenberg, Lee, & Lyon, 2014; Stolzenberg et al., 2017).

Empirically supported methods for asking children about conversations do not currently exist although testing hypotheses regarding third-party influence and asking about informal disclosures are ubiquitous interviewing practices. Forensic interviewers are universally advised to use open-ended questions before yes/no questions because children provide more accurate and more elaborative responses to open-ended versus yes/no prompts (Lamb, Orbach, Hershowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007). Children often recollect some statements from dyadic conversations when prompted with open-ended questions (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2015), but recall is limited in accuracy and in completeness after relatively short delays. In our previous study (Lawson & London, 2015), eight-year-olds accurately recounted 7% and 4% of a dyadic conversation after a 1- or 3-week delay. Accuracy was judged by gist rather than for verbatim content. Children's limited conversation recall, in conjunction with evidence suggesting that many child witnesses do not spontaneously recount allegation-relevant conversations in forensic contexts (Ahern & Lamb, 2016; Malloy et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014), highlights potential challenges in eliciting information about conversations with open-ended questions.

Many questions posed by forensic professionals about conversations can be answered with a "yes" or a "no" response (Ahern & Lamb, 2016; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). However, relying on yes/no questions for eliciting conversation information might be problematic. Children usually answer yes/no questions even when they lack the necessary information to respond and are advised that "I don't know" can be an appropriate answer (Fritzley & Lee, 2003; Waterman & Blades, 2013). Children are more reluctant to admit a lack of knowledge after extended delays than during more immediate questioning (Waterman & Blades, 2013). Furthermore, children might demonstrate a response bias in answering yes/no questions, especially when questions are confusing, the subject of the question is unfamiliar, and/or after experiencing a delay (Fritzley & Lee, 2003; Fritzley, Lindsay, & Lee, 2013). Asking false yes/no questions (i.e., questions where the correct answer is no) might be particularly problematic because children often acquiesce to false questions even when the content concerns potentially stressful experiences such as a dentist appointment (Rocha, Marche, & Briere, 2013) or physical trauma (Peterson & Biggs, 1997). Children are more inclined to agree with false questions months after the to-be-remembered event occurs than soon after the experience (London et al., 2009; Rocha et al., 2013). In our prior study, children who experienced a 1-week delay from the target conversation to the initial interview answered 74% of the yes/no questions correctly. Children who experienced a 3-week delay were significantly less accurate in answering yes/no questions (68% of questions were answered correctly) compared to children who experienced a 1-week delay. Whether children demonstrated a response bias was not examined.

The current investigation expands upon our original study by reevaluating children's conversation memory after a 1-year

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