A systematic review of the reliability of children's event reports after discussing experiences with a naïve, knowledgeable, or misled parent☆

Monica Lawson[a,*], Lillian Rodriguez-Steen[b], Kamala London[c]

[a] *University of Notre Dame, 390 Corbett Family Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, United States*
[b] *University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2000 Simcoe Street North, Oshawa, ON L1H7K4, Canada*
[c] *University of Toledo, 1880B University Hall, Toledo, OH 43606, United States*

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment allegations often initially arise during informal conversations between children and a non-offending parent. Whether and how initial parent-child discussions influence the reliability of children's subsequent forensic reports are critical contemporary questions regarding child witness testimony. In the current paper, we systematically reviewed the extant empirical literature regarding the effects of parent-child discussions on the accuracy of children's subsequent event reports. PsycINFO, PubMed, and Web of Science databases were searched for English-language, peer-reviewed papers that examined children's (defined as participants 17-years-old or younger) reports after they discussed a target event with a parent. The systematic search yielded 23 eligible studies. To facilitate interpretation of the reviewed findings within the autobiographical memory and child witness literatures, our review is organized according to whether parents were naïve, knowledgeable, or misled prior to conversing with their children. We also report whether the studies demonstrated facilitative, misinformation, or non-significant effects of the parent-child discussion on the accuracy of children's reports during a subsequent memory interview with a researcher. Consistent with the broader child memory literature, facilitative effects were often found among studies where children discussed the target event with a knowledgeable parent. In addition, misinformation effects were frequently observed among studies with misled parents. Limitations of the current studies, including generalizability of the observations to experiences on which children testify, and recommendations for future research and for forensic professionals are discussed.

Discussions about past experiences have important mnemonic consequences for children's autobiographical memory and forensic reports. Event-related discussions may facilitate children's memory by providing opportunities for rehearsing event details and by fostering connections between events and the self (Fivush, 2011; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pipe, Sutherland, Webster, Jones, & La Rooy, 2004). Alternatively, event-related discussions may hinder the accuracy of children's memory by exposing children to erroneous event details (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 2006; London, Bruck, & Melnyk, 2009; Principe & Schindewolf, 2012). The extent to which conversations between children and an unfamiliar researcher bolster or impede the reliability of children's memory as it applies to forensic contexts has been a central focus of much of the extant child witness

research. However, in the vast majority of child maltreatment cases that come to the attention of authorities, children make initial outcries to someone in their everyday lives, such as a non-offending parent (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2013). That is, children involved in child maltreatment investigations typically have talked to a parent about the events in question prior to being forensically interviewed. Elucidating whether and under what circumstances parent-child discussions (as opposed to conversations with an unfamiliar adult) influence the reliability of children's subsequent reports are critical contemporary questions regarding child witness memory.

The accuracy of children's disclosures to their parent(s) is undeniably important because official reports are often made on the basis of these initial accusations. Parents may provide information to the investigation team regarding their children's disclosures, which establishes a foundation for questioning children during the forensic interview (Rivard & Compo, 2017). In addition, hearsay exceptions generally allow parents to testify about their children's initial statements (Lyon & Stolzenberg, 2014; Meyers, 2011). Notwithstanding, once the formal investigation is initiated, identifying whether earlier allegation-relevant conversations between child witnesses and their parents may have influenced children's formal forensic reports are central concerns (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Goodman, Jones, & McLeod, 2017; Goodman, Quas, Bulkley, & Shapiro, 1999; Newlin et al., 2015; O'Donohue, Benuto, & Cirlugea, 2013; Powell & Lancaster, 2003). The current paper provides a systematic review of the extant empirical literature examining the objective accuracy of children's event reports after children discussed the target experience with a parent. From this systematic review, the breadth of the existing literature, its limitations, and patterns among the data are identified. Recommendations for future research and for forensic professionals are provided.

The following systematic review is organized according to whether parents were naïve (i.e., lacked knowledge about the target event), knowledgeable (i.e., observed the event or had correct information regarding the event), or misled (i.e., had incorrect information about the event) prior to conversing with their children. Whether interviewers have *a priori* beliefs regarding the events in question has an enduring impact on children's concurrent and subsequent reports (for reviews see Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 2006; Rohrabaugh, London, & Hall, 2016). The term *interviewer bias* describes situations in which interviews are conducted in a manner to elicit reports that are consistent with the interviewers' preconceptions of the interviewees' experience. Biased interviewers engage in a confirmatory bias strategy in which details that confirm their preexisting beliefs are emphasized and contradictory information is negated (Kassin, Dror, & Kukucka, 2013). Biased interviewers frequently employ leading questioning techniques, including positive and negative reinforcement and repeating questions when previous responses did not affirm the interviewers' theories (Ceci & Bruck, 2006; Rohrabaugh et al., 2016). Children often provide reports that coincide with the interviewers' pre-established beliefs (Thompson, Clarke-Stewart, & Lepore, 1997). When questioned by erroneously biased interviewers, misinformation effects have been observed during subsequent unbiased interviews (London et al., 2009; Melnyk & Bruck, 2004; Thompson et al., 1997). On the basis of this research, investigators are recommended to test alternative hypotheses regarding parental biases and whether initial parental questioning may have influenced children's subsequent forensic reports (Newlin et al., 2015; O'Donohue et al., 2013; Powell & Lancaster, 2003). Demonstrating the potential for contamination resulting from parental inquiry is a core component of the defense strategy in cases involving maltreatment allegations and can also be pertinent in divorce and child custody cases (Goodman et al., 1999; Powell & Lancaster, 2003).

An implicit assumption in the forensic developmental literature is that children's reports are similarly influenced by biased interviewers regardless of their status as a parent or an unfamiliar adult. Preliminary empirical evidence, however, suggests that the relationship status of the interviewer may differentially impact children's *interrogative suggestibility* (i.e., how readily children acquiesce to misleading questions or agree with misinformation during a particular conversation; Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995; Jackson & Crockenberg, 1998). Children may be less inclined to agree with misleading questions posed by a biased parent than a biased stranger given the familiarity of the parent-child relationship and the frequency in which parents and children likely discuss conflicting opinions during daily discourse (Goodman et al., 1995; Jackson & Crockenberg, 1998). However, once an official investigation is initiated, whether initial discussions with a misled parent could have influenced the accuracy of children's subsequent event reports via *misinformation effects* and *source misattribution errors* are paramount questions for forensic professionals.

In the context of parent-child discussions, *misinformation effects* may occur when parents introduce false information during the conversation and children later report such erroneous details when subsequently recalling the event. *Source misattribution errors* may occur when children are unable to explicitly differentiate whether erroneous information suggested by a parent actually happened or was only introduced by their parent during conversation (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). A large child suggestibility literature demonstrates that misinformation effects and source misattribution errors are more or less likely to occur depending on various circumstances, such as the child's age and the timing of the post-event information in reference to the target event and the formal interview (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 2006 for reviews). For example, source monitoring abilities improve across the preschool years (Johnson et al., 1993), indicating that younger children may be especially vulnerable to commit source misattribution errors. In addition, misinformation effects are more likely to occur after the passage of time and memory for the target event weakens (Loftus, 2005; London et al., 2009). Therefore, in the following review, design elements such as child participant age and delay from the event to the parent-child discussion and from the discussion to the interview are emphasized.

Just as exposing children to false post-event information may distort their reports, true post-event information has been shown to bolster children's recall (London et al., 2009; Melnyk & Bruck, 2004). In that vein, parent-child discussions may have a *facilitative effect* on children's subsequent memory. Sociocultural theories of autobiographical memory development suggest that parent-child discussions of past experiences are critical in aiding children's memory consolidation and for fostering children's ability to communicate about past events through narratives (Fivush, 2011; Fivush et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). In addition, when considering children's memory for traumatic experiences, such as child abuse and neglect, discussions with a parent may be especially