

# The consistency of false suggestions moderates children's reports of a single instance of a repeated event: Predicting increases and decreases in suggestibility

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## Abstract

Participants (6- and 7-year-olds,  $N = 130$ ) participated in classroom activities four times. Children were interviewed about the final occurrence (target event) either 1 week or 4 weeks later, during which half of the event items were described inaccurately. Half of these suggestions were consistent with the theme of the detail across the occurrences (e.g., always sat on a kind of floor mat) or were inconsistent (e.g., sat on a chair). When memory for the target event was tested 1 day later, children falsely recognized fewer inconsistent suggestions than consistent suggestions, especially compared with a control group of children who experienced the event just one time. Furthermore, the longer delay reduced accuracy only for consistent suggestions. Source-monitoring ability was strongly and positively related to resistance to suggestions, and encouraging children to identify the source of false suggestions allowed them to retract a significant proportion of their reports of inconsistent suggestions but not of consistent suggestions. The results suggest that the gist consistency of suggestions determines whether event repetition increases or decreases suggestibility.

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## Introduction

After decades of careful research, there is now a broad knowledge base on the capabilities and vulnerabilities of child witnesses (for a review, see [Gordon, Baker-Ward, & Ornstein, 2001](#)). Because a sizable proportion of child witnesses allege multiple crimes, it is unfortunate that most of the research has studied children's eyewitness memories for isolated events. Children's memories of repeated events differ quantitatively and qualitatively from memories of events experienced just one time ([Fivush, 1984](#); [Fivush, Kuebli, & Clubb, 1992](#); [Kuebli & Fivush, 1994](#); [Powell & Thomson, 1996](#); see also review by [Hudson, Fivush, & Kuebli, 1992](#)). Repeated experience, for example, can wipe out age differences in suggestibility ([Powell, Roberts, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1999](#)). Hence, there is a major omission in our knowledge of the processes affecting children's testimony, and scientists are limited in their ability to provide the legal profession with empirically based conclusions about children's memories of repeated experiences.

An especially important issue is children's suggestibility after repeated experiences. Compared with reports from children who have experienced an event one time, event repetition makes children highly resistant to suggestions about details that were identical in each occurrence of the event ([Connolly & Lindsay, 2001](#); [Powell et al., 1999](#)). It is not yet clear, however, how event repetition affects reactions to suggestions about details that vary each time (e.g., a child abuse victim could be abused at different times and in different places). Repetition of items that vary in each occurrence has been shown to increase suggestibility ([Connolly & Lindsay, 2001](#); [Powell & Roberts, 2002](#)), to decrease suggestibility ([Powell, Roberts, & Thomson, 2000](#)), and to have no discernible effect on suggestibility ([Powell & Roberts, 2002](#); [Powell et al., 1999](#)). To this point, researchers have identified postevent factors that determine the direction of event repetition effects on suggestibility. Event repetition is more likely to increase children's suggestibility when, for example, the suggestions are explicitly linked to the occurrence that is later the target of the memory test rather than linked generally to the series of events ([Powell et al., 2000](#)). It is probable, however, that qualities of the event representation itself influence suggestibility, and so we investigated whether the consistency of suggestions to the gist of experienced details affected levels of suggestibility. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that children would be more suggestible when the suggestions were consistent with the gist of experienced details than when they were gist inconsistent and that this effect would be stronger in children with prior experience of the event than in those with no prior experience.

A second aim of this investigation was to determine the relation between source-monitoring skills and suggestibility after repeated experiences. Specifically, we tested whether source-monitoring instructions enabled children to retract their false reports, and we expected that such instructions would be more successful in retracting reports of gist-inconsistent suggestions than of gist-consistent suggestions. We begin by discussing memory representations of repeated experiences.

### *The consistency effect*

Children can have remarkably good memories of routine events ([Davidson, 1996](#); [Roberts & Powell, 2001](#)). Like adults, children have the capacity to store large amounts of knowledge in schemata or knowledge structures that contain typical elements of a given entity such as people, objects, places, and events ([Fivush, 1984](#); [Nelson, 1986](#); [Schank & Abelson, 1977](#)).

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