



## Children's metacognitive judgments in an eyewitness identification task

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### Abstract

Two experiments examined children's metacognitive monitoring of recognition judgments within an eyewitness identification paradigm. A confidence–accuracy (CA) calibration approach was used to examine patterns of calibration, over-/underconfidence, and resolution. In Experiment 1, children ( $n = 619$ , mean age = 11 years 10 months) and adults ( $n = 600$ ) viewed a simulated crime and attempted two separate identifications from 8-person target-present or target-absent lineups given lineup instructions that manipulated witnesses choosing patterns by varying the degree of social pressure. For choosers, but not nonchoosers, meaningful CA relations were observed for adults but not for children. Experiment 2 tested a guided hypothesis disconfirmation manipulation designed to improve the realism of children's metacognitive judgments. Children ( $N = 796$ , mean age = 11 years 11 months) in experimental and control conditions viewed a crime and attempted two separate identifications. The manipulation had minimal impact on the CA relation for choosers and nonchoosers. In contrast to adults, children's identification confidence provides no useful guide for investigators about the likely guilt or innocence of a suspect. These experiments revealed limitations in children's metacognitive monitoring processes that have not been apparent in previous research on recall and recognition with younger children.

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## Introduction

Children, like adults, sometimes witness crimes. Furthermore, they occasionally will be asked by police to view a lineup or photoarray to see whether they can identify the offender. Indeed, UK data on the involvement of different age groups of witnesses at police lineups suggest a significant involvement of young people, especially for some crime categories (Pike, Brace, & Kynan, 2002). As occurs with adult witnesses, children's identifications may shape the nature and direction of police investigations and are used as evidence in court. It is important, therefore, that we recognize the strengths and limitations of child witnesses in the identification test context.

Given the impact that a positive identification can have on a police investigation and any subsequent trial, a major concern is whether a child's identification is accurate. During recent years, eyewitness fallibility has been highlighted by laboratory and field studies (Cutler & Penrod, 1995; Innocence Project, 2006; Wells et al., 1998). For child witnesses' identifications, this concern is heightened by one well-documented characteristic of children's performance: Compared with adults, children and young adolescents (~9–13 years of age) are more likely to make a positive identification (i.e., to choose) from a lineup, particularly when presented with a culprit- or target-absent lineup (Parker & Carranza, 1989; Parker & Ryan, 1993; Pozzulo & Lindsay, 1998). The latter, of course, is precisely the type of identification test outcome that can result in a wrongful conviction. Acknowledging these concerns, the focus of the experiments reported here is on a variable that may assist in the discrimination of accurate identifications from inaccurate ones. Specifically, we examined whether children's identification confidence is informative for the diagnosis of identification accuracy (Experiment 1) and whether an intervention designed to improve children's scaling of their identification confidence rendered it of greater diagnostic value (Experiment 2). Not only are the answers to these questions important from the perspective of interpreting children's identification responses, but they also contribute to developmental theorizing by refining our understanding of children's metacognitive monitoring and judgment capacities.

What is known about the confidence–accuracy (CA) relation for child witnesses or about developmental trends in the CA relation? Given the well-documented fallibility of children at identification tests, the identification of variables (e.g., confidence) that either assist in or are irrelevant to the discrimination of accurate and inaccurate responses is crucial. Several eyewitness identification studies have reported data on the CA relation for children, with modest point-biserial CA correlations generally reported (e.g., Leippe, Romanczyk, & Manion, 1991; Parker & Carranza, 1989; Parker, Haverfield, & Baker-Thomas, 1986; Parker & Myers, 2001; Parker & Ryan, 1993; Peters, 1987). In a recent eyewitness identification study, Brewer and Day (2005) contrasted CA correlations for two groups of individuals with average ages around 10 years (children) and 16 years (adolescents) and also charted identification accuracy against certainty expressed by participants (on a 5-point scale anchored by *really unsure* and *really sure*). Although the CA correlations for both groups were similarly low (.26 and .33, respectively), the accuracy–certainty relations differed markedly in other ways. At each level of certainty, children's identification accuracy was much lower than that for adolescents. Children's relative overconfidence when compared with that of 16-year-olds was most evident from the finding that, when participants were *really sure* about the accuracy of their identification, the proportion

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