

THE CHALLENGES WITH “BEFORE” AND “AFTER” QUESTIONS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

The ability to articulate the order of events is a critical element necessary for understanding a child's experience. Factors that influence children's memories for events can include prior knowledge or experiences (i.e., did the maltreatment occur one time or numerous times), the length of delay between events and recall, how familiar the child is with the interview environment, and the phrasing of questions asked during the interview. Being able to recall not only what happened, but also the order in which events happened is central to eyewitness reports.



Event Sequencing is Challenging for Preschoolers

Event sequencing can be particularly challenging for preschool children because language acquisition is a gradual, uneven process. “Before” and “after”, used to indicate time or temporal order, show up in children's speech long before they have *mastered* the rules for their use (early elementary school years).

Understanding newly acquired linguistical rules can be fragile, operating well when used in familiar sentence structures to talk about familiar things but operating uncertainly in novel or stressful circumstances (i.e., a forensic interview).

A common area of misunderstanding occurs when interviewers ask children “before or after” questions (e.g., “Did your dad hit you before or after he locked the door?” or “Did the touching happen before or after Christmas?”). Again, even at a young age, children can use the words “before” and “after” accurately when they talk about events that are familiar to them, but when they attempt to describe unfamiliar events, or are questioned about an event, they can confuse the two. This is particularly likely to happen if the words do not match the actual order of events they describe.



Let's examine the following example: A child's brother comes home from school, mom and the brother have an argument, and then the brother hits the child. If a child discloses to the mother before dinner, then the question that, “Did you tell your mom before you ate dinner?” matches the order of events. “Before you ate dinner, did you tell your mom?” does not match the order of events.

Preschoolers will often respond to “before” questions with what occurred “after”. This is known as “order of encoding bias” and is an example of preschoolers being forward-order thinkers. Answers to before/after questions are more likely to be accurate if they reflect the order of the event; otherwise, especially with children 5 and under, they may simply reflect whether the child told mom and not when.

In a 2020 study by Kleffuss, et. al., the authors reported that preschool children appeared to be able to report the “first” action in an event. Asking what action occurred first could possibly be an alternative to asking “before” or “after”. It should be noted that the child is not being asked about the “first time” just “what happened first” in a particular event. This is developing research and is an interesting direction for future forensic interviewing practice.

Using a Recurring Occasion as an Event Marker

Another before or after question often posed in a forensic interview is asking if an event occurred before or after a holiday, birthday, or other occasion (i.e., Did it happen before or after Christmas?). This is a forced choice question, and many preschoolers may not realize that “I don’t know” is an option and may often choose an option even if it is incorrect. Secondly because holidays/birthdays occur repeatedly, an event could be both before and after. If the event in question occurred closely after a “target event” (i.e., birthday), a child might say afterwards. However, there is some research which indicates that if the target event occurred more than a few months in the past, children, when asked the “before or after” question, may say before because they are thinking of the upcoming birthday, not the one which recently occurred.

What Does This Mean for the Forensic Interview



- Avoid asking a preschooler before or after questions.
- Ask about the first action in one event.
- Accept that preschool children can often answer who, what, and maybe a where. Do not expect that they will be able to accurately respond to all of the questions posed in a forensic interview.

References

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