

Administering Interview Instructions in Forensic Interviews of Children



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Scope

This bibliography provides citations and abstracts to the most significant English-language literature concerning administration of interview instructions, also known as ground rules, for forensic interviews with children.

Organization

Entries are arranged in date descending order.

Disclaimer

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Administering Interview Instructions in Forensic Interviews of Children

A Bibliography

Steen, R., & Lillian, A. (2022). [Examining interview ground rules in formal interviews with children](#) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Ontario Institute of Technology].

Within the context of formal interviews with children, accuracy and clarity are paramount. Thus, protocols for interviewing children establish ground rules to encourage children to, for example, say “I don’t know,” “I don’t understand,” or correct interviewer mistakes as necessary. Interview ground rules are intended to facilitate children’s success during formal questioning. Despite widespread recommendation and use of such instructions, relatively little is known regarding children’s understanding and implementation of these rules; and adults’ perceptions of children’s application of the ground rules have yet to be investigated. The current thesis fills crucial gaps in the literature regarding the ground rules for interviews with children, particularly the “I don’t understand” rule. Three studies are presented. Study 1 tested a novel intervention aimed at increasing children’s appropriate use of the “I don’t understand” rule. Results indicate that child age and “I don’t understand” rule reminders impacted children’s clarification requests to tricky questions in that older children and children who received such reminders requested clarification more frequently than younger children and children who did not receive reminders. Study 2 investigated individual differences (age, ADHD diagnosis, and executive functioning) in how children understand the ground rules and whether, how, and under what circumstances children apply the ground rules. Results demonstrate that children did not differ based on individual differences in ADHD diagnosis or executive functioning with respect to ground rule understanding or application but older children did exhibit a significantly higher degree of ground rule understanding than younger children. Study 3 examined adult perceptions of children’s use of the “I don’t understand” rule compared to the “I don’t know” rule, including how many times they applied either rule in an investigative interview about sexual abuse. Results indicate that the child who applied either ground rule only once during their interview was viewed more positively than the child who applied either ground rule multiple times, though the type of rule applied by the child had little impact on mock jurors’ perceptions. Together, the proposed studies yield valuable insights into the widely used but under-researched ground rules for conducting interviews with children.

Fessinger, M. B., McWilliams, K., Bakth, F. N., & Lyon, T. D. (2021). [Setting the ground rules: Use and practice of ground rules in child forensic interviews](#). *Child Maltreatment*, 26(1), 126-132. DOI:10.1177/10775595209107

Most child forensic interviewing protocols recommend that interviewers administer a series of ground rules to emphasize concepts that are important to accurately answering interview questions. Limited research has examined whether interviewers follow ground rules recommendations in real-world forensic interviews. In this study, we examined how often highly trained interviewers presented and practiced each of the recommended ground rules. We also examined whether children accurately responded to practice questions. We coded transcripts from 241 forensic interviews of 4- to 12-year-old children conducted by interviewers in the United States who were largely trained using the Ten Step Investigative Interview. Results demonstrated that interviewers routinely presented and practiced the ground rules, but this significantly varied by children's age. Additionally, children often accurately responded to practice questions, but younger children were less accurate than older children. Taken together, results highlight that interviewers may deviate from ground rules recommendations based on the characteristics of the child, which has implications for both future research and practice.

Gongola, J., Quas, J. A., Clark, S. E., & Lyon, T. D. (2021). Adults' difficulties in identifying concealment among children interviewed with the putative confession instructions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 35(1), 18-25. DOI:10.1002/acp.3729

The putative confession (PC) instructions (“[suspect] told me everything that happened and wants you to tell the truth”) increases children's honesty. However, research has shown that children who maintain secrecy despite the PC are more convincing. We examined whether (a) the PC undermines adults' deception detection abilities or (b) children who conceal despite the PC are better deceivers. Adults evaluated truthful and deceptive children interviewed with the PC where the PC portion of the interview was either present or absent. Adults' deception detection was no worse when the PC was present; in fact, it was slightly better. Rather than negatively affecting adults' ability to detect deception, the PC selects an unusually convincing group of concealers.

Henderson, H. M., & Lyon, T. D. (2021). [Children's signaling of incomprehension: The diagnosticity of practice questions during interview instructions](#). *Child Maltreatment*, 26(1), 95-104. DOI:10.1177/1077559520971350

Forensic interviewers are routinely advised to instruct children that they should indicate when they do not understand a question. This study examined whether administering the instruction with a practice question may help interviewers identify the means by which individual children signal incomprehension. We examined 446 interviews with children questioned about abuse, including 252 interviews in which interviewers administered the instruction with a practice question (4- to 13-year-old children; Mage = 7.7). Older children more often explicitly referred to incomprehension when answering the practice question and throughout the interviews, whereas younger children simply requested repetition or gave “don't know” responses, and individual children's responses to the practice questions predicted their responses later in the interviews. Similarly, older children were more likely to seek confirmation of their understanding of interviewers' questions and to request specification. The results highlight the need for interviewers to test and closely monitor younger children's responses for ambiguous signs of incomprehension.

Lawrence, K. (2021). [Ground rules in forensic interviews: Should we make practice more applied?](#) [Doctoral dissertation, The Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington].

Introducing ground rules is recommended in many forensic interview best-practice protocols, but children do not always use them when they should. There is not yet a consensus in the literature on the best way to teach the rules, and many of the practice methods researched are not feasible for practitioners. Additionally, increased intensity of practice can lead to adverse effects on other aspects of child testimony too. We draw on cognitive learning literature to understand how to better facilitate ground rule use amongst children in forensic interviews. Ninety-three children between the ages of 5-12 from Greater Wellington region, New Zealand, participated in a staged event at their school and were interviewed using the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol (Lamb et al., 2018) 2-3 weeks later. At the interview, children practised the ground rules ‘I don't know’ (IDK), ‘I don't understand’ (IDU) and ‘Correct me’ (CM) in one of four ways which varied by the degree of match between the practice and interview context. Children were asked difficult questions designed to elicit the rules throughout the interview, and coding children's accuracy of reporting also examined the broader effects of

practice method and rule use. No significant effects were found between the practice method and responses to difficult questions for the IDK and CM rules. The Control condition, which received no ground rules instruction or practice, was significantly different to the other practice conditions for the IDU rule. In addition to this, there was no significant effect of practice method or competency at using ground rules on children's general accuracy about the event. Several possible explanations for this pattern of results are explored in the discussion section.

McWilliams, K., Williams, S., Stolzenberg, S. N., Evans, A. D., & Lyon, T. D. (2021). [Don't know responding in young maltreated children: The effects of wh-questions type and enhanced interview instructions.](#) *Law and Human Behavior*, 45(2), 124-137.
DOI:10.1037/lhb0000404

Two studies examined 4–7-year-old maltreated children's "I don't know" (IDK) responses to wh-questions after receiving various interview instructions. We predicted (H1) children would be less inclined to give IDK responses and more inclined to guess to color/number questions compared to other wh- questions; (H2) IDK instructions would increase children's IDK responding compared to no instructions, with an increase in accuracy; but (H3) instructions would be less effective in reducing guessing for color/number questions than other wh- questions. In Study 1, we predicted that (H4) verbalizing a commitment to answer IDK would be particularly effective. In Study 2, we predicted that (H5) IDK instructions would reduce children's accurate corrective responses, but that (H6) the negative effect of IDK instructions on corrective responses would be alleviated by a "correct the interviewer" instruction. Across 2 studies, 301 four- to seven-year-old ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.09$) maltreated children viewed videos and answered wh- questions about true and false details. Both studies included a within-subjects manipulation of wh- types (color/number & wh- detail) and a between-subjects manipulation of instructions (Study 1: IDK practice, IDK practice/verbalize, control; Study 2: IDK, correct me, IDK + correct me, control). In both studies, (a) color/number questions elicited more guessing than wh- detail questions, (b) IDK instructions decreased inaccurate responses, but they also decreased accurate responses, including accurate corrective responses, and (c) IDK instructions had a larger effect on wh- detail questions, reducing accurate corrective responses. In Study 1, verbalization failed to enhance the effect of instructions. In Study 2, the negative effect of IDK instructions on accurate corrective responses was not alleviated by instructions to correct the interviewer. Among young maltreated children, color/number questions elicit higher rates of guessing than other wh- questions. IDK instructions

reduced inaccurate responses, but also reduced accurate responses. (PsycInfo Database Record © 2022 APA, all rights reserved)

Brown, D. A., Lewis, C. N., Lamb, M. E., Gwynne, J., Kitto, O., & Stairmand, M. (2019). [Developmental differences in children's learning and use of forensic ground rules during an interview about an experienced event](#). *Developmental Psychology*, 55(8), 1626-1639. DOI:10.1037/dev0000756

Children often answer questions when they do not have the requisite knowledge or when they do not understand them. We examined whether ground rules instruction—to say “I don’t know,” to tell the truth, and to correct the interviewer when necessary—assisted children in applying those rules during an interview about a past event and whether doing so was associated with more accurate accounts. We compared children with intellectual disabilities (mild or moderate severity, n = 44, 7–12 years) with 3 groups of typically developing children (2 matched for mental age, and 1 for chronological age, n = 55, 4–12 years) on their understanding of 3 ground rules, their use of these rules in an interview, and their accuracy in recalling a personally experienced event. Many children were able to demonstrate proficiency with the rules following simple instruction but others required additional teaching. Children applied the rules sparingly in the interview. Their scores on the practice trials of each rule were unrelated to each other, and to the use of the rules in context. Their developmental level was significantly related to both of these skills. Regression models showed that developmental level was the best predictor of children’s accuracy when they recounted their experience during the interview but that use of responses consistent with the rules, in conjunction with developmental level, predicted accurate resistance to suggestive questions. Future research should identify how best to prepare children of different ages and cognitive abilities to answer adults’ questions appropriately.

Lamb, M. E., Brown, D. A., Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., & Espline, P. W. (2018). Contributions to testimony: Preparation for the interview and questioning strategies. In *Tell Me What Happened: Questioning Children about Abuse*, 2nd ed. (pp. 54-66). New York: Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Brubacher, S. P., Poole, D. A., & Dickinson, J. J. (2015). The use of ground rules in investigative interviews with children: A synthesis and call for research. *Developmental Review, 36*, 15-33. DOI:10.1016/j.dr.2015.01.001

Guidelines for conducting investigative interviews with children often include instructions that explain the conversational rules of the interview. Despite the widespread and international use of such instructions (also referred to as “ground rules”), the body of research characterizing children's understanding of these rules and documenting the impact of instruction on memory reports is relatively small. We review the use of ground rules in investigative interviews, the developmental differences that likely underlie children's ability to make sense of these rules, and research pertaining to the effects of the ground rules commonly included in interview guidelines on the reports of 3- to 13-year-old children. We then present a study space analysis concerning the five ground rules reviewed: (a) a statement about interviewer naïveté regarding the target events, (b) instructions to tell the interviewer when a mistake has been made, (c) cautions that some questions may be repeated, and instructions to say (d) “I don't understand” and (e) “I don't know.” The results demonstrate obvious gaps in this body of literature, with only the “I don't know” ground rule having received significant attention. In addition to exploring how individual rules impact interview performance, we encourage more process-oriented studies that relate developmental differences in ground rules benefits to the cognitive processes that underlie rule understanding and implementation. Optimally, this research should identify the most suitable format and placement of instruction in interviews and broaden to more often include field studies of child witnesses.

Danby, M. C., Brubacher, S. P., Sharman, S. J., & Powell, M. B. (2015). The effects of practice on children's ability to apply ground rules in a narrative interview. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law, 33*(4), 446-458. DOI:10.1002/bsl.2194

Despite the widespread use of ground rules in forensic interview guidelines, it is unknown whether children retain and apply these rules throughout narrative interviews. We evaluated the capacity of 260 five- to nine-year-olds to utilize three ground rules. At the beginning of the interview all children heard the rules; half also practiced them. Children then responded to open-ended prompts about a repeated laboratory event and were assessed for their application of the rules. Logistic regressions revealed that practice only benefitted the use of the “don't know” rule. Although the children accurately answered “don't understand” and “correct me” practice questions, practice

appeared to give no greater benefit than just hearing the rules. Results suggest that the current format of ground rule practice in interview guidelines is appropriate for the “don’t know” rule, but the other rules may require more extensive practice with this age group. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Dickinson, J. J., Brubacher, S. P., & Poole, D. A. (2015). [Children’s performance on ground rules questions: Implications for forensic interviewing](#). *Law and Human Behavior*, 39(1), 87–97. DOI:10.1037/lhb0000119

Ground rules, also called interview instructions, are included in investigative interviews with children around the world. These rules aim to manage the expectations of children who are typically unaccustomed to being questioned by adults who are naïve to the children’s experiences. Although analog research has examined the efficacy of ground rules instruction, a systematic analysis of children’s ability to respond appropriately to each of the rules has not been reported. In the current study, we scored the accuracy of children’s (N = 501, 4 to 12 years) responses to 5 ground rules practice questions (e.g., “What is my dog’s name?”) and 2 questions that asked whether they would follow the rules, and then assigned inaccurate responses to 1 of several error categories. Few children answered every question correctly, but their performance on individual questions was encouraging. As expected, there were marked differences in children’s understanding across ground rules questions (especially among the younger children), with “Don’t guess” and “Tell the truth” rules being the easiest to comprehend. Together with evidence that ground rules instruction takes little time to deliver (typically 2 to 4 min) and is associated with improved accuracy in previous research, these findings support the use of ground rules in investigative interviews of children 4 years and older. (APA PsycInfo Database Record © 2016 APA, all rights reserved)

Krähenbühl, S. J., Blades, M., & Cherryman, J. (2015). A qualitative examination of “Ground Rules” implementation practice in investigative interviews with children. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 22(6), 830-841. DOI:10.1080/13218719.2015.1015206

There are specific guidelines for forensic interviews with children [for example, Crown Prosecution Service. (2011). *Achieving best evidence in criminal proceedings: Guidance on interviewing victims and witnesses, and guidance on using special measures*. London: Crown Prosecution Service]. Such guidelines include a set of “ground rules” – these are procedures that

should be followed at the start of an interview to explain the nature of the interview to a child and to ensure that evidence is obtained in a legally appropriate way. The procedures are also used as a way to demonstrate how well a child understands aspects of the interview. This study investigated how ground rules were implemented in 51 investigative interviews with child witnesses and victims alleging criminal activities. The results showed that there was a lack of consistency in ground rule implementation, and that even when ground rules were implemented, their relevance to the remainder of the interview was not made clear. These findings highlight concerns as to the efficacy of ground rule implementation practices.

Waterman, A. H., & Blades, M. (2011). Helping children correctly say “I don't know” to unanswerable questions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 17(4), 396-405.
DOI:10.1037/a0026150

Adults ask children questions in a variety of contexts, for example, in the classroom, in the forensic context, or in experimental research. In such situations children will inevitably be asked some questions to which they do not know the answer, because they do not have the required information (“unanswerable” questions). When asked unanswerable questions, it is important that children indicate that they do not have the required information to provide an answer. These 2 studies investigated whether preinterview instructions (Experiment 1) or establishing a memory narrative (Experiment 2) helped children correctly indicate a lack of knowledge to unanswerable questions. In both studies, 6- and 8-year-olds participated in a classroom-based event about which they were subsequently interviewed. Some of the questions were answerable, and some were unanswerable. Results showed that preinterview instructions increased the number of younger children's appropriate “don't know” responses to unanswerable questions, without decreasing correct responses to answerable questions. This suggests that demand characteristics affect children's tendency correctly to say “I don't know.” The opportunity to provide a narrative account increased children's appropriate “don't know” responses to unanswerable yes/no questions, and increased the number of younger children's correct responses to answerable questions. This suggests that cognitive factors also contribute to children's tendency correctly to say “I don't know.” These results have implications for any context where adults need to obtain information from children through questioning, for example, a health practitioner asking about a medical condition, in

classroom discourse, in the investigative interview, and in developmental psychology research. (PsycINFO Database Record © 2016 APA, all rights reserved)

Evans, A. D., & Lee, K. (2010). Promising to tell the truth makes 8-to 16-year olds more honest. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 28(6), 801-811. DOI:10.1002/bsl.960

Techniques commonly used to increase truth-telling in most North American jurisdiction courts include requiring witnesses to discuss the morality of truth- and lie-telling and to promise to tell the truth prior to testifying. While promising to tell the truth successfully decreases younger children's lie-telling, the influence of discussing the morality of honesty and promising to tell the truth on adolescents' statements has remained unexamined. In Experiment 1, 108 youngsters, aged 8–16 years, were left alone in the room and asked not to peek at the answers to a test. The majority of participants peeked at the test answers and then lied about their transgression. More importantly, participants were eight times more likely to change their response from a lie to the truth after promising to tell the truth. Experiment 2 confirmed that the results of Experiment 1 were not solely due to repeated questioning or the moral discussion of truth- and lie-telling. These results suggest that, while promising to tell the truth influences the truth-telling behaviors of adolescents, a moral discussion of truth and lies does not. Legal implications are discussed.

Lyon, T. D., & Dorado, J. S. (2008). [Truth induction in young maltreated children. The effects of oath-taking and reassurance on true and false disclosures.](#) *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 32(7), 738-748. DOI:10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.08.008

Two studies examined increased disclosure among children who would qualify as competent to take the oath. In Study 2 neither the oath nor reassurance increased false reports among children who would qualify as competent, whether yes/no questions or tag questions were asked. Among non-competent children, reassurance (but not the oath) increased false reports. Children were more likely to accuse the confederate of the transgression than to implicate themselves. The results suggest that a promise to tell the truth may increase true disclosures without increasing false allegations. Reassurance that specifically mentions the target activity also increases true disclosures, but may increase acquiescence among some children. A child-friendly version of the oath may be a useful addition to child interviews. The effects of the oath or reassurance (“truth induction”) on 5- to 7-year-old maltreated children's true and false reports of a minor

transgression. In both studies an interviewer elicited a promise to tell the truth, reassured children that they would not get in trouble for disclosing the transgression, or gave no instructions before questioning the child. In Study 1, children were encouraged to play with an attractive toy by a confederate, who then informed them that they might get in trouble for playing. In Study 2, a confederate engaged children in play, but did not play with the attractive toy. In Study 1, the oath and reassurance.

Russell, A. (2006). Best practices in child forensic interviews: Interview instructions and truth-lie discussions. *Journal of Public Law and Policy*, 28(1), 99-130.

There is minimal empirical evidence that providing interview instructions at the beginning of a forensic interview is the most effective way to enable children to resist social expectations that may undermine truthfulness. Although children may be able to resist suggestion or indicate when they do not know an answer during pre-interview instructions, these skills may not be transferred to performance during the interview itself. Research on truth-lie discussions with children shows that this practice gives the child the message that there are "right" and "wrong" answers expected from the child. This conflicts with the recommended approach of accepting the child's answers for what they are, without the child feeling that the interviewer is testing his/her answers. Case law may provide guidance on whether to use a truth-lie scenario during a forensic interview. In *Crawford v. Washington* (2004), the U.S. Supreme Court held that "examinations...[that have] an essentially investigative and prosecutorial function" produce testimonial information. Pursuant to the confrontation clause of sixth amendment of the U.S. Constitution, these testimonial statements must be accompanied in court by a witness for the purpose of cross-examination. Subjection of a child to a truth-lie ritual may influence a child's perception of the status of the interview, which in turn may influence the court's determination of the interview's testimonial nature. This may impact whether a videotaped statement of a child may be admitted into court without the child's testimony.

London, K., & Nunez, N. (2002). Examining the efficacy of truth/lie discussions in predicting and increasing the veracity of children's reports. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 83(2), 131-147. DOI:10.1016/S0022-0965(02)00119-4

This study investigated whether children's ability to reason about truths and lies influenced their truth-telling behavior. Four–six-year-old children ($n=118$) played a game that was intended

to motivate children to use deception to hide a minor transgression. Next, an interviewer gave children one of four preliminary discussions. Children received a typical forensic truth/lie discussion (TLD), a developmentally appropriate and more elaborate TLD, or one of two discussions that controlled for the time spent conversing with children. Children were interviewed about the event. The results revealed that children's performance on the truth/lie questions did not predict their truth-telling behavior. Regardless of their performance on truth/lie questions, children who received TLD's gave more honest reports than children who did not receive TLD's. These results suggest that discussing truths and lies with children may promote truth-telling behavior. However, the results cast doubt on the validity of using children's performance on truth/lie questions as a measure of competency.

Huffman, M. L., Warren, A. R., & Larson, S. M. (1999). Discussing truth and lies in interviews with children: Whether, why, and how? *Applied Developmental Science, 3*(1), 6-15.
DOI:10.1207/s1532480xads0301_2

Two studies examined discussions of truth and lying during interviews with children. In Study 1, truth-lie discussions (TLDs) during 132 actual sexual abuse interviews were analyzed, focusing on the types of questions asked and their developmental appropriateness. TLDs, which were fairly common for all ages of children interviewed, typically involved asking children closed-ended questions and did not differ in quality or form by age of child interviewed. Study 2 compared the typical TLDs (found in Study 1) to either no discussion or a more elaborate discussion in their effects on preschoolers' (n = 67) reports of an interactive event. Children given the extended TLD were significantly more accurate than those questioned following a typical or no TLD. The results suggest that discussing truth and lying with young children is effective only if the discussion is more elaborate than those typically conducted in forensic interviews.

Haugaard, J. T. (1993). Young children's classification of the corroboration of a false statement as the truth of a lie. *Law and Human Behavior, 17*(6), 645-659.
DOI:10.1007/BF01044687

This article reports on an investigation of children's definitions of the truth that can pertain to their ability to provide accurate information during an investigation or trial: whether corroborating an inaccurate statement made by a parent is lying or telling the truth. Subjects were 133 preschool through third-grade children who were shown a videotape in which either a boy makes a false

statement to a neighbor about the neighbor's daughter hitting him and his mother listens passively or a mother makes a similar false statement and the boy corroborates it. None of the children classified the corroboration as the truth. Only a small percent of the preschool and kindergarten children classified the boy's or mother's initial false statement as the truth; all of the older children classified these statements as a lie. About 20% of the children recalled incorrectly that the neighbor's daughter hit the boy.