MEMORY CONCEPTS FOR FORENSIC INTERVIEWING DECISION-MAKING

Balancing Timing and Preparation in Child Forensic Interviews

Children's memories of experienced events fade more quickly than those of adults, making it essential to schedule interviews promptly after a disclosure of maltreatment or witnessing an incident. However, this urgency should not lead to a "hasty or poorly planned" forensic interview (Danby, 2024).

Taking the time to gather key pre-interview information allows the interviewer to tailor the approach to the child's developmental abilities and incorporate effective social support strategies. A phased interview process—incorporating rapport-building, clear instructions, and narrative practice—helps familiarize the child with the process while equipping the interviewer with insights to ensure a trauma-informed interaction.

In addition to memory decay, other factors justify timely interviews, including immediate safety concerns, exposure to post-incident information, and potential influences on the child's statements.

Recommendations to allow for two sleep cycles before attempting an interview are based on the experiences of soldiers in combat and have more recently been considered for law enforcement officers following a critical incident (Hopper et al., 2020). However, there is no existing research on how sleep cycle delays affect children's memory, so this should not be a consideration when scheduling forensic interviews.

Retrieving Details from Long-Term Memory

Forensic interviews primarily focus on two long-term memory subsystems: episodic and semantic. Episodic memory refers to personally experienced, time-specific events, while semantic memory encompasses general knowledge, such as recalling all the U.S. state capitals. Additionally, the ability to

collectively recall lived experiences—such as identifying all the U.S. states one has visited—is a form of semantic memory known as script memory.

Both episodic and semantic memories are relevant to child-involved investigations. However, forensic interviewers should be mindful of the specific memory demands of their questions. Focusing on one memory subsystem at a time helps avoid topic hopping—the repeated shifting between episodic and semantic questions—which can increase cognitive strain, lead to fatigue, and contribute to memory recall errors (Danby, 2024).

Children who have experienced repeated episodes of abuse often initially rely on script memory when responding to substantive questions in forensic interviews. Linguistically, script memories can be identified by the use of the present perfect tense, which describes experiences that began in the past and continue into the present. For example, a child might say, “I have been having some problems. This teacher is always doing nasty stuff to me.”

Research focusing on children has found that in cases of repeated experiences, beginning with a script account (what usually happens) before posing episodically aimed questions, helps to elevate overall informativeness (Connolly & Gordon, 2014). Additionally, children’s script accounts can provide valuable context for episodic inquiries. For example, “It always happens when my grandma has dialysis.”

Recognizing the role of these two memory subsystems during forensic interviews also underscores the importance of narrative practice. When children are prompted to recall and verbalize a distinct, personally significant past event, they become better prepared to retrieve and report details during the substantive phase of the forensic interview. Narrative practice also serves multiple functions—it fosters rapport development while providing insight into the child’s memory and language capacities.

Prioritizing Deep and Accurate Memory Retrieval

The types of questions forensic interviewers ask during the interview can enhance the child’s ability to remember. The benefits of prioritizing open-ended questions, which encourage highly elaborative, multi-word responses, are among the most researched aspects of forensic interviewing. These types of questions prompt children to conduct deep memory searches and retrieve their unique encoding of an event, or series, of events. This allows them to recall the most salient and personally significant elements of their memories, with an accuracy of recall comparable to that of adults.

While forensic interview protocols may use different terms for these best-practice questions, they generally fall into two broad categories: open invitations and follow-up questions based on the child's initial responses. Open invitations serve as broad retrieval cues, prompting children to recall and share what they remember from the event in their own words (Powell & Snow, 2007). Follow-up questions then build on the details the child provides, guiding the conversation without leading or suggesting new information.

In contrast, narrower, more specific questions do not prompt the same deep memory search, but rather elicit a shallow recollection, constrained by details contained in the interviewer's question. This does not mean that forensic interviewers should never pose these types of inquiries, but they need to consider four key questions before doing so.

1. Have I exhausted the narrative by requesting the full event sequence and following up with requests to elaborate?
2. Is the information I am seeking essential for the investigation?
3. Is the interviewee likely to be developmentally capable of a reliable response?
4. Is the interviewee the only source of knowledge available for the investigation?

If these criteria are met, then a limited number of specific questions may be asked. However, interviewers should continue to provide children with memory retrieval opportunities by asking them to elaborate on responses to narrow questions when appropriate.

References

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