

HOW CHILDREN SIGNAL INCOMPREHENSION

It's not uncommon for misunderstandings to occur when people converse. Think about a time when you've had a conversation with a co-worker, family member, or friend and they've asked you a question. However, the question is confusing or unclear and you are unsure of what's been asked. How do you respond?



Often, it may be “huh?” or “what?” Perhaps you repeat the last few words of the question with a lilt at the end, which is, in essence, turning the repetition itself into a question. Or, perhaps you reply, “I’m not sure what you’re asking.” In some way, you signal to your conversational partner that you do not understand the question that’s been asked.

Conversational Challenges with Young Children

The challenge for forensic interviewers is that young children are unlikely to recognize when they do not understand a question. Children often attempt to answer questions they do not understand or that are unanswerable (such as, “What did the refrigerator say?”) rather than ask for clarification. In commonplace, everyday interactions, this misunderstanding does not commonly have negative consequences. However, in a forensic interview the answers provided are of utmost importance.

In an attempt to help reduce miscommunication and comprehension errors, most interview protocols utilized in the United States either contain explicit interview instructions (e.g., don’t know, don’t understand, and correct me) or reinforcement of an instruction, if the opportunity presents organically in the interview (e.g., “Thank you for telling me I got that wrong”). Younger children, however, often have difficulty comprehending and utilizing the “I don’t know” instruction.

What does this mean, then, for the forensic interview? How are children instructed to inform interviewers when they do not understand a question? And how do children signal incomprehension?

Signaling Incomprehension

Children can express incomprehension in a continuum ranging from statements requesting repetition of the question; voicing, “What?”; signaling ignorance (“I don’t know”); and to older children referencing a failure to understand the question, “I don’t know what you mean.”

The use of “what” to signal incomprehension develops around 25 months, though keeping in mind this could indicate the child simply did not hear the question. Around 26-28 months, “I don’t know,” appears in response to questions that are not understood.

Around the ages of 3-3 1/2, children begin to request confirmation for what they believe was said. They repeat back a part of the question (“I’m a scaredy cat?”) with a lilt at the end. They also can request specification, asking the speaker to clarify the focus of the question or utterance (i.e., “Look at the mirror. Where?”)

What we do know is that age trends in the ability to understand the “I don’t know” instruction is an unreliable indicator as there is no clear age cutoff for determining when the instruction cannot be understood. It is a specific task that varies from child to child.

Older children in the study were more likely to respond to the practice “I don’t know” interview instruction and to questions in the interview with references to incomprehension. Younger children more often requested repetition or gave a “don’t know” response.

Practice Opportunity

Henderson and Lyon (2021) found that children who were given a practice opportunity along with the “I don’t know” instruction and responded with an explicit reference to incomprehension were more likely to make explicit references to incomprehension later during the interview. This effect was independent of age.

Older children more often requested clarification of what the interviewer meant versus younger children who requested clarification of what the interview said.

What Does This Mean for the Forensic Interview?

What this means for you and me, as forensic interviewers, is attempting the “I don’t know” instruction with a practice opportunity with all children. Interviewers should pay particular attention to how a child responds. Did the child say “huh?” or “what?” Did the child repeat back part of the question, or did the child explicitly

say, “I don’t get your question”? Noting how children express incomprehension to the “I don’t know” instruction signals how they may express incomprehension later in the interview.

References

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