

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD "TOUCH"



During child sexual abuse investigations, understanding the nature and invasiveness of inappropriate contact is important in determining if maltreatment occurred. The word “touch” is frequently utilized to describe multiple forms of contact. Some forensic interviewers will routinely use the word “touch” when discussing body safety as a way to probe for possible child sexual maltreatment when no prior report has been made.

Defining “Touch”

How do adults define “touch”? What does the word “touch” mean to children? Is touching something that only happens with a person’s hands? Do children use the word “touch” when describing contact with an object or a body part other than hands? Knowing the answers to these questions is critical to understanding children’s recounting of experiences. Imprecise use of the word “touch” can result in potential miscommunication as children may respond to questions regarding touch when they have only a partial understanding of the question, or none at all.

According to Hashima et al. (1988), “Using the word ‘touch’ in questions for obtaining information concerning an alleged offense of sexual assault may not be an effective method for obtaining accurate information” (p. 690). While adults generally categorize any contact between two objects as touch, past research indicates children may frequently deny touch occurred because they view the word “touch” specifically to mean contact with a person’s hand. Children were less inclined to endorse kissing as touching. This exclusiveness may be due to children viewing the word “kissing” as a more specific action. This could also apply to words such as “lick” or “bite.”

Children may deny touching if there is oral–genital, genital–genital, or object–genital contact. Younger children may also deny touch if the contact is viewed as accidental or if it occurs during toileting, bathing, or dressing. In her book, *Handbook on Questioning Children: A Linguistic Perspective*, 3rd Edition, Anne Graffam

Walker, Ph.D., states “it is particularly important that questioners recognize it (touch) as one of those higher order words that adults understand to include many kinds of contact, but that children may understand to mean one specific kind of contact with one specific kind of instrument (as with the hand)” (p. 36).

Yes/No Questions Versus Invitations

Another challenge inherent when attempting to understand children’s definitions of “touch” is recognizing children’s different responses to yes/no questions (recognition) versus responses to invitations or open-ended questions (recall). When asked specific yes/no questions regarding touch, children tend to overly *deny* touching has occurred. This denial may be a result of not understanding how adults define “touch” or intrinsic difficulties with yes/no questions. When children do respond negatively to yes/no questions, they rarely elaborate or say, “I don’t know.” The denial could result from misunderstanding the question, a true negative (no touching has occurred), or a false denial (touching occurred but child denies). Once a child denies abuse when asked a specific yes/no question, without other evidence, the case may be closed.

In response to invitations, such as “Tell me about being at Uncle Joe’s,” children frequently recount details of an event but often *omit* reports of touch. The failure to report touching in response to invitations may be due to the insignificance of the touch, a failure to encode the activity as touch or difficulty in recounting abuse due to fear, timidity, embarrassment, or reluctance. Additional focused narrative invitations (“Tell me more about playing with Uncle Joe.”) could elicit further information regarding an event and assist in understanding children’s experiences.

Current Research on Children’s Interpretations of Touch

Sullivan et al. (2022b) examined how children identified touch, as well as the frequency in which children reported touch in response to yes/no questions (“Is the boy touching the girl?”) or invitations (“What is happening in the picture?”).

Researchers showed 122 four- to nine-year-old children cards depicting 24 different “touch” vignettes (touching with hands, touching with another body part, touching of the body with an object, and no touching). After viewing the cards, the children were asked a series of yes/no questions and invitations regarding the scenes depicted in the vignettes.

Most children, even the oldest, endorsed touching only if the touching was with a hand (manual touch). Many did not endorse touching with an object as touch, nor did they endorse touching if the touching was with a part of the body other than the hand. This was especially true when children were asked yes/no questions. Another problem with yes/no questions was a higher report of touching when no touching had occurred, as well as a failure to elicit a true report when touching did occur. Younger children frequently denied touching if they thought the touching was accidental.

When researchers used an invitation to ask about touching, children frequently failed to report touching when touching had occurred. If an object had been used to touch, some children would say “touched with” versus “touched.”

What Does This Mean for the Forensic Interview?

- Children’s understanding of the word “touch” may be limited to touching with a hand.
- If asked about touch, children may fail to report inappropriate touch if oral–genital, genital–genital, or object–genital contact occurred.
- Children may give false denials or false positives when asked yes/no questions using the word “touch.” If a specific yes/no question was asked about touch, either a denial or affirmation, follow with a request for additional information.
- Children may provide information of a target event but *omit* reports of touching in response to invitations requesting narration. If no report of maltreatment is made, interviewers may need to follow up with requests for additional information.

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