

SUGGESTIBILITY, COACHING AND THE IMPACT ON THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW

Suggestibility is the degree to which a person's memory or recounting of an event is influenced by suggested information or misinformation and can be a result of being told what to say or being asked questions in a way that alters recollection.

There is general agreement that children can be susceptible to suggestion, more so than adults, but that not all children, all the time, are susceptible. While some children readily accept suggested information, others within the same age range can strongly resist suggestive information. The critical question for forensic interviewers is not how much children, in general, are suggestive, but to what extent is a specific child likely to be suggestible.

Age and Suggestibility

The ability to fabricate, remember, and maintain a lie requires greater cognitive resources than telling the truth. Fabricating a believable narrative can be especially difficult for children, as they are still developing crucial cognitive facilities, including memory capacity, language skills, and conceptual knowledge of time.



Much of the historic research conducted on suggestibility examines preschool children. Research demonstrates the likelihood of suggestibility decreases with age meaning younger children being considered more susceptible than older children. Research also finds that children's ability to maintain a lie increases with age and that younger children are more likely to reveal their lie when asked follow-up questions. Additionally, when children are asked to provide longer narratives or answer follow-up questions, their intentionally fabricated reports may be easier to detect.

Parental Coaching

An analog study by Talway, Hubbard, Saykaly, Lee, Lindsay, and Bala (2018) found that children with minimal parental coaching were more likely to recant their false report when asked direct follow-up questions. As the amount of time spent coaching increased, the children were more likely to maintain their fabricated reports. However, when children were asked if the event really happened, over 40% said no. When asked if they made up the event, a little over 50% maintain the fabrication, while almost 50% said yes. Less than 20% of the children in the study provided any spatial, sensory, or emotional information.



What to do if Coaching is Suspected

According to research by Lyon, Malloy, Quas, and Talwar (2008), eliciting a promise to tell the truth led to improvements in truth telling when children had been extensively coached to either conceal or falsely reveal information. For children coached to deny an incident, the oath exhibited the most consistent positive effects.



In addition, eliciting the context of an alleged event, what happened before and after, may assist law enforcement or child protective service workers conducting the investigation. Interviewers should also ask children about body positioning (if abuse is alleged), sensory details, as well as inquire as to their emotions or thoughts during the reported event(s).

As with all interviews, if you suspect a child has been coached to either deny or fabricate an allegation of maltreatment, it is important to remember that the forensic interview is one part of a child abuse investigation. The forensic interview should never stand alone.

References

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