


CHILDREN'S ABILITIES TO DATE EVENTS

- Understanding time is a consequence of brain maturation, cognitive development and emergence of the conscious awareness of the passing of time.
- To date an event, a reconstructive process occurs in memory retrieval. A general knowledge of time patterns is combined with contextual information remembered about the event to infer “when” an event occurred.
- Children may have poor memories for the event, which limits the amount of contextual information from which they can draw time-related details.
 - Younger children have limited understanding of conventional time patterns and lack executive functioning necessary to coordinate episodic recall with knowledge of time patterns.
- Children’s use of words that express clock, calendar, or duration should not be an indicator that they can reliably give information about when or how long ago something happened, or for how long it lasted.
- Phrases like “two months ago,” “three hours,” “it happened Friday,” “in the summer,” or “it started when I was 9” should not be taken literally with further questioning (e.g., “Talk to me about remembering how it was when you were 9.”)

What We Ask to Determine When Abuse Occurred

- Asking if the alleged abuse occurred in relation to a holiday, birthday, or some other landmark event (e.g., before or after school started; before Christmas) is not an effective or productive memory cue and can lead children to guess.
 - Landmark events may not be personally meaningful to the child
 - Landmark events are often reoccurring – birthdays happen every year, as do major holidays or school starting
 - The abuse could have occurred both before and after a landmark event, especially if the maltreatment has been ongoing for several years
- Asking how old a child was, what grade a child was in, what the child’s teacher’s name was, or what season it was can confuse a child.
 - There may not be a personally meaningful connection between the child’s age, grade, or teacher’s name and the abuse.
 - According to Wandrey, Lyon, Quas, and Freidman (2012), in a study on children’s ability to date an event, only 50% of the children were accurate when asked their age at the time of the studied event.

- Asking about season or time of year can be problematic and should be avoided. In Friedman and Lyon (2005), when children were asked what season an event occurred, about 35% were wrong and some children were off about 50 days.
 - Another challenge is, dependent on where the child lives or where the abuse took place, it could be warm year around or it could be cold for most of the year. If the child says, “It was hot outside,” respond with a request for more details (e.g., “Tell me about remembering when it was hot outside.”)

What We Ask Instead:

- First, if developmentally appropriate, ask the child what else was happening in his/her life at the time of the incident. Children may relate the abuse to an idiosyncratic detail, something that we don’t think to ask (e.g., starting Scouts, the summer the child learned to swim, the house the child lived in, etc.).
- Look for elements in narrative descriptions of abuse that can be linked to timing of events
 - Use adults as resources about time
- Elicit information regarding concurrent events (other events in the child’s life during time period)
- Location of other persons in home
- Activities before or after event, if developmentally appropriate
- Place the child was living (yellow house?)



While interviewers understand there are legitimate reasons the MDT looks for children to date events, there must be a cautious process which includes always asking for additional information if children do give a date or age.

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