

ASSISTING CHILDREN IN RECALLING DETAILS OF REPEATED EVENTS OF MALTREATMENT USING LABEL TRAINING

In the past 40 years, research has consistently provided forensic interviewers with insight into how children's memories develop, the processes which assist children in retrieving and verbalizing those memories, and ways to improve how information is gathered from children.



In many jurisdictions, children are asked to describe at least one instance of repeated events with precision for a charge to be laid. Thus, from a pragmatic perspective, forensic interviewers must use techniques that assist children in reporting individual incidences of repeated maltreatment. One of the greatest challenges for forensic interviewers when gathering information from children about repeated events is making sure that both the child and the interviewer are discussing the same incident. According to research, labeling events and helping children identify the difference between events may result in the elicitation of more forensically relevant details.

Generally, by the age of 3, most typically developing children can describe highly familiar activities in an organized way. Talking about what normally happens is called scripting. An advantage of scripting is the strengthening of memories, so they are later available for recall. Unfortunately, the strength of scripts can be offset by challenges in retrieving memories of specific instances of repeated events.



Think about this: Even adults have a difficult time talking about separate incidences of events that occur repeatedly. If you routinely go to the grocery store, how do you separate and describe each time you went to the grocery store in the last 6 months? Doing so would be difficult for most adults, yet the expectation is that children of all ages should be able to give specific details regarding similar repeated abusive events. While the main details of the maltreatment may remain the same (e.g., the perpetrator or clothing worn) other details could change across instances (e.g., locations or specific acts).

Two methods utilized in the forensic interview can assist children in remembering details that may change across repeated similar abusive events. One is allowing children to provide a script of what normally happens before asking for event-specific details.

After asking children transition questions (e.g., "What did you come here to talk to me about?"), if the child responds with information about maltreatment (e.g., "I came to tell you about my mom hitting me."), then ask what normally happens (e.g., "Talk to me about mom hitting you."). These types of questions should prompt a script response. Use narrative invitations or cued narratives to exhaust the script while listening for cues or clues within the script which could indicate separate incidents (e.g., locations, acts, etc.).



Follow-up with each of the episodic cues to gather additional information about different instances of abuse (e.g., “You said mom hit you one time with the paddle. What happened the time your mom hit you with the paddle?”). Allowing a child to provide a script for what normally occurs may assist in eliciting episodic cues to individual instances.

A second method to assist children in providing specific details about separate events is to conduct an effective narrative practice. Ideally, an effective narrative practice allows children to practice recalling instances of a repeated event from their everyday lives. Research suggests that asking children to talk about one to two instances of a repeating event, such as basketball games or fun experiences, provides greater benefits compared to discussing a time that may contain mostly routine elements (e.g., everyday morning routine, brushing their teeth). For more information specific to narrative practice, review the [“Conducting Narrative Practice” \(June 11, 2019 \)Takeaway Tuesday episode.](#)



Brubacher et al., (2018) recommends asking children to recall two instances of a repeating event and then asking how one instance is different from other instances. If children respond with a difference (e.g., “That was the day I scored a goal in the last minute and we won the game.”), then this difference could be used as a unique name or “label” for the event. Before adopting the label, the interviewer should ask “Did [child’s label for an event] happen any other times?” If the response is no, the label is unique and, when referencing the event, the interviewer should use the label (e.g., “Tell me more about the game where you scored a goal at the last minute and won the game.”). If children cannot provide a unique label, then the interviewer can ask what children want to call each event.

Interviewers should use the children’s labels and resist changing the labels to one of their own. An example would be discovering that the above-mentioned event was the last time the child’s team had won a game and changing the child-generated label to the “last time”. Changing labels can result in less information and fewer episodic details provided. Allowing children to describe events from their everyday lives that are similar and helping them provide labels for different instances, assists in particularizing events.

By conducting an effective narrative practice and allowing children to script what normally happens before asking for specific episodic details, children may be able to provide the particularization required during investigations of alleged maltreatment.

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