

15 PRINCIPLES FOR FORENSIC INTERVIEWERS: PART I

Interviewers should keep abreast of the latest research concerning how children's memories develop, how children report events, threats to the accuracy of children's answers, and other information that can impact children's abilities to provide information during a forensic interview. One of the most valuable contributions to emerge from research on interviewing children is the development of best practice standards and guidelines.

In an article written by Brubacher et al. (2019), the researchers reviewed transcripts from laboratory studies and real-world interviews and developed 15 principles that capture how children talk about events. Some of the principles will enforce your current knowledge base, while other principles may assist to further develop your forensic interviewing skills.

A summary of seven of the 15 principles are listed below:

Principle 1

- Children begin verbally encoding and talking about events in their lives around the age of two and can remember some of these events for several years
- 4 and 5-year-old children could not remember about 39% of previously identified memories discussed two years prior, even after cueing
 - 46% of memories were lost after eight years

Implications

- Follow recommendations for accommodating young children
 - Schedule (usually) during morning
 - Give child adequate time to process, retrieve, and respond to questions
- Do not dismiss a report based solely on a child's age at the time of the event or report



Principle 2

- Delayed reports by children who were preverbal at the time of the event(s) are often sparse and/or riddled with errors

Implications

- Avoid probing for specific information when speaking with children who were preverbal at the time of the alleged event(s)
- Be aware that conversations with significant adults and prior interviews can impact a young child's narrative and may result in errors during the recounting of an event

Principle 3

- Children report in piecemeal fashion across open-ended prompts

Implications

- Use a series of open-ended prompts
- Understand that trauma may negatively affect a child's memory storage of events and later recall
- Use facilitators to prompts further dialogue
- Combine invitations ("Tell me what happened") with cued invitations that ask a child to expand on something already mentioned ("Tell me more about the time he took pictures.")
- Don't assume if a child says "that's all I remember" it means a child cannot elaborate



Principle 4

- Children maintain accuracy across a series of differently worded open-ended prompts

Implications

- Maintain open-ended prompts by varying wording of prompts (Move beyond "Tell me about...").
- Find further information in the May 14, 2019 *Takeaway Tuesday* episode(<https://calio.org/takeaway-episodes/beyond-tell-me-more/>).

Principle 5

- All age groups sometimes drift off-topic

Implications

- Redirect children when they change topics
- Repeat names of people, locations, and actions of interests instead of using "she", "there" or "that"
- Ask clarifying questions to determine if child is still talking about the event in question when the child mentions unexpected information or details



Principle 6

- Young children use words that come to mind and ones they can easily pronounce

Implications

- Do not guess what children mean by using phrases such as, "Did you say...?"; ask them to repeat their answers
- Ask questions to clarify key event features (e.g., "What did [...] look like?")

Principle 7

- Event narratives can contain non-fluencies (false starts, repetitions, fillers, and corrections) and expressions of uncertainty

Implications

- Do not cut an interview short based on the assumption that non-fluencies and expressions of uncertainty indicate a lack of memory for an event

The principles discussed in the Brubacher et al. (2019) article reflect foundational development and cognitive abilities of children while highlighting the implications for forensic interviews.

References

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