

# Children's Abilities to Date Events

During a forensic interview, when a child relays information regarding allegations of abuse, the investigators of the multidisciplinary team (MDT) want to know more details about when and how many times the alleged abuse occurred. The forensic interviewer is tasked with gathering as much information as possible from the child about the timing, dates, or number of the alleged occurrences. To establish timing, an interviewer often asks a child to judge the date of an incident in relation to a landmark event, such as before, after, or "near" a holiday or birthday. In addition, an interviewer may ask a child "how many times" the alleged events occurred.

While these questions seem relatively straightforward, research has shown that a child's ability to understand time (when events occurred) and number of times (how many times an event occurred) is not straightforward and asking direct questions about when an event occurred or how many times, may result in inaccurate and confusing responses. When an interviewer understands the challenges of asking about time and maximizing memory recall through appropriate questions, it is possible to assist a child's attempts to date an event.

## Understanding Time

- **A child's ability to understand time is a consequence of brain maturation**, cognitive development, and the emergence of the conscious awareness of the passing of time. A child's use of words that express clock, calendar, or duration are not necessarily an indicator he or she can reliably give information about when or how long ago an incident occurred. Phrases like "two months

ago," "three hours," "it happened Friday," "in the summer," or "it started when I was nine" should not be taken literally, but should be followed with further questioning (e.g., "Talk to me about remembering how it was when you were nine.").

- **A reconstructive process occurs during memory retrieval** as a child attempts to date an event. A general knowledge of time patterns is needed and is combined with contextual information remembered about an event to infer "when" it occurred.
- **A child may have poor memories for an event**, which limits the amount of contextual information from which he or she can draw time-related details.
- **A younger child has limited understanding** of conventional time patterns and lacks executive functioning necessary to coordinate recall of specific events with knowledge of time patterns.

## Determining 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 a child to guess.
  - Landmark events may not be personally meaningful to a child.
  - Landmark events are often recurring (i.e., 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.

According to 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.**

- Asking how old a child was, what grade a child was in, what a child's teacher's name was, or what season it was can confuse a child.
  - There may not be a personally meaningful connection between a child's age, grade, or teacher's name and the abuse.
  - According to Wandrey et al. (2012), in a study on a child's ability to date an event, only 50% of the children were accurate when asked their age at the time of the studied event.
  - According to 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 with asking about the season is, depending on where a 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 a child says, "It was hot outside," the interviewer should respond with a request for more details (e.g., "Tell me about remembering when it was hot outside").

## Asking Appropriate Questions

- Ask a child what else was happening in his or her life at the time of the incident, if developmentally appropriate. A child may relate the abuse to an idiosyncratic detail, something that an interviewer does not think to ask (e.g., starting Scouts, the summer a child learned to swim, etc.).
- Listen for elements in narrative descriptions of abuse that can be linked to timing of events.
- Corroborate times, given by a child, with other adults in the child's life.
- Determine the location of other persons in the home at the time of the alleged incident.
- Ask a child what occurred before or after an alleged incident, if developmentally appropriate.
- Determine where a child was living at the time of the alleged incident (e.g., "Tell me about the place you were living when [...] happened").

While an interviewer understands there are legitimate reasons the MDT looks for a child to date events, there must be a cautious process which includes always asking for additional information if a child does give a date or age. Often gathering additional information from a child regarding the alleged offender, what happened, and the location can help the MDT determine when an event occurred (e.g., Who + What + Where = When).

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