

Interviewing preschoolers

Facilitators and barriers to young children's legal testimony

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligas försvaras fredagen den 11 december 2020, klockan 9.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Martine Powell, Griffith Criminology Institute och the Centre for Investigative Interviewing, Griffith University, Australia.

Föreliggande uppsats grundar sig på följande artiklar:

- I. Magnusson, M., Ernberg, E., Landström, S., & Akehurst, L. (2020). Forensic interviewers' experiences interviewing children of different ages. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 26, 967–989.
- II. Magnusson, M., Ernberg, E., & Landström, S. (2017). Preschoolers' disclosures of child sexual abuse: Examining corroborated cases from Swedish courts. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 70, 199–209.
- III. Magnusson, M., Ernberg, E., Landström, S., Joleby, M., & Akehurst, L. (2020). Can rapport building strategies, age, and question type influence preschoolers' disclosures of adult wrongdoing? *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 61, 393–401.
- IV. Magnusson, M., Joleby, M., Ernberg, E., Akehurst, L., Korkman, J., & Landström, S. (in press). Preschoolers' true and false reports: Comparing effects of the sequential interview and NICHD protocol. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*.
- V. Magnusson, M., Ernberg, E., Landström, S., Joleby, M., Akehurst, L., Korkman, J., & Ask, K. (2020). *Effects of drawings on preschoolers' statements of self-experienced and non-experienced events*. Manuscript submitted for publication.



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Abstract

Magnusson, M. (2020). Interviewing preschoolers: Facilitators and barriers to young children's legal testimony. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 500, SE-405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden.

Children's testimonies are often vital during criminal investigations of alleged maltreatment. The aim of this thesis was to improve our understanding of forensic interviews with preschool-aged children (aged 3 to 6 years). **Study I** consisted of a mixed-methods survey of 88 specialist child interviewers. Preschoolers were described as particularly challenging to interview due to their limited verbal abilities, short attention spans, and insufficient memory. The practitioners described various modifications to their technique when questioning preschoolers, indicating a potential need for standardized guidelines. **Study II** examined preschoolers' disclosures of sexual abuse in 57 Swedish court cases containing strong corroborative evidence. Many young children could provide information about the abuse, but their first disclosure was often delayed. Reluctance was common during the forensic interviews. The court documents mentioned several barriers to disclosure, including requests for secrecy, internal feelings (e.g., shame, guilt, and self-blame), fear of upsetting the non-abusive caregiver, loyalty to the perpetrator, and language difficulties. **Study III** consisted of an experiment examining 53 preschoolers' secret-keeping for an unfamiliar adult. Only 18.9% disclosed the secret in response to a free-recall request. After more specific questions, the number of secret-tellers increased to 83%. No significant differences were observed as a function of manipulating the rapport-building strategy used during the initial phase of the interviews. **Study IV** concerned the effects of the pre-substantive phase of two different child interviewing techniques (i.e. the NICHD protocol vs. the sequential interview model) on preschoolers' statements about a self-experienced ($n = 84$) and non-experienced ($n = 45$) event. Children in the NICHD condition exhibited slightly higher accuracy than did children in the SI model condition when describing a self-experienced event. Regardless of the interviewing technique, 31.1% of the children inaccurately assented to remembering a non-experienced event, and 15.6% gave a long false report. **Study V** examined the effects of the draw-and-talk technique on preschoolers' reports of self-experienced ($n = 83$) and non-experienced ($n = 25$) events. Draw-and-talk did not increase the number of details given about a self-experienced event. When suggestively asked to draw a non-experienced event, 61.9% of children complied and provided inaccurate details while drawing. Across the experimental studies, we observed a positive linear association between children's age (in months) and the quantity and accuracy of details. The current thesis highlights the importance of age-appropriate interview techniques when collecting testimony from preschool-aged witnesses. The studies show that preschoolers can give accurate testimony when following research-based guidelines. However, a range of developmental, socio-emotional, and motivational factors can hinder or delay young children from disclosing sensitive information. Future research could benefit from addressing questions of how to elicit information from reluctant child witnesses. Considering that the task of interviewing preschoolers demands considerable knowledge and practical skills, police and prosecutors may consider implementing specialized training courses on forensic child interviewing involving preschoolers. Another possible facilitating factor would be to routinely consult with experts on preschoolers' cognitive and linguistic development in connection with the preliminary investigation. As preschoolers testify through their video-recorded forensic interviews, priority should be given to ensure that young children are given the prerequisites needed to tell their stories to the police.

Keywords: Child testimony, preschooler, investigative interview, police, criminal investigation, child witness

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