



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Children's Ability to Describe Past Events Develops Over Time

In the first study to examine how children talk about the time-related features of their experiences--when, how often, in what order events occur--researchers have found intriguing changes as children grow older. The study's findings may have implications for understanding these aspects of cognitive development as well as for questioning child witnesses and victims.

The study was conducted by researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the University of Cambridge. It appears in the July/August 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers analyzed forensic interviews of 250 4- to 10-year-old children who were alleged victims of sexual abuse, focusing on the kinds of references to time they made when describing these real-life events.

The children made increasing numbers of references to time-related characteristics of experienced events as they grew older, the researchers found. However, witnesses under 10 seldom mentioned specific times or dates, or what happened before reported events or actions. There were dramatic increases to such references at the age of 10.

References to the sequence of events or parts of events were most common, and their increase with age may be related to children's developing capability to elaborate. Children were more likely to mention time spontaneously when asked to recall what happened than when they were asked specific recognition questions. This is pertinent because information retrieved from memory by recall is much more likely to be accurate than information retrieved in response to questions that ask children to select among options offered by the interviewer (such as "Did he ...?" or "Was it x or y?").

The children remembered the times of past events by making references to clock times, events that occurred in the same time frame, or the calendar, the researchers found. While older children were capable of using both short- and long-scale time patterns (such as time of day and day of the month), younger children mostly referred to short-scale time patterns (such as time of day), or they anchored the events to familiar activities (such as "when I returned from school").

These findings have important implications for forensic interviews, where the ability to provide information about the number of incidents, the time of occurrences, and the sequence of events may allow suspected victims and witnesses to define specific episodes of allegedly experienced crimes. This ability increases children's competence as witnesses and the prospect that their cases will be pursued in the criminal justice system. In addition, awareness that children acquire some temporal skills late in their development may discourage attempts to discredit child witnesses when they fail to provide the requested time-related information.

"By helping forensic interviewers to recognize children's capabilities and limitations, our findings may also encourage interviewers to seek essential temporal information using age-appropriate techniques," according to Yael Orbach, staff scientist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the study's lead author.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 4, *Young Children's References to Temporal Attributes of Allegedly Experienced Events in the Course of Forensic Interviews* by Orbach, Y (National Institute of

Child Health and Human Development), and Lamb, ME (University of Cambridge). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.