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# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

*Research in Brief*

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## ACQUISITIONS New Approach to Interviewing Children: A Test of Its Effectiveness

Investigators, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges—all have voiced concern about the accuracy, completeness, and other aspects of information derived from interviews with children who are victims of, or witnesses to, alleged crimes.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is acutely aware of those specific concerns as well as issues pertaining to victims and witnesses generally. From its earliest years, NIJ has funded research focusing on maximizing the helpfulness of victims and witnesses to the criminal justice process, while minimizing the inconvenience, discomfort, and stress they can experience while offering that help.

In the mid-1980's, an NIJ *Research in Action*<sup>1</sup> noted that child victims were viewed by some as incompetent, unreliable, or not credible as witnesses. That NIJ-funded research noted the need to identify the best techniques for conducting interviews of child victims to obtain the most reliable information.

Within months after that research was published, another NIJ-funded study reported the development of a promising memory-retrieval procedure for interviewing adult witnesses, the cognitive interview (so named because its techniques are borrowed from research in cognitive psychology). Researchers found that use of the procedure increased the amount of correct information obtained from a wide range of eyewitnesses without producing a higher percentage of inaccurate information.<sup>2</sup>

Could a version of the cognitive interview procedure for use with child victims and witnesses prove effective in terms of enhancing the completeness and accuracy of their information? NIJ awarded a grant to R. Edward Geiselman, Gail Bornstein, and Karen J. Saywitz of the University of California, Los Angeles, to address that and related questions. Their study, summarized here, presents a highly positive picture of the interviewing procedure.

That has major implications. For instance, the extent to which a child's information is complete is likely to affect not only the success of investigations but also jurors' perceptions of the credibility of the child as a witness. As for accuracy, correct information minimizes false leads that may waste valuable time and talent of investigators and, more important, may preclude a miscarriage of justice.

The primary purpose of the NIJ study was to evaluate the effect of a practice interview (about a nonrelated staged incident) on children's recall performance during a subsequent cognitive interview about an event under investigation.

Also, the researchers evaluated the impact on children's recall performance of child-oriented modifications they had made to all components of the cognitive interview procedure—with a sample of children different from that used in previous studies. This evaluation included assessments

### From the Director

Issues involving child witnesses are currently significant in appellate law. In the last 2 years or so, the United States Supreme Court has heard, or agreed to hear, at least three child-witness cases. The decision in one of them turned on the question of whether out-of-court statements made by a young child were reliable—an issue at least indirectly addressed by the research summarized in this *Research in Brief*.

The need has never been greater to learn what works and why. The research reported in this *Research in Brief* on the

cognitive interview procedure goes a long way toward meeting that need. Cases involving children are no exception to the maxim that information is the lifeblood of criminal investigation and prosecution. The ability to obtain useful information from child victims or witnesses is often crucial.

Yet even experienced investigators or district attorneys may not be familiar with new developments in interviewing. Or if they are, they may not be using them as effectively as they might; the present research documents one such instance.

The cognitive interview procedure is easy to learn and to incorporate into the investigative routines of law enforcement agencies and prosecutors' offices. According to the research reported here, the procedure holds great promise in enhancing the completeness and accuracy of information obtained from children. In so doing, the cognitive interview could remove many of the legal and other challenges to statements elicited from child victims or witnesses.

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## Exhibit 1

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### Practice Interview About the Waiting-Room Staged Event

#### *The staged event*

Following the staged event described in exhibit 2, an adult escorted third- and sixth-graders to a waiting room and left. After a brief delay, a male portraying a "surfer dude" entered. He told the children that his name was Andrew and that he was waiting for Mr. Henderson. Andrew asked the children whether he could wait for Mr. Henderson but departed after about 5 minutes. This incident, staged at a location on the UCLA campus, was rich in details about persons, objects, and events.

#### *The interviewers*

Immediately following the waiting-room event, advanced undergraduate psychology majors from the University of California, Los Angeles, interviewed each child, one on one, at a UCLA location different from that of the staged event. The interviewers were provided with a script of the waiting room incident in advance, so that they could "challenge" a child who had given incorrect information.

Interviewers had received training in how to conduct the cognitive interview with children. Training included written instructions, 2-hour training session, videotape, and live demonstration and critique.

#### *The interview: two types*

Each interviewer conducted two types of practice interview. For some children, the interviewer only developed rapport; for others, the interviewer conducted the full cognitive interview. The study labeled the rapport-only practice interview as an "R" practice interview and the full cognitive interview as a "C" practice interview.

correcting the child's misconceptions about the interview procedure, enhanced a willingness to speak freely, and reduced feelings of anxiety.

As explained in exhibits 1 and 2, interviewers conducted two types of practice interview and two types of target interview. An assigned letter labeled each type (C for cognitive interview; R for rapport development only; and S for standard interview).

Researchers randomly assigned each child to one of three practice-target interview combinations: CC, RC, and RS (the first letter of each combination refers to the practice-interview type, the second to the target-interview type).

Comparing target-interview results of the RC and RS combinations permitted assessment of how the target cognitive-interview approach fared against the target standard interview. Analysis of the target-interview results of the CC and RC combinations provided an assessment of whether the practice cognitive interview enhanced the children's performance during the target cognitive interview.

### Guidelines for interviewers

The researchers provided interviewers with guidelines tailored to the type of practice or target interview to be conducted—cognitive, standard, or rapport development only.

**Rapport development.** All interviews began with the development of rapport with the child. Guidelines included the following:

- Do not begin by asking the child for his or her name. Greet the child by saying, "You must be Mary? My name is Bob."
- Follow the greeting by asking simple questions about the child's world and provide some personal information about yourself.
- Do not ask questions that could be regarded as coercive, such as "Do you want to be my friend?" Use positive, open-ended questions, which are likely to promote expanded conversation: "What are your favorite TV shows?"
- Do not be overly patronizing, such as by making the child feel pressured to "be your friend."

of the effect of various memory-jogging techniques, interviewers' styles, and children's ages on recall ability.

### Basics of the cognitive interview

The cognitive interview is a three-phase procedure. The first focuses on developing rapport between interviewer and child and on setting the ground rules for subsequent questioning. Phase 2 involves techniques designed to elicit from the child as complete a narrative account or report of the alleged crime as possible.

The objective of the methods used in phase 3 is to encourage the child to clarify and expand upon what was reported in the narrative account. The interviewer probes for specifics that the child knows but may not have included in the narrative report.

Outlined in the sidebar on page 4 are the components (listed in the sequence used by the children's interviewers) of each phase of the cognitive interview.

### The study's method

Thirty-four third-graders between the ages of 8 and 9 and 58 sixth-graders between the ages of 11 and 12 witnessed two staged events and were interviewed about each. Advanced undergraduate psychology majors conducted "practice interviews" for a staged event similar to one that would be staged for practice-interview purposes under real-life conditions.

Sheriff's deputies interviewed the children ("target interviews") about another staged event, which was the study's stand-in for an incident under actual investigation.

Exhibits 1 and 2 present additional information about the practice interview, target interview, and the staged events.

The researchers introduced the practice interview to test its potential for having a positive impact on the effectiveness of the subsequent target interview by familiarizing the child with the interview process. That could result if the practice interview increased the chances of identifying and

- Empathize with a nervous child's feelings. Indicate the naturalness of such feelings: "I wonder whether it feels scary to talk to a stranger about stuff that is so hard to talk about."

#### **Interview preparation instructions.**

Interviewers scheduled to conduct a practice or target interview of the cognitive type or a target interview of the standard type followed rapport development with preparation of the child for the upcoming questions by instructing the interviewee as follows:

- "There may be some questions that you do not know the answers to. That's okay. Nobody can remember everything. If you don't know the answer to a question, then tell me 'I don't know,' but do not guess or make anything up. It is very important to tell me only what you really remember. Only what really happened."
- "If you do not want to answer some of the questions, you don't have to. That's okay. Tell me 'I don't want to answer that question.'"
- "If you do not know what something I ask you means, tell me 'I don't know what you mean.' Tell me to say it in new words."
- "I may ask you some questions more than one time. Sometimes I forget that I already asked you that question. You don't have to change your answer. Just tell me what you remember the best you can."

**Narrative report.** Interviewers scheduled to conduct a practice or target interview of the cognitive type or a target interview of the standard type continued the interview by asking the child for a narrative account of "what happened."

**Narrative report: cognitive interview only.** Before asking, those conducting cognitive sessions asked the child to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the event witnessed and to be complete.

*Reconstruct the circumstances.* Guidelines for the interviewers stated that the child's reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the incident should include not only external factors but also his or her feelings at the time. That should be done aloud to ensure that the child will expend the necessary mental effort and will understand what is expected. To keep the child grounded in reality and minimize fantasy,

## *Exhibit 2*

### **Target Interview About the Slide-Show Staged Event**

#### ***The staged event***

A female, playing the role of a teacher, showed slides of California landmarks to third- and sixth-graders, in groups of three or four at a location on the UCLA campus. After she presented seven slides and short stories about the landmarks, a male entered the room, waved a stick, threw down his backpack, and created sufficient commotion to gain the children's attention.

Engaging in a somewhat heated discussion about the scheduled use of the slide projector, teacher and intruder exchanged several bits of key information, which pertained to people, objects, and events. The intruder exited the room after he and the teacher resolved the dispute in a socially acceptable manner. The teacher continued the slide show and presented two more landmarks.

#### ***The interviewers***

Two days after the children witnessed the slide-show incident, deputies from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department interviewed them, one on one. Volunteering to participate in the study, each deputy had completed formal training given by the Sheriff's Department on interviewing child witnesses and victims. Each had at least 4 years' experience in the field. All were provided written instructions on how to conduct the type of interview assigned, and all but one attended a 2-hour training session conducted by the researchers.

None of the deputies were given prior knowledge of the staged event.

#### ***The interview: two types***

Each deputy, as randomly assigned, conducted one of two types of target interview: cognitive or standard. The study labeled the cognitive interview as a "C" target interview and the standard interview as an "S" target interview. (Written instructions on how to conduct the type of interview assigned were sent to each deputy. Additionally, the researchers presented a 2-hour training session.)

the guidelines state that the interviewer must avoid using such terms as "pretend" and "imagine."

The interviewer's guidelines recommended that the child be told the following: "Picture that time when [insert here the appropriate lead-in information], as if you were there right now. Think about what it was like there. Tell me out loud. Were there any smells there? Was it dark or light? Picture any other people who were there. Who else was there? What things were there? How were you feeling when you were there?"

*Be complete/report everything.* According to the researchers' guidelines, after the child reconstructs the circumstances, interviewers are to instruct the child as follows:

"Now I want you to start at the beginning and tell me what happened, from the beginning to the middle, to the end. Tell me everything you remember, even little parts that you don't think are very important. Sometimes people leave out little things because they think little things are not important. Tell me everything that happened."

The guidelines include several caveats and suggestions. Do not interrupt while the child is talking. To do so risks foreshortening the child's narrative report and exposing it to legal complications based on "leading" the witness. If needed, prompting in a neutral way is all right: "And then what happened?" Take notes sparingly; ask for clarification when the child is finished. Use a tape recorder. Speak slowly so the child will do so also.

**Specific questions phase.** Those conducting a practice or target interview of the cognitive type or a target interview of the standard type are to encourage the children to expand upon or clarify what was reported in the narrative account. Guidelines for all such interviewers included such advice as the following:

- Ask open-ended questions whenever possible: "Can you tell me about the clothes that the man was wearing?"
- Permit the child to answer one question before posing another.
- Speak in a relaxed tone and keep language simple. Use positive phrasing: "Do you remember the color of the car?" Not, "You don't remember the color of the car, do you?"
- Pay attention to the child's answers to your questions and do not jump to conclusions about the reliability of the child as a witness.
- Praise the child's effort, not the content of the responses.

**Specific questions phase: cognitive interview only.** Researchers prepared additional guidelines about the use of special memory-jogging techniques, highlighted below, for only those who conducted practice or target interviews of the cognitive type.

*Backward-order recall.* Guidelines said that interviewers should ask the children to recall the events in backward order, starting at the end, then the middle, and then the beginning. Prepare the child for that technique before asking backward-order questions. After each response, prompt the child: "What happened right before that?"

*Alphabet search.* If the child believes that a name may have been mentioned during the incident witnessed, ask the child to go through the alphabet as an aid to recalling the first letter of the name.

*Speech characteristics.* Probe for speech traits. Did a voice remind the child of another's? If so, why and what was unusual about the voice?

*Conversation.* How did the child feel about what was said? Unusual words or phrases?

*New perspective.* Guidelines informed interviewers to ask each child to recall the incident from the perspective of someone

else present at the event: "Put yourself in the body of \_\_, and tell me what you would have seen or heard if you had been that person?" A further recommendation: use that technique only after the child appears to have exhausted his or her memory of the event.

In actual cases it might be upsetting for children to report the event from the viewpoint of the alleged perpetrator. In such cases, the perspectives of other victims or even a stuffed animal may not carry similar emotional overtones that could influence reporting.

## Results of the study

Transcripts of the deputies' sessions with the children yielded sufficient information on which to base an assessment—from a number of standpoints—of the effectiveness of the various types of interviews and related techniques.

As a general observation, Geiselman, Bornstein, and Saywitz concluded that variations either in the number of questions asked during the various types of interviews or in the length of the interviews are irrelevant to an explanation of the effects of using either the practice interview or the cognitive-interview procedure.

### Number of facts recalled correctly.

When children received rapport development only in the practice interview and then were interviewed by deputies using the cognitive interview procedure, the children recalled correctly 18 percent more facts than did the children receiving the standard interview from deputies after a rapport development practice interview. The improvement was 45 percent when the children's practice interview was of the cognitive type. Those percentages probably underestimate the potential of the cognitive interview inasmuch as many deputies, as noted later, did not use all the techniques that make up the cognitive interview procedure.

The older children correctly recalled significantly more facts than the younger children.

**Number of recall errors.** Statistically, third-graders in this study did not make more recall errors than sixth-graders. This finding, the researchers say, has far-reaching implications for the evaluation of testimony by children in different age ranges.

## Cognitive Interview Components

### Phase 1

- Develop rapport with the child in accordance with recommended guidelines.
- Prepare child for the interviewer's questions through a set of four instructions.

### Phase 2

- Ask the child to reconstruct, aloud, the circumstances surrounding the incident. That includes not only such external factors as the appearance of the scene, the people present or nearby, and the weather but also the child's thoughts and feelings at the time.
- Instruct the child to report everything that happened from beginning to end, including what may not seem important.

### Phase 3

- Ask the child to recall events in backward order, from the end of the incident to the beginning.
- Use the memory-jogging techniques of asking the child to run through the alphabet as an aid to identifying the first letter of a forgotten name; to reflect on whether the suspect's appearance reminded the child of someone else; to recall unusual speech characteristics; and to remember conversations, unusual words or phrases, and reactions to them.
- Ask the child to recount the incident from a different perspective, such as through the eyes of someone else who was present, or through the "eyes" of an inanimate object, such as a stuffed animal that was present.

Additionally, the differences in incorrect item recall among the interview format conditions were not significant.

**Accuracy of recall.** The accuracy rate of the children's recall (number of instances of accurate recall divided by all recall instances) during interviews with deputies

was remarkably high for each practice-target interview combination:

**RC** Practice—Rapport only  
Target—Cognitive  
89 percent accuracy

**CC** Practice—Cognitive  
Target—Cognitive  
88 percent accuracy

**RS** Practice—Rapport only  
Target—Standard  
84 percent accuracy

Such rates provide another illustration of the recollection capability of young children who are interviewed by experienced law enforcement personnel, state the researchers.

#### **Assessment of four cognitive techniques.**

Deputies used each of the four cognitive techniques much less frequently than did the student interviewers. For example, most of the deputies assigned to conduct one set of cognitive interviews did not use all four techniques, whereas 5 percent of the students assigned to conduct full cognitive interviews failed to use each of the four.

Use of the reconstruction-of-circumstances technique was significantly associated with the number of correctly recalled facts during the deputies' cognitive interviews. So also was use of the be-complete technique, which was not associated with an increase in the number of items recalled incorrectly.

When interviewers used the backward-order technique, it elicited new information 44 percent of the time, 79 percent of which was correct. Use of the new-perspective technique generated new information 75 percent of the time, 86 percent being accurate.

**Interviewing style and children's performance.** The researchers characterized interviews as ambivalent (31 percent), condescending (38 percent), or positive (31 percent). Each style affected the recall performance of children differently.

Ambivalent interviewers were described as bored and disinterested—as if their primary concern was to complete the interview, not to gather complete and accurate information. Their interviews usually lasted under 10 minutes, less than half the average time computed for all interviews. Often, they asked three or more

sometimes-leading questions at once: "Did he have any hair on his face or jewelry? Did he have earrings like you or a beard or a mustache, or you don't remember?" In such interviews little time was spent developing rapport with the child.

Ambivalent interviewers were the least productive, asking the fewest questions and eliciting the smallest number of informational items (correct or incorrect) from the children.

Condescending interviewers appeared to convey that they did not have faith in the children's responses: "You say his name is David. Are you sure his name is David? How do you know his name is David?" Such interviewers also frequently repeated questions, posed questions in rapid-fire fashion, and foreshortened responses by interrupting the child.

Compared to the other two types of interviewers, the condescending interviewer asked the most questions (87.6, more than twice as many, on average, as the ambivalent questioner) and generated more information than did the ambivalent interviewer but at the cost of eliciting more incorrect information.

Positive interviewers appeared to develop rapport effectively, showed interest in what children were saying, maintained a high level of attention, praised children for their efforts, and generated expanded responses through open-ended questions.

Positive interviews produced the most information and the highest accuracy rate (90.1 percent). Compared to the condescending interviewer, for example, those using the positive approach asked fewer questions and generated more information without an increase in errors.

## **Conclusions and implications**

**Practice interviews.** The impact of a practice cognitive interview about an innocuous event on a child's recall performance during a later, official interview is indeed beneficial. Practice interviews can serve one or more of these purposes:

- Give the child experience with the usually unfamiliar task of being interviewed by a stranger about details of an event.
- Clarify the methods used in a subsequent interview.

- Encourage the child to use recall techniques spontaneously so that more of them will be employed.

At first glance, the recommendation in favor of practice interviewing creates a dilemma. Others have emphasized that victims and witnesses of child abuse must undergo several interviews about the alleged crime; that paves the way for numerous psychological and legal complications. One might regard the practice interview as yet another in an already too-long series of interviews.

However, if the child provides a more complete report early in the process because of more effective interview techniques, the overall time required for interviewing the child should be less.

The NIJ study documents that children who experienced a practice cognitive interview about an unrelated event gave the most complete reports about the target event. Children who are victims and witnesses could undergo a practice interview without the need to retell frightening or anxiety-producing experiences as many times as are currently customary or required. Thus, the practice interview seems well worth the minimal time and expense to implement, conclude the researchers.

**Cognitive interviews.** With or without a practice cognitive interview, cognitive interviewing significantly improved children's recall performance, particularly for the sixth-graders. (Third-graders also displayed a significant increase in correct recall, but the effects were less pronounced.)

Furthermore, the increase in correctly recalled information did not entail the cost of an increase in the amount of incorrect information generated.

**Training.** To be most effective, the study indicates, all four techniques associated with the cognitive interview procedure should be used at least once, and a positive style of interviewing should be followed. Deputies conducting the target interviews included all four cognitive techniques (reconstruct circumstances, be complete, backward order, and new perspective) less frequently than did student interviewers conducting the practice sessions; about one-third of the deputies using the positive interview style.

To produce interviewers who are reliably effective in questioning children, more individualized training is required, the researchers conclude. They suggest an approach that includes in the training regimen an individualized role-playing exercise, which could be videotaped and critiqued by personnel proficient in cognitive interviewing.

This *Research in Brief* summarizes findings of a study conducted by R. Edward Geiselman and Gail Bornstein of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Karen J. Saywitz of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Their study was conducted under grant no. 88-IJ-CX-0033 from the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.

## Notes

1. Whitcomb, D. (1986). "Prosecuting Child Sexual Abuse—New Approaches." National Institute of Justice *Research in Action*.
2. Geiselman, R.E., and Fisher, R.P. (1985) "Interviewing Victims and Witnesses of Crime." National Institute of Justice *Research in Brief*.

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For further information on the research described in this *Research in Brief*, see:

Geiselman, R.E., Saywitz, K.J., and Bornstein, G.K. (forthcoming). "Effects of cognitive questioning techniques on children's recall performance." In G.S. Goodman and B.L. Bottoms (eds.), *Understanding and improving children's testimony: Developmental, clinical, and legal issues*. New York: Guilford Press.

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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