

From the Mouths of Babes: The Validity of Children's Testimony

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Sometimes, a child is victim and/or the only eyewitness in a court case. How much validity do we ascribe to statements by a four-year-old child? How can we tell if the child was coached to express something other than the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

APS Fellow Maggie Bruck, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, addressed these and similar questions at the APS Annual Convention in Atlanta. Bruck's invited address, "Effects of Suggestion on the Reliability and Credibility of Children's Reports," explored the various aspects, including many myths of suggestibility, of the reliability and credibility of children's reports.

"The issue is sometimes, but not always, how accurate are children's reports," Bruck said.

Many people believe, for example, that most children do not disclose sexual abuse, but there is no evidence to support this myth, Bruck said. "The more illogical and incredible the initiation might seem to adults, the more likely it is that the child's plaintive description is valid," Bruck said.

Bruck's second myth leads one to inquire, as she did, concerning whether or not children have the ability to answer open-ended questions. Evidence did not prove this to be a reality. Lamb Sterberg's National Institute for Child Health and Human Development structured protocol suggests that there is "a line that is drawn through the interview." As it turns out, children ages four through eight provided the most answers to open-ended questions.

The third myth, that suggestive interviews are defined by many misleading questions, provoked no obvious objections from Bruck. "Just look for misleading questions and discount them," Bruck said. Bruck's proposition in solving this complex issue sounds un-perplexingly simple. As Bruck pointed out, "You do not have to ask a lot of questions to get children to make false allegations."

"Children will not be misled in one interview" is the fourth myth of interest. Bruck advocates referring to results of scientific research studies in this area like that of Melynck. This brings up placement of interviews. The timing involved is pertinent. When the child receives the information, in relation to when they relay it, is precious enough to make a difference in the soundness of their reports.

Last but not least in the array of myths, the effects of suggestive interviewing techniques are mainly of concern with preschoolers. In all actuality there are "very low rates of suggestibility," Bruck. Older children, not preschool age children provided the most suggestive responses as is substantiated in Zaragoza et al. per Bruck. Future studies, Bruck reports, should work on formulating answers to questions such as "What are the mechanisms underlying suggestibility?"

In closing of her speech Bruck counseled that the effects of suggestibility on the reliability and

credibility of children's reports is "a much more complex phenomenon than originally thought." Although it cannot be stated precisely how valid a child's words are the potentiality that lies behind them is still compelling. The effects of suggestion on such reports speak for themselves in the area of magnitude. It is because of credible research like Bruck's that leads to the invaluable significance for the continuance of studies concerning the effects of suggestibility on the reliability and credibility of a child's report.