



19 Measuring Preschool Children's Interrogative Suggestibility in Forensic Interviews

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become familiar with the area of suggestibility in children between three and five years of age. The factors of gender, age, cognitive capacity, and the interval of time between the event and the interview will be discussed.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by explaining how one of the most important forensic issues during the questioning of a child is the possibility of suggestibility during the interrogation of forensic cases. Ethical professionals must respect and protect children's rights (New York Convention 1989; Strasbourg Convention 1996). According to the international literature, children's cognitive development is not complete until adolescence.¹⁻³ Therefore, the problems inherent in children serving as witnesses are self-evident.⁴ In preschool-aged children, false memories may be identified because of misinformation and insight bias. Additionally, they are generally susceptible to implanted suggestions.^{5,6}

The aim of this study is to verify the possible levels of suggestibility in children between three and five years of age. The variables of gender, age, cognitive capacity, and the interval of time between the event and interview are considered. Ninety-two children were individually examined (44 male, 48 female; M=4.5 years, SD= 9.62).

The most widely used tool for assessing and evaluating levels of interrogative suggestibility are the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scales (GSS) and the Bonn Test of Statement Suggestibility (BTSS).^{7,8} All subjects completed the BTSS (which is indicated for the age range between 4 and 11 years). The duration of this test is about 30 minutes and is structured in four defined phases: presentation of the "toy duck story" with four illustrations, free report of the child, a 15-minute interval for distracting the child, and questioning (31 questions) the child about the story. The BTSS investigates the dimensions: Yield, Shift, Immediate Recall, and Total Suggestibility.^{9,10}

The study hypothesizes that the younger children (three years of age) were more susceptible to the suggestibility than the older children (five years of age). Another hypothesis is that a higher score in the dimension Immediate Recall is positive-correlated with the dimension Total Suggestibility. The last hypothesis is that a high score of Yield is correlated with the younger children and that, in contrast, an elevated score of Shift is associated with older children.

The results of this study of 92 participants concluded: (1) younger children are more susceptible to suggestibility; and, (2) no significant gender difference was observed. The dimension Immediate Recall was negatively correlated with Total Suggestibility ($r=-.357$).

Social compliance and source monitoring errors can contribute to presenting patterns of suggestibility because older children change their answers more often (Shift).^{11,12} Social factors and memory, especially autobiographical memory, can underlie suggestibility. Children will hardly remember their early childhood (4 – 5 years) and it is also known, from numerous studies, that children can lie to avoid punishment or to get a reward.¹³⁻¹⁵ In forensic issues, children are normally interviewed several times before a case goes to court. This study shows that repeated questions can transmit the message that they have to change their given answer.

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