

Child abuse interview guidelines may need to be reviewed for victims' sake

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Do the guidelines on interviewing alleged victims of child abuse need to be re-thought? New research from the University of Abertay Dundee has found evidence that multiple interviews can actually help victims recall greater details about their abuse.

Currently the guidelines for the UK and Scotland recommend [investigators](#) avoid repeated interviews wherever possible, arguing that this risks inconsistent [evidence](#) and ‘suggestability’ – the problem of an interviewer suggesting answers by not asking open-ended questions with multiple possible answers.

However, research by Dr. David La Rooy and colleagues has found that when conducted properly, multiple interviews using open-ended questions can deliver stronger evidence to convict, and actually help alleged victims recall greater details about their experiences of abuse.

“When interviewers follow internationally recognised best-practice guidelines on using open questions and free-memory recall, more complete accounts of their abuse can be pieced together through conducting multiple interviews,” Dr. La Rooy said.

“It’s commonly assumed that conducting more than one interview damages the quality of evidence, but our research has found that this isn’t necessarily the case.

“When properly conducted, more than one interview helps victims’

memories develop, revealing far greater detail than just one interview ever can.”

Guidelines to investigators from both the UK Government in 2007 and the then Scottish Executive in 2003 recommend strongly against multiple interviews. However, the researchers found a strong body of psychological evidence suggesting otherwise.

Dr. La Rooy added: “There is a need to distinguish between multiple interviews that are conducted properly and help a victim gradually recover their memory, and multiple interviews that are conducted poorly and lead a child to give particular answers.

“As guidelines are revised in the future we strongly hope that this evidence is taken into account.”

The key psychological process is known as ‘reminiscence’, where an individual’s memory is incomplete but can be gradually pieced back together over time. The researchers found that separating interviews gave time for additional, new information to be recalled.

The need to re-interview alleged victims also needs to be balanced with concerns about the welfare of victims, who can find the interviewing process extremely stressful and disturbing. However, the research shows that children can benefit from more than one opportunity to recall information.

Conducting a series of interviews, with structured and open-ended questioning, can allow the child to develop a trusting relationship with the interviewer and limit the negative effects of the process.

More information: The research is published in the latest edition of *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, the journal of the *American*

Psychological Association.

Provided by University of Abertay Dundee

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