



Lay Summary

Verbal, Visual, and Intermediary Support for Child Witnesses with Autism During Investigative Interviews

Background

Previous research has shown that children on the autism spectrum may have problems with recalling memories of past events. Autistic children also have difficulties communicating and interacting socially. As a result, legal professionals (such as police officers) may have concerns about whether children with autism can be reliable witnesses. The current study looked at the amount and accuracy of information that children with and without an autism diagnosis recalled during mock police interviews.

What were the aims of the research?

- 1) To compare how well a group of children with autism (these children did not have intellectual disabilities, although many did have other complex needs) performed during a mock police interview, relative to a group of typically developing children (of a similar age and level of general ability).
- 2) To see whether we could identify how to support children with and without an autism diagnosis in remembering as much accurate information as they could about an event, during a mock police interview.

What we did...

The children in our research, 71 on the autism spectrum (many of whom attended special schools) and 199 who were typically developing (all between the ages of 6 and 11 years), watched two men give a short talk (lasting approximately three and a half minutes) about what school was like in Victorian times. Towards the end of the talk, one of the men 'stole' something from the other. One week later, a team of specially trained researchers visited the children and carried out one of four different interviews with them.

Interview 1 – Best Practice interview. This interview followed the guidelines that police currently use in England and Wales when interviewing children. The interview protocol includes greeting the child, building rapport with them, ensuring they can tell the difference between a truth and a lie, and then gathering the child's account of what happened (initially by asking the child to recall everything they saw, before using open questions, to ask for further information based on what the child has already said).

Interview 2 – Verbal Labels. This interview followed the same principles as the Best Practice interview, but children were also asked (straight after giving their initial account of the event) to tell the interviewer some more information about a number of key areas: People, Objects, Actions, Conversations, and the Setting.

Interview 3 – Sketch Plan. Again, this interview followed the principles of the Best Practice interview, except that the children were asked – before recalling the event – to draw a picture of anything they wanted to that would help them remember what they had seen. As they were doing this, they were asked to chat to the interviewer about what they were drawing. They also had their drawing with them for the rest of the interview.

Interview 4 – Registered Intermediary. Registered Intermediaries (RIs) are trained professionals whose role is to facilitate communication between vulnerable witnesses and members of the justice system (such as police officers, solicitors/barristers and judges). The role of the RI is wide ranging, but includes conducting an assessment of the witness prior to the interview and advising the interviewer how best to communicate with the witness. They are also present during the interview, to facilitate communication where necessary. In the present study, one of two trained, experienced RIs assessed the children and advised the interviewer as they conducted the interview (which also followed the Best-Practice guidelines but with some amendments as advised by the RIs to simplify the process – see below for an example).

Rules for talking

1. It's very important to say what really happened 
2. It's  to say
 I don't know /  I don't understand /  I can't remember
3. If a person talking to you has got it wrong
you can say ... you got it wrong or point to 
4. If a person talking to you has got it right....
you can say ... you got it right or point to 

What did we find?

For the typically developing children, the assistance of an RI led to them recalling a higher amount of correct information, and it did not increase the number of errors made. There was also some evidence that the Verbal Labels interview increased the amount of

information recalled by typically developing children, but it also slightly increased the number of errors the children made.

For the children on the autism spectrum, we couldn't establish which interview technique worked best – they performed similarly in all four interviews (recalling a similar amount of correct information).

Encouragingly, the autistic children performed just as well as the typically developing children in most of our interviews – recalling as much correct information, and making no more errors. However, whilst the recall of the typically developing children was considerably 'boosted' by the assistance of an RI, this was not the case for the children with autism. However, it is important to emphasise that children with autism *still need an RI* to help them cope with formal interviews within the criminal justice system. Our study was 'fun', took place in a familiar environment (usually school), and had no trauma associated with it. We were not able to assess the wider role of the RI in facilitating children with autism to give evidence in unfamiliar and worrying circumstances.

Why are these findings important?

Registered Intermediaries have been used to support vulnerable witnesses in the criminal justice system in England and Wales for many years now. This is the first experimental study to show that they are effective at improving the amount of accurate information provided by witnesses (in this case, with typically developing children).

Although the assistance of an RI did not improve the amount of accurate information recalled by children with autism, this does not mean that RIs should not be used for children on the spectrum. To the contrary, RIs are likely to benefit children with autism in many different ways; ways that we were not able to measure in this study. For example, RIs can play a really important role in helping to ensure that a formal police interview can actually take place at all with a child on the autism spectrum. Once an interview is taking place, RIs can reduce an autistic child's anxiety and distress prior to and during an interview by recommending particular adjustments to procedures to help an autistic child manage the interview process. Future research is now being planned to address all of these important aspects of the RI role for children with autism.

Read the full paper in *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*:
<https://link.springer.com/journal/10803>

Reference: Henry, L.A., Crane, L., Nash, G., Hobson, Z., Kirke-Smith, M., & Wilcock, R. (2017). Verbal, visual, and intermediary support for child witnesses with autism during investigative interviews. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*