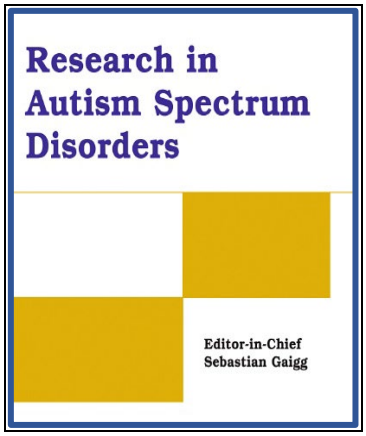

Lay Summary

Eyewitness identification in child witnesses on the autism spectrum.

Background

There is little research into how well autistic children perform when asked to identify perpetrators from lineups. This is despite research literature showing that autistic children experience face recognition memory difficulties. The current study asked autistic and non-autistic children to view a 'mock crime' event. Approximately a week later, we examined how accurate the children were at identifying the 'mock' perpetrators in lineups.

What were the aims of the research?

1) To compare how well a group of children on the autism spectrum (these children did not have intellectual disabilities) performed on identification lineups, relative to a group of typically developing children (of similar age and level of general ability).
2) To see how children performed on lineups where the 'mock' perpetrator was *present* in the lineup, and also on lineups where the 'mock' perpetrator was *absent* from the lineup.

What we did…

The children in our research were 50 autistic children and 84 typically developing children (between the ages of 6 and 11 years). All of them 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 showed the children two lineups, one for each of the perpetrators seen in the 'mock crime'. All children saw one *perpetrator present* lineup and one *perpetrator absent* lineup (where the perpetrator was replaced with a designated innocent suspect).

Lineups. These were produced by the UK's Metropolitan Police Service, and our lineup procedure followed the guidelines that police currently use in England and Wales (PACE Code D). Each lineup had nine colour video images of head and shoulders, facing forwards and then turning to show the left and right side of the face. The children watched all nine images one at a time (sequentially) and they did this twice before they made any identification. Children were also told before seeing the images that the perpetrator may or may not be present.

Lineup responses:

1. **Perpetrator Present Lineups**
    a. Correct identification of the perpetrator
    b. Foil identification
    c. Incorrect rejection

2. **Perpetrator Absent Lineups**
    a. Correct rejection of the lineup
    b. Foil identification

What did we find?
Despite autistic children showing poorer performance than typically developing children on a standardized measure of face recognition, on our 'real world' identification lineup task autistic children showed broadly equivalent performance to typically developing children. For perpetrator 1, there were no group differences on either the perpetrator present or absent lineups. For perpetrator 2, there was no group difference on the perpetrator absent lineup, although autistic children were less likely to make a correct identification on the perpetrator present lineup. This could be because the foils in the perpetrator 2 lineup were more similar-looking to the perpetrator - making it a more difficult identification task.

Why are these findings important?
This research shows that on 'real world' facial recognition tasks such as identification lineups, children on the autism spectrum can be reliable witnesses. This is despite research showing that they have poorer face recognition memory on standardized tasks. As such, eyewitness identification evidence from autistic child witnesses should be considered by criminal justice practitioners. Future research could focus on how best to support eyewitness identification performance in autistic and non-autistic children. Registered Intermediaries have been used to support vulnerable witnesses in the criminal justice system in England and Wales for many years, and research shows they improve lineup performance in typically developing children. The next step is to see how Registered Intermediaries can support autistic children during lineups.

Read the full paper in *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*:
https:/ (currently in press)

Reference: Wilcock, R., Crane, L., Hobson, Z., Nash, G., Kirke-Smith, M., & Henry, L.A. (2019 – in press). Eyewitness identification in child witnesses on the autism spectrum. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, X,* xx-xx. doi: