



## Lay summary

# Mock juror perceptions of child witnesses on the autism spectrum: The impact of providing diagnostic labels and information about autism

### Background

Previous research has shown that autistic children are able to remember accurate and relevant information about a mock crime event that they have witnessed. However, jury members may also rely on other cues (e.g., non-verbal cues) when judging the credibility of a witness, and this information could influence the jury's verdict. In the current study, individual mock jurors viewed videos of autistic children being interviewed about a mock crime event, and were subsequently asked to rate how credible they thought the child witnesses were.

### What were the aims of the research?

- 1) To look at mock juror perceptions of the credibility of two child witnesses on the autism spectrum.
- 2) To see whether knowing about the child's autism diagnosis (and additionally being provided with general information about autism) influenced the perceptions of witness credibility.

### What we did...

Participants were 120 jury eligible adults aged between 18 and 69 years. They each watched one of two videos of an autistic child being interviewed (using a best practice police interview) about a mild crime. Interviews took place one week after seeing a staged event involving two men giving a short talk about what school was like in Victorian times. Towards the end of the talk, one of the men 'stole' something from the other.

Witness information	<i>Child A</i>	<i>Child B</i>
Number of details recalled	43 details	27 details
Interview length	10 minutes 16 secs	6 minutes 44 secs
Age	9 years 11 months	10 years 9 months
Cognitive ability	average	average
Receptive (understood) language	low average	low average
Expressive (spoken) language	high average	low average
Ratings of videos on behavioural characteristics	more monotonous more composed, coherent and focused more appropriate use of vocabulary	less monotonous less composed, coherent and focused less appropriate use of vocabulary

### Knowledge of Autism Diagnosis / Information about Autism:

Prior to watching one of the witness videos, mock jurors were assigned to one of three knowledge groups:

- 1) **Told AUT + info** – jurors were informed that the child had an autism diagnosis and asked to read information detailing key features and characteristics of the condition.
- 2) **TOLD AUT + no info** – jurors were informed that the child had an autism diagnosis but given no additional information.
- 3) **Not told AUT + no info** – jurors were given no information about the child's diagnosis and no additional information about autism.

### Questionnaire:

Mock jurors used a questionnaire to rate 11 aspects of the child's credibility: accuracy; convincingness; confidence in what was said; confidence in demeanour; competence; honesty; believability; completeness of account; level of cognitive functioning; capability to testify; and overall performance on 7-point Likert scales (1 'not at all' through to 7 'very much').

### What did we find?

For **Child A**, there was no significant effect on juror perceptions of credibility of knowledge of autism diagnosis or autism information. For **Child B**, mock jurors gave lower credibility ratings in the **not told AUT + no info** condition compared to the **told AUT + info** condition. In other words, providing general information about autism as well as informing jurors about the autism diagnosis led to **higher** credibility ratings for **Child B**.

### Why are these findings important?

These findings highlight the importance of understanding that a key feature of autism is that individuals display different behaviours and to differing degrees. Giving information to jurors about autism might, therefore, affect juror perceptions of autistic child witnesses differently. Why? Children recalling more details about an event may be perceived as 'more convincing', such that the autism information need not be used to 'explain' a weaker account. Similarly, autistic children displaying fewer atypical behavioural characteristics, possibly associated with autism (i.e., being less focused, composed, coherent), may also be perceived as more convincing. Therefore, provision of information to juries about an autism diagnosis and autism more generally should be tailored to the specific profile of the individual child witness.

Read the full paper in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders:

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-018-3700-0>

Reference: Crane, L., Wilcock, R., Maras, K.L., Chui, W., Marti-Sanchez, C. & Henry, L.A. (2018). Mock juror perceptions of child witnesses on the autism spectrum: The impact of providing diagnostic labels and information about autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. doi: 10.1007/s10803-018-3700-0