

Intermediaries may increase recall of correct information in police interviews with vulnerable witnesses, says study

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Credit: City University London

The use of intermediaries during police interviews with vulnerable witnesses - such as children - may significantly increase the recall of correct details, according a new study from City, University of London and the University of Winchester.

The researchers found that with the assistance of a Registered Intermediary (communication specialists who facilitate vulnerable witnesses to give evidence during police investigations and at trial), typically developing primary school-age children mentioned over 60 per cent more correct details compared to comparable children who received a [police interview](#) in line with current best-practice, without any intervention. The study is the first to measure the positive impact of [intermediaries](#) on recall levels in child witnesses.

Although the researchers found that intermediaries did not increase the volume of recall in primary school-age children with [autism](#), more research is needed to find out other important ways intermediaries may help this vulnerable group. The paper is published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

To explore whether three promising investigative interview interventions would increase the amount of information recalled about a witnessed event, the researchers recruited 270 children aged

between 6 and 11 years-old. This included 71 children with autism and 199 typically developing children. The researchers then replicated a criminal investigation with the participants, simulating an initial crime and then following it up with a brief evidence gathering statement to replicate a police first response.

Participants were then allocated to one of four interview conditions, which included a 'Best-Practice' police interview and three interventions, with all interviews carried out a week later. The interventions were:

- Verbal Labels: interviewers provided children with four additional verbal prompts concerning key aspects of the event (e.g., perpetrators, setting, actions, and conversation);
- Sketch Reinstatement of Context (Sketch-RC): children drew a detailed sketch of whatever they believed would help them to remember the event before talking to the interviewer about it;
- Registered Intermediaries (RI): children were supported by an impartial, trained professional who facilitated understanding and communication between them and the interviewer.

When compared to the 'Best-Practice' interview (i.e. an interview carried out according to usual police best-practice in England and Wales), the researchers found that for typically developing children, the RI and Verbal Labels interviews increased the number of correct details recalled compared to a Best-Practice interview.

RI interviews showed the greater increase in number of correct details (an average increase of over 60%), without affecting error rates. In contrast,

whilst the Verbal Labels [interview](#) increased the amount recalled, it also increased the number of memory errors.

Children with autism, performed as well as typically developing children in most interviews, but some expected benefits (e.g., of Registered Intermediaries) were not apparent for children with autism in this study (although intermediaries help children with autism in other important ways).

Professor Lucy Henry, Professor of Speech and Language in the Division of Language and Communication Science at City, University of London and lead author of the study, said:

"The current study offers the first empirical evidence to support the use of Registered Intermediaries in 6- to 11-year-old typically developing children, as they produced highly significant increases in correct recall without compromising the children's accuracy. Although intermediaries did not improve the volume of recall for children with autism, they are likely to have other helpful effects in real cases, reducing the stress and trauma associated with giving evidence.

"As a result, our new findings strengthen the case for using intermediaries for younger children in the justice system and further research is needed to explore the wider aspects of the intermediary role in more depth, particularly for [children](#) with autism."

More information: Lucy A. Henry et al. Verbal, Visual, and Intermediary Support for Child Witnesses with Autism During Investigative Interviews, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-017-3142-0](#)

Provided by City University London

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