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“How” and “Why” prompts in forensic investigative interviews with preschool children

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ABSTRACT

Although young children may frequently be asked “How” and “Why” questions, it is unclear whether they have the ability to respond well enough to justify the use of these words during investigative interviews. The range of possible uses and interpretations of the words “How” and “Why” makes it critical to examine their use when communicatively immature children are interviewed. In this study, police interviews of 3- to 5-year-old suspected victims of sexual abuse ($n = 49$) were examined. The use of How/Why prompts by interviewers and children’s responses to interviewers’ How/Why prompts were coded. How/Why prompts represented 22% of all interviewer prompts. Of all details provided by children, however, 8.5% were in response to How/Why prompts. In addition, children provided the information sought in response to only 20% of the interviewers’ How/Why prompts, whereas uninformative responses were relatively common. Children responded to more How/Why prompts with the information sought by interviewers as they grew older. The findings suggest that How/Why prompts may not be particularly effective when interviewing preschool children.

Research on child witnesses, especially on their memory and suggestibility, has advanced remarkably over the last few decades (see Bruck, Ceci, & Principe, 2006; Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011, for reviews), and this knowledge has led to vast improvements in investigative interview techniques (e.g., Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). Preschool children are often recognized as the most difficult to interview (e.g., Tang, 2006), yet field research concerning preschool children is rare (though see Hershkowitz, Lamb, Orbach, Katz, & Horowitz, 2012). Furthermore, although many researchers have explored the effects of leading, suggestive, or complex questions on children’s accounts of experienced events (Bruck et al., 2006; Malloy & Quas, 2009), there has been little research on ostensibly simpler questions that may nonetheless be difficult for young children to understand and answer. How and Why prompts represent one such type, and they were the focus of the present research examining forensic interviews with 3- to 5-year-old suspected victims of child sexual abuse.

Most studies of children’s responses to How/Why questions have been conducted in the laboratory with small numbers of children, have investigated specific syntactic issues related to WH-questions (e.g., inversion errors such as “Where she is going?”), have focused on

children with disabilities or language impairments, or are case studies exploring the occurrence of How/Why in naturalistic conversations (e.g., Ambridge, Rowland, Theakston, & Tomasello, 2006; Deevy & Leonard, 2004; J. G. deVilliers, Roeper, Bland-Stewart, & Pearson, 2008; Rowland, Pine, Lieven, & Theakston, 2003). In forensic interview research, How/Why questions (which we sometimes refer to as “prompts” because some requests for information are not framed in the form of questions) are grouped with other types of WH- or yes/no questions, often referred to as focused or directive questions (e.g., Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999). It is thus unclear how often forensic interviewers use How/Why prompts specifically, and whether preschool children understand them. Children’s ability to respond appropriately and accurately to How/Why prompts can have important implications when they are questioned in legal contexts. In the present study, we asked how often and in what way investigators used “How” and “Why” in forensic interviews with preschool children and how the children responded to interviewers’ prompts containing How/Why.

Researchers have extensively examined children’s responsiveness to invitations (i.e., open-ended) as opposed to directive or narrower questions such as

WH-questions (see Lamb et al., 2008, 2011; Lamb, Malloy, Hershkowitz, & La Rooy, 2015, for reviews). However, a minimal amount is known about potential differences in children's responsiveness to the various types of WH-questions. This gap in the literature is critical for several reasons. First, WH-questions are unique because they request information in specific categories and thus are more narrow than open-ended invitations to narrate, yet also require that children do more than simply confirm or negate assertions provided by an interviewer as yes/no questions do (Peterson et al., 1999). Second, interviewers often feel compelled to move beyond invitation prompts, especially with preschool children who typically require more cues to prompt the retrieval of information (Hamond & Fivush, 1991; Hershkowitz et al., 2012). Examining the interviewers' use of How/Why prompts and the associated responses of young interviewees represents an important first step in gaining a more thorough understanding of the role of WH-questions in forensic contexts. Next, we briefly review key aspects of preschool children's language and cognitive development that have implications for their ability to understand, misunderstand, or respond appropriately to How/Why prompts. Second, we describe why How/Why prompts in forensic interviews are particularly complex and worthy of study.

Preschool children's language and cognitive development: Implications for understanding and responding to How/Why prompts

In approximately their second year of life, children begin to use the words where, what, when, who, why, which, and how (P. A. deVilliers & deVilliers, 1979). Although they use what, who, and where (WH-identity) questions comparatively early, preschool children have particular difficulty responding to when, how, and why questions (WH-sententials). This may, in part, be because appropriate responses to WH-identity questions require command of concepts and information which children are more used to expressing (e.g., agents, objects, locations) than those required to answer other WH- prompts, like How/Why questions (i.e., manner, causation, purpose, time; J. G. deVilliers & deVilliers, 1978). Thus, constraints on children's abstract thought, exerted by syntactic or semantic complexity, may affect their understanding of and responsiveness to How/Why questions (Bloom, 1991; Bloom, Merkin, & Wootten, 1982). Rowland et al. (2003) argued that children have difficulty understanding How/Why because they are exposed to such questions less than to other WH-questions, and that the higher relative exposure may be a

more powerful predictor of understanding than linguistic complexity.

Interviewers may over-estimate children's ability to understand and respond to How/Why prompts because language develops so rapidly during the preschool years. Typically, by the age of 3, children have become cooperative conversationalists who understand the general structure of conversations, and by the age of 5, they have already acquired skills and vocabularies enabling them to converse with adults (Dale, 1976; MacWhinney, 2010). However, some adult-like language usage may disguise a more primitive understanding of language, including comprehension of WH-questions (Clark, 2003). For example, children may use words before they understand their meaning or understand words only in certain contexts. Also, children may not interpret words or questions as intended by adult interlocutors (see Walker, 1999, for a review). In addition, children are more concrete and literal than adults in their understanding, thinking, and speaking (Hewitt, 1999; Piaget, 1977) and this may affect their ability to respond appropriately with the information sought by interviewers. These characteristics can lead to misunderstandings between interviewers and children.

Moreover, preschool children may not indicate when such misunderstandings occur perhaps because they fail to monitor their comprehension accurately. Research reveals that there are marked shifts in comprehension monitoring, metacognition, and metalinguistic awareness in the early elementary school years (e.g., Edwards & Kirkpatrick, 1999; Markman, 1977; Saywitz & Wilkinson, 1982) which may help them interpret interviewers' questions correctly. Taken together, these characteristics have implications for children's understanding of How/Why prompts, especially given their potential complexity, as discussed in the next section.

The complexity of How/Why prompts

In addition to varying with respect to their complexity and the cognitive skills and knowledge required to answer them, How/Why prompts may include references to objects, subjects, and/or the self. The range of possible uses and interpretations of How/Why and the consequent potential for error make it critical to examine their use in investigative contexts, especially with preschool children. Furthermore, in forensic interviews, it is helpful if children provide detailed accounts of their experiences. Thus, it is also important to investigate the amount of information that children provide in response to How/Why prompts.

Understanding and responding to different "How" prompts may require such skills and conceptual

understanding as the abilities to describe actions (e.g., How do you go to school every day?) or to reinstate the sequence of events (e.g., Tell me how that happened). Other “How” prompts may require that children understand kinship (e.g., How is she related to you?) or other conceptual issues including temporal (e.g., How long were you at his house?) and spatial (e.g., How far is your school?) concepts. Still other “How” prompts involve evaluative requests (e.g., How did you feel when it happened?) or requests for action (e.g., How many times do I have to tell you?), whereas others call upon children to recognize formulaic uses of “How” (e.g., How do you do?) and those that are simply comments on another’s behavior (e.g., How could he do that?). Although preschool children can respond accurately to some “How” questions, even adults find some problematic (e.g., how far, how many; Orbach & Lamb, 2007).

Lyon, Scurich, Choi, Handmaker, and Blank (2012) examined questions eliciting evaluative information (e.g., emotional reactions) from children alleging sexual abuse. They found that “How” questions such as “How did you feel?” elicited evaluative content more effectively than option posing and suggestive questions requesting similar types of information. However, the study was focused narrowly on the elicitation of evaluative information using a particular type of “How” question.

There are also many potential uses and interpretations of “Why” prompts. Subjective “Why” questions (e.g., Why did you wait so long to tell?) can be difficult to answer because they may be cognitively demanding, requiring meta-cognitive, cognitive, and linguistic operations, including remembering, reflecting, and reasoning backward from effect to cause. Children may also perceive such “Why” questions as accusatory or critical, and thus try to justify their actions rather than describe events (Walker, 1999). Other “Why” prompts require that children take another’s perspective and infer or speculate about his or her intentions (e.g., Tell me why he asked you to go with him). Although preschool children are capable of responding to questions requiring inferences about others’ internal processes (Eson & Shapiro, 1982), even adults can make incorrect inferences.

The present study

To date, no studies have focused on preschoolers’ responses to How/Why in forensic interviews, where communicative abilities are challenged by the stressful circumstances, and the implications of miscommunication and inaccuracy are high. The current study was designed to provide a descriptive analysis of the use of How/Why in actual investigative interviews with

suspected victims of sexual abuse. Children were interviewed by police detectives using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol (Lamb et al., 2008), and the research focused on: (1) how often and in what way interviewers used How/Why with preschool children; and (2) how the children responded to How/Why. A key goal was to determine whether there were age differences in interviewers’ use of How/Why prompts and children’s responses to them.

Method

Sample

Investigative interviews with 49 (80% female) suspected victims (22%, 41%, and 37%, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, respectively) were examined. The interviews, conducted by nine police detectives in two U.S. police departments, were the first forensic interviews of the children. Cases included single and multiple incidents of alleged abuse, including exposure (2%), touch over/under clothes (67%), and penetration (8%) by family members (49%) and non-related individuals (51%). In 23% of the cases, the suspected abuse type was unknown.

Procedure

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed and checked to ensure their completeness and accuracy. Two raters categorized interviewers’ utterance types in each transcript using the NICHD Codebook (Lamb et al., 2008), and two raters identified, quantified, and categorized interviewers’ utterances containing references to How/Why, using a coding system developed specifically for the present study. To ensure reliability, first, all coders were trained until they reached at least 90% agreement on all coding categories (i.e., interviewer utterances types using the NICHD Codebook, interviewer use of How/Why, children’s responses to How/Why utterances, and details). Then, 20% of the transcripts were independently coded by two raters who achieved at least 90% agreement on all coding categories. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the remaining transcripts were split among raters.

Coding

Interviewer prompt types using the NICHD codebook

Interviewer prompts were defined as conversational turns, containing one or more substantive statements, questions, or imperatives (i.e., anything related to the investigated incident) or non-substantive statements,

questions, or imperatives (i.e., anything unrelated to the investigated incident such as “Why did your mom spank you on the butt?” when the investigation concerned sexual abuse allegedly perpetrated by a male acquaintance). Substantive utterance types were further coded, based on the extent of interviewer-introduced allegation-related contents, using five categories defined more fully by Lamb et al. (2009) as (1) Invitations (open-ended requests to talk), (2) Summaries (reviews of the child’s account), (3) Directive (focused recall questions), (4) Option-posing (questions which provide children with limited options such as yes/no questions), or (5) Suggestive (questions which communicate an expected response). Given the large literature demonstrating the powerful effects of question type on children’s narratives and responses (see Lamb et al., 2008; Malloy & Quas, 2009), it is critical to examine specifically how interviewers formulate How/Why prompts.

Interviewer How/Why prompts

All interviewer prompts (both substantive and non-substantive) that contained either of the terms “How” or “Why” were identified and categorized as substantive or nonsubstantive. Substantive prompts were further classified as one of the categories previously described (with examples taken from the actual investigative interview transcripts): (1) Invitations (e.g., Tell me why you came here to talk to me); (2) Summaries (e.g., So he asked how old you were); (3) Directive (e.g., Why did you go to the doctor?); (4) Option-posing (e.g., Were you standing up or sitting down or laying down?); or (5) Suggestive (e.g., How would he do that if your clothes were on?). Multiple requests were also identified and included single interviewer prompts containing more than one information request (with at least one of the requests containing a How/Why reference) and statements embedded within a multiple request prompt containing at least one How/Why reference (e.g., Does he live by you? How did he touch you?).

Children’s responses to interviewer How/Why prompts

Children’s responses to interviewers’ How/Why prompts were categorized on the basis of their *content* into one of two primary categories: (1) “information sought” or (2) “uninformative.” The information sought category was used when children provided the information requested by the How/Why prompt (e.g., Interviewer: “Will you tell me how he did that?”; Child: “He pushed me down”). Uninformative responses were further categorized into three mutually exclusive categories “confused,” “format appropriate,” or “no information.” When children responded to other than the

specific How/Why term posed by the interviewer (e.g., a different WH word; yes/no), their responses were coded as confused (e.g., Interviewer: “Tell me everything about how he did that”; Child: “Because he’s rude.”). The format appropriate category was used when children responded to the *format* of the How/Why prompt but did not provide the information sought by the interviewer (e.g., Interviewer: “Will you tell me how he did that?”; Child: “Yes”). When children did not provide any information (e.g., don’t know/remember, digression, or omission), their responses were coded as no information.

Details

To quantify the amount of information provided by children, details were defined as words or phrases identifying or describing individuals, objects, events, or actions (Lamb et al., 2008). Central details were considered integral to the allegation. Details were counted only when they were new and added to understanding of the target events. Repeated details were counted once in the total number of details. Total details and total central details in response to How/Why prompts and other types of interviewer prompts were calculated.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The total number of interviewer prompts per interview ranged from 3 to 89 ($M = 45.0$, $SD = 20.8$) with 16.7% classified as non-substantive. The total number of substantive interviewer prompts ranged from 0 to 86 ($M = 39.1$, $SD = 20.2$) with 30% Invitations, 8% Summaries, 22% Directives, 30% Option Posing, and 10% Suggestive. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that the number, proportion, and type of interviewer prompts did not vary depending on the children’s ages.

Interviewer How/Why prompts

On average, interviewers posed 8.5 How/Why prompts per interview ($SD = 6.5$, range = 0–36), representing 21.7% ($SD = 15.9\%$, range = 0–67%) of all interviewer utterances. How (57%) prompts were slightly more common than Why (43%) prompts. Because How/Why prompts occurred rarely and because children tend to understand both types later than other types of WH-questions (i.e., WH-identity questions; J. G. deVilliers & deVilliers, 1978), we combined the How and Why prompts for all subsequent analyses. Unless otherwise specified, all analyses combine substantive and non-substantive prompts.

Overall, How/Why prompts made up 17.9% of the invitations, 18.0% of the directives, 5.9% of the option posing, and 3.7% of the suggestive prompts. One age difference emerged in a univariate ANOVA: Of the How/Why prompts formulated as invitations, a greater proportion were addressed to younger children, $F(2, 42) = 5.46$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .21$. Follow-up ANOVAs revealed that a greater proportion of How/Why prompts formulated as invitations were addressed to 3-year-olds (32.1%) than 4-year-olds (10.7%) or 5-year-olds (17.1%, $p = .055$).

Almost half of the How/Why prompts were non-substantive ($M = 49.3\%$, $SD = 29.2\%$, range = 0–100%). Of the 51.7% of How/Why prompts classified as substantive, many were formulated as invitations (46.4%) or directives (35.5%), with smaller proportions formulated as option posing (15.4%), or suggestive (2.8%). Interviewers did not vary the type of How/Why prompt depending on the children's ages except with regard to suggestive prompts. That is, correlational analyses revealed that, with age, the proportion of How/Why prompts that were classified as suggestive decreased, $r(43) = -.36$, $p = .018$, with 11% for the 3-year-olds and less than 1% each for the 4- and 5-year-olds.

Multiple requests represented 5% of all interviewer How/Why prompts ($M = .49$, $SD = 1.14$). According to correlational analyses, the proportion of How/Why prompts formulated as multiple requests decreased as children grew older, $r(48) = -.30$, $p = .040$, with 8.6%, 6.0%, and 1.5% posed to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, respectively.

Children's responses to How/Why prompts

Children provided the information sought by the interviewer in response to only 19.6% of the interviewer

How/Why prompts (see Figure 1). Age differences emerged: ANCOVA analyses (covarying the number of interviewer How/Why prompts) revealed that children responded to more How/Why prompts with the information sought as they grew older, $F(2, 45) = 4.12$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .16$ ($M_s = 0.8, 1.0$, and 2.2 for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, respectively; see Figure 2). Over two-thirds (67.3%) of the children provided the information sought in response to at least one How/Why prompt ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 1.5$, range = 0–7). Chi square analyses revealed that older children were more likely than younger children to provide the information sought in response to at least one How/Why prompt, $\chi^2(2) = 6.69$, $p = .035$, with 46% of the 3-year-olds, 60% of the 4-year-olds, and 89% of the 5-year-olds doing so.

All other responses to interviewer's How/Why prompts were uninformative, thus further categorized as confused, format appropriate, or no information (Figure 1). Confused responses represented, on average, 8.2% of the children's responses to How/Why prompts ($SD = 18.3\%$, range = 0–88%). For example, 28.6% of the children responded as if asked a when, where, what, or who prompt rather than a How/Why prompt, and 8.2% of the children responded as if asked a How instead of a Why prompt. There were no age differences in this regard. Approximately half (48.5%, range = 0–100%) of the children's responses to How/Why prompts were format appropriate; almost all children (93.9%) provided at least one format appropriate response ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 3.7$, range = 0–16), with no age differences emerging. No information uninformative responses represented 18.2% of the children's responses to How/Why prompts ($SD = 19.8\%$, range = 0–75%). Over half (61.2%) of the children provided at least one no information response ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 3.2$,

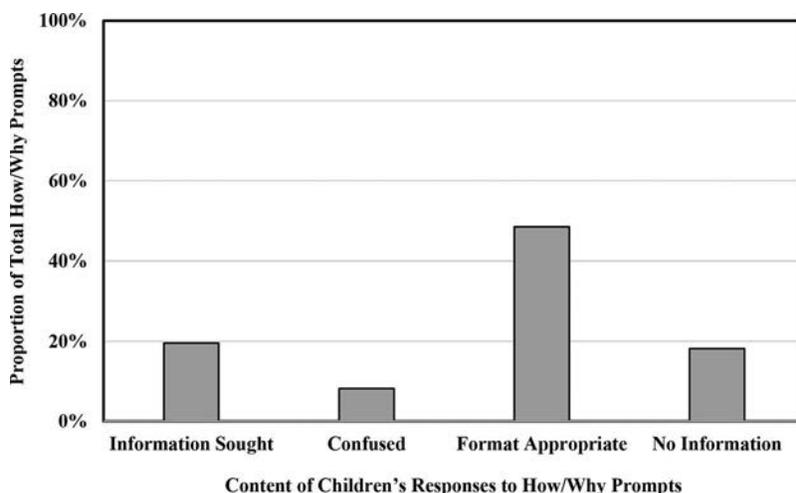


Figure 1. Proportion of children's response types to How/Why prompts out of the total number of How/Why prompts posed by interviewers.

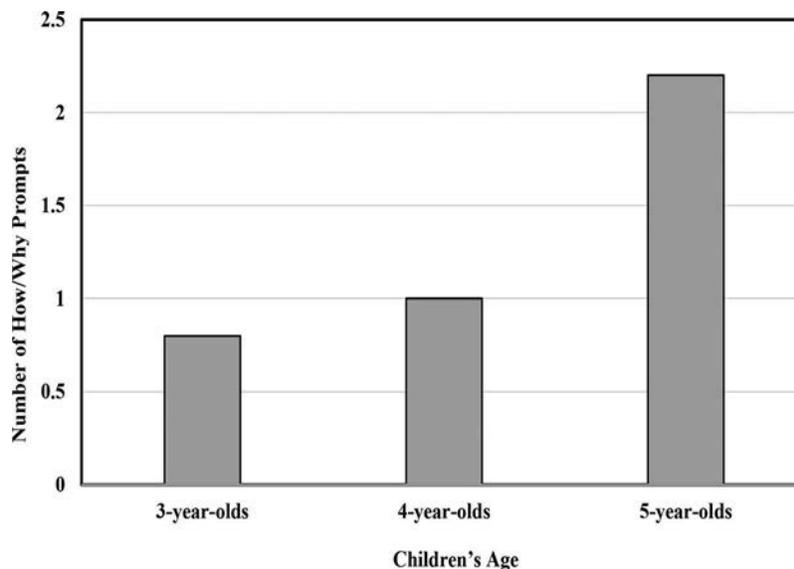


Figure 2. Number of How/Why prompts to which children responded with the information sought by age.

range = 0–21), but chi square analyses revealed that there were no significant age differences in the tendency to respond in this manner.

Details provided in response to How/Why prompts

Overall (i.e., regarding all interview prompts), children provided, on average, 27.1 details in response to invitation prompts ($SD = 45.8$), 20.7 in response to directive prompts ($SD = 20.8$), 17.7 in response to option posing prompts ($SD = 19.3$), and 6.4 in response to suggestive prompts ($SD = 7.8$). Although interviewers used a How/Why prompt at least once with all but two children, however, approximately half of the children (49%) provided no details in response to interviewer How/Why prompts. Of all interview details provided by children, 8.5% were in response to How/Why prompts ($SD = 11.5\%$, range = 0–49%), and the number of details provided in response to such prompts ranged from 0 to 67 ($M = 9.0$; $SD = 15.72$). Most (83.5%) of these details were central: 9.9% of all central details were provided in response to How/Why prompts ($M = 6.7$; $SD = 11.0$, range = 0 to 53). Chi square analyses and univariate ANOVAs revealed no age differences in whether or how many total or central details children provided in response to How/Why prompts.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to provide a descriptive analysis of the use of How/Why prompts and children's responses to them in an important

real-world context where children are apt to confront unfamiliar or confusing requests for information. In our sample of forensic investigative interviews with preschool children about suspected sexual abuse, How/Why interviewer prompts were relatively common, representing 22% of the interviewer prompts, although they elicited only 8.5% of all the details that children provided. Furthermore, children rarely provided the information sought by the interviewer in response to How/Why prompts and mostly provided responses that were uninformative.

WH-questions are often asked in investigative interviews even though children may have difficulty understanding WH words. The current study sheds light on interviewers' use of and children's responsiveness to rarely studied, but frequently posed, types of prompts: those containing How and Why. The results provide insight into the interviewers' reliance on and children's emerging ability to answer prompts using the more difficult WH-words by focusing on such questions in forensic interview contexts.

Only 20% of the children's responses provided the information sought using How/Why prompts, perhaps because preschool children are more concrete and literal in their understanding of the prompts posed by interviewers, often responding with format-appropriate answers that did not address the intended purpose of the prompts (Hewitt, 1999; Piaget, 1977). Controlling for the number of How/Why interviewer prompts, children were more likely as they grew older to provide the information sought by the interviewer (i.e., responding to the "How he did that" part of the question when asked "Can you tell me how he did that?").

Furthermore, clear linear trends were evident in the likelihood that children would respond to at least one of the How/Why prompts with the information sought (46%, 60%, and 89% for the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, respectively). Future studies should examine how interviewers react to children's responses that fail to provide the information sought and instead respond primarily to the question format including experimental studies that test which reactions (e.g., an additional invitation prompt versus a more focused prompt) are more likely to result in children providing the information sought.

Over one-quarter of children's responses to How/Why prompts were considered uninformative (format appropriate, confused, or providing no information). Approximately half of the children's responses were format appropriate, meaning that they were reasonable responses but did not provide the information sought by interviewers. Almost a third of the children responded at least once as if asked a when, where, what, or who, rather than a How/Why prompt, and their responses were coded as confused. Similarly, other research has shown that children understand WH-sentential questions (How/Why; Bloom et al., 1982) later than they understand WH-identity questions (i.e., who, where, what). Surprisingly, no age differences were found in children's tendency to respond with confusion, perhaps because there was not enough power to detect such differences. Overall, findings from the present study suggest that How/Why prompts may not elicit forensically relevant information from preschool children effectively. Interviewers may wish to reduce or rephrase such questions when interviewing preschool children.

Given the wide variety of purposes and interpretations of How/Why and preschool children's limited metacognitive and metalinguistic skills, it may be difficult for them to (1) provide the specific information sought when interviewers use How/Why prompts, or (2) recognize that they do not understand the purpose of the questions posed. Whereas adults recognize a reciprocal obligation to be clear, adults cannot assume that young children do so (Walker, 1993). In fact, children rarely ask for clarification in investigative interviews about suspected sexual abuse (Malloy, Katz, Lamb, & Mugno, 2015). This may be because children fail to monitor their comprehension accurately, especially when taxed by stress, memory searches, difficult-to-comprehend questions, and the complex and unfamiliar characteristics of investigative interviews. Children's comprehension-monitoring skills likely develop gradually over time alongside their metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness (Markman, 1977; Saywitz & Wilkinson, 1982), thereby ensuring that

children sometimes answer questions inappropriately or fail to provide the information sought even when they know the requested information. This may be especially so among children who have experienced trauma because child maltreatment is associated with cognitive and language delays (e.g., Lyon & Saywitz, 1999).

Consistent with evidence that interviewers rarely adapt to children's linguistic or cognitive abilities (e.g., Evans, Lee, & Lyon, 2009; Korkman, Santtila, Drzewiecki, & Sandnabba, 2008; Walker, 1993), the interviewers' uses of How/Why varied little by children's age. However, younger children were asked proportionally more of the riskier types of prompts (suggestive and multiple requests). Although their use was relatively rare, decades of research has shown that these prompt types are associated with inaccurate responses more generally (see Lamb et al., 2008, for a review). To the extent possible, interviewers may wish to rephrase How/Why prompts (e.g., "Show me what he did" instead of "How did he do that?"), and future experimental research should examine whether rephrasing the prompts is more useful than relying on how or why. It is important to note, however, that 'How' questions may be particularly useful in eliciting evaluative content from children (Lyon et al., 2012). Although children's subjective reactions to abuse are not "central" to the alleged incidents (e.g., actions, people), such evaluative content may affect children's narrative coherence and credibility.

Several limitations should be mentioned as they suggest important avenues for future research in this area. First, because How and Why prompts share many features in common and occurred relatively rarely in this sample, we analyzed them together in the present study. However, future studies should investigate all types of WH prompts separately using large data sets derived from interviews with children with a greater range of ages. Second, the nature of this field study precluded us from identifying the mechanisms underlying children's responses. For example, children's difficulty responding to some How/Why prompts (e.g., multiple request prompts) may be related to processing issues triggered by the question length or syntax. Laboratory analogue research can systematically vary the intended purpose, length, format, and content of How/Why prompts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their usefulness when interviewing children about past events.

Overall, this research suggests that How/Why prompts may not be effective at eliciting the intended information from preschool children. Although individual How/Why prompts are not necessarily bizarre, nonsensical, confusing, or complex like the types of questions investigated in other studies (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996;

Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2004), they may be interpreted variously, making it difficult for children to recognize that they may require clarification or are unable to answer the question posed. How/Why prompts seldom elicited the information sought and often elicited uninformative, though mostly format-appropriate, responses. Certainly, more research is needed, however, before definitive conclusions can be drawn about the utility of How/Why prompts with preschool children. The present study provides an initial descriptive analysis demonstrating that How/Why prompts are prevalent enough in forensic interviews with preschool children to warrant further laboratory and field research on their effectiveness, especially in comparison to other ways of obtaining the same information.

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