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This is a state-of-the-art review on children's eyewitness memory and child forensic interviews that is dedicated to Dr. Karen J. Saywitz, who devoted her entire career to scientific research in this area and to advocacy for children. I have no doubt that both researchers and practitioners in the fields of developmental, clinical, and forensic psychology will benefit from reading this holistic overview.

—**Yoojin Chae, PhD**, Department of Human Development & Family Sciences,
Texas Tech University, Lubbock

Judges, lawyers, social workers—indeed, all legal professionals—risk contributing to injustice when they rely on intuition or untested assumptions in their work. In the field of child abuse, this handbook offers a vital corrective. Authored by leading experts on children and the law, it presents the most up-to-date, comprehensive synthesis of foundational and applied research, making it essential reading for any legal professional who is committed to advancing justice.

—**Donna Shestowsky, JD, PhD**, Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and
Martin Luther King Jr. Professor of Law, School of Law, University of California, Davis

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1

Child Witness Research

Introduction

Gail S. Goodman, Thomas D. Lyon, Sue D. Hobbs, and Rayna Enriquez

Our futures reside in our childhood memories. Moreover, childhood memories of trauma are of legal and societal significance. When children experience the trauma of a sexual assault or the trauma of a false report, society at large suffers. Traumas such as these in childhood have lasting mental and physical effects on children, their families, and communities. Although we cannot yet avoid child victimization, we need to hear victims' voices to take appropriate action so we can protect children, prevent future occurrences, and avoid false reports. That's where forensic interviewing comes into play, as does basic research on memory, suggestibility, linguistic, and social/emotional development.

This handbook provides the most up-to-date science- and practice-based information on child forensic interviewing, especially in child abuse cases. Eliciting descriptions of childhood assaults—from children, adolescents, and adults—is a daunting task. Each age period poses its own challenges: For example, young children may be susceptible to influence, may fail to disclose abusive experiences, or their descriptions of events might be ignored. Adolescence is a time of sexual experimentation in which exploitation by adults can be confused with love and affection. Adults who describe childhood trauma may suffer from depression and fading memory of the events at issue, which can undermine their claims about their childhood.

In this area of study and practice, we have seen excessive concerns about both false denials and false allegations. Fortunately, evidence-informed protocols

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Handbook on Child Witnesses: Improving Psychological Science and Legal Practice,

G. S. Goodman, T. D. Lyon, S. D. Hobbs, and R. Enriquez (Editors)

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have been developed that seek a balance, including the Developmental Narrative Elaboration (DNE) interview (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014), the Ten Step Investigative Interview (Lyon, 2021), the cognitive interview (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992), and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) revised investigative interview protocol (Lamb et al., 2018). Yet, there is still much to learn about child forensic interviewing. For example, how much social support and rapport building is required for disclosure, and do these protocols sufficiently foster the optimal amounts of disclosure? Is too much rapport harmful for some subgroups? What predicts accurate disclosure versus too much parental influence? Even basic questions—such as how reconstructive memory is for unforgettable, traumatic events—need to be addressed. There are many questions yet to explore. Yet experimental work is inherently limited, because for ethical reasons, research on children’s reports focuses on nontraumatic events. Observational work examining issues such as disclosure of abuse is often hampered by uncertainties over the accuracy of the reports.

Nevertheless, we expect the chapters included in this handbook will help the field learn about children’s abilities and needs, as well as what works and what does not work. We also hope the research findings will stimulate new research and growth in this field of study.

BASIC RESEARCH AND APPLICATIONS

We start with a chapter by Yo Jackson and colleagues from Tulane and Penn State Universities, respectively. Like Dr. Saywitz, Dr. Jackson is a child clinician who specializes in research on child maltreatment and trauma. In this chapter, Jackson and her colleagues, Sherille Bosfield and Sara Such, lay important groundwork as to correlates of childhood trauma often found by psychologists using standardized tests, which can influence court and clinical evaluations: This includes cognitive and educational problems, emotional issues, and psychopathology symptoms.

We dive into another view in the chapter by Yuerui Wu and colleagues. Working at New York University Shanghai and educated at the University of California campuses in the United States, Wu and her colleagues, Nathalie Moriarty, Juan Pablo Hernandez Aldaco, Ben T. Reeb, and Gail S. Goodman, present an “adaptation” view informed by evolutionary psychology and anthropology (e.g., Ellis et al., 2017). Adaptation theories explain how childhood trauma heightens memory for trauma cues, while also explaining the findings of memory deficits that Jackson et al. reviewed. Wu et al. discuss several studies of children’s memory and suggestibility for abuse-related information through the lens of adaptation theories.

In contrast to the focus on children in Wu et al.’s chapter, developmental psychologist and attorney Deborah Goldfarb and her colleagues Avery Stackle and Martine Fredrickson focus on adults’ long-term memories of childhood abuse-related events. Because children often fail to disclose sexual abuse in childhood but realize in adulthood they should take legal action (as demonstrated by the Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell cases), research on adults’

long-term memory of childhood trauma is particularly important. Goldfarb and colleagues find that adults can remember the central features of stressful, child abuse-related events, such as forensic genital examinations, especially if the adult has trauma-related symptoms.

Dr. Goldfarb met Dr. Saywitz at a conference in Los Angeles, and some of the research Dr. Goldfarb reviews was inspired by Saywitz and colleagues' research on memory for genital touch (Saywitz et al., 1991). That research was novel in examining the effects of different types of questions on both true and false allegations, reminding researchers that efforts at reducing false reports often entail reducing true reports as well. Moreover, although the study's focus was on memory, it found that older children were less inclined to recall genital touch than younger children, highlighting the need to consider reluctance and denial as well as memory in understanding nondisclosure.

Unfortunately, abuse, including child sexual abuse (CSA), is often repeated. The chapter by Sarah L. Deck, Sonja P. Brubacher, and Martine B. Powell addresses research on children's memory and suggestibility for repeated events. Deck et al. utilize the source monitoring framework (Johnson et al., 1993) and "script theory" (Schank & Abelson, 1977) to help explain some of what we know about children's memory and suggestibility for repeated events. They provide suggestions on how to interview children who have experienced repeated abuse.

Thomas D. Lyon, one of the editors of this handbook, was a postdoctoral fellow with Dr. Saywitz in the mid-1990s, which led to a longstanding collaboration. Lyon and his coauthors, Breanne E. Wylie and Zsolt A. Szojka, review research on children's denial of abuse and show how denial is underestimated because suspicion and substantiation of abuse are largely dependent on disclosure. Uncovering high rates of nondisclosure and denial, they discuss the implications for expert testimony explaining disclosure dynamics to jurors. They also note how reluctance to disclose embarrassing and abusive genital touch undermines the generalizability of suggestibility research examining non-abusive events.

Closing out this section of the book is a chapter by Henry Otgaar, Mark L. Howe, and Charlotte Bücken on highly suggestive techniques that led society to question child forensic interviewing. The authors review several CSA cases (e.g., the McMartin case in the United States during the 1980s and the 1993 Peter Ellis case in New Zealand) that are controversial yet widely considered by scientific researchers to represent false reports. They mention the benefits of having scientific memory-development researchers as expert witnesses in court (see also Goodman et al., 2025; Quas et al., 2025, for the advantages of clinical and scientific experts in CSA cases).

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S REPORTS

How best to interview children is still debated, and interview protocols are being refined to better fit children's needs. We start this section of the book with Lorinda B. Camparo's review of the Developmental Narrative Elaboration (DNE) interview and research that supports it. Dr. Saywitz first developed the

technique in the mid 1990s (Saywitz & Snyder, 1996; Saywitz et al., 1996), and it has been studied with over 1,000 children from 3 to 12 years of age in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014). In addition to outlining a training procedure for assisting children to recall events with reminder cards, the technique includes a verbal-labels approach that has spawned a great deal of research identifying cued recall questions that increase productivity without increasing error (Brown & Pipe, 2003; Canning & Peterson, 2020). The chapter refers readers to the Saywitz and Camparo book (2014) that provides full details of the technique.

Another important innovation in forensic interviewing is narrative practice, in which the interviewer asks the child to narrate a nonabusive event so the child can practice providing narrative information in response to open-ended questions before the interviewer asks about the allegation. Dr. Saywitz first demonstrated the benefits of this technique in her work adapting the Cognitive Interview for children (Saywitz et al., 1992) and included it in the DNE interview (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014).

Narrative practice has been incorporated into numerous protocols, including the revised NICHD interviewing protocol developed by Michael E. Lamb and colleagues (Lamb et al., 2018). In their chapter, Lamb and his coauthors Irit Hershkowitz, Yael Karni-Visel, and Uri Blasbalg discuss the increases in productivity related to the use of narrative practice, and they argue (and we agree) that “[b]efore seeking to elicit information from children about personal experiences that might have been frightening, embarrassing, confusing, or shameful, interviewers need to ensure” that children feel “comfortable with the interviewer to discuss such personal information” (p. 164). The revised NICHD Interviewing Protocol is having a tremendous impact on child forensic interviewing worldwide.

A common component of interviewing protocols and practice guidelines (DNE, NICHD, Ten Step) are ground rules that the interviewer presents toward the beginning of the interview, including “don’t know,” “don’t understand,” and “interviewer ignorance” (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014). These provide a type of coordination between the interviewer and the child, one of the foundations of rapport building (Dianiska et al., 2024). Sonya P. Brubacher and Deirdre A. Brown discuss the latest research on ground rules in their chapter. They note that “Saywitz’s work laid an important foundation for the evidence base underpinning the use of ground rules” (p. 182; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993; Saywitz et al., 1999). Their review stresses the importance of practicing ground rules, but also notes their limitations, particularly with younger children. They emphasize the overarching importance of asking the right questions during the substantive phase of the interview and call for much-needed research on how to make instructions more effective.

Victoria W. Dykstra, Rachel E. Dianiska, and Jodi A. Quas describe some of the dilemmas of interviewing adolescents. They rightly argue that much of the research is oriented to young children rather than adolescents, who may be particularly difficult to interview if they have been sexually trafficked. The

chapter authors point out the difficulties of interviewing teenagers and offer ideas for successful interviewing.

The authors of our next chapter are Sue D. Hobbs, Rakel P. Larson, and Christine R. Wells, all of whom worked closely with Dr. Saywitz on systematic literature reviews and a meta-analysis on social support and rapport building (Saywitz et al., 2015, 2016). There is relatively little basic research on supportive interviewing, including on rapport building, even though some people, like Dr. Saywitz, mastered it. Yet, Hobbs et al. present convincing theoretical and research-based evidence demonstrating the importance of support and rapport building for successful child interviewing.

Angela M. Crossman and Victoria Talwar review the research on children's ability and proclivity to lie and to conceal information. Crossman and Talwar discuss how younger children are less capable of lying and maintaining secrets, and outline the factors that influence children to deceive. The chapter authors suggest ways in which understanding children's cognitive and social development can assist interviewers in encouraging honesty.

Rayna Enriquez from the University of California, Davis and her coauthors Katie Maras and Lucy A. Henry, both from the United Kingdom, have a special interest in autism and how to interview children with this developmental disorder. The chapter authors argued that with proper supports, children and teenagers on the autism spectrum, if verbal and high functioning, can be accurate witnesses when interviewed.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN COURT

In some of her earliest published work, Dr. Saywitz questioned children about courtroom processes, demonstrating their limited understanding (Saywitz, 1989; Saywitz et al., 1990). Years later, these studies helped convince the U.S. Supreme Court that young children's complaints of abuse should not require that they later appear in court and testify (*Ohio v. Clark*, 2015). Dr. Saywitz also developed a task for sensitively assessing children's ability to answer questions about truth-telling and lying (Lyon & Saywitz, 1999, 2000), a mainstay of American court procedure. However, surviving the competency questions is only the first challenge for child witnesses. Stacia N. Stolzenberg and Colleen E. Sullivan, and their student Lea Sobrilsky, review the legal requirements for child witness competency and the psychological research that identifies the best procedures for establishing competency. They also review research on courtroom questioning and demonstrate the many ways in which both prosecutors and defense attorneys ask developmentally inappropriate questions.

This handbook would not be complete without a review of jurors' reactions to child witnesses. Jonathan M. Golding, Margaret C. Stevenson, Kelly C. Burke, and Mary M. Levi provide a thoughtful review of research on jurors' views of children in CSA trials and other alleged child victims. Golding et al. call for further research on non-CSA cases on the effects of jury deliberation and research that investigates racial disparities for child victims and witnesses of color.

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS AND COURT PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Dr. Saywitz experimentally demonstrated how the stress of being questioned in the courtroom impairs children's performance (Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). Stephanie D. Block, along with her colleagues Hannah M. Johnson, Michaela G. Ramsey, and Alexandria P. Winstead review the literature on children's emotional reactions to the prospect of appearing and actually appearing in court. Dr. Block has conducted well-known research on the prosecution of CSA cases and uses her findings as a backdrop to review the possible negative and positive effects when children take the stand.

Working with Rebecca Nathanson, Dr. Saywitz developed procedures for reducing child witnesses' stress in court (Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003). In her chapter, Dr. Nathanson describes the court preparation school that she directs at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Creating a program to evaluate and support children's preparation to take the stand, then doing so without treading on the legal process, is tricky. However, the school achieves this goal with positive effects. The preparation program might well be copied in other jurisdictions.

We have many professionals to thank in our quest to illuminate child forensic interviewing. First, we thank Monica Miller, PhD, JD, for her support of this book, sponsored by Division 41 (American Psychology–Law Society [AP-LS]) of the American Psychological Association (APA). Dr. Miller chaired the AP-LS Publication Board at the time our proposal was accepted, and she provided guidance throughout. We also thank Christopher Kelaher from the APA Publication Office for his advocacy and help, and for providing us with additional motivation to publish the enclosed chapters. We thank Krissy Jones and Meghan Quinn for their fine editing. We thank our colleagues, friends, and families. Most of all, we thank Dr. Karen J. Saywitz for all that she did for traumatized youth, for researchers and clinicians, for society, and for being such an amazing person and dear friend.

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