

Introduction

In the neighborhood park, children are swinging from the monkey bars and pushing to get their turn on the slide, laughing and enjoying the warmer weather that spring brings. Parents chat with each other while a 7-year-old boy goes off to look for rocks so he can build a fort with his friends. A man approaches the boy and asks whether he needs any help. The youngster says no. The man then asks whether the boy is hungry and would like a chocolate bar. When the boy says no, the man attempts to grab the boy and lift him into his arms. The boy starts screaming and frees himself from the stranger's hold, running back to the other children and adults. The stranger runs off. How accurate a description of the stranger would the young boy and the other children provide? For that matter, would the adults provide similar descriptions as the children? Would the children (and adults) be able to identify the stranger from a lineup?

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The Young Eyewitness: How Well Do Children and Adolescents Describe and Identify Perpetrators?

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Every year, numerous abductions, murders, thefts, and other crimes occur in which children are victims of and/or witnesses to the crime (e.g., Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009). For example, in one survey with a large nationally representative sample of children (ages 1 month–17 years) and their caregivers, approximately three in five children had been exposed to at least one act of violence either as a victim or a witness in the prior year (including physical assault, sexual victimization, maltreatment, property victimization, and witnessing violence; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby, & Kracke, 2015).

In some cases, children are the only witnesses to a crime, so forensic investigators cannot corroborate the children's statements with adult eyewitnesses' statements. In such cases, investigators must rely on the children to describe the event, describe the perpetrator, and sometimes identify the perpetrator from a lineup. But how reliable is this evidence? How complete or accurate are a child's responses to interview questions? Because of their unique developmental status, children and adolescents may be less able to recall an event, describe a perpetrator, and identify him or her in a lineup. They may "remember" incorrect information about what happened or how the perpetrator appeared. They may even identify an innocent person as the perpetrator.

When we examine known cases of wrongful conviction, we notice the frequency with which eyewitness evidence was erroneous and contributed to unjust outcomes. Given the devastating outcomes that can accompany erroneous eyewitness evidence—including incarceration and capital punishment—it is imperative that we understand the young eyewitness's descriptive and identification abilities and the factors and conditions that can increase or decrease their accuracy. And that is the aim of this book.

This volume summarizes research on children's and adolescents' abilities to recall an event, describe a perpetrator, and identify him or her, as well as the conditions that optimize these abilities. Although young eyewitnesses tend to be less advanced in these skills than adults, they can still provide valuable evidence. The key intended audience for the book includes forensic investigators and those who evaluate eyewitness evidence, because these people must understand how both the nature of the

crime and the conditions of the subsequent interview and lineup affect the completeness and accuracy of young people's responses.

Several exceptional sources are available elsewhere delineating the strengths and weaknesses of adults' eyewitness descriptions and identifications (Brewer & Wells, 2011; Cutler & Kovera, 2010; Malpass, Ross, Meissner, & Marcon, 2009; Wells & Olson, 2003). Thus, that topic is not reviewed herein unless it helps with understanding children's eyewitness abilities.

The chapters that follow describe the conditions and procedures that can increase (and decrease) the likelihood of a young eyewitness providing accurate evidence. To give background and context for this review, Chapter 1 first provides real-world examples of crimes that involved a young eyewitness and then defines key terms and concepts for understanding research in this area. Chapter 2 reviews the recall ability of young eyewitnesses, and Chapter 3 suggests techniques to improve this ability. Chapters 4 and 5 review the identification ability of young eyewitnesses. Chapter 6 considers why young eyewitnesses' abilities might differ from adult eyewitness abilities, and Chapter 7 considers whether there is any relationship between young eyewitnesses' recall ability and their identification ability. Chapter 8 reviews the research on how jurors perceive young eyewitnesses, including the perceived reliability of children's interview responses and testimony. Chapter 9 considers policy implications, and Chapter 10 suggests new directions for research in this area.

It is my hope that readers gain a fuller understanding of the value of child eyewitness evidence, as well as ways to maximize that value when interviewing these children.