

Research and Practice Update on Child Interviewing

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What we'll do today

- Asking children about their reactions to abuse
- Asking children about dates and numbers
- Asking children about truth and lies
 - In court
 - In the lab

Asking children about their reactions to abuse

Law and Human Behavior

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“How Did You Feel?”: Increasing Child Sexual Abuse Witnesses’ Production of Evaluative Information

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Children don't spontaneously describe their emotional reactions

- Lamb et al. (1997): 49% of interviews contained “subjective feelings”
- Westcott & Kynan (2004): only 20% of children spontaneously described reactions

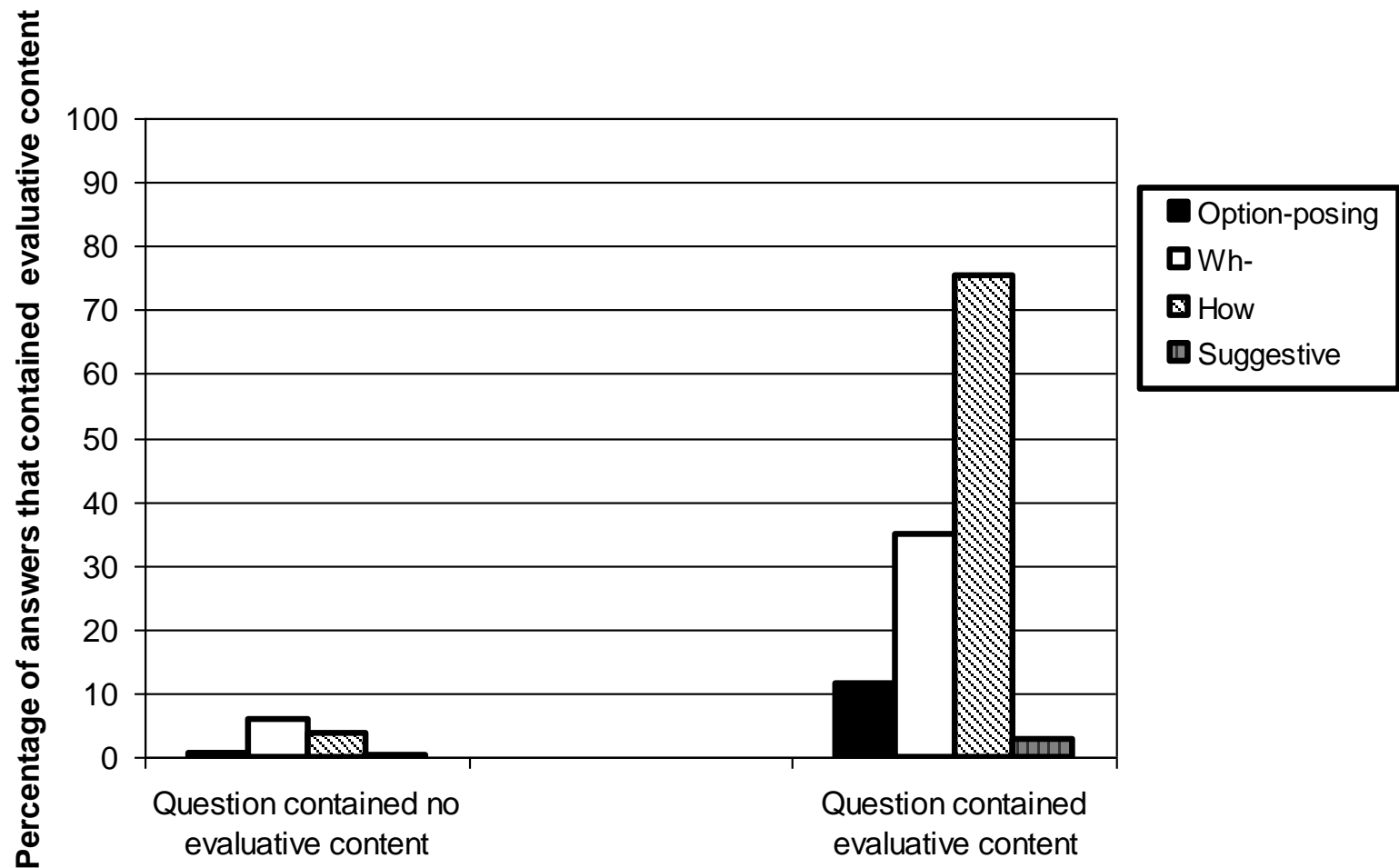
Why ask? Lends credibility to child's report

- Part of a believable narrative (actions/reactions)
- Unlikely to have been coached
- Child perspective on abuse
- Makes child sympathetic
- Reminds jury of sexual abuse harms
- Children don't show affect when disclosing or testifying about abuse

Method: Study 1

- 80 5- to 18-year-old victim-witnesses testifying in child sexual abuse prosecutions
- Examined “evaluative” information: emotional, physical, or cognitive reactions
- Considered question-type: Option-posing (yes/no and forced choice), wh-, How, and suggestive

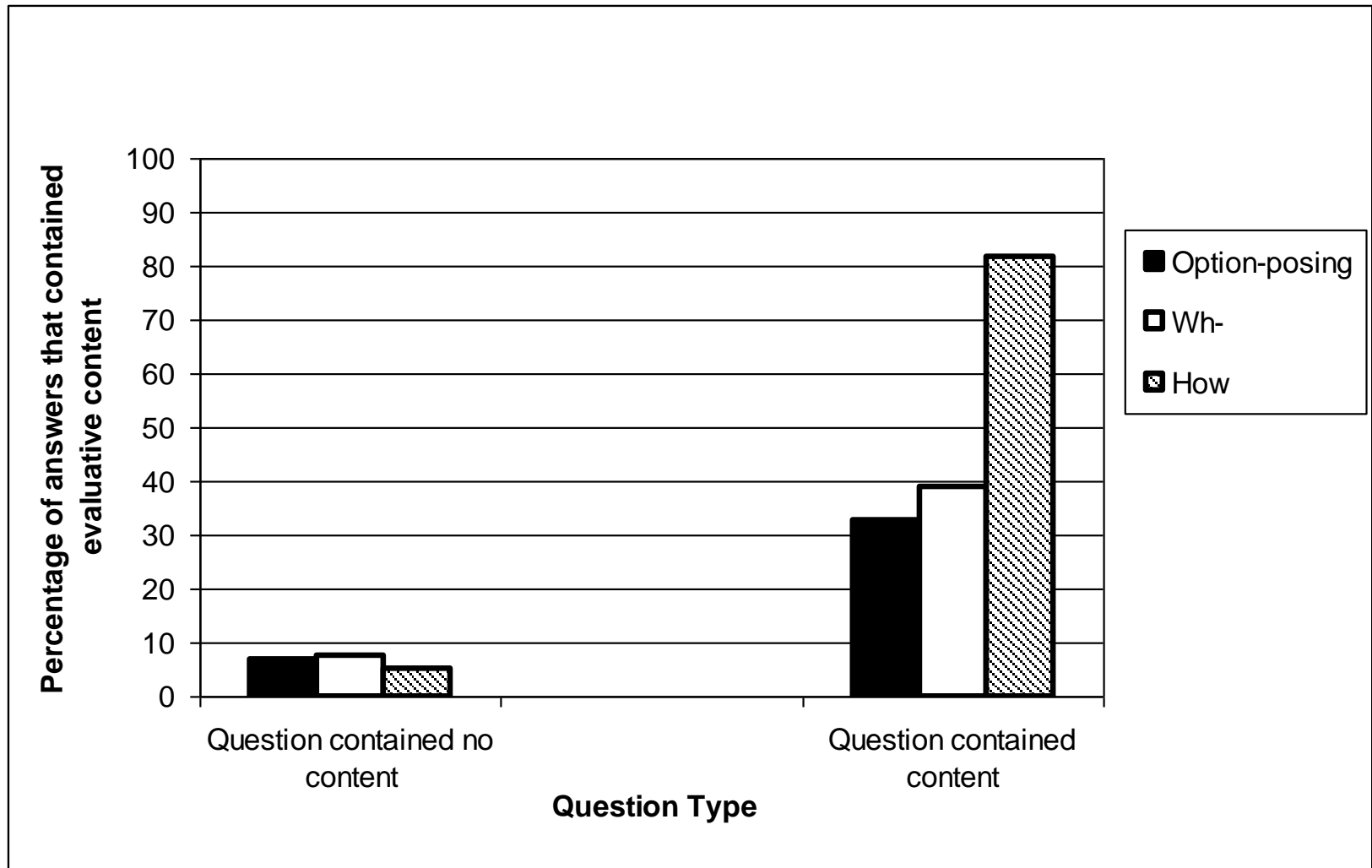
Study 1: What questions led to evaluative information?



Method: Study 2

- 61 6- to 12-year-old children disclosing sexual abuse in forensic interview
- Interviewers trained to ask:
 - How did you feel when he touched you?
 - How did you feel after he touched you?
 - How did you feel when you went to the bathroom?

Study 2: What questions led to evaluative information?



How did you feel?

(10-year-old girl, S58)



Q: How did you feel when he touched you?

A: Kind of angry at him cause he shouldn't be doing that and sometimes I thought that he was doing that cause I wasn't his daughter.



Q: Oh. Okay.

A: I felt kind of mad, disappointed. Cause in front of my mom he always say that he love me really. And on my mind I always say that if he loves me why was he doing that to me.



Q: How did you feel after he touched you?

A: I felt like nasty. Like dirty.



Q: Really. Tell me about that, dirty and nasty.

A: Cause he touch, if he touches me, he touch me right. Then he just leaves and like if like if I didn't work anymore just leave me like that.



Q: Uh-huh.

A: And I felt like mad and at the same time felt like dirty because he shouldn't be doing that because I'm just a little girl.

Conclusions

- Children unlikely to spontaneously mention reactions to abuse
- “How did you feel” questions are highly effective
- May need to ask child to elaborate on single word responses
- Potentially good follow-ups
 - What did you think when...
 - How did your body feel when..

Asking children about dates and numbers

Psychology, Public Policy, and Law

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MALTREATED CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO ESTIMATE TEMPORAL LOCATION AND NUMEROSITY OF PLACEMENT CHANGES AND COURT VISITS

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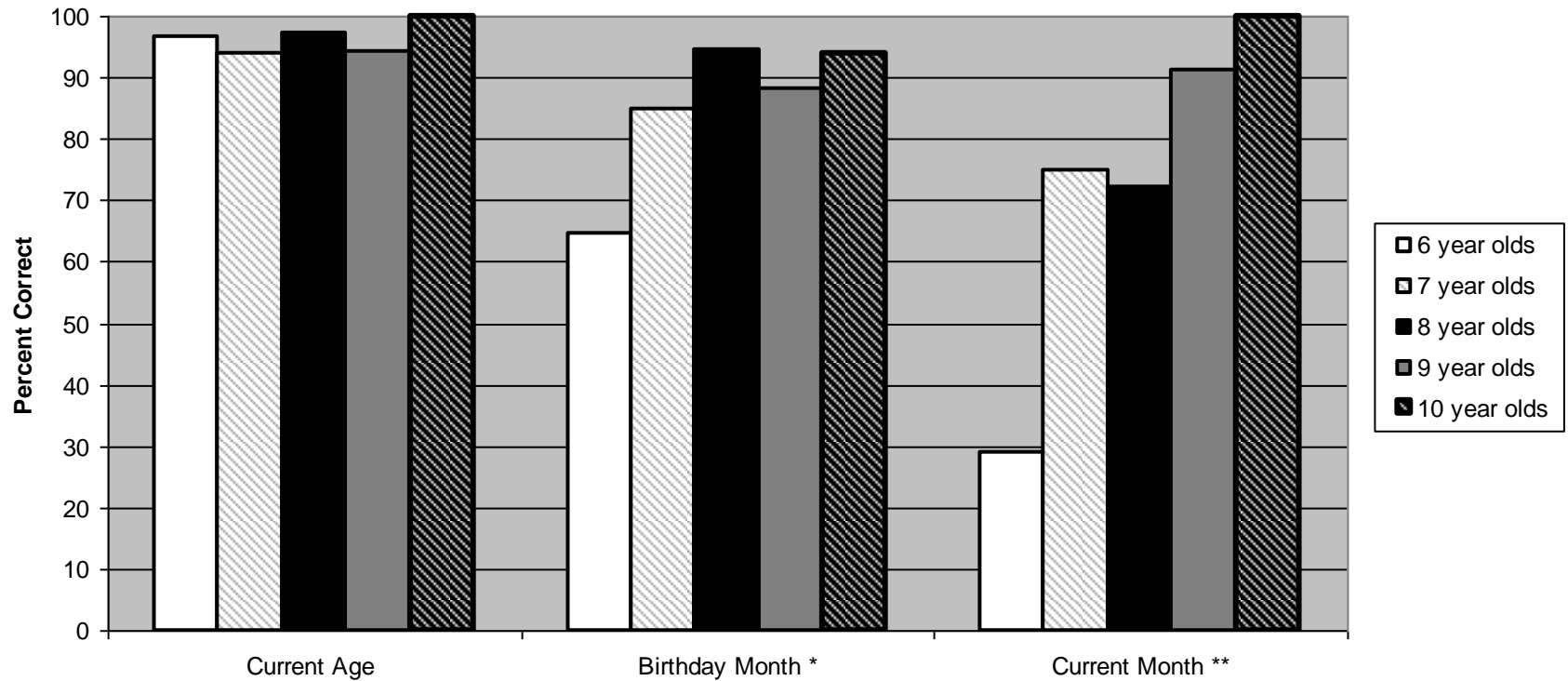
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Method

- 167 6- to 10-year-old children in dependency court
- ½ asked about prior placements, ½ about court visits
- Asked about current age, birthday, current month
- Asked about age/month at first/last placement or court visit
- Asked about number of placements or court visits

Current age, birthday month, current month



Time of Placement?

- Age at first placement ($M = 2.3$ years ago)?
- 42% correct
- Month at first placement?
- No better than chance

- Age at last placement ($M = 1.5$ years ago)?
- 54% correct
- Month at last placement?
- No better than chance

Time of court visit?

- Age at first court visit ($M = 1.7$ years ago)
- 52% correct
- Month at first court visit?
- No better than chance

- Age at last court visit ($M = 6$ months ago)
- 59% correct
- Month at last court visit?
- Older children better than chance (20% correct)
- No other age differences in accuracy

Number of placements?

- How many placements? ($M = 3$)
- 23% correct
- One or more than one?
- 67% correct
- No age improvement

Number of court visits?

- How many visits? ($M = 3.2$)
- 14% correct
- One or more than one?
- 62% correct
- No age improvement

Conclusions

- Children's knowledge of current time (age, birthday, month) doesn't predict ability to estimate when something occurred.
- Children are unlikely to remember their age when describing remote events.
- Asking "how many times..." is a bad idea.
- Even "once or more than once" is risky.
- Better to ask child to narrate individual episodes and to rely on contextual clues to timing.

Time recommendations

- Do ask “what happened next/first”
 - Be careful with “what happened before”
- Do ask tell me *everything that happened* the last time
 - Be careful with “Tell me about the last time...”
 - Don’t ask “what time”
- Do ask “when” questions, including what was happening when abuse occurred
- Do ask “where” questions, which often allow you to date abuse
 - Residences, Vacations

Asking children about truth and lies

Law Hum Behav

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Assessing Children's Competency to Take the Oath in Court: The Influence of Question Type on Children's Accuracy

Angela D. Evans · Thomas D. Lyon

Method

- 328 child witnesses testifying in court (L.A. County 1997-2001, U.S. 1974-2008).
- Analyzed children's accuracy of questions about the meaning and consequences of lying.

Hard questions

- “Do you know” questions
 - E.g. “do you know what it means to tell a lie”
 - 21% incorrect
- “Have you ever told a lie?”
 - 41% incorrect
- Evaluation questions (good/bad) easier than consequence questions (what happens when)

Hypothetical questions

- E.g.,
 - If I said this x was y...
 - If you told a lie
- Young children reject rather than answer negative hypotheticals (Lyon et al., 2001)
- Impersonal pronouns better (if “this child” or “someone” says...). 90-99% accurate.
- Attorneys only ask better questions 10% of the time.

Case study

(California v. Cardenas; Sarahi, 8 years old)

Q: Now, the district attorney asked you if you know what telling a lie is, and you told her that you did.
Have you ever told a lie?

A: No.

Q: Never lied to your mom?

A: No.

Q: You've never lied to a teacher or anything?

A: No.

Prosecution: Objection, relevance.

Court: Overruled.

Q: So you've never, ever in your whole life told a – in your whole life told a lie; is that right?

A: Yes.

Trial resumes several months later:

Q. Have you ever told a lie?

A. No.

Q. You've never lied to your mom?

A. No.

Q. Have you ever lied to a teacher or anything?

A. No.

Q. You've never -- never in your whole life told a lie?

A. No.

Asking children about truth and lies (2)

Right and Righteous: Children's Incipient Understanding and Evaluation of True and
False Statements

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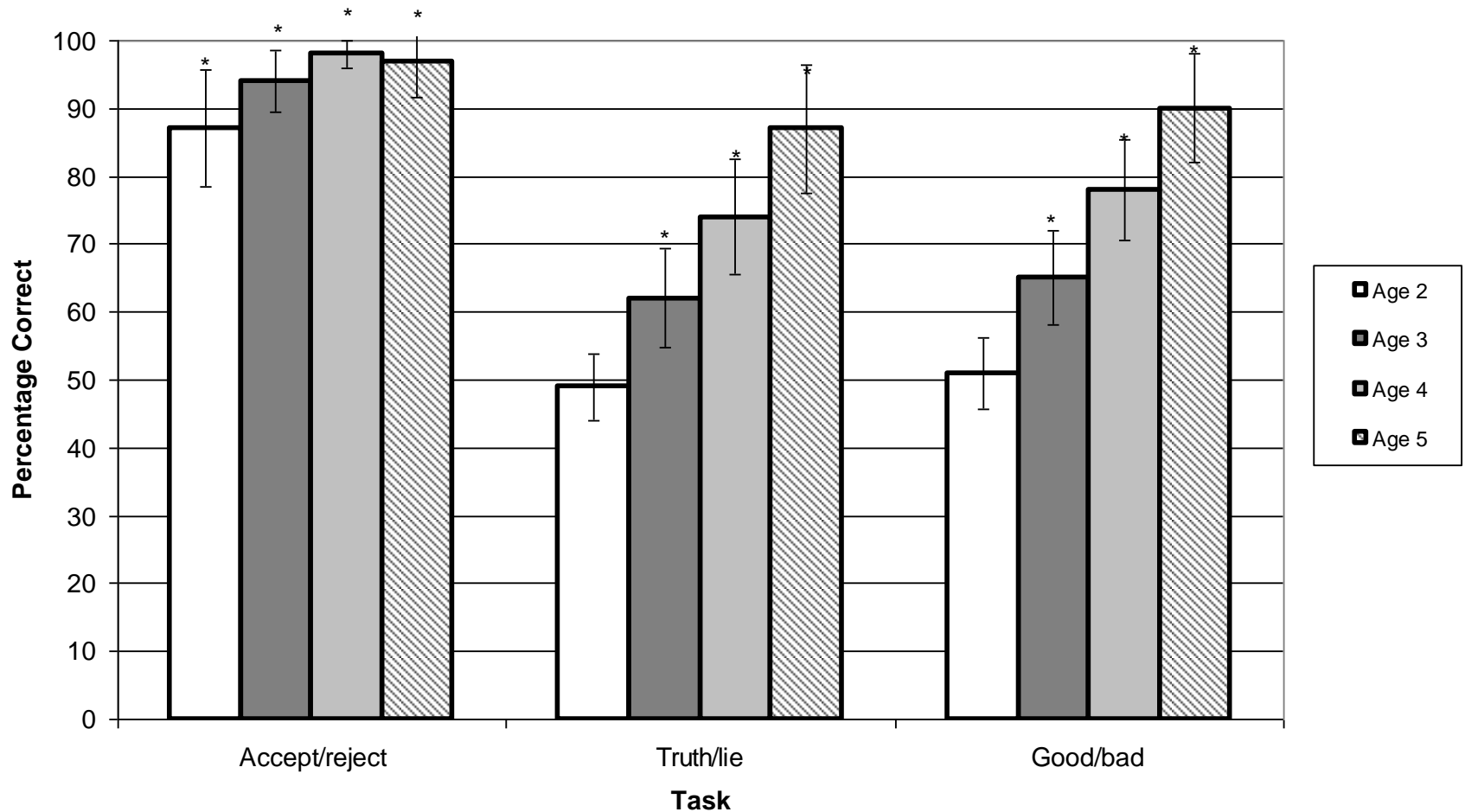
Accepted, *Journal of Cognition and Development*

Method

- 101 2- to 5-year-olds
- 4 tasks
 - Accept/reject t/f statements (e.g. “is this a truck?”)
 - Label t/f statements as truth or lie (e.g. “did the girl tell the truth?”)
 - Label t/f statements as good or bad (e.g., “did the girl say something bad?”)

Reject false statements by 2, call them lies and bad by 3 1/2

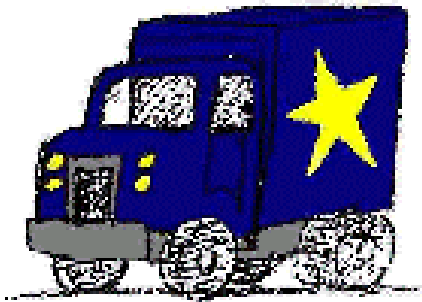
Figure 1. Percentage Correct Across Tasks by Age in Study 1



Best means of establishing truth-lie competency

- Only ask about the “truth.”
- Ask about third person (not interviewer or the child).
- Ask for evaluation (not consequences)
- Ask with pictures and closed-ended questions.
 - Closed-ended hazardous when questioner *doesn't* know the correct answer.

Best means of establishing truth-lie competency



This girl looks at the truck and she says "it's a plane."

Did the girl tell the truth?

Did the girl say something good/bad?

(if child fails)

Is this a truck? (pointing at truck)

For further information

- Google “bepress lyon”
 - Copies of all published papers
 - Practitioner aids
- Google MRCAC and click on “webinars”
 - Child interview seminar
- tlyon@law.usc.edu