

Research Spotlight: March 2020

Preschoolers can be a challenging group to interview due to immature cognitive development and increased suggestibility, but they can provide accurate and informative information when questioned appropriately. Katz and Kosher wanted to know how forensic interviewers in Israel experienced and viewed the participation of pre-schoolers in forensic interviews. Given that forensic interviewers are usually the first point of contact when gathering evidence in the criminal justice system, it is important to understand their perceptions and attitudes when interviewing very young children.

In this study, nine focus groups comprising ten forensic interviewers were held. The focus groups were two hours long and the aim was to provide a safe environment to reflect on their experiences and perceptions when interviewing preschoolers. Preschoolers were defined as children aged 3-6 years old. The participants in the focus groups were asked four key questions followed by open-ended questions to promote elaborate responses:

- (1) tell me about your experiences when talking to preschoolers
- (2) what are the main barriers you encountered?
- (3) what are the main successes you have had?
- (4) who helps participation of preschools in the criminal justice system?

The researchers found that there were three potential barriers to preschoolers' participation in forensic interviews.

1. Forensic interviewers tended to believe that preschoolers are limited in their ability to give detailed and reliable testimony and respond to interview questions.
2. Interviewers experienced emotional difficulty during their interviews (i.e., they described hopelessness, frustration, and a need to protect the child from participating in the system due to their vulnerability).
3. The criminal justice system itself acts as a barrier to preschoolers' participation as it places unrealistic demands on the children.

Although the study was conducted in Israel, the results likely resonate with forensic interviewers in many other countries. The current study demonstrates the urgent need for changes to adapt the criminal justice system's expectations of preschoolers and to improve practical training for practitioners working specifically with this group of interviewees.

Katz, C., & Kosher, H. (2020). "He's just a baby": Forensic interviewers' experiences and perceptions of maltreated preschoolers' participation in the criminal justice system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 110, 104738. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104738>