



**Language and Child Interviewing:
A Tribute to Anne Graffam Walker**

Thomas D. Lyon, JD, PhD
USC Gould School of Law
Julie Kenniston, MSW, LISW
National Criminal Justice Training Center
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Never blame the child

- Even very young children can tell us what they know if we ask them the right questions in the right way.
- (Walker & Kenniston, 2013)

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Never stop learning from experience

We do not question children.
We question one child at a time.
(Walker & Kenniston, 2013)

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What we'll do

- Walker, 1993
 - Complexity
 - Ambiguity
 - Do you remember questions (Evans et al., 2017)
 - Pronouns (he/she/it/that)
 - Short doesn't mean simple
 - Extension: Ellipsis

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What we'll do

- Walker, 1994, 1999; Walker & Kenniston, 2013
 - Words to use with caution
 - Difficult question-types
 - Extension: "Something else" a solution? (Stolzenberg et al. 2017)
 - Extension: From yes/no any/some to wh-

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Walker, 1993




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Case study of a 5-year-old witness to homicide.

- Hard words (“Age inappropriate words and expressions”)
- Difficult grammar (“Complex syntactic constructions”)
- “Now Lurene, with respect to this second group of pictures in which you identified previously as showing the people who hurt Doug, were you telling the truth when you said that?”
- Recommendation: Keep questions short and simple.

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Ambiguity: Not knowing what was meant (Walker, 1993)

- “Do you remember when Don asked you, ‘What color was their skin, like mine or like Martha’s?’”
- “Do you remember saying that John had the knife when Doug got hurt?”
- ? No, I don’t remember.
- ? No, I didn’t say that.
- ? No, John didn’t have the knife.

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Short but not simple: Do you remember questions with an implicit yes/no

- “[E]ven short questions, free of child-challenging words, can be just as problematic in terms of the ambiguity of the replies.” (Walker, 1993)
- “Do you remember if it was dark?” “No.”
- ? No, I don’t remember.
- ? No, it wasn’t dark.

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Short but not simple: Do you remember questions with an implicit yes/no

- Among 104 child witnesses (4 to 9) over 1,800 do you remember/know questions with implicit yes/no questions (Evans et al., 2017).
- Half of responses were unelaborated.
- Unelaborated responses disambiguated only about 25% of the time.
- Jury-eligible adults recalled “no” responses as ambiguous less than 10% of the time (Wylie et al., 2019).

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Thinking ahead to question-type

- Note that only implicit yes/no questions lead to ambiguity.
- “Do you remember where it was?” “No”
- NO ambiguity
- But still a yes/no question, and so better to ask the wh- question.

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Short but not simple: he/she/it/that

- He/she/it/that (“personal pronouns”/“extended reference) (Walker, 1993)
 - Who is “he”?
 - What is “that” referring to?
- Problem: using pronouns makes questions *shorter*. Our intuitions about what makes questions child-friendly can lead us astray.

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Extension: Ellipsis

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Short but not simple: Ellipsis

A: A guy stole an apple.
 B: How?
 A: Really fast when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at him.
 B: When?
 A: Yesterday.
 B: Where?
 A: Across the mall.

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Get rid of ellipsis?

A: A guy stole an apple.
 B: How did a guy steal an apple?
 A: A guy stole an apple really fast when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at the guy.
 B: When did the guy steal an apple when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at the guy?
 A: The guy stole an apple yesterday when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at the guy.
 B: Where did the guy steal an apple yesterday when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at the guy?
 A: The guy stole an apple yesterday across the mall when the shopkeeper wasn't looking at the guy.
 (after Roeper, 2007)

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Short but not simple: Ellipsis (6-year-old)

Q: If your mommy said those shoes were gray, would that be the truth or a lie?
 A: Lie.
 Q: What if your mommy told you to say that those shoes were gray, would you say that?
 A: No.
 Q: Why not?
 A: Because this is--I don't know.
 Q: You don't know?
 A: Huh uh, no.

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Short but not simple: Ellipsis

Q: But you wouldn't say it?
 A: Yeah.
 Q: Yes, you would?
 A: Yep.
 Q: If your mommy told you to, you would?
 A: Yep.

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Short but not simple: Ellipsis

Q: But you wouldn't say [something false]?
 A: Yeah.
 Q: Yes, you would [say something false]?
 A: Yep.
 Q: If your mommy told you to [say something false], you would?
 A: Yep.
 (State v. Reynolds, 1999, acquittal)

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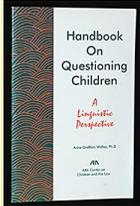
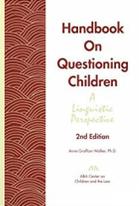
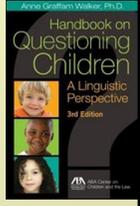
Thinking ahead to question type

- Note that because the child was giving unelaborated “yes” responses, they were ambiguous.

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Walker (1994, 1999), Walker & Kenniston (2013)

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Short but not simple: Words to use with caution

- Pronouns (he/she/it/that)
- Prepositions (in/out, inside/outside, on/off, over/under)
- Ask/tell
- Before/after/first/last
- Touch
- Ahead of/behind
- Always/never
- Any/some
- Big
- Different/same
- Forget
- Inside
- Know/think/guess/sure
- Let/make
- More/less
- Move
- Neither/either
- Promise
- Remember
- Some/all
- Yesterday/today/tomorrow

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Question-types to avoid

- Do you remember questions
- Tag questions (didn't/wasn't)
- Compound questions that can be answered yes/no
- “Did you not” questions
- Forced-choice questions
- Questions with the word “any” (e.g., “Did he say anything?”)
- “How many/what time” questions
- Note that these are all *closed-ended* questions
 - (yes-no, forced-choice, wh- questions with limited options)

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Question-types to avoid

- “Closed-ended and forced choice (multiple choice) questions don't offer an opportunity for the interviewer to recognize miscommunication.” (Walker & Kenniston, 2013, p. 129)

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“Possible alternative”

- Give three options, the last one open-ended.
- E.g. “Were your clothes on, off, or something else?”
- (Walker & Kenniston, 2013)

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**Extension: Testing
"something else"**

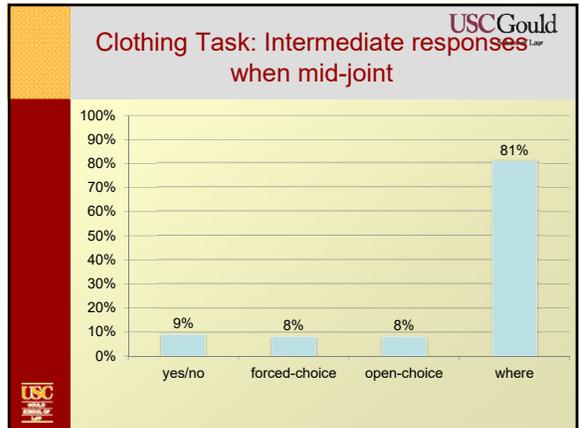
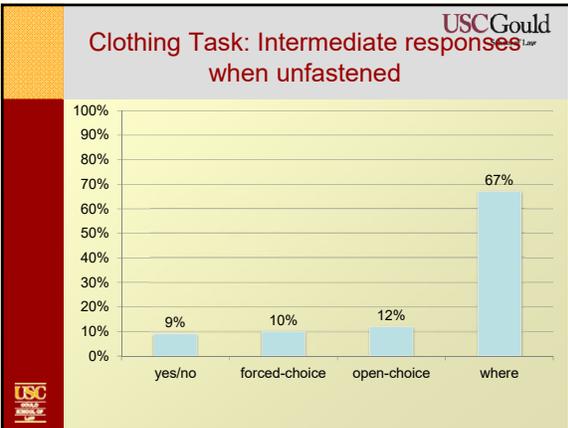
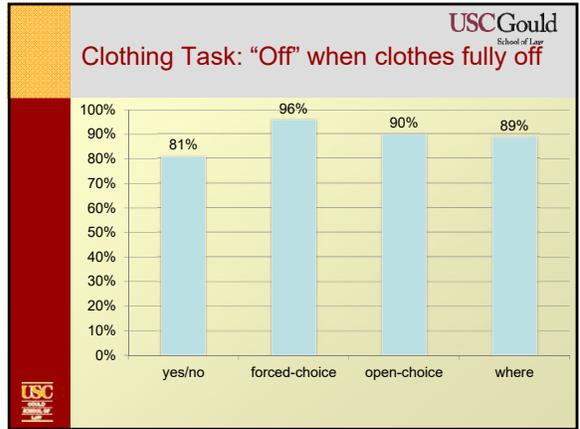
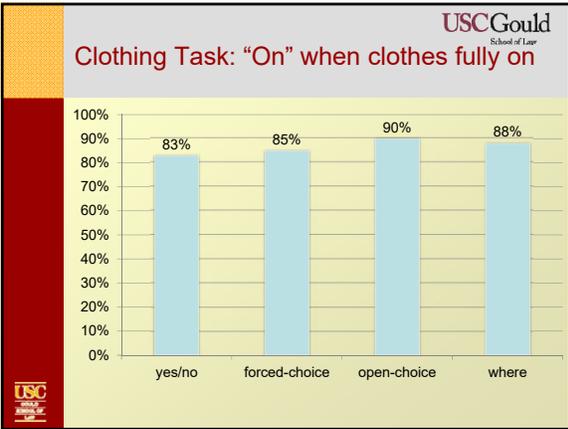


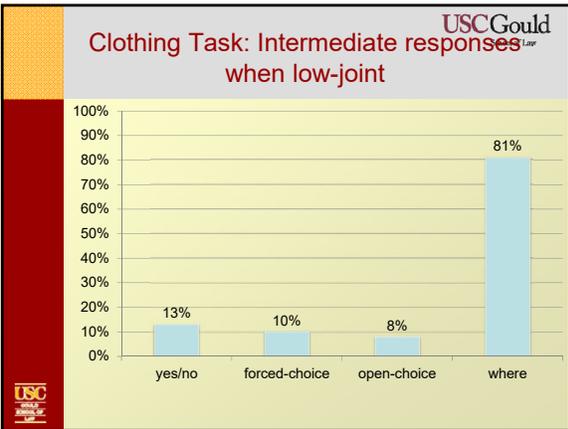
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**Stolzenberg et al. (2017):
97 3- to 6-year-old children**



Yes/no: Are her pants on?/Are her pants off?
Forced-choice: Are her pants on or off?
Open-choice: Are her pants on or off or something else?
Where: Where are her pants?



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“Where were your clothes” in forensic interviews

Table 4. Examples of children’s intermediate descriptions of clothing placement

Child’s Age	Sample	Question	Answer
5	Forensic	Q: Oh, ok. And where were your clothes when this was happening?	A: My pants were falling down when I was walking, because I needed to use the bathroom (ok) and I had my boxers on, and my shirt was right here [motions to chest]. (Oh, ok. Ok) I rolled it up
6	Forensic	Q: And where were your shorts?	A: On me too, its just pulled off a little bit
7	Forensic	Q: But when [suspect] touched your vagina what happened to your underpants?	A: He lifted them up, put his finger in (ok), touched my vagina, blood came out [inaudible], blood came out of my vagina, touching my underpants, we put them in the trash

Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2017

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“Where were your clothes” in our recent interviews

- Q: Mm-hmm, ok. And so when he squished your butt, where were your clothes?
A: A: My clothes was on but he like squished it through the clothes and there was a hole in my clothes because he like cut them. (Aaliyah, 7)
- Q: Ok Kelly, and so when he touched you, where were your clothes?
A: I was wearing, I was wearing shorts, no I was wearing leggings like these but in black, and a tank top that’s pretty big and it covers my whole chest and everything (mm-hmm), kind of like this one [child points to shirt] but in a tank top way and yeah(mm-hmm), and I had socks on, and my hair was like this [child points to hair] (mm-hmm), yeah. (Kelly, 8)

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Extension: From yes-no “any” and “some” to wh-

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“Did anything happen?”

Answering a question that includes the word “any” or its compounds (e.g., “anything,” “anyone,” “anywhere”) generally requires **making a global search through all possibilities**, something even adults fail to do if their memories are not jogged.
(Walker & Kenniston, 2013)

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“Did something happen?”

- Walker and Kenniston (2013) note that “any” pulls for a “no” response because “any” is usually used in negative contexts.
- For example, you would say “I don’t have any money” but you wouldn’t say “I have any money.”
- Some research suggests that asking about “something” is more effective than asking about “anything” (Heritage et al., 2007).

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Problem: Even "something" is vague

- 34% of miscommunications about body mechanics involved attorneys' use of "some" or "any" questions to introduce abusive acts (Sullivan et al., in press)
- "Questions that ask about *something* may be imprecise. For example, in the testimonies of an 8-year-old male (Hines, 2006), and a 10-year-old female (Stark, 2010), children denied an abusive act to questions that used "something" to query about abuse (Q: "Well, did *something* happen to you in the bathroom?" A: "Not really;" Hines, 2006; Q: "Did he do *something* else to you while you were on the bed?" A: "No;" Stark, 2010)." (Sullivan et al., in press)

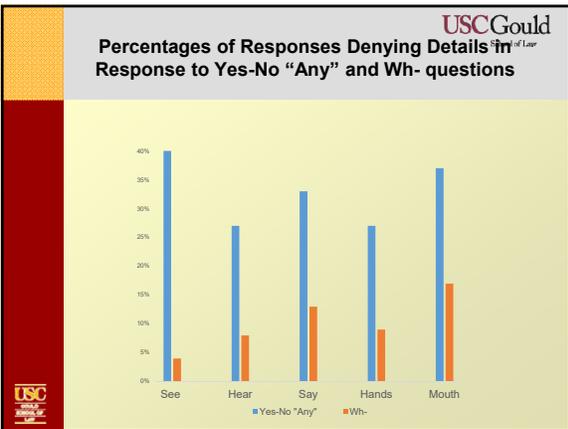
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Pilot work: Y/N/ANY vs. Wh-

- Follow ups to narratives about things the child likes to do outside, what happened yesterday, and what happened on the child's last birthday.
- Did you see anything?
 - Vs. "What did you see?"
- Did you hear anything?
 - Vs. "What did you hear?"
- Did X say anything?
 - Vs. "What did X say?"
- Did X do anything with x mouth?
 - Vs. "What did X do with x mouth?"
- Did X do anything with x hands?
 - Vs. "What did X do with x hands?"

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"What did he do with his hands?"

Q: Mm-hmm, ok. And what did he do with his hands?
A: Well he was trying to put it, put it in my mouth, I keep backing up but he put it. And after he put it in, he pushed. (Tianna, 14)

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"What did you do with your hands?"

Q: Ok, and then when you played the blindfold game, what did you do with your hands?
A: He would tell me to rub his penis, so I'd go up and down or side to side, I dunno, 'cause he was standing up, so his penis would be like this [shapes hand into circle and extends it away from body] and he would just tell me to motion my hands like this [moves hand back and forth] or to do this with my hands [shapes both hands into circles and rotates them in opposite directions] and, with two hands, and I felt very uncomfortable. And sometimes when he ejaculates on me, he wants me to cup my hands like this [cups hands with both palms up] (mm-hmm), then I would, and then he would do on me, and then he said it's warm white lotion. Once he pulled up, I guess, he puts up his pants, and then he tells me to open my eyes (mm-hmm) so I can walk to the bathroom and wash my hands. (Cryszhel, 13)

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Standing on Walker's Shoulders

- Identify the most productive open-ended wh- questions,
- both to reduce miscommunication
- and to recognize miscommunication when it occurs.

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For more information

- tlyon@law.usc.edu
- For reprints of articles, Google “Bepress Lyon.”
- julie.kenniston@gmail.com



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