

Early Childhood (3-6 years) Factsheet

Prepared by Child Witness Service

Words and Language

- Unlikely to have any understanding of legal terms, and will assume the non-legal meaning of the word, i.e. swear, court.
 - Likely to use terms for body parts that are not technically correct.
 - Confuse the meaning of prepositions, i.e. before, after, behind.
 - Have difficulty with pointing words such as this, that, here, there. Instead, use descriptive nouns and place names.
 - Understand words referring to concrete objects better than words that refer to categories or abstract concepts, i.e. ask if a person had a knife, rather than a weapon.
 - Interpret words literally, and very narrowly or very broadly, i.e. a child may understand that 'touching' only happens with a person's hand, and deny being touched because another body part was used.
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- Expect sentences to take the sequence subject-verb-object. Passive voice can be confusing, as are embedded phrases (use two separate questions instead), i.e. "did a man chase you? Was he wearing a red coat?" rather than "was the man who chased you, wearing a red coat?"
 - Have difficulty with negatives, avoid using such questions as "wouldn't you say?" Instead use "did".
 - Have difficulty responding to a question that suggests an answer and may feel pressured to agree, i.e. "Fred came to your house."
 - Might be able to use specific words, but may not understand the concepts behind them.
 - Lack detail in their descriptions.

Cognitive

- Cannot self regulate emotions or monitor comprehension. They will not be able to say when they do not understand a question or when they need a break.
- Have difficulty expressing degrees of uncertainty, i.e. "Are you sure that is right or do you just think it is right."
- They generally believe that adults are sincere and know what the child knows. This can lead to confusion in cross-examination.
- Unable to reason logically or abstractly, so often have difficulty accurately attributing causation. When eliciting evidence from children it is best not to ask 'why' questions. Equally, they will not be able to answer hypothetical questions.
- Young children can only focus on one idea at a time. If a question contains two parts, they will only be able to focus on one part and may not fully answer the question.
- 'Do you remember' questions are complicated and difficult for young kids to process. 'Do you remember going for a drive with your father last Sunday?' instead ask, "Did you go for a drive last Sunday?"
- Cannot accurately attribute motives or emotions to others.

Time and measurement

- Know the names of numbers before they can actually count. They may have difficulty with 'some' and 'all', denying they know some of a thing because they know it all.
- Cannot generally tell the time, nor understand the concept of time measurement, i.e. will not be able to estimate the duration of something, nor distinguish days and months. They may know the names of these units of

measurement, but not their real meaning. However, they can usually identify if something happened 'at the same time' they were doing something else, i.e. 'it happened when I was eating breakfast'.

- Have difficulty putting events into chronological order. They are most likely to remember what happened first and what happened last.

Things to Avoid

- Idioms and figures of speech.
- Mix tenses i.e. "Did Mary ask you who I am?"
- frowning or using a loud, cross tone.



- Avoid using pronouns like he, she – use the proper name.
- Tag questions, i.e. "You went to school on that day, didn't you?"

Things that are helpful

- Signpost a change of topic and set the scene for the new topic, i.e. "We have finished talking about when you lived at the farm. We are now going to talk about when you lived with your grandparents."
- Simple, short questions with words of only one or two syllables.

- Speak slowly and give the child enough time to answer.
- Start early in the day and plan regular breaks. A 4 year old will need more frequent breaks than a 6 year old.

REFERENCES:

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