



Lay summary

The narrative coherence of witness transcripts in children on the autism spectrum

Background

Autistic children sometimes recall fewer details than typically developing children (of comparable age and ability) about an event they have witnessed. However, the information they do recall is usually just as accurate.

This study looked at a different aspect of witness memory - whether the information recalled about an event makes good sense to a listener. This is known as 'narrative coherence'. Previous research on autistic witnesses has not looked at narrative coherence. This is an important area. Criminal justice professionals and juries might think witness accounts that are more coherent are higher in quality and more believable.

What were the aims of the research?

To compare the narrative coherence of witness accounts in two groups:

- Autistic children.
- Typically developing children.

We made sure that both groups had the same ages (6-11 years), levels of language understanding, and levels of reasoning ability. This was to make sure that our two groups were comparable to each other.

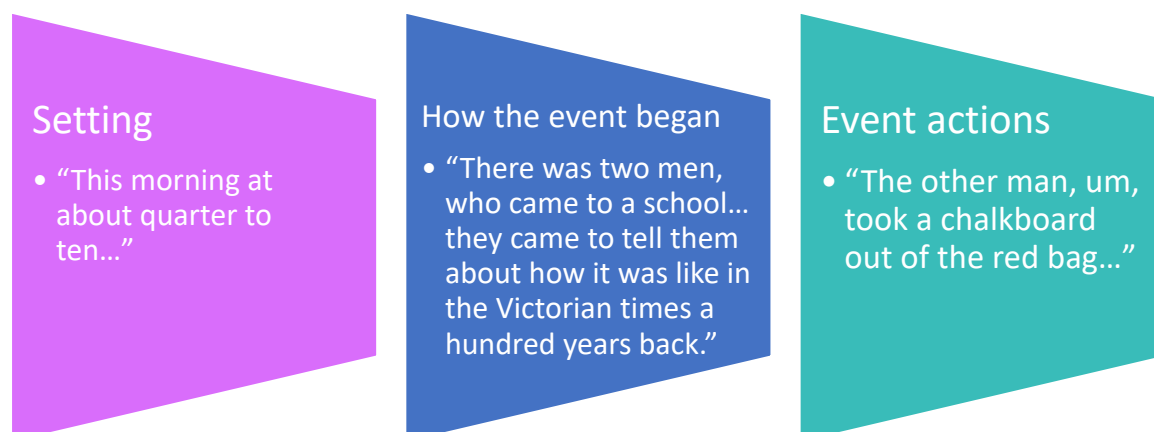
What we did...

The participants in our research were 52 autistic children and 52 typically developing children. All of the children watched a short event. In this event, two men gave a talk (lasting approximately three and a half minutes) about what school was like in Victorian times. Towards the end of the talk, one of the men 'stole' something from the other. On the same day, the children were given a brief interview. They were asked to tell the interviewer what they could remember about the event that they had seen. We recorded the interview and wrote down everything they said. This was their 'witness account'.

How did we measure narrative coherence?

Narrative coherence can be measured in several ways, but we looked at something called 'story grammar'. This focuses on seven key elements that make an account (or story) clear, organised and understandable for the listener. For example, does the witness describe a setting where everything takes place? Does the witness explain how the event began, what happened in the event (actions), and how the event ended?

Here are three examples of story grammar:



What did we find?

Autistic children remembered less information about the event than typically developing children. This is what research often finds when autistic people are given open-ended interviews ('tell me what happened...') like we did here.

The important new result was there were ***no differences*** in narrative coherence between autistic and typically developing children. All of the children showed some difficulties in making well-structured accounts. But this was because they were young and had not developed these skills fully. It did not make any difference having an autism diagnosis.

Why are these findings important?

Autistic children's witness accounts were just as coherent as those given by typically developing children. This is a positive finding for autistic children. Their narrative coherence skills were at the level we would expect for their age.

These findings could be because we were careful to match our autistic and non-autistic groups on some important features. We made sure they were the same age, had the same level of language understanding, and the same level of reasoning ability.

Read the full paper in: *Research in Developmental Disabilities*

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2019.103518>

Reference: Henry, L.A., Crane, L., Palmer, L., Fesser, E., Harvey, A., & Wilcock, R. (2020). The narrative coherence of witness transcripts in children on the autism spectrum. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 96, 103518.

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