



## Lay summary

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

### Background

Autistic children sometimes recall fewer details about witnessed events than typically developing children (of comparable age and ability). However, the information they do recall is generally very accurate. This study looked at whether the information remembered by autistic children showed the same degree of **narrative coherence** as we see in typically developing children. An account with good narrative coherence can be full or sparse in terms of details, but will show a degree of organisation and structure relating to the context, the content and the characters associated with an event. It is important to understand the narrative coherence of autistic children's accounts, because accounts with higher a degree of narrative coherence might be perceived more favourably by criminal justice professionals and juries.

### What was the aim of the research?

We wanted to know whether autistic child witnesses showed a similar degree of narrative coherence when remembering a witnessed event as typically developing child witnesses. We made sure that both of these groups of children were of the same age and ability levels. This meant that when we compared them to each other, it was a 'fair' comparison.

### What we did...

We included 52 autistic children and 52 typically developing (TD) children (ages 6–11 years). All of the children had abilities in the average range, and we were careful to match the autistic and typical children for age, general abilities, and vocabulary understanding. All children watched two men give a short 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. Immediately after the event, an interviewer asked them about what they had seen using a 'brief interview', which included some follow-up prompts, if needed (see below).

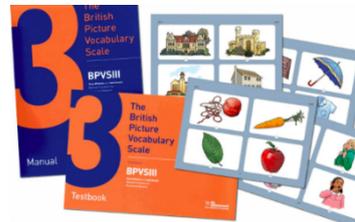


The children also took part in some tasks to assess their...

### General abilities



### Vocabulary understanding



### What did we find?

- (1) Fewer details about the event overall were reported by autistic children.
- (2) However, when we looked at the narrative coherence of the information that was recalled, there were **no differences** between the autistic and typical children.
- (3) We checked the number and diversity of 'story grammar' elements the children used, the length of the narratives that were produced, and the range of vocabulary used. None of these elements differed between autistic and typical children.

### Why are these findings important?

These findings suggest that the narrative coherence of autistic children's witness accounts is equivalent to that of typical children (when these groups are matched to each other on age, ability and vocabulary understanding). Narrative coherence is important because it may affect the degree to which members of the criminal justice system understand a child's evidence. This could impact on how meaningful and credible the child appears to jurors. The findings give us further confidence in the quality of autistic children's witness skills.

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, January 2020, 103518.