

Communication Assessments: Informing Interviewers and Empowering Children?

Presenter: Miss Alex Jane Smethurst

Supervisors: Dr Kimberly Collins, Dr Nikki Carthy, Professor
Becky Milne and Dr Karri Gillespie-Smith

Overview

- Background
- Rationale
- Method
- Results study 1
- Results study 2
- Conclusion / Implications for practice

Background – Why are Pre-Interview Assessments Important?

- Each year in the UK, 20,000 children act as witnesses in criminal proceedings (NSPCC, 2014).
- Even very young children can provide accurate and reliable accounts of past events (Brown & Lamb, 2015).
- However, they may require additional scaffolding (e.g. communication aids) and support (e.g. an intermediary) (Oxburgh, Myklebust, & Grant, 2010).
- Pre-interview assessments can help ascertain the degree and nature of scaffolding required.

Background – Best Practice Guidance

- Pre-interview assessments ‘should be considered for all child witnesses’ (Achieving Best Evidence; Ministry of Justice, 2011).
- Factors that may be explored include:
 - Social, emotional and cognitive development
 - Receptive and expressive language abilities
 - Willingness and ability to talk within a formal setting
 - Signs of clinical or psychological problems
- No formal guidance / framework as to how these factors should be assessed.

Aims and Rationale

- Pre-interview assessments have a dual purpose:
 - Help the interviewer plan / structure the interview
 - Prepare the child for the interview
- This is the first research project to examine whether a pre-interview assessment:
 - Provides an accurate indication of a child's abilities (study 1)
 - Impacts upon the child's communication at interview. More specifically their ability to use the ground rules and refute incorrect suggestions (study 2)

Method - Measures

- Children were allocated to one of three experimental conditions:
- Pre-interview communication assessment
- No pre-interview communication assessment
- Colouring activity

Condition	Age	BPVS	RAPT	Ravens	SDCCS	Stroop / Day- Night
Assessment	84.19	100.50	61.50	19.53	2.25	23.42 / 23.75
No assessment	79.80	100.20	59.95	19.90	2.40	22.27 / 13.80
Colouring activity	84.80	95.80	58.80	19.53	2.33	21.10 / 26.40

Method – Outcome Measures

- How well pre-interview predictions matched children's interview behaviour.
- How likely the children were to refute incorrect suggestions.
- The frequency with which the children employed the ground rules.

Method – Staged Event

- Adapted from the Mr Science Germ Detective paradigm (Dickinson & Poole, 2017).
- The event was about germ transmission and contagion presentation.
- There was a rule that Mrs Science was not allowed to touch the children's skin.
- She broke the rule on two occasions.

Method – 'Unpacking the Box'

- Assessment tool developed by Triangle.
- Currently used by investigative interviewers and intermediaries.
- Consists of a silver box containing small objects (e.g. keys, thimble, paperclips) and an accompanying guidance manual.
- Designed to assess:
 - Receptive communication
 - Expressive communication
 - Attention, anxiety and behaviour



Method – Predictions

- Predictions were made regarding:
 - Question comprehension
 - Use of ground rules
 - Responsiveness
 - Suggestibility
 - Attention span
 - Ability to draw

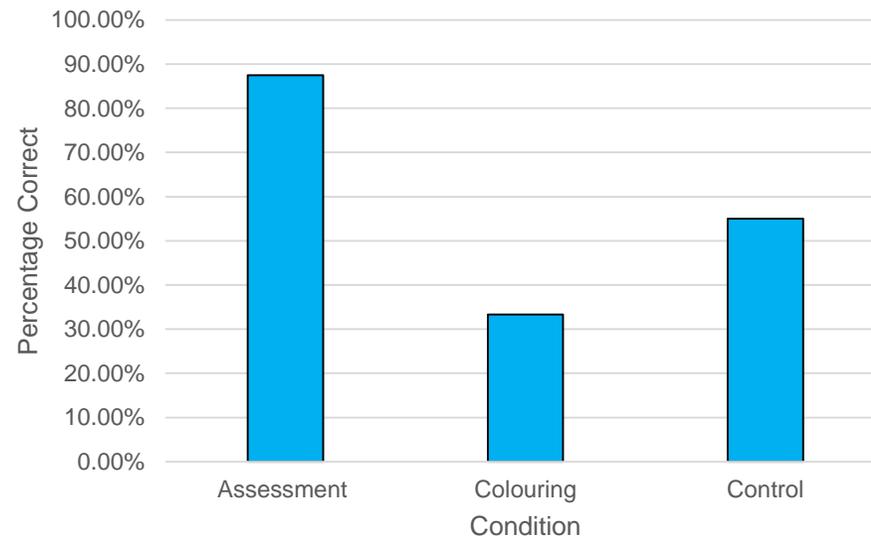
- Predictions were based upon:
 - Pre-interview assessment – assessment findings and professional judgement.
 - No pre-interview assessment and colouring activity – professional judgement alone.

Method – Interview

- One week later, all of the children took part in an interview about the staged event.

Results (Study 1) - Ground Rules

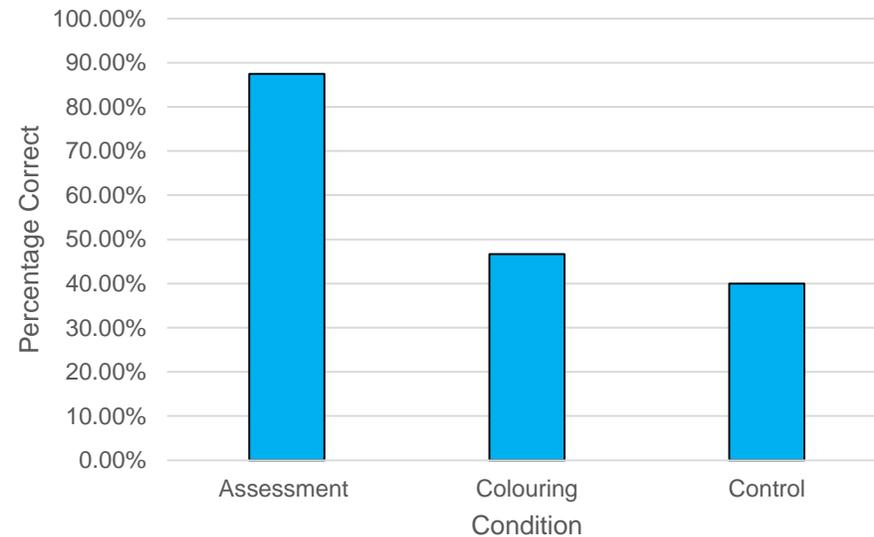
- Communication assessments were able to provide a better indication of whether children would use ground rules (I.e. 'I don't know', 'you got it wrong') than professional judgement alone.



- Having this knowledge could dictate what questions are asked at interview.

Results (Study 1) – Responsiveness

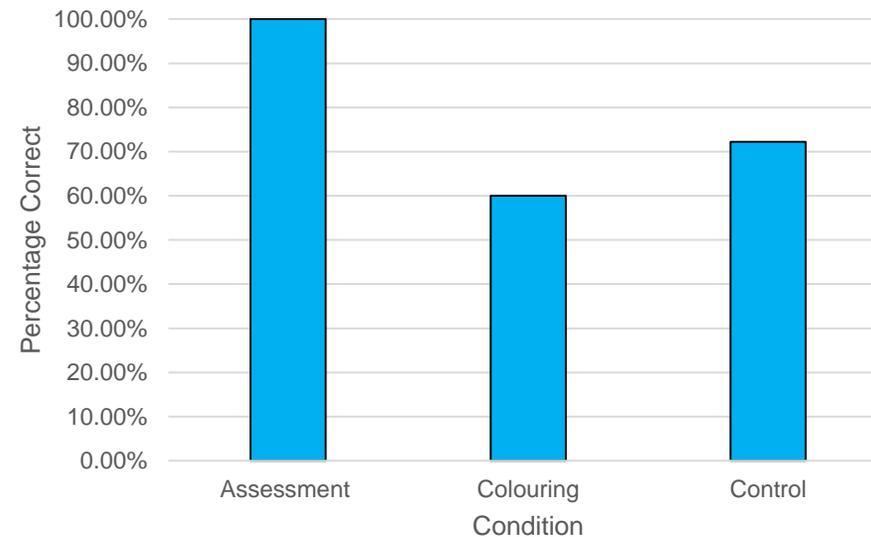
- Communication assessments were able to provide a better indication of children's responsiveness than professional judgement alone.



- Establishing whether a child will engage can help determine whether more time is required to develop rapport.

Results (Study 1) – Drawing Ability

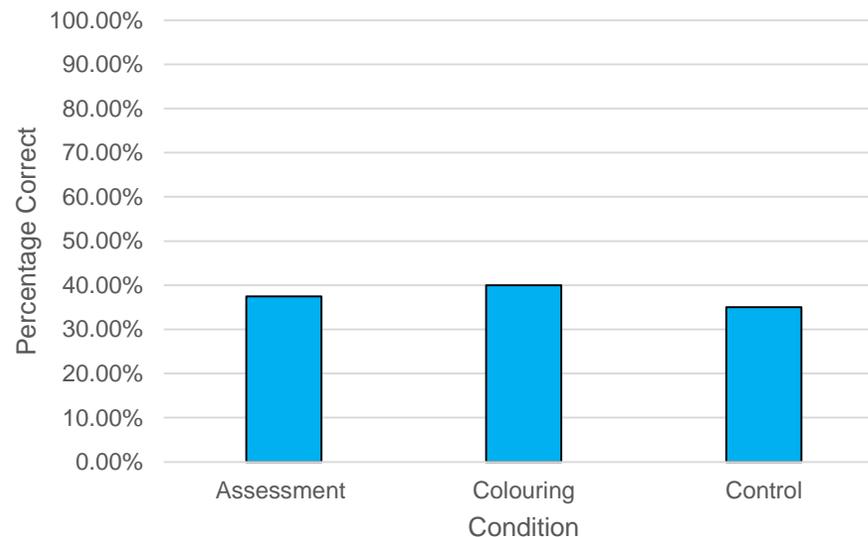
- Communication assessments were able to provide a better indication of whether children were able to draw a person (that is sufficiently detailed to be submitted into evidence) than professional judgement alone.



- Ensures that the time is used most effectively at interview.

Results (Study 1) - Suggestibility

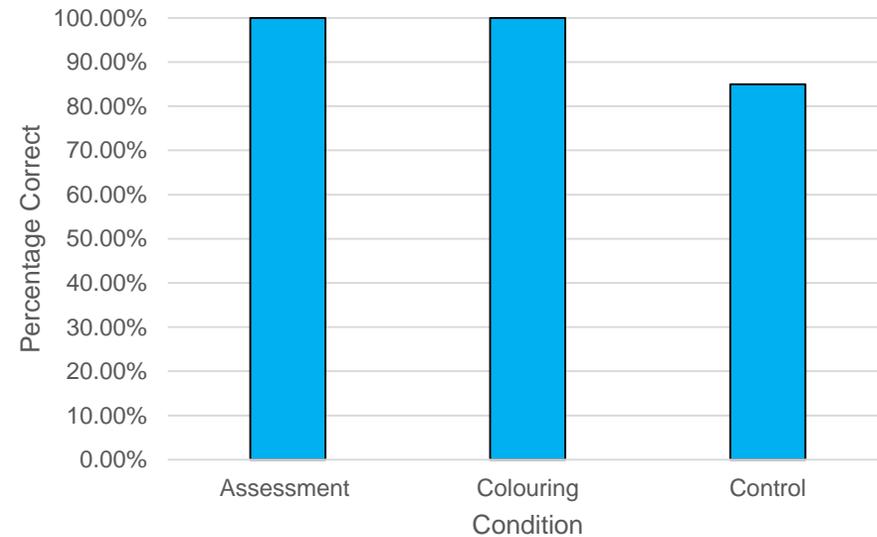
- Communication assessments did not differ from professional judgement in terms of providing a reliable indication of suggestibility.



- Highlights the importance of avoiding leading questions with all children.

Results (Study 1) - Attention

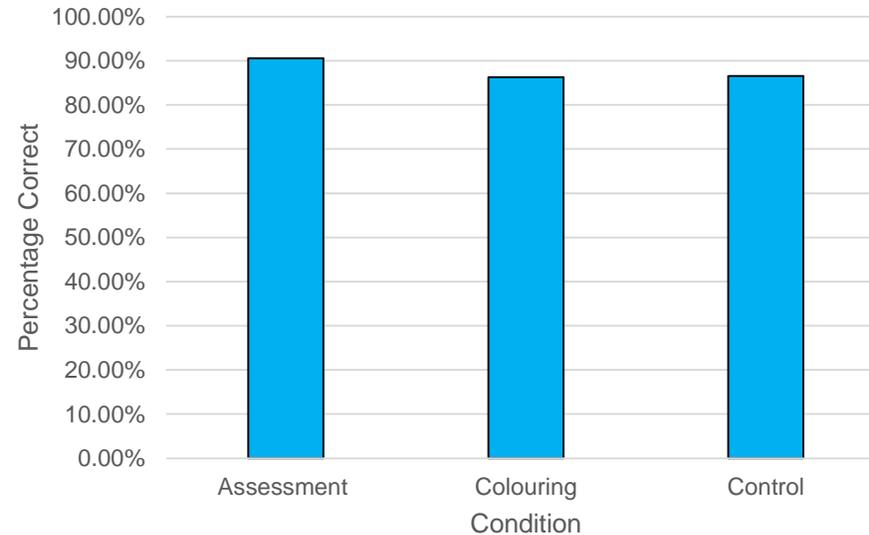
- Whether communication assessments provide a better indication of children's attentional abilities could not be fully explored.



- Could prove pivotal in planning an interview (I.e. breaks).

Results (Study 1) – Question Comprehension

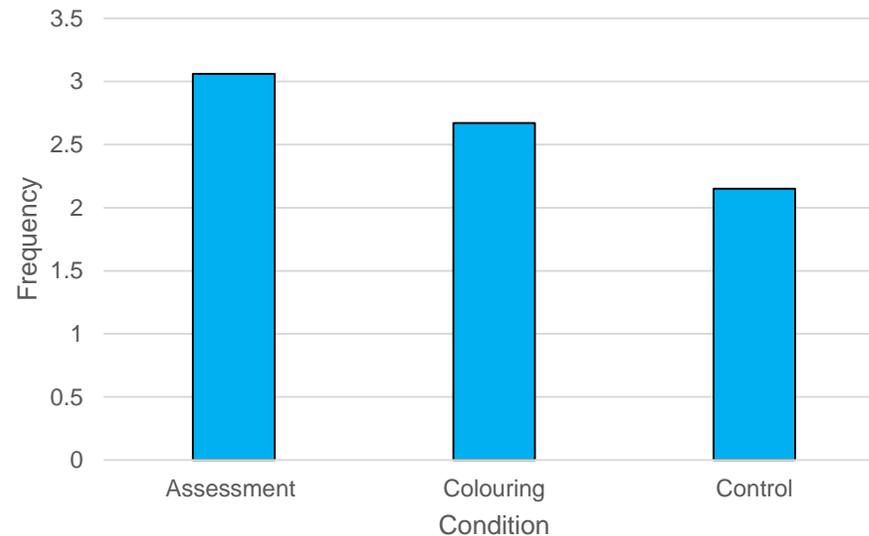
- Communication assessments did not differ from professional judgement in terms of providing a reliable indication of the questions children could answer. However, across all three conditions accuracy was high.



- Having an awareness of child's receptive language can help tailor an interview to that child's needs.

Results (Study 2) – Summary

- The assessment increased resistance to suggestion:
 - 11% incorrect in the assessment condition
 - 24% incorrect in the colouring condition
 - 28% incorrect in the control condition
- Increased use of ‘you got it wrong’ rule.



Conclusion / Implications for Practice

- Overall, a pre-interview assessment does provide a good indication of a child's abilities.
- Pre-interview assessments increased children's resistance to suggestion. It is likely that this is linked to the acquisition of ground rules.
- The results justify the wider use of 'unpacking the box'.

Conclusion – Future Research

- Examine real-world interviews, with and without a Registered Intermediary (RI).
- Look at how the RI's presence / pre-interview assessment impacts upon:
 - The amount of information provided by the child.
 - The use of ground rules.
 - The structure of the interview.
 - The use of additional aids (e.g. drawings).

Contact Details

For further information please contact:

A.Smethurst@tees.ac.uk

Thank you.