

## The Cognitive Interview of Children

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*The cognitive interview is a method of enhancing memory through facilitating the process of recall. This method is used for interviewing witnesses, including child witnesses. The authors present the principles of the cognitive interview of children and describe its phases.*

### Introduction

The cognitive interview (CI) is a method of enhancing memory through improving the process of recall. It was developed between 1984 and 1985 by two American psychologists: Ronald Fisher and Edward Geiselman. Having conducted extensive research into memory processes, in 1980s they published several papers on the practical use of their findings, especially to improve the effectiveness of interviewing witnesses.

According to the authors of the CI, it focuses on two major problems related to interviewing witnesses: **memory processes** and **communication processes**. A witness must make much effort to recall the details of an event, and then communicate this information to the interviewer. Successful interviewing depends on both processes.

The fundamental principle of the cognitive interview is the guidance of memory scanning. The interviewer's task is to help the witness to recall important information through guiding him/her – using appropriate questions – towards various areas of memory, where such information may be encoded. The authors emphasize that it is **the witness, and not the interviewer**, who should play the central role in the interview, because it is the witness who has access to information. The interviewer's role is limited to reasoning about how the witness has learned the information, while subtly guiding the witness's recall processes, accompanying him/her, and suggesting effective strategies of searching the memory.

In order to encourage the witness's active engagement in the interview, the interviewer should create appropriate conditions to help the witness feel as comfortable and secure as possible. The witness should also have the feeling of being treated individually. Thus it is essential to **personalize the interview**, i.e., treat the witness as an individual with a unique set of traits and abilities. To achieve this goal the interviewer should start from establishing a rapport with the witness, express interest in his/her current emotional state and personal situation. The interviewer should encourage the witness to express his/her fears and emotions, so that the witness does not have to focus on them while recalling the event.

The other important element of an interview is communicating the recalled information. There may be problems associated both with how the witness phrases and communicates the report and with the way this information is understood and noted by the interviewer. Because every interview is an act of communication between two persons, each of them has to be aware of the other's needs and capabilities. In the CI communication is improved as a result of helping the witness to give a complete and comprehensible account, and helping the interviewer to understand and note this information and to acknowledge the witness's psychological needs (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992).

The cognitive interview is based on two fundamental laws concerning human memory:

1. A memory trace consists of several elements and the effectiveness of its recall is closely related to the number of overlapping elements, i.e., with the complexity of the event.
2. There are several possible ways of retrieving an encoded event, so information that cannot be retrieved in one way, may turn out accessible using another method.

Building on the above theoretical assumptions, the authors developed four basic techniques of retrieving memory traces of events during cognitive interviews. Two of these mnemonics have been designed to improve the effectiveness of recalling partially overlapping elements of a memory trace, while the other two concern the ways of retrieving information:

- **Report all details, regardless of their apparent importance.** The witness should give a free, complete account of the event, including information he/she may consider insignificant. The witness should present all details of the event he/she can recall, even those that seem unimportant, inconsistent or disordered.
- **Reinstate the context.** The witness is encouraged to relive the offence mentally in the personal and environmental context, in which the event occurred. The interviewer may ask the witness to imagine the experienced offence, trying to reestablish the details of the event, and the psychophysical states of all participants (his/her own and others').
- **Change the sequence of recall.** The interviewer should ask the witness to describe the event in various orders, e.g., in a reverse chronological sequence: starting from the last remembered episode.
- **Change the perspective.** The interviewer should prompt the witness to describe the event from a different perspective, e.g., from the perspective of another witness, the offender, or the victim.

The earliest experimental research, conducted by Geiselman and his colleagues among groups of students, confirmed the effectiveness of this interviewing technique. Comparing to standard methods of interviewing, the CI elicited from 20% to 35% more information without increasing the concomitant amount of errors and confabulations (Geiselman et al., 1986).

Geiselman and his colleagues attempted to verify the effectiveness of the cognitive interview when applied to child witnesses (Geiselman & Padilla, 1988). They studied children from 7 to 12 years old and found that the cognitive interview elicited 21% more information than standard interviewing methods, without changing the amount of errors and confabulations.

In general, however, children were more likely to make errors and confabulate than adults, which suggested that they might have misunderstood the instructions concerning various interviewing techniques. Therefore, in the years that followed researchers focused on adjusting interviewing procedures to the developmental characteristics of children. Their conclusion is that it seems most effective to use open-end questions, especially at the beginning of the interview, without moving to more guiding or specific questions before a general outline of the event is elicited (Fisher & McCauley 1991).

During the past twenty years the idea of cognitive interviewing has inspired research all over the world. In Europe it has sparked most interest among British, German, and Spanish psychologists. Researchers have tested selected elements of the technique and the frequency of their use, as well as how certain psychological processes may improve the process of recall.

The application of the technique to interviewing children has been studied by researchers such as Gunter Koehnken, who has developed a detailed procedure of the cognitive interview of child witnesses. Promising results of research conducted by psychologists in various countries and clear signals of the technique's practical usefulness make it strongly recommendable and worth promoting.

## **The procedure of the cognitive interview of children**

The procedure described below is based on training materials developed by Gunter Koehnken and offered to the Institute of Forensic Expert Opinions in Kraków in 1995.

The cognitive interview's goal is to help interviewed children in improving the process of recall, i.e. generating retrieved details without increasing the amount of inaccurate or invented data.

### **General guidelines concerning the interviewer's behavior**

The role of the interviewer, just as in case of interviewing adults, is to facilitate the process of retrieving information from the child's memory. It should be kept in mind that the child plays the

central role in the interview, because it is the child who has all the information that the interviewer is interested in. Therefore the interviewer should adjust the sequence of questions to the process of retrieving information from the child's memory.

Koehnken recommends that the interviewer should encourage the child witness to speak continuously, asking auxiliary questions only when it is really necessary. Therefore the interviewer should adhere to the following principles:

- Sit naturally, leaned toward the child.
- Express friendliness and support.
- Use eye contact frequently, but do not stare at the child.
- Speak slowly, use short sentences, and make pauses between sentences.
- Express your attention and interest through nodding, saying „aha”, etc., but do not use evaluative terms, such as „that's right”.
- Praise the child for his/her efforts.
- Avoid rapid movements or chaotic style of speaking.
- Don't interrupt the child.
- Allow breaks.
- Show patience.

### **Phases of the cognitive interview**

The cognitive interview of children consists of several phases. In the first one the interviewer's goal is to **personalize the interview and establish rapport** with the child. Therefore interviewers should start from greeting the child using his/her name, introducing themselves, and begin a brief conversation on a subject that is unlikely to make the child experience an internal conflict (conflict-generating subjects may include difficulties at school or relationships with others). The interviewer may ask the child about his/her interests or favorite leisure activities.

In the next phase the interviewer should **explain the goals of the interview** to the child. The interviewer should emphasize the importance of reporting as many details of the event as possible, and make it clear that the child is the only person having all the information. It is worth noting that the task is not going to be easy and will require much concentration from the child. The interviewer should also prompt the child to describe everything that will come to his/her mind, as soon as the thought emerges. This applies to all the details, including information that may seem trivial or redundant. It is also important to discourage the child from guessing or inventing things he/she cannot remember.

The subsequent phases are associated with the use of specific mnemonics, with **reinstating the context of the event** being the first of them.

The context may be reestablished by requesting the child directly to think about all environmental and personal circumstances of the event or by asking specific questions, which will make the child think about these circumstances. To ensure that this phase of the interview is effective, the interviewer should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Ask the child to listen to the instruction carefully. Emphasize that you want to help him/her to recall all details of the event;
- Give the child enough time to reinstate the context;
- Ask questions slowly, making intentional pauses;
- Ask one question at a time;
- Do not continue the interview before the child reestablishes the context.

Obtaining a **free account** of the event is another technique that should be used during the interview. One of the goals pursued in this phase is designing the strategy for the next part of the interview, i.e. the question asking phase. Therefore it is worth making brief notes and identifying subjects, which should be elaborated in the next phase.

In order to obtain a free narrative account, the interviewer should ask the child to describe his/her memories of the event. The interviewer must not interrupt the child or ask any specific questions. It might be helpful to paraphrase the child's last thought, without adding any details. Thus the interviewer should apply the techniques of active listening.

Koehnken points to several practical problems, which may emerge in the free account phase, and provides some advice on how to deal with them. For example the child may stop at some point of giving the account, even if there is more to say. The interviewer should demonstrate patience and stay quiet, even if the pauses in the child's report are long. It is important to remember that this phase precedes asking questions, and silence may be a very effective tool of eliciting more elaborate answers, if it is followed by open-end questions. When the child makes an impression of having finished the narrative account, the interviewer should not start asking questions immediately, but rather encourage the child to try to recall more details, by asking: "Do you remember anything else?", and waiting a few more seconds.

**Asking questions** is the next phase of the cognitive interview of children. Before moving on to this part, the interviewer should explain the child that he/she is going to be asked about the details of the event. It is important to emphasize once again that the child should describe everything that will come to his/her mind, without guessing or inventing anything. The interviewer may also add that this is going to be a difficult task, which requires much effort and attention. It seems useful here to briefly describe the types of questions, their advantages and limitations, and their potential effects on the answers provided by the child.

- **Open-end questions.** They allow the child to form more elaborate and extensive answers (e.g., *How did the teacher look like?*). The interview should be structured in such a way that most information is elicited from the child's narrative answers to open-end questions.
- **Close-end questions.** They require a precisely defined answer, usually one word or a short phrase (e.g., *What color were his trousers?*). This type of questions, however, has several drawbacks and should be avoided.
- **Multiple choice questions.** They provide a limited number of alternative answers, and the child has to choose the right one. This type of questions should be strongly avoided, as it seriously limits the amount of elicited information. If such questions cannot be avoided, they must be as simple as possible and should focus on one person or object.
- **Complex questions.** These contain many auxiliary questions. Children often make errors when responding to them, as they find it difficult to understand this type of questions and scan their memory at the same time. Instead of asking complex questions, the interviewer should use simple ones, giving the child enough time to answer each of them.
- **Grammatically complex questions.** Children find this type of questions difficult to comprehend, so they should be divided into a number of simpler ones.
- **Suggestive questions.** They suggest the answer, directly or indirectly, or contain facts unknown to the interviewee. They may influence both the content of the child's memory and what the child says, so they should be avoided at any cost.

The general rule is that questions must not suggest answers to the interviewed child and, most importantly, should be adjusted to the child's developmental stage. The cognitive interview is not based on questions prepared in advance. On the contrary, questions must be constantly adjusted to the process of recalling information.

Asking questions is associated with **activating imaginative pictures (or representations)** in the interviewee's mind. Asking a question makes the child use an imaginative picture and "read out" the required information. For example, if we request the child to describe his/her teacher, a picture of

that person will emerge in the child's consciousness. If the next question concerns the same picture (e.g., *What was he wearing?*), the child will continue to use the same picture. If, however, the next question concerns another imaginative representation (e.g., *Who else was there in the room?*), the first representation will be abandoned and the child will evoke another picture, corresponding to the question. Every single act of evoking a new representation interrupts the process of memory scanning and requires some mental effort. Therefore hopping from representation to representation may seriously reduce the amount of information recalled by the child.

Koehnken underlines repeatedly that asking questions in a way that minimizes the number of imaginative representations developed by the child is essential for a successful interview. When such a picture has already been evoked, the questions that follow should concern it directly. A new representation should not be activated before the content of the previous one has been completely exhausted.

Activating imaginative pictures begins in the phase of reinstating the psychological and environmental context of the event being the subject of the interview. The context is specific as it relates to a particular moment of the event.

Trying to evoke this representation, the interviewer should reconstruct the child's description as accurately as possible, using the original vocabulary and the child's reporting style. After reestablishing the context, the interviewer should ask the child to create a possibly clear mental picture of the place where the event occurred. This may take some time, so it is important that the interviewer remains silent when the child is trying to elaborate the picture. In some cases it is helpful to ask the child to close his/her eyes. This instruction, however, may only be used when the interviewer is certain that it is not going to make the child feel insecure.

Exploring the imaginative representations evoked by the child in the course of the interview is essential for its effectiveness. Koehnken recommends adhering to the following guidelines:

- Begin with an open-end question so that the child may provide an exhaustive answer;
- Ask the child directly to try to recall as many details as possible;
- Ask questions slowly and considerately, so that the child is able to maintain the evoked representation;
- Ask only relevant questions, do not stray from the core subject;
- Ask one question at a time;
- Continue exploring the picture with more specific questions only when the child has provided a complete answer to the first, open-end question;
- If the child does not provide any answer, repeating the question in the same form is unlikely to be effective; it is much better to rephrase it.

Numerous studies cited in literature, which have been designed to verify the effectiveness of particular techniques of the cognitive interview of children, have found that the best results are achieved using two of them: reinstating the context of the event and eliciting a spontaneous account, complemented with specific questions (in accordance with the previously described procedure).

In some cases, particularly among older children who have reached the appropriate level of cognitive development, when more details are needed concerning a particular circumstance of the event, the interviewer may try to use the **reversed sequence** mnemonic. The child may start such an account from the most recent episode or another important fact that has already been described, and then move on to describing earlier events. The interviewer may use information derived from the child's spontaneous report (noted by the interviewer), if the child suddenly stops. When applying this technique, it may be helpful to use the instruction suggested by Geiselman: *Tell me about it as if it was a movie played backward from the end* (Geiselman et. al, 1988).

As follows from literature, understanding the instruction concerning the **changed perspective** mnemonic, i.e. the instruction to report the event from the perspective of another person involved in the event, may prove difficult, especially for younger children. If, however, the interviewer tries to apply this technique, it may be helpful to use the instruction: *Tell me what your teddy-bear could see if it was there*.

The last phase of the interview is the **closure**. Koehnken emphasizes its importance for the child. When closing the interview, the interviewer should try to create a positive impression of the whole process. This may be done through thanking the child for his/her participation and effort, praising the child for the accurate, detailed report, and, first of all, expressing interest in the child's feelings and emotional state.

Research literature and practical experiences prove that the cognitive interview is unquestionably useful for forensic purposes. Obviously there is no need to apply this technique in all cases; there are situations, however, when eliciting as many details as possible from the witness is essential for solving a particular problem, for example for establishing the course of the investigated event, the witness's involvement, or a credible description of the offender.

It must be emphasized that this method may only be used by trained professionals. In some countries special training programs are conducted for police officers. For an experienced interviewer this is not a particularly time-consuming method, and eliciting a complete, detailed testimony during one interview prevents multiple interviewing.

Finally, we must not overlook the fact that this procedure, as it recognizes the child's psychological state and developmental abilities, may significantly contribute to minimizing the potential negative effects of the child's participation in legal proceedings.

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