



# Age differences in the effects of social influence on children's eyewitness performance and their metacognitive monitoring

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## Abstract

The current work investigated the effects of social influence on children's recall accuracy and metacognitive monitoring. Two studies were conducted in which 8- and 10-year-olds were confronted with postevent information in an interview situation. An interviewer (Study 1) or a confederate (Study 2) provided postevent information with two levels of assertiveness, inducing (a) a variation of conformity pressure and (b) a variation of information credibility. Afterwards, children's confidence judgments were assessed. The results revealed significant age differences in children's ability to adequately cope with variations of social influence. Although conformity pressure was especially important for the 8-year-olds, effects of informative social influence were independent of age. However, 10-year-olds were also able to act appropriately on low credibility, thereby demonstrating a more sophisticated consideration of social influence sources. Moreover, varying assertiveness also affected the quality of children's confidence judgments by improving their metacognitive differentiation skills.

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## Introduction

Many cognitive factors mediate differences in children's eyewitness reports and their suggestibility, including prior knowledge (Ornstein, Shapiro, Clubb, Follmer, & Baker-Ward, 1997) and metacognitive monitoring processes (Roebers, 2002). There is also growing consensus about the importance of social factors in memory accuracy. For example, reports by adult eyewitnesses can be contaminated when participants observe coparticipants being questioned (Wright, Self, & Justice, 2000), observe a confederate being questioned (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2004), or read the written statement of someone they believe to be another participant (Hoffman, Granhag, Kwong See, & Loftus, 2001; Walther et al., 2002).

Developmental research on children's susceptibility to natural sources of social influence on their memory reports is rare. Some research shows that children are sensitive to the social demands of an interview situation in that their performance differs as a function of, for example, personal attributes of the interviewer (Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995; Jackson & Crockenberg, 1998) or the status and/or familiarity of the interviewer (Bjorklund et al., 2000). However, such studies typically do not consider age differences in the magnitude of social influence. As a result, it remains an open question whether, and to what extent, children of varying ages differ concerning their vulnerability to the social influence of the interview situation. Studies examining conformity development using simple perception tasks (i.e., judgments of line lengths [Asch, 1956]) offer evidence that, although conformity to peers shows an inverted U-shaped development with a peak during early adolescence (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986), conformity toward adults and authority figures decreases continuously from the early elementary school years until puberty (Berndt, 1979).

In a recent study (Schwarz, Roebers, & Schneider, 2004), age differences in children's susceptibility to social influences were investigated in the context of memory reports. In that study, 8- and 10-year-olds first underwent a leading interview in which an adult confederate was present during the interview for half of the children, and the confederate answered half of the questions correctly and half incorrectly. For the other half of the children, no confederate was present. The 8-year-olds were significantly affected by leading questions and the confederate's answers, whereas the 10-year-olds were affected only by the confederate's answers. Furthermore, when children were interviewed a second time using the same questions but without a confederate present, both 8- and 10-year-olds who had been interviewed with the confederate during the first round achieved lower recall accuracy scores. Thus, although 10-year-olds were well able to resist the influence of misleading questions when the confederate was present, the confederate's incorrect answers nevertheless impaired children's subsequent memory reports (Schwarz et al., 2004).

However, in a subsequent study, there were also indications of age differences with regard to the social influence stemming from a confederate. Roebers, Schwarz, and Neumann (2005) found that 10-year-olds in a strong social influence condition (misleading questions and a confederate yielding to the wrong suggestions) did not differ significantly from those in a control condition with no confederate. In contrast, 8-year-olds in the confederate condition were significantly affected. In other words, Roebers and colleagues (2005) found an age-dependent effect of social influence, whereas Schwarz and colleagues (2004) did not. A possible reason for the divergent findings may lie in the way in which

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