Spring May 17, 2017

59. Ask versus tell: Potential confusion when child witnesses are questioned about conversations

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Children's potential confusion between "ask" and "tell" can lead to misunderstandings when child witnesses are asked to report prior conversations. The verbs distinguish both between interrogating and informing, and between requesting and commanding. Children's understanding was examined using both field (Study 1) and laboratory methods (Studies 2–4). Study 1 examined 100 5- to 12-year-olds' trial testimony in child sexual abuse cases, and found that potentially ambiguous use of ask and tell was common, typically found in yes–no questions that elicited unelaborated answers, and virtually never clarified by attorneys or child witnesses. Studies 2 to 4 examined 345 maltreated 6- to 11-year-olds' understanding of ask and tell. The results suggest that children initially comprehend telling as saying, and thus believed that asking is a form of telling. As such, they often endorsed asking as telling when asked yes–no questions, but distinguished between asking and telling when explicitly asked to choose. Their performance was impaired by movement between different use of the words. Child witnesses' characterization of their conversations can easily be misconstrued by the way in which they are questioned, leading questioners to misinterpret whether they were coached by disclosure recipients or coerced by abuse suspects.

Keywords: ask, tell, child witnesses, linguistic development, child sexual abuse

In child sexual abuse cases, children are routinely asked about their conversations with disclosure recipients and suspects (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014b). Discussions of conversations often involve the verbs "ask" and "tell." A key issue with respect to children's abuse disclosure is whether the details of their reports might have been influenced by adults. Whether the disclosure recipient merely *asked* the child questions or *told* the child what the adult believed occurred is an important distinction. With respect to children's conversations with suspects, an important issue concerns the level of coercion utilized by the suspect in accomplishing abuse or in silencing the child. A relevant distinction is

whether the suspect merely *asked* the child to engage in various behaviors or *told* the child to do. Although any sort of sexual contact with children constitutes criminal conduct, regardless of children's acquiescence, the potential use of coercion affects the severity of the alleged offense, and forms part of the narrative of how the abuse unfolded over time. Hence, potential confusion regarding whether conversations involved asking or telling is an important legal question and is addressed by this article, which both examined transcripts of 5- to 12-year-old children's testimony in 100 sexual abuse trials and questioned 345 6- to 11-year-old maltreated children about their understanding of ask and tell. In what follows, we elaborate on the legal importance of the distinction between ask and tell, review the developmental psychology research on understanding of the verbs, and discuss the importance of question type in understanding children's comprehension in legal settings.

The Legal Significance of Asking and Telling

Asking and telling can refer either to the flow of information between conversationalists or to speaker's requests for action. When referring to the flow of information, ask and tell distinguish between interrogating (asking) and informing (telling). This is referred to as epistemic use, because one is distinguishing between the person acquiring knowledge (the one who asks) and the person transmitting knowledge (the one who tells; Stephany, 1995).

Distinguishing between interrogating and informing is particularly important when children relate their prior disclosures of abuse. This is illustrated in *California v. Ortega* (2010), a criminal

case in which a 5-year-old girl accused her uncle of sexual abuse. The defense attorney argued that the allegations were the result of coaching by the child's mother. At several points during the forensic interview, the child appeared to disclose that the mother had told the child that she had been abused. For example, the child reported that after the alleged abuse occurred, "We got home and my mom says, 'Come here.' And we go to our room and *she tells me all what happened* when he was touching my private parts." During cross-examination of the forensic interviewer, the defense attorney asked, "Now, if . . . the child says to you that someone *told me to say* that I was touching that person, you know, that he was touching my private parts, a number of times, wouldn't you follow up on that?" (p. 37; emphasis added).

The child in *California v. Ortega* (2010) appeared to be revealing that her mother had coached her. However, if she was confusing ask and tell, then she could have been referring to questions her mother asked. She might report that her mother *told* her "what happened" even if she meant that her mother merely *asked* her "what happened." This confusion would apply to other aspects of the conversation as well. The child could report that the mother *told* her who, what, where, when, why, and how, even if the mother had merely asked questions. Without further clarification, it is difficult to determine if the child was disclosing coaching or questioning.

When referring to requests for action, ask and tell distinguish between polite requests (asking) and commands (telling). This is referred to as *deontic use*, because the distinction is based on obligation; one asks when the recipient's compliance is voluntary, and tells when the recipient's compliance is obligatory (Stephany, 1995).

Distinguishing between requesting and commanding is especially important when children are questioned about the methods used by the suspect to accomplish abuse or to induce silence. For example, a child confusing the terms might report that the suspect *told* her to lie down when he had in fact *asked* her to lie down, or that the suspect *told* her to keep a secret when he *asked* her to keep a secret. Of course, consent is not a defense to most child sexual abuse crimes. However, whether threats and force were used is legally relevant: It accentuates punishment (e.g., California Penal Code, 2017), and research has found that jurors are more likely to convict when force is alleged (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014a), and that male jurors consider consent a mitigating feature in cases involving alleged victims as young as 11 years old, even when instructed not to do so (Isquith, Levine, & Scheiner, 1993).

Proving child sexual abuse is complicated by its unique dynamics. According to perpetrators, they often groom and seduce children into acquiescing in abusive contact, which increases in severity over time (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). The process maintains secrecy because perpetrators are able to both identify children who are unlikely to disclose, based on their initial non-disclosure, and silence children, who feel partially responsible for the abuse because of their acquiescence in the initial, less obviously sexual behavior (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). The process also helps explain why children often do not resist contact with the perpetrator during the escalation of the abuse. However, jurors are less likely to convict when children maintained contact with the suspect after they alleged that abuse had begun (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014a).

Because of these complications, it is important to accurately characterize children's conversations with suspects. On the one hand, calling grooming and seductive methods "telling" could exaggerate force, leading jurors to misunderstand the dynamics of abuse. On the other hand, calling coercive actions "asking" could understate the use of force. Aldridge and Luchjenbroers (2011) discuss a case in which a police officer interviewing a 14-year-old girl phrased the suspect's statements as "asking" the child to perform various sexual acts, and the child initially assented but then subsequently stated that the suspect was "telling" her to do so. The authors note that they "wonder why the verb 'asked' is used which implies the child had an option and could have refused" (p. 37). Whether younger children would have recognized (and corrected) the distinction is an important question.

Understanding of Ask and Tell: From Basic to Applied Developmental Psychology

Despite the legal significance of children's understanding of the distinction between ask and tell, there is virtually nothing in the literature on child interviewing that touches on the issue. The notable exception is Walker's (2013) "linguistic perspective" on children's testimony. Walker warned that the difference between the words is "often not sorted out by children until they are anywhere from 7 to 10" (p. 34), citing Carol Chomsky's (1969) classic work on syntactic development.

Review of this work highlights the different perspectives of basic and applied research in developmental psychology. From a basic developmental perspective, one's interest is in identifying the youngest possible age at which understanding emerges, and one does so by stripping away any unnecessary complications to the task that might mask incipient understanding. Hence, if the way in which understanding is measured affects children's performance, this is a methodological flaw that should be corrected. From an applied perspective, however, the methodological flaws of developmental psychology are of interest in their own right. That is, the ways in which child witnesses may be misunderstood because of how they are questioned is a central focus of applied work.

There are several ways in which Chomsky's work has uncertain applicability to child witnesses' understanding. First, although it received some support (Chomsky, 1982; Kessel, 1970; Olds, 1968), it was also subject to criticism (Tanz, 1983; Warden, 1981). In her primary test of understanding, Chomsky (1969) gave children instructions with the words ask or tell (see also Kessel, 1970; Olds, 1968). Critics argued that this led children to interpret the sentences pragmatically rather than literally, potentially masking understanding. That is, children attempted to determine what the researcher was trying to accomplish, rather than focus on the precise words the researcher used (Tanz, 1983; Warden, 1981). Because child witnesses are questioned using the words ask and tell, rather than instructed to ask or tell, Chomsky's (1969) instruction method is of questionable ecological validity.

Second, Chomsky was solely interested in children's understanding of ask-interrogate and tell-inform. Very little research has examined children's understanding of the distinction between ask-request and tell-command (Bock & Hornsby, 1981; Makoid, 1977). Even young children appear to have good understanding. For example, Makoid (1977) found that by 5 years of age, children were adept at choosing "ask" to describe sentences using "please"

and an interrogative (e.g., "Can you. . ."), and "tell" to describe sentences simply using an imperative. Ironically, revisiting her work, Chomsky (1982) noticed that children sometimes appeared to misinterpret ask as "request politely" (p. 677). Hence, the different ways in which ask and tell are used may confuse children.

A third difficulty in Chomsky's work was that children appeared to exhibit better understanding when asked forced-choice questions, in which they were asked to choose which of two speakers was asking or telling (Tanz, 1983; Warden, 1981). Chomsky and her supporters acknowledged that this improved children's performance, which they confirmed through their own work, though they argued that difficulties still persisted with a particular syntactic form (omitted subject "wh-" clauses; for further explanation see Chomsky, 1969, 1982; Kessel, 1970). Notably, Makoid's (1977) finding that 5-year-olds understood the distinction between ask-request and tell-command included a forced-choice procedure.

From an applied perspective, the way in which children's understanding was elicited in the ask–tell research is as important as children's understanding itself. A central focus in applied developmental psychology is on how the form of the question affects children's answers. Forensic interviewers, attorneys, and others who question children have been found to rely on closed-ended questions, primarily yes–no questions (Lyon, 2014). Although much of the literature examining interviewing has focused on suggestibility, whereby children answer in accord with the biases of the interviewer, also important is the potential for ambiguity and miscommunication.

We propose that children often exhibit formal reticence, whereby they provide answers that are minimally responsive given the form of the question. When asked yes–no questions, they tend to provide unelaborated "yes" and "no" responses (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014b). When asked forced-choice questions, they tend to simply choose one of the responses, even when neither response is correct (Peterson & Grant, 2001; Rocha, Marche, & Briere, 2013). Even when they do not know the answer, they will answer yes–no and forced-choice questions rather than give "don't know" responses (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996; Poole & Lindsay, 2001; Rudy & Goodman, 1991).

From a suggestibility perspective, the primary problem with yes–no questions is that they suggest information, eliciting a "yes" bias. However, there is surprisingly little evidence of a yes bias among children (Brady, Poole, Warren, & Jones, 1999; Greenhoot, Ornstein, Gordon, & Baker-Ward, 1999), and at an early age, children develop a no bias when the content is clearly incomprehensible, negative, or self-incriminating (Evans & Lee, 2013; Fritzley & Lee, 2003; Fritzley, Lindsay, & Lee, 2013; Peterson & Biggs, 1997).

From the perspective of formal reticence, a primary danger of yes–no, forced-choice, and other closed-ended questions is that children's unelaborated answers may be underinformative. Oftentimes the correct answer to a yes–no or forced-choice question is "neither" or "both," but children's failure to go beyond the form of the question in providing an answer makes such answers rare. Several recent studies have illustrated these problems. Young children will provide unelaborated responses to yes–no and forced-choice questions about clothing placement when placement is intermediate, thus failing to communicate that the clothes are partially on and partially off (Stolzenberg, McWilliams, & Lyon, 2017). Children will provide unelaborated yes–no responses to questions about the proximity of events to their birthday, and unelaborated responses to forced-choice questions whether events are before or after their birthday, thus failing to communicate which birthday they are using as a landmark (McWilliams, Lyon, & Quas, 2016). Children will provide unelaborated yes–no responses to "do you know/remember" questions with an embedded yes–no question (e.g., "Do you remember if it was dark?"), thus failing to communicate if they are answering the explicit question (whether they remember) or the implicit question (whether it was dark; Ahern, Stolzenberg, McWilliams, & Lyon, 2017).

This article explores how children's answers to ask and tell may be underinformative. To anticipate, we develop the argument that children initially understand "tell" as synonymous with saying, and "ask" as a type of telling, which leads them to endorse ask-interrogate and ask-request as *both* asking and telling. Combined with formal reticence, this understanding of ask and tell leads to a different pattern of responding to yes–no and forced-choice questions. Children will often respond "yes" to yes–no questions asking whether ask-interrogate and ask-request statements are telling. When given a forced-choice question, however, children will appropriately choose "ask" when asked whether ask-interrogate and ask-request statements are asking or telling, because a "both" response to a forced-choice question is not part of the repertoire of the reticent child. This leads to potential confusion when children are asked yes–no questions about conversations.

The Current Investigation

The present investigation assessed how allegedly maltreated children are questioned about asking and telling in court in Study 1, and tested maltreated children's understanding of asking and telling utilizing various question types in Studies 2 to 4. In Study 1, we identified all uses of ask and tell in 100 transcripts of 5- to 12-year-olds testifying about sexual abuse. We analyzed whether the words were typically used by the attorneys or mentioned by children, what sort of question types contained the words, and under what conditions use of the terms was potentially ambiguous (such that the child might be confusing ask and tell). We examined whether ambiguous references were clarified, either by questions that inquired into the content of the conversation or by questions that explicitly asked whether ask or tell was more appropriate. We predicted that there would be substantial potentially ambiguous use of ask and tell, largely in yes–no questions with unelaborated "yes" and "no" answers, and that there would be little effort to clarify potential ambiguities. In Studies 2 to 4, we examined maltreated children's comprehension of ask and tell when presented with brief scenarios depicting conversations. We examined the extent to which the kinds of questioning typical in the courtroom would likely lead to confusion, and whether children's use of ask and tell could be clarified through improved questioning. Specifically, we compared children's performance across yes–no and forced-choice questions, and considered whether presenting children with different uses of asking and telling (ask-interrogate/tell-inform vs. ask-request/tell-command) undermined their apparent understanding.

Study 1

Method

One hundred cases of alleged felony sexual abuse in which 5- to 12-year-olds testified (*M* age at trial = 9 years old, *SD* = 1.89 years) were examined. We obtained information on all felony sexual abuse charges under Section 288 of the California Penal Code (2017; sexual abuse of a child under 14 years of age) filed in Los Angeles County from January 2, 1997, to November 20, 2001, and identified the 309 cases that went to trial: 82% convictions (*N* = 253), 17% acquittals (*N* = 51), and 1% mistrials (*N* = 5; additional information about the full sample can be found in Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014b). We were able to obtain transcripts of 235 children's testimony. For the current investigation, we analyzed the 100 cases with the youngest child witnesses.

We flagged all occasions in which the words "ask" or "tell" (or their derivatives) were spoken by the attorney or child, and referred to prior conversations (thus excluding references to the child's current testimony, including attorneys or judges explaining that they would "ask" questions or asking children to "tell" information). We then coded for who used the verb (attorney/child/both), the content, question type, and response type. For content, the question–answer pair was categorized into either disclosure of abuse (e.g., "Did you ever tell your sister what had happened?"), conversations with the suspect during the abuse event (e.g., "He told me to take off my swimming suit"), or other conversations. For question type, all attorney questions were categorized as "wh-" (e.g., "What did you tell your sister?"); yes–no ("Did you tell anybody?"), forced-choice (e.g., "Was it the same day that your mom asked you or was it a different day?"), suggestive (either a tag or negative term question; e.g., "Isn't that the only thing you told her?"), or unclassifiable/not-a-question. For response type, children's responses were coded as unelaborated response to yes–no or forced-choice (e.g., "no"), elaborated response to yes–no or forced-choice (e.g., "No, but my sister asked me once"), open response (e.g., "I told her that he was doing something wrong to me"), or do-not-know/request-for-clarification (e.g., "I don't know what you mean"). We also noted whether a single question–answer pair contained different uses of the words (e.g., both ask-interrogate and tell-command).

To determine whether the use of the word was potentially ambiguous, we assessed whether the statement was comprehensible and grammatical were one to exchange ask with tell or vice versa (e.g., "Did he tell you?" is potentially ambiguous because it can be reworded as "Did he ask you?"). We then assessed whether potentially ambiguous uses were followed up with questions or responses that would disambiguate use of ask and tell, either by requests for the content of the conversation in question (e.g., "What did he say?") or by an explicit request to characterize a statement as asking or telling. Two research assistants coded all question–answer pairs for each variable. To assess reliability, they independently coded 20% of the sample; coders reached a reliability of κ = .80 or above on all coding schemes.

Results

Examination of the 100 transcripts revealed 3,844 question–answer pairs containing ask or tell (or both) in reference to prior conversations. Fifty percent (*n* = 1,935) of the references were about disclosures of abuse. The other half were references to conversations the child had with others (*n* = 1,909), about a third of them (35%) with the suspect (*n* = 664). Of the conversations with the perpetrator, 69% (*n* = 459) occurred during the alleged abuse.

Of the question–answer pairs, 50% (*n* = 1,936) were identified as potentially ambiguous. Most of the ambiguous references were in attorneys' questions (76%, *n* = 1,467), fewer ambiguous references occurred in children's responses (17%, *n* = 334), and it was rare for an ambiguous reference to be present in both attorney question and child response (7%, *n* = 135).

Most ambiguous questions were yes–no (65%, *n* = 1,258), with "wh-" (30%, *n* = 574) questions occurring less frequently. Forced-choice questions were rare (2%, *n* = 37). The remaining 3% (*n* = 67) were unclassifiable or did not constitute questions. Children tended to answer attorney's questions with one-word, unelaborated responses (yes, no, or a forced-choice option; 53%, *n* = 1,026); it was less common for children to give elaborated answers either to an open-ended prompt (27%, *n* = 522) or a yes–no or forced-choice question (11%, *n* = 205). Children rarely indicated a lack of knowledge or confusion (7%, *n* = 138).

Clarifications were rare. Attorney's ambiguous uses were clarified by children's responses in 4% (*n* = 62) of question–answer pairs and by subsequent attorney questions in 4% (*n* = 53) of question–answer pairs. Children's spontaneous ambiguous references were clarified by their own subsequent answers in only one question–answer pair, and by attorneys asking for clarification in 4% (*n* = 17) of cases. When attorneys sought clarification (*n* = 70), they typically did so by asking about the content of the conversations, usually with "wh-" questions (80%, *n* = 56; e.g., "What did he say?"), less often they asked yes–no questions (17%, *n* = 12; e.g., "Do you remember what you told him?"). In only two cases did attorneys use a forced-choice question to explicitly ask which word was more appropriate (e.g., "When he rubbed your chest did you ask him to stop or tell him not to?").

Discussion

The purpose of Study 1 was to identify potentially ambiguous uses of ask and tell in children's testimony about prior conversations. If children have difficulty in distinguishing between ask and tell, then their testimony about disclosures of abuse and interactions with suspects may be misunderstood. We defined potentially ambiguous as use in which substitution of ask for tell or tell for ask would make sense. If an attorney used the words in a potentially ambiguous manner, then a child who did not understand the difference between ask and tell or confused them in some way would not be able to deduce the meaning from the question. For example, if the mother in fact asked the child what happened, but the attorney's question was "Did your mother tell you what happened?" the child who confused ask and tell would answer "yes" and appear to have been coached. In turn, if the child used the word in a potentially ambiguous manner, then the attorney would be similarly hampered in understanding.

We found that the words were used frequently to ask about prior conversations and that those conversations often involved disclosures of abuse and conversations with the perpetrator. Use was potentially ambiguous in about half the cases. In most cases of

ambiguous use, only the attorney used the words, and used them in a yes–no question that led to an unelaborated "yes" or "no" response. Note that in these cases, there would be very little context within which to assess the child's understanding of the words. As a result, children's responses virtually never clarified whether ask or tell better described the conversation. Moreover, follow-up questions virtually never sought to clarify possible ambiguity. When clarification did occur, it was through asking the child to recall what was said, as opposed to characterizing the statement as asking or telling.

Study 2

Study 1 established that children might be confusing ask and tell in their testimony without that confusion being detected. Of course, we do not know whether they were in fact confused, because we do not know the actual contents of the conversations about which they were testifying. But the results demonstrate how that confusion most likely would come about: through yes–no questions. In turn, the results also suggest how such confusion might be avoided: through questions asking the child to recall the conversation. However, children sometimes spontaneously used the words ask and tell, and when they did, their use was itself often ambiguous. Therefore, even children's recall might be an imperfect means to clarify possible misunderstanding.

In Study 2, we examined how maltreated children answered questions about conversations, asking them to recall the conversation and yes–no questions about whether the conversationalists were asking or telling. We created short vignettes in which a parent or child asked or told. In the epistemic vignettes, one character asked a question seeking information (ask-interrogate) and the other character answered it (tell-inform). In the deontic vignettes, one character either requested action (ask-request), using the word "please" in an interrogative statement, or demanded it (tell-command), using the words "you must" in a declarative statement. We asked children to repeat the target conversationalists' statement, and then asked a yes–no question about whether the target conversationalist had asked or told. Because of their participation in court, we recruited maltreated children. We tested children from 8 to 11 years old, based on claims in the literature that children's understanding of ask and tell develops over this age range (Walker, 2013), as well as the results of pilot testing.

We treated this study as exploratory, because of the uncertain applicability of prior research on children's understanding of ask and tell to their ability to recall statements and answer yes–no questions using the terms. The results would enable us to determine whether children could recall statements but nevertheless have difficulty in accepting or rejecting ask and tell as describing those statements, and if they did exhibit difficulty, whether it constituted a global failure to distinguish between ask and tell or a more specific pattern.

Method

Participants. Ninety-six maltreated 8- to 11-year-olds participated. The sample included 24 8-year-olds ($M = 8$ years 6 months [8–6], $SD = 3.88$, range = 8–0 to 8–11; 12 males), 23 9-year-olds ($M = 9$–6, $SD = 3.91$, range = 9–0 to 9–11; 12 males), 25 10-year-olds ($M = 10$–5, $SD = 3.93$, range = 10–0 to 10–11; 12 males), and 24 11-year-olds ($M = 11$–6, $SD = 2.93$, range = 11–1 to 11–11;13 males). Sixty-seven percent of the children were Latino, 21% were African American, 8% were mixed race, 2% were Caucasian, and 2% were Asian.

Because children were not in the legal custody of their parents because of child maltreatment, consent for their participation was elicited from the Presiding Judge of Juvenile Court. Children were ineligible if they were awaiting adjudication or contested disposition hearing on the date of testing (because they might be asked to testify) or if interpreter services were provided to their family and they were incapable of communicating with the researchers in English. In addition, written assent was obtained from all participants.

Procedure. An experimenter read each child a series of illustrated scenarios depicting conversations between parents and children. For each scenario, the experimenter asked two questions. Because the scenarios were very brief, the procedure took approximately 13 minutes. To familiarize children with the need to listen carefully to the scenarios and questions, and to teach them that their task was to assess the appropriateness of the words used, the experimenter read two practice scenarios involving the use of the words give and take. The first scenario depicted a mother giving a child an apple, and the experimenter narrated, "The Mommy comes home from work and says, 'Here's an apple.' The boy says, 'Okay.'" The experimenter first asked, "What did the mommy do?" If the child failed to understand the scenario, the experimenter reread the script and asked the question again. Once the child demonstrated comprehension of the scenario, the experimenter asked, "Did the mommy *give* the boy an apple?" The second scenario depicted a father receiving a banana from his daughter; the experimenter read, "A girl comes home from school and says 'Here's a banana.' The daddy says 'Okay.'" The key question was "Did the daddy *give* the girl a banana?" Note that in order to exhibit comprehension, the child had to answer "yes" and then "no." One child (male, 11-year-old) was eliminated because of his failure to complete the practice questions. The experimenter explained that for the upcoming scenarios, she wanted to know whether the conversational partners were asking or telling. She noted that sometimes the people would be "telling" and sometimes they would be "asking."

Each child was read 16 scenarios, four of each type: ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, and tell-command. After the first eight scenarios, the experimenter briefly reiterated the instructions, again emphasizing that sometimes the people were telling and sometimes they were asking. The characters included a mother (mommy), a father (daddy), a boy, and a girl. To make the task engaging for children, and to reduce the likelihood of unthinking responses, each of the scenarios involved a different item (puppy, soccer ball, cards, bird, piano, crayons, chalk, jump rope, kitten, drums, blocks, skateboard, violin, paint, computer, and lizard). The ask-interrogate and tell-inform scenarios were of the following form: "The Mommy said, 'When I was at work, did you play with the puppy?' The boy said, 'Yes.'" Hence, the mother was asking and the boy was telling. The questions either asked about the speaker asking the question or the speaker answering the question. The ask-request scenarios took this form: "The Mommy said, 'Now that I'm home, can we *please* play with the puppy?' The boy said 'Okay'" and the tell-command scenarios took this form: "The Mommy said, 'Now that I'm home, you *must* play with the puppy.'

The boy said 'Okay.'" Hence, the mother in the requesting scenario was asking and in the commanding scenario was telling. The questions asked about the speaker issuing the request or the command.

After each of the 16 scenarios, participants were asked two questions: (a) recall: "What did the [target speaker] say?" and (b) yes–no: "Did the [target speaker] ask/tell?" For each type of scenario, children were asked two ask questions and two tell questions. For each of the 16 scenarios, the use of ask and tell in follow-up yes–no questions was fully counterbalanced, as was the queried speaker (parent/child).

Following the ask–tell scenarios, the Picture Vocabulary Scale of the Woodcock-Johnson Test of Cognitive Ability (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989, 1990) was administered, which assess children's receptive vocabulary. Because of time constraints, one child was not administered the scale.

Coding. We transcribed children's responses to the recall question, and two research assistants coded the responses for accuracy. Accuracy was defined as verbatim recall or a correct paraphrase that preserved the ask–tell relationship of the speaker and recipient. We also coded for whether children used terms that would clarify whether the target speaker was interrogating (use of question terms, i.e., "did" or "if"), requesting (i.e., use of "can" or "please"), or commanding (use of "must" or "have to"). When children did not use any of these terms, their statement was coded as consistent with informing. Finally, we noted whether children explicitly used the words ask or tell and whether their use was correct. To assess reliability, the coders independently coded 20% of the transcripts, and all variables had a minimum reliability of $\kappa = .80$.

Children's yes–no responses were coded as accurate or inaccurate. Accuracy ranged from 0 to 16 correct, with scores ranging from 0 to 4 for scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and 0 to 2 for prompt ("Did the [mommy, daddy, boy, girl] ask?"/"Did the [mommy, daddy, boy, girl] tell?") within each scenario type.

Results

We examined children's accuracy to the recall ("What did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] say?") and yes–no questions ("Did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] ask/tell?") by scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request and tell-command), age, and vocabulary. For the yes–no questions, we considered whether children were asked if the speakers asked or told. Preliminary analyses revealed no effects attributable to participants' gender or the identity of the speaker (adult vs. child), and these factors were omitted in subsequent analyses.

Children's performance on the vocabulary task revealed that the average age-normed vocabulary score was 94.32 ($SD = 23.6$; $n = 95$), such that the average child performed at the level of a typical child 7 years 10 months old (7–10; 8-year-olds: $M = 6$–9, $SD = 20.03$; 9-year-olds: $M = 7$–8, $SD = 21.26$; 10-year-olds: $M = 7$–11, $SD = 23.65$; 11-year-olds: $M = 9$–1, $SD = 21.83$).

Recall performance. Children had little difficulty in quoting the target speakers (ask-interrogate proportion correct, $M = .80$, $SD = .35$; tell-inform, $M = .88$, $SD = .30$; ask-request, $M = .84$, $SD = .32$; tell-command, $M = .85$, $SD = .32$). In order to examine scenario type differences and the effects of age and vocabulary, we conducted a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on children's accuracy on the free recall questions, with age in years as a between-subjects factor, scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) as a within-subjects factor, and vocabulary score as a covariate. Only vocabulary score predicted free recall performance, $F(1, 92) = 9.57$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, 95% CI [.01, .22].

Most of children's recall responses included language suggesting whether the target conversationalist was interrogating (82%), informing (86%), requesting (82%), or commanding (77%). However, children's free recall only infrequently used ask or tell explicitly (ask-interrogate, 22%; tell-inform, 19%; ask-request, 22%; tell-command, 19%). When they used the terms, they tended to use them correctly (ask-interrogate, 86%; tell-inform, 95%; ask-request, 92%; tell-command, 91%). Notably, the majority of incorrect uses of ask or tell were inappropriate uses of tell for ask-interrogate (e.g., "The mom told the boy, 'When I was at work did you play with the violin?'").

Yes–no performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy on the yes–no questions with age in years as a between-subject variable, and scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and prompt (ask or tell) as within-subjects variables, with vocabulary scores as a covariate. Prompt referred to whether the child was asked about the verb "ask" or the verb "tell." There was a main effect for prompt, $F(1, 90) = 5.42$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, 95% CI [.001, .17], reflecting better performance on ask prompts ($M = .78$, $SD = .16$) than on tell prompts ($M = .62$, $SD = .19$), which was qualified by an interaction between prompt and scenario type, $F(3, 88) = 12.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .60$, 95% CI [.13, .42]. The interaction is depicted in Figure 1. Examination of the means revealed that children performed better on the ask prompts except with respect to the tell-command scenarios, in which they performed better on the tell prompts. This was confirmed by post hoc repeated measures ANOVAs with a Bonferroni correction: ask-interrogate, $F(1, 95) = 136.14$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .60$, 95% CI [.46, .68]; tell-inform, $F(1, 95) = 17.47$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, 95% CI [.04, .29]; ask-request, $F(1, 95) = 21.51$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, 95% CI [.06, .32]; and tell-command, $F(1, 95) = 57.07$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .38$, 95% CI [.22, .50]. There was also a main effect for vocabulary
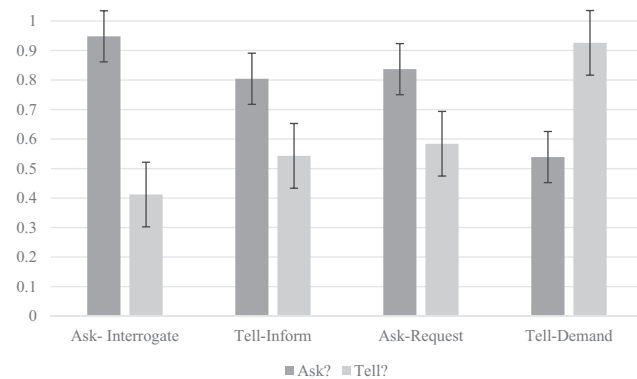

Figure 1. Proportion correct in response to each scenario type in Study 2, by whether prompt queried if target speaker had asked or told. Error bars indicate standard errors.

score, $F(1, 90) = 14.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, 95% CI [.03, .27], not surprisingly reflecting better performance by children with larger vocabularies.

Discussion

Recall. Children had little difficulty recalling the statement and typically used words that would enable an adult to determine whether the target speakers were asking or telling. However, children rarely spontaneously used the words ask and tell to describe the statements. When they did, they tended to use the words correctly, though the most common error was using "tell" to describe ask-interrogate.

Yes–no questions: Ask-interrogate. Children were near ceiling at affirming that the speakers were asking but had difficulty in denying that those speakers were telling. Children were thus often endorsing asking as both asking and telling. Note that this is similar to the most common error in spontaneous usage, and to the potential discussed in the introduction for children to describe disclosure recipients as "telling" them that abuse occurred.

Yes–no questions: Tell-inform. Children were near ceiling at denying that the speakers were asking but also frequently denied that the speakers were telling either. This was a surprising finding, because it suggests underutilization of tell rather than overuse. We suspect that children may have done so because the informers answered questions with a single word; hence, they said very little, leading children to deny that they had told. We expand on this interpretation in the General Discussion.

Yes–no questions: Ask-request and tell-command. The pattern of responding was similar across the ask-request and tell-command scenarios. Children were near ceiling at correctly affirming that statements were either asking or telling but also often endorsed asking as telling and vice versa. In other words, they endorsed requests and commands as both asking and telling.

The results are consistent with a tendency to equate telling with "saying." If children equate telling with saying, then they will endorse telling whenever a speaker says something substantive, regardless of whether it is a question or a request. It would be possible, with such an understanding, for a person to both ask and tell. Equating telling with saying does not explain children's difficulty in denying that commands were asking. Here, there seems to be a more general difficulty in distinguishing between requests and commands, one that is not explained by an overinclusive use of tell.

The results cannot be explained by a simple yes bias. If children were inclined to answer all questions "yes," then they would have endorsed all statements as both asking and telling. However, their tendency to deny that tell-informing was either asking or telling demonstrates that they were not reflexively answering "yes."

The results clearly demonstrate the difficulties that child witnesses are likely to encounter if they are asked yes–no questions utilizing ask and tell rather than asked to recount the content of conversations. To the extent that they equate asking with saying, they will endorse suggestions that disclosure recipients "told" them details that they actually only asked about. To the extent that they do not distinguish between requests and commands with respect to their use of ask and tell, they will endorse suggestions that suspects both "asked" and "told" them to perform certain acts.

Next steps. It is possible that we underestimated children's understanding of the distinction between asking and telling. First, because the informants in our tell-inform scenarios were uttering single words, which possibly led children to deny that they were telling or asking, we were unable to adequately test children's understanding of tell-inform. In Study 3, we ensured that interrogators and informants were saying the same amount.

Second, we suspected that alternating between different uses of asking and telling might impair children's performance. Part of the difficulty of distinguishing between asking and telling is that one applies different criteria depending on whether one is distinguishing between ask-interrogate and tell-inform or between ask-request and tell-command. For example, politeness matters in distinguishing between requesting and commanding, but not between interrogating and informing. In Study 3, we blocked the scenarios.

Third, we suspected that although children might endorse some statements as both asking and telling, they would nevertheless be able to distinguish between asking and telling if explicitly asked to choose between the words. Children might equate telling with saying but nevertheless recognize that "ask" more precisely applies when one is seeking information or politely requesting action. The reader will recall that children in court were virtually never asked forced-choice questions about asking and telling, whereas developmental research suggests that the approach is more sensitive to early understanding (Chomsky, 1982; Makoid, 1977), albeit with risks of miscommunication. In Study 3, we tested how children responded to forced-choice questions that required children to choose whether statements were asking or telling.

Based on the findings of Study 2 and our speculation about problems children encountered with the scenarios, we made several predictions. First, we predicted that children would again show good ability to recall the statements and include language enabling one to determine if the speaker was asking or telling. Second, we anticipated that when children spontaneously misused the words "ask" and "tell," they would predominantly do so in response to the ask-interrogate scenarios. Third, we predicted that children would equate telling with saying in response to the yes–no questions, which would impair their performance on ask-interrogate and ask-request scenarios. Fourth, we predicted that they would have general difficulty in distinguishing between asking and telling in the deontic scenarios: ask-request and tell-command. Fifth, we predicted that children would perform better on the forced-choice questions than on the yes–no questions.

Study 3

Method

Participants. One hundred twenty-one 8- to 11-year-old maltreated children participated. The sample included 31 8-year-olds ($M = 8$–6, $SD = 2.96$, range $= 8$–1 to 8–11; 16 males), 31 9-year-olds ($M = 9$–6, $SD = 3.82$, range $= 9$–0 to 9–11; 15 males), 28 10-year-olds ($M = 10$–5, $SD = 2.97$, range $= 10$–0 to 10–11; 15 males), and 31 11-year-olds ($M = 11$–5, $SD = 4.75$, range $= 11$–0 to 11–11; 14 males). Sixty-two percent of the sample was Latino, 29% was African American, 6% was Caucasian, and 3% was biracial or other. Every child passed the practice comprehension questions. Children were not eligible to participate if they had participated in Study 2.

Procedure. The procedure for Study 3 was identical to Study 2, with three exceptions. First, all the scenarios were rewritten so that they constituted multiword utterances by a single speaker. For example, whereas in Study 2 an informant answered "yes" to the question "When I was at work, did you play with the puppy?" the informant in Study 3 stated, "When you were at work I played with the puppy." This change would ensure that children who equated telling with saying would not deny that a character who informed was telling simply because she said little.

Second, the scenarios were blocked so that children heard eight epistemic scenarios about interrogating/informing and eight deontic scenarios about requesting/commanding, with the order counterbalanced between children. This change would reduce potential confusion between epistemic and deontic references to asking and telling. Third, half of the subjects were asked forced-choice questions. For example, whereas children in the yes–no condition were asked "Did the Mommy tell?" children in the forced-choice condition were asked "Did the Mommy ask or tell?" Whether ask or tell was mentioned first was counterbalanced. This would enable us to determine whether children would exhibit understanding that asking or telling more appropriately describe statements, even if they might believe that telling is synonymous with saying. To assess reliability, the coders independently coded 20% of the transcripts, and all variables had a minimum reliability of $\kappa = .80$.

Results

We examined the accuracy of children's responses to the recall, yes–no questions ("What did [the mommy/daddy/boy/girl] say?" and "Did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] ask/tell?") and forced-choice questions ("Did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] ask/tell or tell/ask?") by scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request and tell-command), age, and vocabulary score. For the yes–no questions, we considered whether children were asked if the characters had asked or told, and for the forced-choice questions, we considered if the question mentioned ask or tell first. We then compared children's accuracy on the yes–no and forced-choice questions. Preliminary analyses revealed no effects attributable to participants' gender or the identity of the speaker (adult vs. child), and these factors were omitted in subsequent analyses.

The average vocabulary score (Woodcock-Johnson) was 92.52 ($SD = 22.49$, $n = 115$), such that the average child performed at the level of a typical child 7 years 9 months (7–9), quite similar to children from Study 2 (8-year-olds: $M = 6$–9, $SD = 23.14$; 9-year-olds: $M = 7$–2, $SD = 20.32$; 10-year-olds: $M = 8$–5, $SD = 17.02$; 11-year-olds: $M = 8$–8, $SD = 20.86$).

Recall performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy on the free recall questions with age in years as a between-subjects factor, scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) as a within-subjects factor, and vocabulary score (age equivalent Woodcock-Johnson score) as a covariate. Scenario type was significant, $F(3, 108) = 39.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .52$, 95% CI [.38, .61]; children were significantly less accurate in recalling the ask-interrogate prompt when compared with the ask-request, tell-inform, and tell-command prompts (ask-interrogate, $M = .73$, $SD = .13$; tell-inform, $M = .97$, $SD = .16$; ask-request, $M = .96$, $SD = .17$; tell-command, $M = .95$, $SD = .18$).

Similar to Study 2, when children responded correctly, they almost always used language that implied asking (ask-interrogate, 99%, ask-request, 100%) or telling (tell-inform, 100%, tell-command, 99%). On the other hand, children rarely explicitly used the terms ask and tell (ask-interrogate, 11%; tell-inform, 8%; ask-request, 9%; tell-command, 9%). When they did, they were usually correct (ask-interrogate, 73%; tell-inform, 98%; ask-request, 97%; tell-command, 97%), with almost all of the errors using "tell" for ask-interrogate.

Yes–no performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy on the yes–no questions with age in years as a between-subject variable, and scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and prompt (ask or tell) as within-subjects variables, with vocabulary scores as a covariate. There was a significant interaction between prompt and scenario type, $F(3, 49) = 2.91$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, 95% CI [.001, .30], which is depicted in Figure 2. Examination of the means showed accuracies were lower for tell prompts for the ask-interrogate and ask-request scenarios, so that children overendorsed telling. This was confirmed by post hoc repeated measures ANOVAs with a Bonferroni correction: ask-interrogate, $F(1, 59) = 15.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, 95% CI [.06, .38]; ask-request, $F(1, 59) = 27.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$, 95% CI [.14, 48]. There was also a main effect for vocabulary scores, $F(1, 51) = 7.15$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, 95% CI [.007, .29]; children with higher scores did better.

Forced-choice performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy on the forced-choice questions with age in years as a between-subjects variable, and scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and prompt (ask mentioned first or tell mentioned first) as within-subjects variables, with vocabulary scores as a covariate. There was a two-way interaction between prompt and scenario type, $F(3, 50) = 4.55$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, 95% CI [.02, .36], and a three-way interaction among prompt, scenario type, and vocabulary, $F(3, 50) = 4.17$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, 95% CI [.01, .35]. There was also a main effect of vocabulary, $F(1, 52) = 14.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$, 95% CI [.05, .39]. In order to interpret the interactions, we plotted children's performance on prompt and scenario type separately for children with low or high vocabulary scores, using a median split. The results are depicted in Figure 3. Examination of the means suggested that children with poorer vocabulary
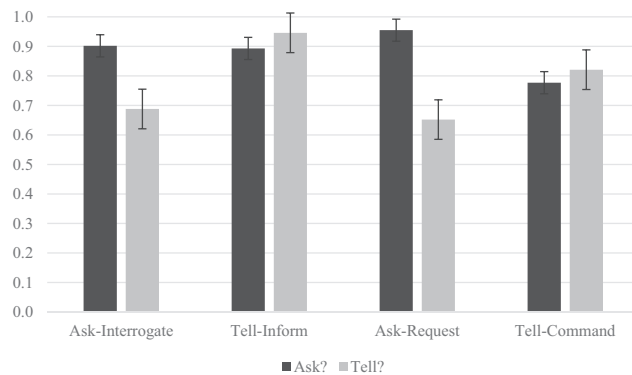
Figure 2. Proportion correct in response to each scenario type for yes–no questions in Study 3, by whether prompt queried if target speaker had asked or told. Error bars indicate standard errors.
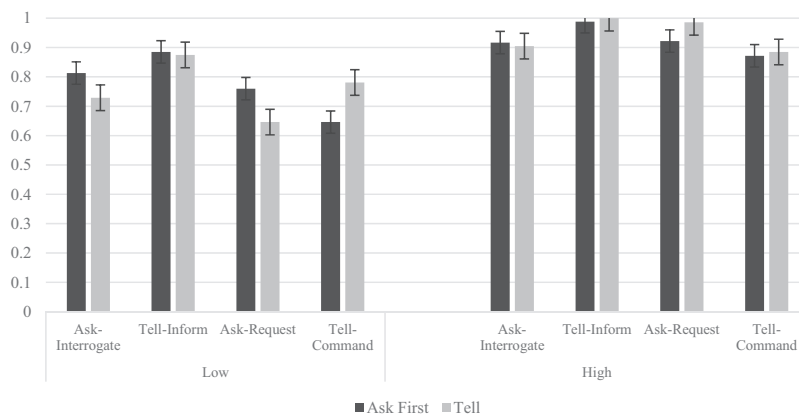
Figure 3. Proportion correct in response to each scenario type for forced-choice questions in Study 3, by whether question initially mentioned ask or tell. Children with low and high vocabulary scores are graphed separately. Error bars indicate standard errors.

showed some tendency to choose the first mentioned response, such that they performed better on the scenarios when the correct answer was mentioned first. However, the differences were small, and post hoc tests with a Bonferroni correction did not reveal any significant differences between the ask-first prompts and the tell-first prompts.

Yes–no versus forced-choice performance. To compare children's performance across yes–no and forced-choice questions, we calculated percentage accuracies for the different scenario types, collapsing across prompt types (ask–tell for the yes–no questions and ask-first/tell-first for the forced-choice questions). We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy with question type (yes–no or forced-choice) and age in years as between-subjects variables, and scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) as a within-subject variable, with vocabulary scores as a covariate. Question type missed significance, $F(1, 106) = 3.62$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 95% CI [.001, .12]. Children's forced-choice performance ($M = .87$, $SD = .17$) was not significantly higher than their yes–no performance ($M = .79$, $SD = .23$).

Discussion

Recall. As we predicted, children again showed good ability to repeat the statements and to do so using language that suggested whether the speakers were asking or telling. However, children were poorer at accurately repeating the ask-interrogate questions, and as in Study 2, when they spontaneously used the terms ask and tell, were most likely to err by calling asking telling in the ask-interrogate scenarios. This suggests that even when children are merely trying to repeat questions seeking information, their statements may cause confusion.

Yes–no questions: Ask-interrogate and tell-inform. Consistent with our prediction, children exhibited good ability to recognize asking as such, but had some difficulty in denying that the speakers who asked were also telling. With respect to tell-inform, presented with scenarios in which speakers uttered more than one word, children were proficient at correctly labeling informants as telling and not asking. These findings are consistent with understanding telling as saying.

Yes–no questions: Ask-request and tell-command. Like Study 2, children continued to have difficulty denying that requests were telling. However, they were quite good at endorsing commands as telling and not asking. Again, the findings appear most consistent with the understanding that telling equals saying.

Forced-choice questions. When forced to choose between asking and telling, children no longer exhibited a tendency to call ask-interrogate and ask-requests telling. Although children with less developed vocabularies showed some evidence of a first-response bias, there were no tendencies to mislabel asking as telling or vice versa.

The results are consistent with a good understanding of ask and an overinclusive understanding of tell. When children are asked yes-no questions about asking, they often endorse them as telling because they view telling as synonymous with saying. When they are given forced-choice questions about asking, they recognize that the word ask better describes the statement, as it is more precise. They appear to believe that asking is a type of telling.

Yes–no versus forced-choice. Although we could not confirm the superiority of forced-choice questions, and found some evidence of a response-bias among the children with poorer vocabularies, the marginal results suggested that they might reveal understanding among younger children.

In sum, the results amplified many of the findings of Study 2, especially with respect to children's difficulty in correctly using the word tell to describe ask-interrogating and ask-requesting. Moreover, the problems reoccurred when children were asked yes–no questions, but not forced-choice questions, suggesting that children equate telling with saying but recognize that asking is a type of telling.

Next steps. We designed Study 4 to answer questions remaining from Study 3. We blocked the ask-interrogate/tell-inform and ask-request/tell-command scenarios in Study 3 to minimize confusion between the two types of scenarios. Study 4 directly compared children's performance when scenarios were blocked and mixed. The question is not merely methodological; in trials, children are asked a mixture of questions, and therefore if mixing the questions impairs performance, this suggests that children's trial performance will suffer. Second, because children's overall per-

formance in Study 3 was often near ceiling across scenario types, we tested a younger group of children to determine if forced-choice questions would exhibit clear superiority over yes–no questions. In addition to expecting to see patterns of results similar to Study 2 and Study 3, we predicted that children would perform better when the scenarios were blocked and when children were asked forced-choice rather than yes–no questions.

Study 4

Method

Participants. One-hundred twenty-eight 6- to 9-year-old maltreated children participated. The sample included 32 6-year-olds ($M = 6$–6, $SD = 3.60$, range = 6–0 to 6–11; 15 males), 34 7-year-olds ($M = 7$–5, $SD = 3.94$, range = 7–0 to 7–11; 17 males), 30 8-year-olds ($M = 8$–5, $SD = 4.07$, range = 8–0 to 8–11; 16 males), and 32 9-year-olds ($M = 9$–6, $SD = 3.86$; range = 9–0 to 9–11; 17 males). Four additional children were recruited but removed from the sample after failing the practice question (two males, two 6-year-olds, one 9-year-old, and one 10-year-old). Children were not eligible to participate if they had participated in Study 2 or Study 3.

Procedure. The procedure for Study 4 was identical to Studies 2 and 3, with three exceptions. First, we tested younger children in order to test whether forced-choice questions might be more sensitive to incipient understanding than yes–no questions. Second, we tested half of the children with the scenarios blocked (separating epistemic ask-interrogate/tell-inform from deontic ask-request/tell-command scenarios) and half with the scenarios mixed.

Results

Our analysis plan largely mirrored Studies 2 and 3. First, we examined the accuracy of children's responses to the recall, yes–no questions ("What did [the mommy/daddy/boy/girl] say?" and "Did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] ask/tell?") and forced-choice questions ("Did the [mommy/daddy/boy/girl] ask/tell or tell/ask?") by scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request and tell-command), age, condition (mixed, blocked), and vocabulary. We then compared children's accuracy on the yes–no and forced-choice questions. Preliminary analyses revealed no effects attributable to participants' gender or the identity of the speaker (adult vs. child), and these factors were omitted in subsequent analyses. The average score for vocabulary (Woodcock-Johnson) was 79.91 ($SD = 24.249$, $n = 151$) such that the average child performed at the level of a typical child at 6 years 8 months (6–8; 6-year-olds: $M = 5$–10, $SD = 21.13$; 7-year-olds: $M = 6$–0, $SD = 20.34$; 8-year-olds: $M = 7$–3, $SD = 20.13$; 9-year-olds: $M = 7$–6, $SD = 23.54$).

Recall performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy to the free recall prompts with scenario type as a within-subjects factor, age in years and condition (mixed, blocked) as between-subjects factors, and vocabulary score as a covariate. Only the covariate emerged as significant, $F(1, 120) = 30.05$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 95% CI [.09, .32], indicating that children's language scores positively predicted their free recall performance. As in Studies 2 and 3, children's recall performance

revealed a high level of accuracy (interrogating, $M = .85$, $SD = .31$; informing, $M = .87$, $SD = .30$; requesting, $M = .87$, $SD = .27$; commanding, $M = .84$, $SD = .30$). Also similar to Studies 2 and 3, when recalling the prompts, children rarely explicitly used the terms ask and tell (interrogating, 13%; Informing, 8%; Requesting, 14%; Commanding, 2%); when they did, all uses of ask and tell were correct.

Yes–no performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy to the yes–no questions with scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and prompt (ask mentioned first or tell mentioned first) as within-subjects variables, age in years and condition (mixed, blocked) entered as between-subject variables, and vocabulary score entered as a covariate. A main effect of condition emerged; children in the blocked condition ($M = .61$, $SD = .24$) were significantly more accurate than children in the mixed condition ($M = .38$, $SD = .24$), $F(1, 58) = 31.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .35$, 95% CI [.16, .50]. In addition, the covariate was significant, $F(1, 58) = 6.83$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, 95% CI [.005, .26], such that children's language abilities positively predicted their accuracy. No significant differences of age, type, or prompt emerged.

Forced-choice performance. We conducted a repeated measures MANOVA on children's accuracy to the forced-choice questions with scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) and prompt (ask mentioned first or tell mentioned first) entered as within-subjects variables, age in years and condition (mixed, blocked) entered as between-subject variables, and vocabulary score entered as a covariate. There was a significant main effect of condition, $F(1, 55) = 69.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$, 95% CI [.37, .67], children in the blocked condition ($M = .78$, $SD = .24$) were significantly more accurate than children in the mixed condition ($M = .45$, $SD = .24$). There was also a significant two-way interaction of Type × Prompt, $F(3, 53) = 3.43$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, 95% CI [.001, .31]. Examination of the means suggested that children exhibited a slight first-response bias, such that their performance was sometimes better when the correct response was first; however, none of the individual comparisons were significant.

Yes–no versus forced-choice performance. To compare children's performance across yes–no and forced-choice questions, we calculated percentage accuracies for the different scenario types, collapsing across ask–tell prompts for the yes–no questions and across ask first–tell first prompts for the forced-choice questions. We conducted a MANOVA on children's responses with question type (yes–no or forced-choice), condition (mixed or blocked) and age in years as between-subject variables, and scenario type (ask-interrogate, tell-inform, ask-request, tell-command) as a within-subject variables, with vocabulary scores as a covariate. Main effects of question type, $F(1, 106) = 13.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, 95% CI [.02, .23], and condition, $F(1, 106) = 85.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$, 95% CI [.31, .55], emerged as significant. Children performed significantly better on the forced-choice questions ($M = .62$, $SD = .23$) than on the yes–no questions ($M = .50$, $SD = .19$). Only forced-choice performance was significantly above chance (50% correct), $t(62) = 4.54$, $p < .001$, whereas the yes–no group was at chance. Similarly, children did better on the blocked condition ($M = .69$, $SD = .20$) than on the mixed condition ($M = .42$, $SD = .13$). Again, only the blocked condition was above chance, $t(65) = 7.80$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Recall. Children in this study, albeit younger than in Studies 2 and 3, performed similarly in recalling the words used by the speakers. The fact that there were no spontaneous incorrect uses of tell was surprising, but as in the previous studies, children's use of the word at all was uncommon.

Yes–no and forced-choice questions. Our two predictions were confirmed. First, children performed better when the scenarios were blocked so that epistemic scenarios (ask-interrogate and tell-inform) and deontic scenarios (ask-request and tell-command) were separated. This supports the proposition that contributing to children's difficulty in distinguishing between ask and tell is the fact that the terms are sometimes used to talk about flow of information and sometimes used to talk about obligations.

Second, children performed better on the forced-choice questions than on the yes–no questions. This supports the greater sensitivity of forced-choice questions to children's ability to distinguish between asking and telling. Study 3 found no significant difference between forced-choice and yes–no performance, whereas this study did so with a younger group of children. However, we failed to find some of the patterns of responding that we found in Studies 2 and 3. For example, children's equation of telling with saying did not emerge from the yes–no results. Rather, children's performance appeared random.

General Discussion

The goal of this research was to assess the quality of questions asked of child witnesses about conversations using the words ask and tell. A central component of children's credibility when testifying about sexual abuse concerns their conversations with disclosure recipients and with suspects (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014b). If children state that abuse recipients merely asked them what occurred, this supports their truthfulness, but if they state that recipients told them what occurred, this suggests coaching. If children characterize suspect's inducements to sexual abuse as asking, this suggests that force was lacking, whereas if children characterize those inducements as telling, this suggests coercion. Hence, confusion between the words can lead to serious misinterpretation of children's reports.

In Study 1, we examined how often the words ask and tell are potentially ambiguous when they occur in children's testimony about sexual abuse. We found that potential ambiguity was common, particularly in attorneys' questions. Those questions were usually yes–no in form, and children's answers tended to be unelaborated yes and no responses. Potential ambiguities were rarely resolved, but when they were, the child was asked to recount what was said. In only two cases were children asked forced-choice questions to clarify whether ask or tell was more appropriate. Of course, because this was an observational study, we could not determine if the words had in fact been confused.

Studies 2 to 4, testing 6- to 11-year-old maltreated children, enabled us to determine the extent to which children's understanding of ask and tell is likely to lead to confusion when they are questioned about conversations. In each study, children were proficient at recalling statements such that one could determine who was asking and who was telling, though they sometimes exhibited difficulty with ask-interrogate scenarios in which speakers were

requesting information, and they sometimes incorrectly used tell to describe asking.

Children's difficulty emerged much more clearly in response to yes–no questions. In Study 2, children often endorsed ask-interrogate, ask-request, and tell-command statements as both asking and telling. Children were surprisingly uncertain whether single word answers to questions were telling (tell-inform), suggesting that they were equating telling with saying (and expecting tellers to say something more substantive). In Study 3, we equalized word use across statements, and presented epistemic (ask-interrogate and tell-inform) and deontic scenarios (ask-request and tell-command) in separate blocks in order to reduce potential confusion. Children continued to overendorse ask-interrogate and ask-request statements as telling, supporting the notion that they equated telling with saying. Study 4 assessed younger children, and found that children showed little comprehension when asked yes–no questions, performing at chance levels.

In Studies 3 and 4, we also examined children's performance on forced-choice questions, in which they chose whether speakers asked or told. Apart from some evidence of response bias, in which less mature children would pick the first proffered choice, children exhibited understanding of the distinction between ask and tell, and among the younger children tested in Study 4 (6- to 9-year-olds), significantly better understanding than in response to the yes–no questions. The results suggest that as they become familiar with the words, children know the difference between asking and telling, but given their equation of telling with saying, understand asking as a type of telling. This would explain children's occasional spontaneous use of tell to describe statements properly understood as asking, and children's overendorsement of tell when asked yes–no questions.

An important methodological change in Study 3 was that we blocked questions (ask-interrogate/tell-inform and ask-request/tell-command) rather than alternating between the two types, as we had in Study 2. Alternating may have complicated children's decision making about whether speakers were asking or telling. If children were attending to politeness, for example, then they might have endorsed ask-interrogate as telling if the speaker failed to say "please." Conversely, if they were attending to informing, then they might have endorsed ask-request as telling because the speaker was informing the recipient of his or her desires. In Study 4, we directly compared children's performance on blocked and mixed scenarios, and confirmed that children performed better when the scenarios were blocked.

The applied implications of Studies 2 to 4 are clear. Conventional methods of questioning child witnesses about their conversations with recipients of abuse disclosures and suspects are likely to lead to misunderstanding because of children's understanding of telling as akin to saying. When children are asked yes–no questions about conversations, they are likely to endorse asking as telling both when questioned about statements seeking information and requests. In the context of conversations with disclosure recipients, this will likely lead to an exaggeration of the extent to which others influenced children (by "telling" them details of the abuse). With respect to conversations with suspects, this will lead to exaggeration of the extent to which suspects coerced children to engage in various behaviors (by "telling" them to do so). Even children's spontaneous use of tell sometimes mischaracterizes

conversations. Furthermore, potential confusion between asking and telling is not only relevant in sexual abuse cases; in any cases in which adult influence over children is an issue, the distinction is important. In order to avoid potential miscommunication, attorneys should do what they rarely do in practice: ask children to describe the specific contents of their conversations, and, when necessary, ask children to specify whether speakers were asking or telling.

The advantages of asking children to recall the details of conversation rather than rely on labels such as ask and tell is illustrated by *California v. Ortega* (2010), described in the introduction. As the reader will recall, the defense argued that the child had been coached, pointing to the child's statements that her mother had "told" her what happened. However, in that case, the forensic interviewer followed up with "What exactly did your mom say to you?" The child clarified: "She said, 'What happened?' And I said, 'My uncle was touching my private parts and it hurt.'"

With respect to the effects of blocking, the mixed conditions probably provide a more realistic picture of children's understanding, insofar as adults are unlikely to be cognizant of movement between the two uses of ask and tell, and in questioning children, will do so without signaling the different meanings. Indeed, it is easy to imagine combining the two types of meaning into a single question: "Did [the suspect] ask you not to tell?" In this case, the questioner is using "ask" as ask-request and "tell" as tell-inform. (We looked back at our transcript sample, and found 143 attorney questions that mixed uses of ask and/or tell in the same question.) The superiority of children's performance when scenarios were blocked supports the speculation in some of the developmental research that children's difficulty with understanding ask and tell is in part attributable to their uncertainty about whether the terms are being used to describe interrogating/informing or requesting/commanding (Chomsky, 1982).

From a theoretical perspective, the results highlight the way in which children's formal reticence when responding to questions leads to underinformative responses and miscommunication. If we are correct that children believe that telling is synonymous with saying, and thus believe that asking is a form of telling, this belief combined with formal reticence helps make sense of the results. Take a case in which the speaker asked. If asked yes–no questions, children will respond "yes" to both "Did he ask?" and "Did he tell?" because they believe that the speaker both asked and told. Viewing the terms as mutually exclusive, an adult questioning the child would likely interpret a "yes" response to "Did he ask?" as implying that he did not tell, and a "yes" response to "Did he tell?" as implying that he did not ask. If asked a forced-choice question, "Did he ask or tell?" children will choose one of the words, formal reticence preventing them from answering "both." They will correctly respond "ask," because they recognize that the word more precisely describes the statement. But the key point is this: Their belief that the correct answer is "both" will go unnoticed because of their failure to go beyond the form of the question.

In Studies 2 to 4, we tested children's immediate recall and characterization of conversations to provide a sensitive test of their understanding of ask and tell. In real-world contexts, children are asked about their own conversations, which may be more memorable, but of course are much more remote in time. In memory, the literal words in conversation are quickly converted to gist (Davis & Friedman, 2007), and an important question is whether chil-

dren's characterization of conversations changes over time. Researchers have only just begun examining children's developing memory for conversations (Lawson & London, 2015; Stolzenberg, McWilliams, Williams, & Lyon, 2017). We suspect that we have presented a conservative picture of children's difficulties; given their equation of telling with saying, as they forget the specific aspects of conversations that enable them to make finer distinctions, they are increasingly likely to overendorse asking as telling.

Researchers studying cognitive development can identify the earliest emergence of children's understanding. Children's better performance on the forced-choice questions in Study 4 suggests that sensitive measures with children with average verbal ability will find good understanding among children younger than the children we studied. However, developmentalists should take note of the fact that forced-choice questions can also obscure children's concepts, such as the belief that asking is both asking and telling. Future research could fruitfully use these approaches to examine children's distinction between ask-interrogate and tell-inform, and to compare children's performance in distinguishing between ask-request and tell-command. This will contribute to our understanding of children's emerging theory of mind and metalinguistic abilities.

In conclusion, child witnesses' characterization of their conversational interactions is significant for assessing the credibility of their claims of abuse. When children are questioned about asking and telling in a conventional manner, through a series of yes–no questions, misunderstanding is likely. Even children's spontaneous use of tell can be in error, highlighting the importance of questions about the specific contents of conversations. Questioning can be misconstrued as coaching; coercion and persuasion can be conflated. Better questioning methods enable children to provide a more complete and more accurate report, enabling decision makers to more fairly assess their credibility.

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