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Maltreated Children's Understanding of and Emotional Reactions to Dependency Court Involvement

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Little is known about the extent to which maltreated children understand what is happening during their participation in court proceedings, despite large numbers of children coming into contact with the legal system as victims of maltreatment. In the present study, maltreated 4- to 15-year-olds were interviewed about their understanding of dependency court on the day of their scheduled court visit. Their feelings about attending their hearings were also assessed, and after their hearing, their understanding of the decisions was examined. Age-related improvements in children's understanding emerged. Also, children who were more knowledgeable about the legal system were less distressed about attending their hearings, as were younger children who had been in the system a longer time. Finally, a majority of children lacked full or accurate understanding of what actually happened during their hearings. Findings have implications for children's participation in legal proceedings and the development of interventions to facilitate children's legal understanding. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, several million children become involved in social service investigations, with the number of children who experience substantiated abuse hovering near one

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million annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). For many of these children, their cases are referred to the dependency division of juvenile court for legal intervention. The courts are charged with deciding how best to intervene on the children's behalf to ensure they are protected and safe. If children are removed from their parents' custody, the courts must further decide where the children should live in the interim, and whether, when, and under what conditions they should return home.

Dependency cases are rarely resolved quickly, but instead routinely involve multiple hearings over the course of months or years (see, e.g., Johnson & Wagner, 2005; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; White, Albers, & Bitoni, 1996). Specifically, once maltreatment is alleged, social services conduct an investigation. If they conclude that state action is necessary to protect a child, a dependency petition is filed, and an initial hearing is scheduled. At this hearing, the court determines whether there is reasonable basis for the allegations and whether the child's safety requires placement outside the home. Subsequent hearings may then be held to evaluate the ongoing case, including a trial at which the allegations are assessed, a disposition hearing at which the court determines the child's placement and typically orders efforts to reunite the child and family (e.g., the parent must enroll in a substance abuse treatment program), and review hearings, which culminate in a permanent plan for the child, such as termination of parental rights and adoption, guardianship or long-term foster care.

During the often lengthy dependency process, children interact with numerous legal professionals, including social workers, investigators, court-appointed special advocates, guardians *ad litem*, foster parents, attorneys, and judges. Many of these professionals are advised to inform children about the nature of legal proceedings and the legal decisions being made (Khoury, 1996). It is unclear, however, whether children actually understand the information with which they are provided, which may be incomplete, contradictory to that provided by other professionals, or too complex to comprehend (see, e.g., Eltringham & Aldridge, 2000; Perry et al., 1995). Thus, there is considerable potential for confusion on the part of children about their situation, even if they are given information from multiple sources.

In some jurisdictions, children are present during hearings, a primary reason for which is to increase their involvement in the case. The children listen while attorneys, social workers, their parent(s), and the judge discuss the case, the parents' behavior, and the children's futures. During the hearings, children, like their parents and other parties present, may be questioned by the judge. For children, questions focus on their maltreatment experiences as well as a range of other factors, such as their behavior in school, placement preferences, and general well-being. To the extent that children lack an adequate understanding, not only of their situation, but also of the court process generally, their presence may not serve the intended function. Moreover, any confusion or misunderstanding experienced by children may inhibit their ability to participate effectively in the process that is designed, in theory, with their best interests as a primary focus.

To date, very little is known about maltreated children's understanding of the legal system. Thus, in the present study, we first investigated maltreated children's understanding of dependency court, both in general and in relation to hearings that they attended. Second, we examined whether children's legal understanding is related to their emotional reactions during court proceedings.

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Children's and Adolescents' Legal Understanding

To date, few studies have directly assessed children's understanding of the dependency court system. Studies have, however, focused on children's knowledge of terms relevant to criminal court and on juvenile suspects' understanding of their legal rights.

Across these two lines of research, several consistent findings have emerged, the most robust of which is that of age differences: With age, children's knowledge improves considerably (see, e.g., Burnett, Noblin, & Prosser, 2004; Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Cooper, 1997; Flin, Stevenson, & Davies, 1989; Grisso et al., 2003; Warren-Luebecker, Tate, Hinton, & Ozbek, 1989), although even adolescents have difficulty comprehending some legal concepts (e.g., the Miranda warnings). A second consistent finding is that greater contact with the legal system does not translate into more accurate knowledge (Belter & Grisso, 1984; Freshwater & Aldridge, 1994; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990). Thus, for example, children involved in a criminal case (as either victims or defendants) are often not more knowledgeable than children who have never had direct contact with the legal system. Third, even when children are generally knowledgeable about the legal system, they may not be similarly knowledgeable with regard to case-specific information (Saywitz et al., 1990; Warren-Luebecker et al., 1989). Instead, children appear to have difficulty applying general legal knowledge to specific situations.

Despite the consistency of these trends across community samples of children, child victims in criminal court, and juvenile defendants, there are several reasons why findings may not generalize to children in dependency proceedings. First, the demographic characteristics between samples often vary. In community samples (e.g. Warren-Luebecker et al., 1989), for instance, children are most likely of average cognitive ability. Maltreated children, in contrast, are delayed cognitively (Cicchetti, Rogosch, Maughan, Toth, & Bruce, 2003; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994), which may translate into poorer legal knowledge. Also, most child victims in criminal cases have endured sexual abuse (Goodman, Quas, Bulkley, & Shapiro, 1999), whereas child victims in dependency cases have predominantly experienced neglect and physical abuse (Lyon & Saywitz, 1999), and children are most likely to testify in child sexual abuse cases (Goodman et al., 1999). Differences in children's victimization experiences may affect how they are prepared for legal involvement and what is expected of them during legal proceedings. Finally, criminal prosecution is less likely when victims are younger (Sedlak et al., 2005; Whitcomb et al., 1991), which may lead to proportionally more older children being represented in criminal than dependency court.

Second, children's experiences in dependency cases often diverge from those of child victims in criminal cases and child defendants in juvenile delinquency cases. In dependency court, children have contact with social workers, investigators, court appointed special advocates, guardians *ad litem*, judges, and, in some jurisdictions, their own attorneys. During the hearings, attorneys representing three different parties—the child, the parents, and the state—are present, and the primary stated goal is to determine the best interests of the child and ensure her or his safety. In criminal court, a child may interact with a number of legal professionals, but few if any are charged with representing a child's best interests or eliciting a child's desires. Further, the primary focus is on the child's ability to testify rather than the child's

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placement or well-being. In delinquency cases, child defendants receive legal representation, but the focus is on their criminal responsibility. Legal knowledge most relevant to child defendants (e.g. the right against self-incrimination) has little in common with that which is most relevant for and would assist children in dependency court. Thus, whether child victims understand the criminal system and whether juvenile defendants understand their rights may reveal little about whether children understand the dependency system or their experiences within it.

To date, two studies include data relevant to maltreated children's understanding of dependency proceedings. In her (unpublished) dissertation, Murphy interviewed 10- to 17-year-olds about their perceptions of foster care. Several questions concerned children's understanding of their dependency cases, and children's responses were compared to their case files for accuracy. When asked why they were living in foster care, 28% of the children were accurate. When asked about the court's plans for their future, slightly more (54%) of the children were accurate. Being older at the time of their first placement (but not current age) was positively related to children's knowledge of the reasons for their placement and the court's plans. Finally, children with prior foster care experience (i.e. children who had been removed from home in a previous dependency case) were less knowledgeable of the court's plans for their future. It is possible that future plans were more ambiguous for children with prior foster care experience, given their history of repeated maltreatment. However, it is also possible that involvement in dependency court simply did not help children understand the process.

In a second study, Block, Oran, Oran, Baumrind, and Goodman (in press) interviewed 7- to 10-year-old maltreated children about what happened during an initial hearing they had just attended following their removal from home. Many children lacked a clear understanding of their hearing, with some children being clearly inaccurate in their responses. For example, when asked whether they knew what happened in their hearing, 57% simply answered "no." When asked why they were in court, 53% said that it was to decide where they should live, 13% said that it was to keep them safe, 11% said it was to see their parent, 11% said to talk to the judge, and 8% said it was because they had been bad. As would be expected, children's knowledge improved with age. Also, similar to Murphy's results, involvement in a previous dependency case was unrelated to children's knowledge.

To summarize, children's legal understanding improves with age, even though gaps in knowledge remain at least into early adolescence. Also, children often have difficulty applying their general understanding to specific legal situations. Prior contact with the legal system does not appear to benefit children's knowledge. To date, studies have not investigated whether maltreated children's legal knowledge is linked to any functional outcome, or, in other words, whether greater knowledge is beneficial to children in actual legal cases. One way in which knowledge may be helpful is by reducing children's distress during dependency cases.

Legal Knowledge and Children's Distress

Participation in a legal case is distressing for many victims, regardless of age. Children involved in criminal court routinely express distress about their experiences, both in and out of the courtroom (Goodman, Taub, Jones, & England,

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1992; Whitcomb et al., 1991). This distress can persist over substantial lengths of time, in some cases years after the case has ended (Oates & Tong, 1987; Quas et al., 2005).

One potentially important source of distress for children is a lack of understanding of the legal system, their case, and decisions being made, despite these decisions directly impacting the children's future. Specifically, studies of children in medical and legal settings indicate that children are significantly more anxious when they do not know what will happen than when they are provided with knowledge about an impending stressor. In fact, effective methods of reducing children's distress during medical procedures include pre-procedure explanations (Harbeck-Weber & McKee, 1995; Zeltzer, Fanurik, & LeBaron, 1989). Benefits of explanations are evident in children as young as four to five years of age and are more robust when the explanations are directly relevant to children's experiences (Peterson & Ridley-Johnson, 1984). Similarly, in legal contexts, as a means of reducing children's distress, prosecutors report using courtroom tours and pre-court preparation to increase children's understanding (see, e.g., Goodman et al., 1999). Children may also participate in ''court-schools'' before testifying in criminal court (see, e.g., Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Sattar & Bull, 1996; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993), a goal of which is to increase children's knowledge, thereby reducing their distress when taking the stand.

Insofar as less knowledgeable children are more distressed during legal proceedings, they may have difficulty comprehending the decisions made. For example, greater distress in children while testifying (in mock or actual trials) is negatively associated with their ability to communicate (see, e.g., Goodman et al., 1992; Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003). Children may be attending to their own emotions and attempting to regulate their feelings at the expense of attending to the ongoing discussions in their cases, leading to continued difficulty in understanding.

In summary, poorer understanding of an impending event increases children's distress, which in turn may inhibit their ability to actively participate or follow potentially complex discussions during a hearing. As a result, children may not understand the decisions made.

The Present Study

In the present study, we interviewed maltreated children about their general knowledge of dependency court and about their feelings regarding attending dependency proceedings. We then observed them while they attended their hearings and, afterward, interviewed them about the decisions made and how they had felt. Three primary hypotheses were advanced: First, age-related improvements in children's dependency court knowledge were anticipated (see, e.g., Block et al., in press; Grisso et al., 2003; Saywitz, 1989), although substantial percentages of older children were still expected to evince deficits in understanding, especially in relation to their own cases. Second, older children and those with a more advanced understanding of dependency court were expected to be less distressed during their hearing (see, e.g., Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberger, & Kuhn, 1997; Zeltzer et al., 1989). Third, being older and experiencing less distress during the hearing were both expected to predict better post-court understanding of what

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had happened during the hearing (see, e.g., Goodman et al., 1992). Finally, given evidence that contact with the legal system is unrelated to children's legal knowledge (e.g. Saywitz et al., 1990) and that children have difficulty applying general legal knowledge to specific situations (e.g. Warren-Leubecker et al., 1989), no a priori predictions were advanced concerning the associations among children's prior dependency court experiences, general legal knowledge, and understanding of their hearings.

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-four maltreated children (49 females), ages 4–15 years ($M = 10.14$, $SD = 2.75$), served as participants in the final sample.[1] All children had been removed from the custody of their parents and were involved in ongoing legal cases in the juvenile court, dependency division, of Los Angeles (LA) County because of substantiated maltreatment. Children were primarily of Hispanic (40%) or African-American (23%) ethnicity, consistent with the population in this court system (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008; Lyon & Saywitz, 1999). Children whose files indicated that they required a translator were not eligible to participate. On the day of the interview, all children were awaiting appearances in dependency proceedings. The types of proceeding included adjudication hearings (trials to assess the veracity of the allegations), six- and 12-month review hearings, permanency planning hearings, and reviews of children's placement plans. The current visit to the courthouse was the first visit for one child (children rarely appear in court before they are four years of age). All other children had been to court on at least one prior occasion. The total number of hearings in children's cases ranged from 2 to 57, $M = 17$ (children do not attend all hearings regarding their cases). The length of children's cases ranged from 4 months to 13.80 years, $M = 3.0$ years.

Procedures and Questionnaires

Study materials and procedures were approved by the Presiding Judge of the LA County Dependency Court and relevant Institutional Review Boards. Following approval from the Children's Law Center of LA (whose attorneys represent most children in the LA dependency system), approximately 20 attorneys were invited to assist with the study. Thirteen, all female, agreed to help, which involved providing individual consent for the children they represented to take part in the study. The attorneys worked in one of eight courtrooms (each overseen by a different bench officer or judge). No attorney withdrew from the study before it was complete.

In the morning before daily hearings began, a trained female graduate or undergraduate researcher reviewed a court calendar that listed all children scheduled to appear in dependency court that day. She identified children whose attorneys were

[1] One child who was listed as 14 on the official court records reported a birth date different from that stated. Using her self-reported birth date in the calculation, she was 15.09 years old. This age was included in the final analyses.

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assisting with the study and who met the eligibility requirement (e.g. age, language proficiency). The researcher then located the attorney representing the child and requested the attorney's written consent.[2] In all but two cases, consent was granted (one attorney declined for two children who had been especially upset at their prior hearing). Next, the researcher located the child, either in the family waiting area (if the child had been placed with a relative) or in a daycare facility of the courthouse (if the child had been placed with a foster family and was brought to his or her hearing by court staff). The researcher explained the study and invited the child to participate. The child's assent was secured, and the child was escorted to a quiet area to begin the study. No child declined to participate at the outset, although two children declined to answer the actual interview questions.

Pre-trial interview

During the interview, several questionnaires were administered. The first asked the child to define seven legal terms. Four terms, taken from the work of Saywitz et al. (1990), were not specific to any particular division of the legal system (judge, court, police, and lawyer), and three terms were most common to the dependency system (foster parent, social worker, minor).

The second questionnaire asked about the child's current living situation and placement preferences. Third, the researcher read the child a brief story about a victim of physical abuse. The story began with a child protagonist breaking his arm on the playground and being taken to the hospital. A doctor notices bruises unrelated to the playground injury, and a social worker comes to talk to the child. After the child discloses that his father hits him, the child goes to live with a foster parent. Next, the child goes to court, meets his attorney, and attends a hearing with a judge. The story is resolved when the judge says that the child can return home after his parents attend classes to help them control their anger. At four proscribed times, the researcher stopped reading and asked one open- and one close-ended question about what was happening. Questions focused on the actions of the social worker, foster parent, lawyer, and judge. All questions were asked verbatim in the order written. The open-and closed-ended questions about each of the characters' actions including the following: (1) What does the social worker want to know? Does she want to know about how he broke his arm, or how he got the bruises? (2) Why does Chad [the story character] have to live in foster care? Does Chad have to live in foster care because of the bruises or because he hurt his arm? (3) What does Rosa, Chad's lawyer, want to know? Should Chad tell Rosa (his lawyer) about when he hurt his arm or where he wants to live? (4) What might the judge decide for Chad? Will the judge decide where Chad should live or whether Chad should be able to go to the park where he hurt his arm?

Fourth, an affect questionnaire, developed for the present study, was administered. The researcher first presented a face scale that depicted five line-drawn faces (ranging from an exaggerated frown to an exaggerated smile). She then asked the child to point to the face that showed how the child felt (a) ''right now''

[2]Informed consent was provided by each child's attorney. Because the children had been removed from their parents' custody and were under the custody of the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), it was not necessary to secure parental consent.

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(i.e., during the pre-trial interview, while waiting for their hearing), (b) about being in court, and (c) about what the judge might decide.

Post-hearing interview

A brief interview was conducted immediately after the hearing in a quiet area of the courthouse. It began with four questions about the details of what occurred during the hearing: ''What happened in court?'', ''What did the judge decide?'', ''Who will you live with after today?'', and ''Will you have to come back to court again?''. Next, questions about the child's emotional reactions to the hearing, similar to those asked before the hearing, were asked. The five-point face scale again accompanied the questions, which asked how the child felt (a) right now (i.e. after the hearing), (b) about being in court, and (c) about the judge's decision.

Debriefing

After the post-hearing interview, the child was fully debriefed. The researcher explained that she was there to find out what children think about being at court and wanted to find ways to help children who come to court. All children were pleased with their participation, and no child expressed concerns or confusion upon debriefing. Children were given a small gift (e.g. a decorated pencil) for their participation.

Coding

The primary investigator, graduate students, and an undergraduate honors student coded children's responses for accuracy. Scores reflected children's ability to define legal terms (definition accuracy), responses to the open- and closed-ended story questions (story accuracy), and understanding of the decisions made in their hearing (hearing accuracy). For the definition and story accuracy, graduate students independently scored 20% of children's responses. Kappas ranged from .88 to .94. For the hearing accuracy, the primary investigator and an honors student independently scored 20% of children's responses, and proportion agreement equaled .88.

Definition accuracy

Children's legal term definitions were scored following a three-point scale modeled after Saywitz (1989): 0 = no correct information, which included incorrect and do-not-know responses (e.g. ''your daughter and your baby'' for a social worker, and ''slave'' for a lawyer); 1 = correct but not complete answer (e.g. ''asks you how you're doing in school'' for a social worker, ''when people speed, the police arrest them'' for police, and ''talks to people'' for lawyer); or 2 = correct and complete answer (e.g. ''taken legal guardianship of you until you can return to parents'' for foster parent, ''they protect you, arrest you for breaking the laws'' for police, and ''defends your case'' for lawyer). Definitions were determined according to public governmental websites and legal dictionaries. A mean definition accuracy score was computed by summing each child's responses and dividing by the number of responses provided (unscorable responses were not included; $\alpha = .74$).

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Story accuracy

Children's answers to the four open- and four close-ended story questions were dichotomously coded. Separate scores were calculated for accurate and inaccurate information provided because a single response could include both correct (e.g., the social worker wanted to know how the boy got the bruises) and incorrect information (e.g., the social worker wanted to know about the playground where the child plays). Thus, for example, when scoring for accuracy, responses that included no correct information received a "0," and responses that included correct information (regardless of whether incorrect information was also included) received a "1." Correct and incorrect responses were summed separately and divided by the number of questions asked to create mean accuracy and inaccuracy scores for both open- and closed-ended questions. The correlations, however, between children's proportions of accurate and inaccurate responses were quite large, $r > -.64$. Thus, only children's mean open-ended and close-ended accuracy scores are considered further.

Hearing accuracy

Children's responses to the post-hearing questions, "What happened in court?" and, "What did the judge decide?" were scored according to a three-point scale: 0 = no correct information, which again included incorrect and do-not-know responses (e.g., "I'm going to live with my mom soon" when the court decided to move to long-term placement); 1 = correct but not complete answer (e.g., a child who said correctly that she could not go home, but did not state that the parent had to attend a drug dependency class); or 2 = correct and complete answer (e.g., child explained the gist of the full decision made in court, "the judge said we had to come back in 6 months to see if my mom is better and if we can go live with her."). Children's responses to the two questions often overlapped and were significantly correlated, $r = .46$. They were combined into a single accuracy score that reflected their understanding of the hearing decision. Children's responses to the question "Who will you live with after today?" were scored according to a similar three-point scale, and children's responses to the question, "Will you have to come back to court?" were scored as 0 = not correct/don't know or 1 = correct.

RESULTS

First, preliminary analyses identified possible confounds. Second, analyses investigated the relations among children's age, the length of time they had spent in the dependency system, and their general dependency court knowledge.[3] Third, the relations among age, time in the system, legal knowledge, and children's emotional ratings were examined. Fourth, analyses assessed whether children's age

[3]During the study, approximately two-thirds of the children completed the Memory for Sentences subtask of the Stanford Binet Intelligence Test, whereas the other third were unable to complete the task due to being called into court. Although children's scores were correlated with age, $r = .60$, scores were unrelated to the length of time children spent in the system or the number of hearings held in their case. Because a substantial number of the children did not complete the task, these scores were not considered in the main analyses.

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Table 1. Characteristics of sample and key study variables

	Mean	SD	Range	*N*
Background characteristics				
Child age in years at the time of the study	10.14	2.75	4.56–15.09	94
Child age in years when the case began	7.15	3.65	.01–14.85	91
Time in system (years)	3.00	3.12	.03–13.83	91
Number of hearings held on case	18.13	13.34	2–58	91
General dependency court understanding				
Definition accuracy	.70	.46	0–1.71	93
Open-ended story accuracy	.55	.33	0–1.0	85
Close-ended story accuracy	.79	.27	0–1.0	89
Pre-hearing emotional ratings				
Feelings while waiting	3.94	1.22	1–5	89
Feelings about being in court	3.44	1.20	1–5	89
Feelings about what the judge might decide	3.10	1.38	1–5	88
Post-hearing understanding				
Hearing decision accuracy	.98	.81	0–2	61
Placement decision accuracy	1.46	.83	0–2	61
Returning to court accuracy	.67	.47	0–1	61
Post-hearing emotional reactions				
Feelings after court	4.12	1.23	1–5	59
Feelings about being in court	3.31	1.16	1–5	59
Feelings about what the judge decided	3.79	1.24	1–5	58

Children's pre-court definitions and post-court hearing and placement accuracy were scored on a three-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = partially correct, 2 = correct). Children's pre-court story accuracy and post-court returning to court accuracy were scored on a two-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = correct). Finally, children's pre- and post-court emotional reactions were coded according to a five-point face pictorial scale (1 = very negative to 5 = very positive). Only a subset of the sample completed the post-court interview.

and distress, as well as their general legal knowledge, predicted their post-court understanding. Descriptive statistics for variables of interest are presented in Table 1, and bivariate correlations among them are presented in Table 2.

Preliminary Analyses

Independent *t*-tests revealed that males and females did not significantly differ in age, time in the system, or the number of hearings held in their cases, $t < 1.15$, n.s. Nor did males and females differ in their knowledge or emotion ratings, $t < 1.71$, n.s. Attorneys who assisted with the study represented between 1 and 18 child participants, with most attorneys representing between 1 and 5 participants (three attorneys had 8 or more children in the study). Thus, it was not possible to assess whether children's knowledge differed as a function of individual attorney. Twenty-three children had talked to their attorney ($n = 22$) or a court-appointed special advocate ($n = 1$) before the initial interview. These children did not differ in legal knowledge or emotional reactions from children who had not talked to a legal professional beforehand. Across the eight courtrooms in which the study children's cases were heard, five had a sufficient number of child participants to test for courtroom effects. No differences were evident across the courtrooms for any of the study's independent or dependent measures. Finally, children who participated in

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Table 2. Bivariate correlations among study variables measured before the hearing

	Age at study	Time in system	Definition accuracy	Open-ended story accuracy	Close-ended story accuracy	Feelings while waiting	Feelings about being in court
Background characteristics							
Age							
Time in system	.29**						
General dependency court understanding							
Definition accuracy	.62***	.00					
Open-ended story accuracy	.54***	.19†	.39***				
Close-ended story accuracy	.65***	.10	.54***	.57***			
Pre-hearing emotional ratings							
Feelings while waiting	−.21*	.01	−.07	−.20†	−.19†		
Feelings about being in court	−.04	.17	−.14	.12	.01	.19†	
Feelings about what the judge might decide	.15	.12	.15	.33**	.16	.11	.29***

Children's pre-court definitions and post-court hearing and placement accuracy were scored on a three-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = partially correct, 2 = correct). Children's pre-court story accuracy and post-court returning to court accuracy were scored on a two-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = correct). Children's pre- and post-court emotional reactions were coded according to a five-point face pictorial scale (1 = very negative to 5 = very positive).
†$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

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Table 3. Type of hearing in which children were participating by age

	Child age in years												
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
Hearing type													
Arraignment	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Pre-trial settlement conference	0	0	1	3	0	2	3	1	2	1	2	0	15
Trial	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	7
Disposition	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
6-month review: child remained in home	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	7
6-month review: child removed from home	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	8
12-month review: child removed from home	1	1	1	4	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	12
18-month review: child removed from home	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Permanent plan: termination or guardianship	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	8
Review of permanent plans	0	0	1	0	2	5	7	2	6	4	0	1	28
Other	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	4
Total	3	5	7	9	7	11	12	10	14	10	5	1	94

'Other' includes multiple hearings and progress reports.

the study attended one of 12 different types of hearing. The types of hearing and the distribution of children by age are presented in Table 3.

Children's General Knowledge of Dependency Court

Our first goal was to examine how children's age and the length of time they had spent in the system (i.e. the length of their legal case) related to their general understanding of dependency court. We expected that, with age, children's knowledge would improve. We also explored whether age interacted with the time children had spent in the system to predict their legal knowledge. Bivariate correlations among children's age, length of time in the system, and knowledge revealed that age was positively related to each of the three legal knowledge scores: children's definition accuracy scores; open-ended story accuracy; and closed-ended story accuracy. The length of time in the system, however, was unrelated to their knowledge (Table 2).

To investigate whether age and time in the system independently and jointly predicted children's legal knowledge, we conducted regressions with children's definition accuracy, open-ended story accuracy, and closed-ended story accuracy as separate dependent measures (Table 4). Age and the length of time spent in the system were entered on Step 1 and the interaction between them was entered on Step 2. Variables were centered prior to their inclusion, following the guidelines of Aiken and West (1991).

Age significantly predicted understanding for each dependent measure. The amount of time in the system negatively predicted children's definitional accuracy, but was unrelated to children's open-ended and closed-ended story accuracy. The

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Table 4. Regressions predicting children's general legal knowledge from age and time in the system

	General legal knowledge					
	Definition accuracy		Open-ended story accuracy		Close-ended story accuracy	
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 1 β	Model 2 β
Predictors						
Age at study	.68**	.72**	.51**	.56**	.67**	.72**
Time in system	−.20*	−.29*	−.07	−.03	−.06	−.16
Age × time in system	—	.14	—	.17	—	.16

Children's definition accuracy was scored on a three-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = partially correct, 2 = correct). Children's open-ended accuracy and close-ended accuracy were scored on a two-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = correct). At Step 1, all Fs (2, 83 or 87) > 15.62, ps < .001.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .001$.

amount of variance accounted for by Step 1 of the models ranged from 42.5% (definitional accuracy) to 53.1% (open-ended story accuracy). The interaction between age and time in the system was nonsignificant in each regression. Thus, consistent with our prediction, children's knowledge of the dependency court system improved with age. Time spent in the system, as assessed via the length of children's legal case, was unrelated or possibly (according to one analysis) negatively related to children's general dependency court knowledge.

Children's Pre-Hearing Emotional Reactions

The second goal of the study was to investigate the associations between children's legal understanding and distress during dependency proceedings. We were specifically interested in whether children's age and length of time in the system in conjunction with their dependency court knowledge predicted their emotional reactions on the day of their court hearing. We expected that more advanced knowledge and being older would both predict reduced distress. Bivariate correlations concerning children's knowledge and pre-court emotional reactions are presented in Table 2.

Children's distress was reflected in their responses to questions about how they felt while waiting for their hearing, about going to court, and about the judge's decision. The latter two ratings were significantly correlated, r (88) = .29, $p < .01$, and were combined for the analyses. Correlations, age controlled, between children's legal knowledge scores (definition, open-ended story, and closed-ended story accuracy) and pre-court distress ratings revealed one significant relation: Greater open-ended story accuracy was associated with feeling more positive about attending their hearing and what the judge might decide, $r(77) = .31$, $p < .01$. Children's legal knowledge scores were unrelated statistically to how they reported feeling while waiting for their hearing.

Next, regressions were conducted predicting children's distress ratings. First, children's age and time in the system were entered. Second, the interaction between

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children's age and time in the system was entered to explore whether older and younger children's experiences in the legal system differentially related to their emotional reactions. Third, children's definitional accuracy scores and proportion correct responses to the open- and close-ended story questions were entered.

The regression predicting children's feelings while waiting for court (i.e. ''right now'') was nonsignificant. When children's feelings about attending their hearing and the judge's decision were examined, the model was significant at Step 2, $F(3, 78) = 3.58$, $p < .05$, and at Step 3, $F(6, 78) = 4.32$, $p < .01$. The R^2 Δ was significant at both steps, and the model (Step 3) accounted for 26.4% of the variance. Results revealed that children's age, time in the system, and accuracy of responses to the open-ended legal knowledge questions emerged as significant predictors, as did the interaction between children's age and time in the system (Table 5).

In support of our hypothesis, greater legal knowledge according to children's responses to the open-ended story questions was associated with reporting less negative feelings about attending the dependency hearing. Being older and having spent less time in the system, in contrast, were associated with more negative feelings. However, the latter effect was qualified by a significant age $\times$ time in system interaction: Longer time in the system led to less negative feelings among the younger but not older children, the latter of whom were uniformly more negative (Figure 1), a finding that runs counter to our prediction of age-related decreases in children's distress.

Children's Understanding of and Emotional Responses to their Dependency Court Hearing

Sixty-one children were interviewed immediately after their dependency hearings about their understanding of and emotional reactions to their hearing. The remaining children either did not attend their hearings (e.g., they were postponed) or left too quickly afterward to be interviewed (e.g., family visitation was scheduled). None of the children who completed the post-court interview had talked to anyone

Table 5. Regression predicting children's pre-hearing emotional reaction to attending their hearing and the judge's decision

Step and predictor	ΔR^2	Standardized βs		
		Step 1	Step 2	Step3
Step 1	.03			
Age at study		−.03	−.15	−.34*
Time in system		.17	.46**	.46**
Step 2	.10**			
Age × time in system		–	−.43**	−.51**
Step 3	.14**	–	–	−.09
Definition accuracy				
Open-ended story accuracy		–	–	.45**
Close-ended story accuracy		–	–	−.01

Emotional reactions scored on a five-point face scale (1 = very negative and 5 = very positive). Children's definition accuracy was scored on a three-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = partially correct, 2 = correct). Children's open-ended story accuracy and close-ended story accuracy were scored on a two-point scale (0 = not correct, 1 = correct).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

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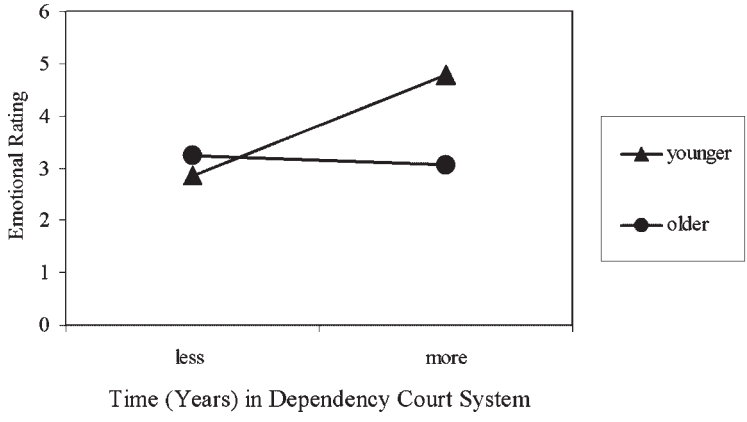

Figure 1. Plot of the significant interaction predicting children's emotional responses (higher numbers indicate more positive emotions) as a function of their age and time in system.

else about the hearing prior to our interview. Thus, our final set of analyses focused on this subset of children. Of interest was the extent to which they understood what happened during their hearing and whether more advanced general legal knowledge predicted greater understanding and reduced distress.

With regard to how well children understood what happened, descriptive statistics are quite informative. After the hearing, children were asked what happened, what the judge decided, whether they had to return to court, and where they would live following the hearing. Collapsing across the two questions about the court's decision, as can be seen in Table 6, approximately one-third of the children failed to report any correct information about what happened. Ten children (50% who provided no correct information) were actually incorrect in their description. The other 10 children simply stated that they did not know.

As predicted, older children reported more correct information about the decision than younger children. Yet, only 33% (6 of 18) of the children ages 12 and older appeared fully knowledgeable; 50% (9 of 18), provided a partially correct description, and the remaining three did not provide any correct information. Among the 27 children aged 8–11 years, 44% (12) provided a full and accurate

Table 6. Percentage of children providing correct information about their dependency court hearings (n = 61)

	Hearing decision accuracy	Placement decision accuracy	Returning to court accuracy
Explicitly said they did not know, understand, or remember	16%	12%	20%
Provided an incorrect response	16%	10%	13%
Provided a partially correct, but incomplete response	36%	12%	n/a
Provided a correct and complete response	31%	67%	67%

In the analyses, the do-not know, understand proportions were combined with incorrect responses to create a three-point scale for children's hearing and placement decision responses (0 = no correct information, 1 = partially correct, 2 = correct), and a two-point scale for children's returning to court responses (0 = no correct information, 1 = correct responses).

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description, 19% (5) provided a partially correct description, and 37% (10) provided no correct information. Finally, among the youngest children, aged 4–7 years, only one child out of 16 provided a clear description of the decision, whereas 50% (8) provided a partially correct description and 44% (7) provided no correct information. Thus, a sizeable percentage of the oldest children did not appear to fully understand the decision that had just been rendered, with this percentage being even larger among the younger children.

When asked with whom they would live after the hearing and whether they would have to return, the results were more encouraging: Over half of the children correctly answered these questions (see Table 5). For instance, when asked whether they had to return to court, 67% ($n = 41$) were correct (33 correctly said ''yes'' and 8 correctly said ''no''). Among the 20 children who did not respond correctly, a majority ($n = 12$) said that they did not know; five incorrectly said ''no;'' and one incorrectly said ''yes.'' The remaining two children provided unscorable answers.

Children's pre-court general legal knowledge scores were correlated with their post-court understanding scores (controlling for age) to determine whether their general dependency court knowledge was associated with case-specific knowledge. One significant association emerged. Greater accuracy in children's legal definitions was associated with greater accuracy when asked what happened, $r = .41$, $p < .05$. Correlations were also computed between children's pre-court emotional reactions and post-court understanding scores, again controlling for age. No significant relations emerged. Thus, in contrast to our hypothesis, greater distress prior to the hearing was not related to children's ability to report what decision had been made in their hearings or with whom they would live afterward.

A final set of analyses focused on whether children's perceptions of having to return to court were related to their emotional reactions. No differences in children's post-court emotional reactions emerged between children who reported that they had to come back and children who reported they did not (regardless of the accuracy of the children's answers). Nor did children who were accurate about returning differ in their post-court emotional ratings from children who were inaccurate.

DISCUSSION

The overarching purpose of the present study was to provide new insight into maltreated children's understanding of dependency court. We were especially interested in the extent to which children's understanding was related to their emotional responses during dependency hearings and their ability to comprehend their own hearings. As discussed next, clear developmental changes emerged both in children's legal knowledge and in children's feelings about being at court. Children's prior contact with the dependency system also had implications for their knowledge and emotional reactions.

Children's Knowledge of Dependency Court

Perhaps the most robust finding to emerge was that of age-related changes in children's legal knowledge. As expected, children's general legal knowledge (evinced

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by their ability to define legally relevant terms) and knowledge of the dependency system (evinced by their answers to the hypothetical narrative about a boy in court) both improved substantially with age. These findings are consistent with research concerning children's understanding of terms common to the criminal justice system (e.g. Saywitz, 1989) and research concerning juvenile competency and adolescent offenders' knowledge of their rights (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Belter & Grisso, 1984).

Despite the age-related improvements, many of the oldest children failed to completely grasp legal terms. Moreover, although older children were more knowledgeable than younger children about the decisions that had been made in their hearings, several older children still lacked a full understanding. Our results are consistent with those in studies of adolescents' legal knowledge (e.g. those in which juvenile offenders' legal competency was assessed) and in Murphy's (unpublished) dissertation, which found that many 10- to 17-year-olds in foster care failed to understand why they had been removed or the court's plan for their future. Of note, when legal professionals are surveyed about children's legal understanding, older children are consistently estimated to be more knowledgeable than they actually are (Eltringham & Aldridge, 2000). As a result, older children may not be provided with adequate assistance in understanding what is happening, a possibility supported, in part, by our data. Both older and younger children need help understanding the legal system generally and interpreting what is happening in their own case, particularly the decisions made on their behalf.

When the relations between the length of children's cases and their dependency court knowledge were examined, few significant associations emerged, and none was in the expected direction. In fact, children in the system longer were *less* able to define legal terms and fared no better in responding to questions about a hypothetical dependency case than children in the system for shorter periods. One potential explanation for this unexpected finding is that, over time, the specific roles of legal personnel become blurred, leading to continued difficulty understanding dependency situations. Another possibility is that children who have spent considerable time in the system differ in other respects from children who have not, and these differences led to the former children's more limited understanding. For instance, children with behavioral problems or cognitive delays may be difficult to place or adopt, leading to their cases lasting longer than children without such problems. Perhaps such problems also lead to greater difficulty in understanding legal personnel's roles. However, among a subset of children administered the Memory for Sentences (a standard measure of cognitive ability), no significant relations emerged between children's performance and the length of their dependency cases. Nonetheless, given that only a subset of children completed the Memory for Sentences, additional research is needed to identify characteristics in children that relate both to the length of their legal cases and to their legal knowledge.

Children's Emotional Reactions to Dependency Court Proceedings

The second goal of the study was to investigate children's emotional reactions to dependency proceedings. We focused most notably on children's age and general

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legal knowledge as predictors of their emotional reactions to and understanding of their hearing.

We expected younger children to report greater distress in relation to their dependency hearings than older children, consistent with research indicating that younger children are typically more distressed when exposed to medical procedures (e.g. Goodman et al., 1997; Merritt et al., 1994; Shrimpton, Oates, & Hayes, 1998). However, no straightforward age differences emerged. Instead, age interacted with the length of children's legal cases to predict their emotional reactions. Among younger children, those who were relatively new to the system were more negative than those who had been in the system for longer periods of time. Older children, in contrast, were more negative regardless of the length of time they had spent in the system. Although these findings were unanticipated, we offer one potential explanation. Perhaps the stability of children's placements affects their emotional reactions to dependency court, and the length of time in the system means something different for younger and older children's placement stability. Thus, younger children whose cases have been ongoing for some time may have achieved some stability in their placement and hence have little memory for their prior living situations. In contrast, older children, who tend to be more difficult to place and are less likely to be adopted, may be negative about attending hearings because of the lack of stability or perhaps their greater knowledge of the potential lack of stability. Experiences or perceptions of instability certainly could lead to more negative feelings about the dependency process.

Our prediction that children with more advanced general legal understanding would be less distressed about their hearing was partially supported. Greater accuracy of children's responses to open-ended questions about the story was associated with less negative responses concerning how children felt about attending their hearing and the judge's possible decision. We suspect that children with a more complete understanding of the dependency system were more comfortable with their legal situation and the personnel with whom they interact, leading to their lower levels of reported distress about their upcoming hearing. Yet, the opposite causal direction is also possible: Perhaps children who were more distressed about their upcoming hearing had difficulty focusing on and answering the legal knowledge questions. Although certainly we cannot rule out the latter possibility, children's self-reported distress during the pre-trial interview (i.e. ''right now'' or before their hearing) was unrelated to children's legal knowledge. Had general distress reduced children's ability to answer the interview questions, current distress should have been related to children's performance. Nonetheless, given the potential for different interpretations of our data, it will be important to continue investigating the ways in which children's knowledge relates to their distress and the reasons for these relations.

Finally, there was some evidence that children with greater legal knowledge understood more about the decisions made in their case. This finding is in contrast to research indicating that children have difficulty applying general legal knowledge to specific situations (Warren-Leubecker et al., 1989). However, unlike former research, in which children were asked to apply their general knowledge to hypothetical cases, children in this study were asked to apply their knowledge to a real-world legal situation in which they were personally involved. Perhaps, in such situations, general knowledge is beneficial, at least in terms of children's immediate understanding of specific decisions.

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Limitations and Conclusions

Although our findings are noteworthy in several regards, methodological limitations must also be acknowledged. First, children's distress levels were measured using a self-report face scale. Because the face scale is a single-item scale, inter-item reliability could not be calculated, and the validity of this technique for measuring distress among maltreated children has not yet been established. However, face scales, such as the one employed here, have been used to assess children's emotional reactions to a range of negative and positive events (see, e.g., Carrick & Quas, 2006), including children's reactions to medical procedures (Hicks, von Baeyer, Spafford, van Korlaar, & Goodenough, 2001; Wong & Baker, 1988). Moreover, given that maltreated children often experience increased difficulty regulating their emotions and cognitive delays (see, e.g., Cichetti et al., 2003; Edwards, Shipman, & Brown, 2005), the simplicity of a single-item pictorial scale may be especially well suited to this population. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study necessitates careful interpretation of the data. Causal relations (e.g. between length of time in the dependency system and legal knowledge, and between legal knowledge and distress) cannot be established. Nor can we rule out the potential influences of unknown third variables. Continued research using multiple methods and longitudinal designs is required to identify causal links. Third, it is unknown to what extent these results are generalizable to other populations of children and to children in other jurisdictions. That is, in LA County, where this study was conducted, children are expected to attend hearings (and their attorney is expected to relate their wishes to the court) by the time they are four years of age. Our findings may thus not generalize to jurisdictions that place less emphasis on children's participation (children in such jurisdictions may evidence even less understanding of the dependency court process). The next steps in this line of research should compare different jurisdictions to determine whether and how children's participation in the process affects their understanding of and attitudes about dependency court. Research should also consider a range of factors that may affect children's understanding of and emotional reactions to dependency court involvement, including the type of maltreatment, placement (e.g., relatives, group home, foster care), and individual difference characteristics (e.g. in coping ability or mental health functioning).

Overall, our results point towards a clear need to develop and test interventions that focus on how to enhance children's understanding, and whether such interventions concurrently improve children's well-being. Given the large number of children involved in dependency proceedings annually and children's limited understanding of these proceedings, this need is critical.

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