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Using Rapport Building to Improve Information Yield When Interviewing Adolescents: A Systematic
Review and Call for Research

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Abstract

Background: Adolescents frequently experience and witness violence and crime, yet very little research has been conducted to determine how best to question these witnesses to elicit complete and accurate disclosures.

Objective: This systematic review integrated scientific research on rapport building with child and adult witnesses with theory and research on adolescent development in order to identify rapport building techniques likely to be effective with suspected adolescent victims and witnesses.

Method: Four databases were searched to identify investigations of rapport building in forensic interviewing of adolescents.

Results: Despite decades of research of studies including child and adult participants, only one study since 1990 experimentally tested techniques to build rapport with adolescents. Most rapport strategies used with children and adults have yet to be tested with adolescents. Tests of these strategies, along with modifications based on developmental science of adolescence, would provide a roadmap to determining which approaches are most beneficial when questioning adolescent victims and witnesses.

Conclusions: There is a clear need for research that tests what strategies are best to use with adolescents. They may be reluctant to disclose information about stressful or traumatic experiences to adults due to both normative developmental processes and the types of events about which they are questioned in legal settings. Rapport building approaches tailored to address adolescents' motivational needs may be effective in increasing adolescents' reporting, and additional research testing such approaches will provide much-needed insight to inform the development of evidence-based practices for questioning these youth.

Key words: adolescence; rapport building; investigative interviewing; disclosure

Using Rapport Building to Improve Information Yield When Interviewing Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Call for Research

For decades, one of the most well-researched topics in the field of law and social sciences has concerned the accuracy of eyewitness memory in children and adults. This extensive body of research has documented how well child and adult witnesses can remember and recount details of prior salient, stressful, and even traumatic experiences, as well as the conditions that contribute to or reduce errors, and approaches that increase disclosures in highly reluctant child and adult witnesses (Bull, 2010; Lamb et al., 2018; Quas et al., 2000; Saywitz et al., 2017; Wells & Olson, 2003). Conspicuously absent from a vast majority of this work is research with *adolescent* witnesses, that is, youth between the ages of 13-17 years who fall in between the child and adult samples. Adolescents are highly likely to experience and witness violence and be questioned legally as a result. They also possess a number of characteristics that may affect their response tendencies. As such, there is a critical need to test whether methods of increasing reporting and reducing errors in adults and children are similarly effective with adolescents, and if not, to develop questioning approaches that adequately address their unique experiential and interviewing needs.

The overarching purpose of the current review is to discuss the application of interviewing research to adolescent populations, with an eye toward identifying strategies most likely to facilitate adolescents' reporting completeness and accuracy. We first focus on why adolescents may be particularly reluctant to disclose some negative experiences. Second, we present results of a systematic review of rapport building in adolescents, which highlights the dearth of research. Third, we describe research concerning rapport building with adults and children, and emphasize the variations between populations in how rapport has been operationalized and studied. Finally, we close with recommendations regarding which operationalizations are likely to be most effective at enhancing adolescents' reporting and important steps in research concerning legal questioning of adolescents that could test these variations.

Before turning to our review, it is important to establish the *need* for research on best practice interviewing strategies for adolescents. For one, as mentioned, most research on children's eyewitness memory has focused on preschoolers and grade school aged children, the oldest of which tend to be 12 or

13 years (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Klemfuss & Olaguez, 2020). This limited inclusion of adolescents extends to research that has tested methods of *enhancing* children's reporting, such as via the use of rapport building. Despite adolescents' infrequent inclusion in research, they are quite likely to be questioned by law enforcement given their frequent exposure to crimes, especially that which is violent (Buka et al., 2001). According to the Bureau of Justice, for instance, 23% of victims of violence are between 12 to 17 years of age (Morgan & Truman, 2020). Only adults ages 18 to 24 years comprise a larger percent (25%). With respect to child maltreatment generally, 23% of victims are ages 12 to 17 years. This percent is substantially higher for certain types of sexual abuse (e.g., 72% of identified sex-trafficking victims are adolescents; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Finally, adolescents may engage in delinquency and crime or be with peers who do so and hence be witnesses to crimes (Chen, 2010). Thus, more so than other age groups, adolescents likely encounter and must answer questions by law enforcement about victimization in and outside of the family, their behavior, and the behavior of friends and peers. Adolescents' responses significantly and directly impact the direction of criminal investigations, the legal system's responses, and ultimately case outcomes.

Reluctance and Adolescent Reporting Tendencies

Despite experiencing and witnessing crimes at particularly high rates, adolescents are often unlikely to be forthcoming in disclosing those crimes. Reasons for this reluctance stem from social, emotional, and cognitive characteristics that are themselves hallmarks of adolescent development. Key among these are adolescents' exploratory tendencies (Erikson, 1968), feelings of autonomy (Beyers et al., 2003), affiliation to peers (Brown & Larson, 2009), and skepticism or distrust of adults (Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021; see Wyman et al., 2023). Clear understanding of these characteristics is crucial in order to develop interviewing strategies that address them and increase adolescent disclosures.

First, adolescence in general is a period of exploration, as youth progress on a path toward their own identity formation in part via expanding experiences and independence (Agnew, 1984; Erikson, 1968; Meeus et al., 2002). Many adolescents change schools and are exposed to new and larger peer groups. Adults simultaneously place fewer activity restrictions on youth, and the youth's need for adult

presence decreases, leading to adolescents' exposure to a wider array of situations, activities, and opportunities. This includes engaging in or exposure to risky behaviors, such as trying drugs, alcohol, or sex (Braams et al., 2015), or interacting with peers who try these behaviors (Agnew, 1984; Chen, 2010).

While adolescents' exploration and potential risk taking behaviors are considered normative, they may go against parents' or society's rules or expectations, leading adolescents to attempt to conceal or refrain from telling (Hunter et al., 2011; Yau et al., 2009). In fact, non-disclosure of topics that parents or adults tend to disapprove of (e.g., sexual activity) is particularly common among adolescents (Mollborn & Everett, 2010; Yang et al., 2006). Yet, so is non-disclosure of negative experiences that do not necessarily involve personal choice about behavior, including trauma-related experiences, such as witnessing violent activity or sexual victimization (Johnson, 2014; Lewis et al., 2012). This suggests a general tendency in adolescents to minimize adults' knowledge of a range of negative or risky events in their lives.

A second characteristic of adolescence that may affect their disclosure likelihood is their increasing tendency to see themselves as autonomous actors. Adolescents gradually make more decisions about what to do and how to behave (Beyers et al., 2003) and assume more responsibility for those decisions. This includes decisions within and outside of their home life, such as what clothes to wear, what time to wake up, with whom they should be friends and when to start dating (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Adults recognize and endorse adolescents' decisions and autonomy, regularly encouraging adolescents to take more responsibility for their actions. Parents provide opportunities for adolescents to "do the right thing," trusting that they will make good decisions about, for instance, what they choose to do with their free time (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Adults also hold adolescents accountable for their actions and experiences. As an example, adults believe that, with age, adolescents should be considered responsible for making decisions about "consensual" sexual relationships with older partners (Reitz-Krueger et al., 2016), and even perceive older adolescents as more blame-worthy for sexual abuse (Rogers et al., 2016) and exploitation (Winks et al., 2022) than younger adolescents.

Adults' tendency to hold adolescents responsible for their decisions and for getting themselves into negative and risky situations is shared by adolescents themselves. Adolescents may feel responsible

even for experiences that are outside of their control (e.g., for being maltreated or for disrupting their family by disclosing abuse) or for experiences into which they were manipulated. They may feel an adult does not have the right to know about their autonomous actions or they do not want to discuss experiences in which they were manipulated that make them appear vulnerable. Adolescents manipulated into sexual relationships or exploitation by an online or offline perpetrator represent one such example. Many are highly reluctant to tell (Ellis, 2019; Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021) and often do so only after external evidence is presented. Sizeable numbers claim that it was their choice to be in the relationship (Lavoie et al., 2019; Lindholm et al., 2014), failing to recognize a perpetrator's manipulative influence (Baird et al., 2020), leading to reluctant and evasive responses when interviewed.

A third characteristic that can contribute to adolescent reluctance concerns their dependency on peers for support, validation, and affiliation. During adolescence, youth shift away from relying primarily on parents for support and turn toward peers, with whom they spend increasingly large amounts of time and whose approval is often a core desire (Brown & Larson, 2009; Noom et al., 2001). If peers engage in risky or deviant acts, adolescents may engage in those acts for acceptance. If they do not, they still may not share their knowledge of the acts with adults for fear of losing acceptance or support (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). In fact, the stronger adolescents affiliate with peers over parents, the more likely it is that adolescents report that parents do not have a right to know information about those peers beyond basic details (Chan et al., 2015). When it comes to peers and disclosure, adolescents often go beyond simply omitting information; adolescents will at times overtly lie to solidify or maintain trust among friends, foster acceptance, and provide protection (Jensen et al., 2004; Malloy et al., 2014; Pimentel et al., 2015).

A fourth particularly noteworthy characteristic with implications for adolescents' disclosure arises from their lacking trust in adult authority figures, including professionals such as the police. Adolescents tend to direct their disclosures of sexual abuse to a peer or friend rather than an adult, because of both greater trust in friends and concerns about adults' responses and what will happen once the adults know (Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021). Adolescents report more suspicion and negative attitudes towards authorities, like the police, than do children and adults (Dirikx et al., 2012; Piquero et

al., 2005; Sindall et al., 2017). This may make adolescents skeptical and evasive in interactions with authorities, particularly if they understand the legal consequences of disclosure, such as the potential outcomes for themselves and their family.

In combination, adolescents' need for autonomy, desire to be responsible for their behaviors and decisions, commitment to friends, and low levels of trust in and high skepticism towards adults likely influence their responses when questioned by adults. For interviewing strategies to be effective in increasing adolescents' disclosures, strategies need to address the motivational processes underlying these developmental characteristics. Rapport building represents one potentially promising strategy, but only if it is tailored in a way that addresses the reasons why adolescents are reluctant in the first place. As we show next, rapport building in forensic interviews with adolescents has rarely been studied directly. It has typically been studied in children and adults, and the ways it has been defined and studied differs between these two age groups. These differences have implications for what types of rapport building might be effective with adolescents.

Rapport Building

At the broadest level, the overarching goal of rapport building in forensic settings is to create a positive and trusting relationship dynamic and increase an interviewee's comfort early in the dyadic interaction in order to facilitate later disclosure. Given this goal, and given that adolescents are uniquely reluctant to disclose, we conducted a systematic review of the literature to ascertain whether rapport building has been examined as a method of increasing adolescents' reporting. We focused on rapport building as a distinct individual interviewing strategy, rather than on broader constellations of strategies employed throughout an interview designed to improve witnesses' reports. Most notable of these is supportive interviewing, which can be difficult to distinguish from rapport as it often includes not only instructions *to* build rapport, but also other verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., acting warm and friendly, maintaining an open body posture, providing non-contingent positive reinforcement of the child's effort) during the interview that collectively should enhance children's report completeness and accuracy (Bottoms et al., 2007; Davis & Bottoms, 2002; Saywitz et al., 2015, 2019; but see Eisen et al.,

2019). The Cognitive Interview employed with adults (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; see Memon et al., 2010) instructs interviewers to build rapport and then to prompt adults in specific ways during the interview, again, to increase how much detail adults provide. Neither supportive interviewing nor the Cognitive Interview, though, describes *how* to build rapport. Furthermore, the effects of the individual strategies included in the constellations have not been disentangled. We contend that how rapport is built at the outset of an interview may be particularly important in relation to adolescents' comfort and initial reporting. Our review, which we turn to next, provides some hints consistent with this possibility.

Rapport Building and Adolescent Reporting

Our systematic review of rapport building with adolescents represented an extension of a comprehensive review of rapport building by Saywitz and colleagues (2015), who identified all publications from 1990 through 2014 that examined rapport building in eyewitness studies with youth under age 18, and identified only three eligible studies. Because of the availability of this review, we restricted our search to studies published after that study was complete (i.e., January 2015-June 2023). Notably, none of the three studies reviewed by Saywitz and colleagues (2015) included adolescents.

Eligibility criteria. Given our intent to extend the findings of the Saywitz et al. (2015), we followed largely the same inclusion/exclusion criteria, with two important alterations: 1) studies published between January 2015 and June 2023 (the time period since Saywitz et al.,'s publication), and 2) study participants had to include those between ages 13 to 17.

Search strategy and results. We developed search strings individualized for four databases: PsycInfo, PsycArticles, Scopus, and Web of Science. These were searched to identify experimental studies published in peer-reviewed journals evaluating the effects of rapport building on interview outcomes (e.g., accuracy, productivity) on adolescents. Search terms included variations of key words (e.g., child*, adolescen*, youth, interview*, rapport, accuracy, mental recall, memory, and recall, where * indicates truncation). The full search flow diagram can be found in the Supplemental material.

Database and journal searches yielded 628 articles, and hand searches yielded an additional four articles. After duplicates were removed, 428 articles were screened for relevance, and articles that

successfully passed the screening underwent a full review for eligibility ($n = 32$; see supplemental material). In all, after applying the exclusion criteria, only one study remained. Sauerland et al. (2018) had children (ages 6-10 years), adolescents (ages 12-17), and adults (ages 18-27) watch a brief video of a theft. Immediately afterward, their memory for the video was tested. Interviewers began with one of three rapport instructions: no rapport, during which interviewers gave no feedback and exhibited a closed posture; minimal rapport, during which interviewers asked superficial, closed-ended rapport-building questions; and extensive rapport, during which interviewers asked open-ended rapport-building questions, provided nonverbal encouragement, and maintained an open posture. The extensive rapport condition most closely approximates open-ended rapport building commonly used with children; however, this condition was confounded with supportive interviewing techniques. Among adolescents, but not children or adults, those who received extensive rapport provided a greater number of details about the video than did those who received no or minimal rapport. Accuracy did not differ across conditions, with most participants in all age groups performing near ceiling in terms of accuracy.

Overall, our systematic literature review revealed a significant dearth in research on rapport building with adolescent potential victims and witnesses, including experimental research testing the effects of rapport on their disclosure, report completeness, or report accuracy. In contrast to this gap, much larger bodies of literature have assessed the effects of rapport building on adults' and children's reporting tendencies, as we describe next.

Rapport Building and Adult Reporting

Research on rapport building with adults has examined its utility with potential adult victims and witnesses, but more often with adult suspects and high-value intelligence sources (Alison et al., 2013, 2014; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Kelly et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2020; Memon et al., 2010; Walsh & Bull, 2012). Regardless of the population, the goal of rapport is the same, to increase adults' disclosure of details regarding a substantive topic--that is, something they experienced, witnessed, or perpetrated.

Rapport building strategies occur during an initial "getting to know you" phase of an interview. They are often heuristically grouped into three broad types based on whether they foster mutual attention,

positivity, or coordination (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990; see Table 1). *Attention* reflects the degree to which interaction partners—in a legal context, the interviewer and the victim, witness, or suspect—are focused on or interested in each other. Interviewer behaviors believed to facilitate attention include active listening, acknowledgements, and identifying emotions (Abbe & Brandon, 2014; Collins & Carthy, 2019; Walsh & Bull, 2012). Active listening includes backchannel responses (e.g., “uh huh”, “yeah”) and rephrasing or summarizing information provided by the interviewee to convey interest and understanding of the information and its value (Abbe & Brandon, 2013, 2014; Walsh & Bull, 2012). An interviewer may also call attention to an interviewee’s expressed emotions (e.g., “You said it made you feel sad”; Collins & Carthy, 2019) to demonstrate the interviewer is engaged and cares about the interviewee’s feelings.

Positivity reflects the affective nature of the interaction, including perceptions of one another’s friendliness and caring. Interviewers are encouraged to introduce themselves, use the interviewee’s name often (i.e., vocatives; Abbe & Brandon, 2014; Walsh & Bull, 2012), and start with personal background questions that suggest a desire to learn about the interviewee as a person (Carol et al., 2021; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014). While eliciting background information, interviewers are encouraged to reveal personal information about themselves, a process called mutual self-disclosure, as a way of eliciting liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dianiska et al., 2021; Vallano & Compo, 2011; Wachi et al., 2018). Self-disclosure by interviewers can also help establish common ground between the interviewer and interviewee, demonstrate reciprocity of disclosure, and emphasize similarities (Collins & Miller, 1994; Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016; Vallano et al., 2015).

Finally, *coordination* reflects synchrony, balance, and harmony of the interaction. Interviewers may provide explanations or information about how the interview process will unfold (Alison et al., 2013; Brimbal et al., 2021; Collins & Carthy, 2019). Other coordination strategies include pausing at appropriate junctures so that the interaction partners can gather their thoughts and establishing appropriate turn-taking patterns with back-channels or behavioral fillers (uh huh, head nods) (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). These behaviors lead to a shared understanding of the interview format and interviewer-interviewee relationship, as well as a balanced question-response pattern. The latter strategies may also

reduce interference from the interviewer because there are built in pauses that give interviewees time to conduct the memory search and develop responses without interruption (Abbe & Brandon, 2013).

Although conceptually these three groupings of rapport are often described separately, in research, they are studied together and may be linked to other interviewer behaviors that similarly encourage more complete reporting. They are also difficult to separate. As an example, because back-channel utterances contribute to both attention and coordination, it would be difficult to separately examine attention and coordination. Furthermore, active listening and mutual self-disclosure are often paired with interviewers showing unconditional positive regard and expressing an understanding of the interviewee's perspective (i.e., acceptance and empathy, respectively; Alison et al., 2013), or with interviewers providing reassurance about individuals' disclosure or its consequences (Collins & Carthy, 2019). In combination, these behaviors should reduce anxiety and unease (Kieckhaefer et al., 2014; Nash et al., 2016) and increase trust, cooperation, and benevolence toward the interviewer (Brimbal et al., 2019; Carol et al., 2021; Dianiska et al., 2021; Macintosh, 2009), all of which should increase disclosure and report completeness.

Effects of Rapport Building on Adults' Reports

Analogue studies have examined the effects of rapport building on adults' memory and suggestibility for positive and negative events, disclosure tendencies, and even general cooperativeness. The experimental approach employed in most studies has allowed for causal inferences about the effects of rapport on reporting tendencies, including accuracy (for review, see Gabbert et al., 2020). Across studies, high rapport is often operationalized as overt behaviors like using vocatives (name use), showing personal interest, and mutual self-disclosure. When present, rapport increases disclosures of negative experiences shortly after an event takes place (Collins et al., 2002; Nash et al., 2016) and after brief or lengthy delays (Holmberg & Madsen, 2014). High rapport has also been shown at times to inoculate adult witnesses against misinformation (Kieckhaefer et al., 2014; Vallano & Compo, 2011), although benefits are not always observed (Carol et al., 2021; Nash et al., 2020; Sauerland et al., 2018). Of particular relevance to adolescents, rapport also increases young adults' disclosures of negative events with which

they feel complicit. Dianiska et al. (2021) found that pre-substantive mutual self-disclosure by an interviewer, especially that which highlighted similarities with the interviewee, increased young adults' feelings of cooperativeness and the amount of detail they provided about prior wrongdoings.

Field research has also investigated rapport building and disclosure tendencies about *actual* crimes most often in suspects and high value detainees but also at times in suspected victims and witnesses. Unlike with analogue research, in which researchers can control exposure to an event and manipulate an interviewer's approach to draw causal inferences about the effects of that approach, field research usually cannot determine whether an interviewer's rapport behaviors increase information gained, whether more productive interviewees elicit high rapport from interviewers, or whether a third variable affects the relationship between rapport and disclosure. These methodological limitations, however, are offset by the unique insight afforded by studying how adults actually talk about and disclose salient and potentially highly emotional crimes (see Gabbert et al., 2021). Findings are fairly consistent with those obtained in analogue research: Positive associations have been reported among rapport, cooperativeness, and suspects' disclosure of child sex crimes, murder, rape, and robbery (Collins & Carthy, 2019; Kelly et al., 2016). In one of the few field studies of rapport building with victims, Kim et al. (2020) coded videos of interviews of adult victims of sexual assault for components of rapport. Greater use of rapport tactics like unconditional positive regard and appropriate revealing of personal information by interviewers (i.e., mutual self-disclosure) were associated with victims providing more substantive information about their assault.

Summary. Across analogue and field investigations, rapport building is associated with increases in reporting from adult victims, witnesses, and suspects. Rapport appears particularly beneficial when adults are asked about sensitive topics, such as those involving negative events, including those with which adults may feel some degree of complicity. As we discuss next, similar benefits of rapport building have emerged with children, although strategies emphasized tend to differ.

Rapport Building and Children's Reporting

Developmental studies of rapport building have examined how rapport affects the completeness and accuracy of children's reports of positive and negative documented events, and the relations between rapport and children's disclosures of alleged abuse in actual forensic interviewers (Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz et al., 2015, 2019). Most studies have included children ranging from preschool-age through later childhood (e.g., 10-12 years), although a few have included adolescents as well (e.g., 13- 14 years, Cyr et al., 2012; Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb et al., 2009; Orbach et al., 2000). Across these studies, rapport building includes instructions as well as pre-substantive questioning.

Instructions (also known as ground rules) provide children with concrete and clear instruction about the interviewer's knowledge and interview purpose. As such, instructions could be conceptualized similarly to the rapport component with adults of promoting *coordination* or establishing a shared understanding of the reasons for the interview. Instructions with children include teaching them to say "I don't know" or "I don't remember" rather than guessing, and telling children to correct interviewers if they say something wrong (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], 2023; Lamb et al., 2018; Lyon, 2014). The use of instructions can increase children's response accuracy (Cordón et al., 2005; Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994; Warren et al., 1991; see Brubacher et al., 2015; Lyon, 2014), especially when given opportunities to practice (Danby et al., 2015).

Other instructions focus on motivational reasons why children may fail to disclose. Interviewers may elicit a promise from a child to tell the truth or reassure a child that she won't get in trouble for telling. These instructions facilitate disclosure from children about their own and others' transgressions, and reduces false allegations attributable to coaching (Lyon et al., 2008; Lyon & Dorado, 2008; McWilliams et al., 2021; Quas et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2002). A promise to tell the truth has been found effective with adolescents up to 16 years of age (Evans & Lee, 2010). An instruction that has been examined experimentally, but has received little attention from interviewers, is the putative confession, in which the interviewer tells the child that the suspect has disclosed "everything that happened." This has been found effective in children up to 10 years of age (Evans & Lyon, 2019; Lyon et al., 2014; McWilliams et al., 2021).

The second category of rapport building includes behaviors embedded in “getting to know you” questions asked of children during the introductory phase of an interview, before the interviewer asks about the substantive topic of interest. Rapport behaviors may include asking about a child’s preferences in terms of likes and dislikes and asking about a significant, non-abuse-related life experience, such as a holiday, vacation, or other special occasion. Asking about such background information and experiences are similar to interviewer behaviors that facilitate the *positivity* element of rapport. Interviewers may also provide implicit encouragement via backchannels (i.e., verbal non-word phrases like “uh-huh” and “mm-hmm”; see McWilliams et al., 2021; Olaguez et al., 2018) that reflect *attention*, given that such acknowledgements show the child that the interviewer is listening and engaged, and *coordination*, because backchannels encourage the child to continue with their narrative.

With children, more important than the topic of the questions is how they are phrased. To build rapport, interviewers are encouraged to ask open-ended questions, such as, “Tell me everything that happened on your last birthday,” rather than closed-ended or short-answer questions, such as “How old are you?” or “When is your birthday?” (Lamb et al., 2009; Lyon, 2014; Sternberg et al., 1997). The process of asking open-ended questions about non-abusive events, also known as *narrative practice*, encourages children to provide contextual and sequential details, and prepares them to answer open-ended questions during the substantive phase (Lyon, 2014).

Effects of Rapport Building on Children’s Reports

As with research including adults, both analogue and field studies have assessed the effects of rapport building on children’s reporting tendencies. Unlike in the studies with adults, though, virtually no studies have specifically considered rapport building in relation to child suspect reporting. Instead, all have focused on rapport and child victims or witnesses. Also unlike in studies with adults, which typically focus on the amount of detail provided, studies with children often distinguish among *disclosure* (whether or not children reveal that a critical event occurred), *productivity* (among children who do disclose, the amount of the information provided), and *accuracy* (the amount or proportion of correct information disclosed). Finally, while most studies have focused only on children, typically preschool-age

through middle childhood (e.g., through ages 10-12 years), a few have included adolescents, although the studies vary in whether they examined rapport separately across age.

Experimental studies of the effects of rapport building have reported fairly consistent benefits, although primarily with respect to productivity and accuracy, rather than disclosure. For example, open-ended questioning about non-substantive topics at the early stages of an interview increases productivity and accuracy in 3- to 9-year-olds' reports of interactions with an adult, including when they disclose transgressions (Lyon et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2004; Yi & Lamb, 2018). However, narrative practice has not been found to increase the likelihood of disclosure itself (Foster et al., 2023; Lyon et al., 2014; Yi & Lamb, 2018).

Field research has also uncovered findings suggestive of benefits of rapport on children's reporting. Open-ended questioning about non-substantive topics prior to questioning children about maltreatment has been linked to increases in the number of statements they provide about the maltreatment (Anderson et al., 2014; Hershkowitz, 2009; Price et al., 2013; Sternberg et al., 1997). However, the design of most field research precludes conclusions about accuracy, since ground truth is unknown, and precludes causal inferences, because differences in interviewer behavior prior to the disclosure of maltreatment may be related to differences during the disclosure of maltreatment details. Furthermore, as with the experimental work, the field work has demonstrated increases in productivity but not differences in disclosure.

An exception to these limitations is studies comparing the original NICHD protocol to the revised NICHD protocol. Whereas the NICHD protocol includes interview instructions, questions designed to build rapport by inquiring into the child's interests, and narrative practice (Orbach et al., 2000), the revised protocol moves the rapport building questions to the beginning of the interview, and emphasizes the need for the interviewer to express more interest in the child, provide more encouragement, and give more emotional support. The revised protocol has been found to increase the likelihood children disclose abuse, including in cases for which there was corroborative evidence, reducing concerns about ground truth (Blasbalg et al., 2021; Hershkowitz et al., 2014).

Of note, most field investigations of rapport building have included children ranging in age from three to 14 years. The revised NICHD protocol appears to be beneficial through at least early adolescence (Ahern et al., 2014; Blasbalg et al., 2019; Karni-Visel et al., 2019). One study examining rapport building included older adolescents. Teoh and Lamb (2010) compared rapport building and the amount of abuse-related details reports across three age groups: 5-7, 8-12, and 13-15 year olds. Interviewers' pre-substantive instructions were coded for statements relevant to rapport building (e.g., asking questions about youth's hobbies), evaluations (e.g., assessing youth's general reporting abilities, such as the ability to discern truths and lies), and explanations (e.g., explaining the rules and expectations of the interview to children). The researchers then coded the amount of details provided about maltreatment. Interviewers included a greater proportion of rapport building than other forms of instructions with the youngest age group. With adolescents, though, interviewers provided proportionally more explanations than rapport. Correlations between the proportion of each utterance type (rapport, evaluation, and explanation) and the amount of abuse-relevant information provided revealed, in contrast to expectations, that increases in the proportion of rapport building statements were related to *decreases* in the amount of substantive detail 5-7 year olds provided about their abuse. None of the instructions (rapport, evaluation, or explanations) were related to the amount of abuse-relevant information the older children and the adolescents provided. However, given the correlational nature of these findings, it could also be the case that younger children were less responsive, prompting interviewers to attempt more rapport that was ultimately unsuccessful.

Summary. Analogue and field research with children suggests that, for the most part, strategies designed to build rapport enhance their reporting tendencies. These strategies include providing instructions and ground rules, engaging children in narrative practice, and asking about personally meaningful non-substantive topics. Narrative practice is best established via open-ended prompts at the outset, which seem to teach children how to provide narrative details about themselves and their experiences, and about what the interviewer expects, expectations that translate into increases in children's later productivity. Open-ended rapport questions likely increase their comfort and willingness to talk about themselves and their experiences, including those that are negative. Whether these rapport

strategies would address the motivational reasons regarding why adolescents do not disclose is not entirely clear, but an issue to which we turn shortly.

Developmentally Informed Interview Approaches for Adolescents

The aforementioned review provides compelling evidence that different forms of rapport building are beneficial in forensic interview settings with adults and children. However, evidence falls short in providing clear direction regarding how the different approaches employed with the two age groups might be applied to *adolescents*, and whether doing so enhances their reporting tendencies, especially for experiences for which reluctance might be high (e.g., when they feel complicit). Rapport with adults emphasizes mutual self-disclosure as key to building cooperation. Rapport with children emphasizes training about expectations and practice answering open-ended questions. By integrating research on adolescent characteristics that likely affect disclosures with extant findings from studies of rapport with both adults and children, it is possible to generate several testable hypotheses about which specific rapport strategies may be particularly useful with adolescents. These hypotheses lay out a roadmap for future research that could lead to best practice guidelines specifically for adolescent victims, witnesses, and perhaps even suspects.

First, research needs to examine rapport strategies that emphasize open communication with adolescents, that is, strategies commonly employed with adult witnesses and suspects. Mutual self-disclosure may be key to do just this. Adolescents generally use self-disclosure to foster positive feelings between themselves and peers, for instance to initiate and support friendships (Bauminger et al., 2008; Berndt, 2002; Buhrmester et al., 1988). During rapport, interviewers can follow-up an adolescent's responses to open-ended questions with a comment about their own experiences. Theoretically, upon learning about an interviewer's similar experiences or difficulties, the adolescent might feel more like an equal and hence be more likely to disclose a subsequent critical event. Moreover, depending on the nature of the mutual self-disclosure, the interviewer may also come to appear more like a peer, leading to increased trust and liking, as well as efforts to affiliate on the part of the adolescent (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dutton et al., 2019). Of course, for such self-disclosures to be effective, they have to be genuine—

and perceived as such by adolescents--highlighting the need to consider not only the mutual self-disclosure itself, but also what adolescents think about that disclosure.

Evidence from several studies suggests that adolescents recognize the value of mutual self-disclosure and that its use may enhance their subsequent reporting. Brown et al. (2014) asked 11-17 year old detainees what qualities in a mental health provider were effective in strengthening their relationship with that provider. A key quality mentioned as important was self-disclosure by the provider. Although researchers may caution against self-disclosure as not being therapeutic best practice, the adolescents in this study seemed to appreciate the feelings garnered by a mental health provider choosing them to be the recipient of the provider's disclosure about experiences. Certainly providers (and interviewers) would need to be selective in what topics to self-disclose, but talking about oneself seemed to be particularly beneficial, at least with these high-risk adolescents. In a study we conducted, adolescents completed questionnaires about their behaviors and experiences, including misdeeds, via an online form (Dianiska et al., 2024). At a later date, interviewers questioned the adolescents via Zoom about misdeeds they reported having committed. Interviewers first began by engaging in either enhanced rapport (open-ended questioning about the interviewee's background, with interviewer self-disclosure), open-ended rapport (open-ended questioning only), or minimal rapport (closed-ended questioning only). Adolescents then rated their perceived rapport with the interviewer. In general, adolescents perceived high rapport across conditions, and they reported the greatest amount of detail in the enhanced rapport and the least amount of detail in the minimal rapport condition. We are now testing this important finding in larger and more diverse samples and via in-person interviews.

A second important rapport strategy that should be tested directly with adolescent populations builds on their growing desire and need for control and autonomy. A core component of the Cognitive Interview, a semi-structured motivational interview protocol used with adult victims and witnesses (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992) involves transferring control to interviewees, given that they are the ones with the knowledge. The interviewer might tell interviewees that they have all of the relevant information and are expected to do most of the talking. Interviewees are thus in charge of when and what they

disclose, which theoretically should increase their comfort when discussing negative experiences. With children, instructions referencing the naïve interviewer place children as the “experts” of their own experience, which implies they can guide what content is revealed. Cued-invitation prompts, such as “tell me more about XX” (see Brown et al., 2013) and supportive reinforcement (see Lamb et al., 2018) similarly allow children to guide the content of what they report, by elaborating on information they already reported. It is unknown whether these implicit forms of control are sufficient to engage adolescents, who are more cognizant than children of the motivations behind an interviewer’s statements (Evans & Lyon, 2019). The detained adolescents in Brown et. al.’s (2014) investigation of client-provider relationship cited control over the content of the interaction as another important feature that helped them build trust with a provider. This “client-directed care” stresses adolescents’ autonomy, empowering them as agentic and valued. Insofar as adolescents are given genuine control in investigative interviews, they may well be more responsive. If this control is perceived as disingenuous or given and then taken back part way through an interview, a possibility given adolescents’ reasoning abilities and skepticism about adults’ motives (Deck et al., under review), decreases in productivity may well result (Nogalska et al., 2021). The effects of manipulating direct and indirect indicators of control could be tested directly in analogue research and evaluated in field research.

Third, given the importance and value adolescents place on peer relationships, acknowledgment of adolescents’ feelings toward peers may also facilitate rapport and perhaps even disclosure itself. It is well documented that adolescents exhibit strong loyalty to their peers, as reflected in their reported willingness to lie to authorities (Warr, 1993) or provide false confessions (Malloy et al., 2014) to protect their friends. Although at times interrogators may attempt to persuade adolescents to tell on their peers via promises of leniency or lower bail (Dodge, 2006), the accuracy of information gained from such tactics is unknown and could, as mentioned, lead to lying and true (or even false) confessions. Interviewers who address adolescents’ commitment to their peers in an honest way may be perceived of as more trustworthy than those who do not. While such a possibility has yet to be tested directly, evidence indicates that efforts to do the opposite (i.e., override adolescents’ affiliation to their peers) might actually

have the opposite effect. Brimbal et al. (2019) had young adults complete a laboratory “test” with a closely affiliated partner (confederate) who knowingly cheated during the test. When asked about what happened, the interviewer attempted to motivate some participants to disclose by highlighting how different the participants were from the partner, who was described as morally bad and delinquent. These participants were less likely to disclose the cheating than participants questioned by an interviewer who made no such comparisons. Whether these trends were due to feelings of affiliation with the partner, or would be stronger in adolescents who are especially likely to value affiliation, are not known. But, given the findings, and adolescents’ general commitment to peers, it is worthwhile to explore whether strategies that involve explicit recognition of peer affiliation early in an interview enhance rapport and trust and improve later reporting completeness.

A related possibility, and one worth exploring, is whether adolescents’ affiliation to peers or perhaps feeling a need to protect others could also serve as a motivation for adolescents to disclose abuse. As already mentioned, adolescents will lie and even falsely confess to crimes to protect a peer. Yet, if adolescents feel that a peer is in need of protection, rapport building that emphasizes the value of peers and how adolescents can help peers could, in theory, encourage adolescents to disclose harm and wrongdoing. Indeed, there is some evidence that adolescents who had delayed disclosing abuse eventually do so out of concern for other children (McElvaney et al., 2014). How such a motivation plays out, though, and whether rapport building can address issues concerning protection, is not yet clear.

Of note, none of the aforementioned recommendations needs to be delivered in isolation. Analogue research could test individual and combinations of recommendations. For instance, ground rules could be combined with narrative practice rapport and mutual self-disclosure to address multiple components of adolescents’ needs while concurrently giving them guidance about what they should do. Variations may also need to be applied across adolescents different ages. Older adolescents may recognize their role as independent agents in a conversation and hence be unreceptive to attempts to “teach” them how to communicate. Explanations for why ground rules are used could increase the rules’ perceived legitimacy, which may in turn increase older adolescents’ adherence by appealing to and

supporting their sense of autonomy (Smetana & Asquith, 1994), especially when interviewers are concurrently sharing personal information.

These suggestions are certainly not the only ways that adolescents' reporting can be enhanced, and other rapport strategies may also be examined. Moreover, tests of broader approaches, such as the Cognitive Interview and supportive interviewing, which incorporate rapport building into strategies employed throughout an interview, should continue to be evaluated. This could be particularly beneficial when adolescents are being questioned about highly distressing events or those about which adolescents feel some degree of complicity (e.g., because they feel they made poor choices that put them in a particular situation). It will also be important to evaluate whether effects generalize across ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. Doing so would broaden the scope of developmentally informed techniques available for interviewers tasked with finding out what, if anything, happened to adolescents.

Conclusions

To date, an understanding of how best to interview adolescents to elicit complete and accurate statements has lagged behind that of children and adults. Building rapport during an interview has been shown to be effective in improving information elicitation in both children and adults, but the techniques emphasized as best practice tend to differ based on the age of the interviewee. Virtually every study on rapport building was conducted with young children (up through age 12 or 13) or with college-age young adults (age 18-21, and older). Few studies have directly examined specific techniques that may work best with adolescents, and none have addressed motivational reasons to counteract adolescent reluctance. Rapport building techniques used with other age groups may or may not be similarly effective with adolescents given normal developmental and socioemotional differences, and thus empirical evidence is needed in order to develop evidence-based best practice recommendations for interviewing this age group. An emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, common to rapport building with adults, may be similarly effective when used with adolescents given that mutual self-disclosures are common among adolescent peers and increase their liking of and affiliation with each other (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Valkenburg et al., 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Rapport building approaches that are tailored to address adolescents' motivational needs may be an effective way of increasing adolescents' reporting, and additional research testing such approaches will provide much-needed insight to inform the development of evidence-based practices for questioning these youth.

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