

Perceptions of Children During a Police Interview: A Comparison of Alleged Victims and Suspects¹

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The present study investigated jury-eligible undergraduates' perceptions of alleged child victims vs. child suspects. Participants read a transcript of a police officer questioning a child who was a victim or a suspect of a crime. The child's age (7, 11, or 14 years) and whether the child admitted involvement in the incident were systematically varied. Results indicated that, under certain conditions, individuals viewed suspects as less credible and less suggestible than victims of the same age. Also, those who viewed the police as fair were particularly likely to perceive that the child, regardless of victim or suspect status, was involved in the crime. Findings have implications for the treatment of child victims and defendants in the U.S. legal system.

In the early days of the juvenile justice system some 100 years ago, one of its founders, the Honorable William Hibbler, stated "Children don't stop being children just because they commit a crime" (as cited in Walker, Brooks, & Wrightsman, 1999, p. 196). Recent changes in the U.S. justice system's treatment of juvenile offenders, however, seem to indicate otherwise: Children accused of crime are often not afforded childlike statuses. The nationwide lowering of minimum ages for juveniles to be tried as adults implies that young offenders are deemed comparable to adults on abilities related to committing the crime (e.g., premeditation, understanding the consequences of the criminal act) and facing prosecution (e.g., conferring with attorneys, understanding the seriousness of the situation). Similarly, police actually recommend treating youths like adults in interrogation contexts, and there is evidence to indicate that these recommendations are followed (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2001; Redlich, Silverman, Chen, & Steiner, 2004).

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Despite these practices, research suggests that juveniles, especially those aged 14 years and younger, do not have the same legal capacities as adults, both in and out of the courtroom (Grisso, 1981; Grisso et al., 2003). What is particularly disquieting about the treatment of youthful suspects is that this treatment stands in stark contrast to the recommended treatment of youthful victims. As we review, the theoretical basis for the discrepancy in treatment as well as the underlying reasons for this discrepancy have implications for decision making in legal cases involving children.³

In 2003, 2.2 million youths were arrested (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Approximately 710,500 of these children were age 15 years or younger. These numbers are in addition to countless other youths who interacted with the police on a less formal basis. However, little attention has been paid to the techniques that police employ while questioning these youths, including how they respond to questioning and how others perceive them during questioning.

In contrast to the dearth of knowledge on young suspects, a voluminous literature exists concerning child victim/witnesses. Of importance, findings from the child victim/witness literature have been used to support the implementation of accommodations for children who testify in court (e.g., Goodman, Quas, Bulkley, & Shapiro, 1999), such as closed-circuit television (*Maryland v. Craig*, 1990), and to improve methods of questioning child victim/witnesses so that reports are as accurate and complete as possible (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Similar lines of research have yet to be conducted on child suspects, which is an interesting paradox, given that delinquents are often former victims (e.g., Quas, Bottoms, & Nunez, 2002) and that the same questioning tactics (e.g., leading interviews) that have been deemed highly inappropriate for use with child victims are both employed and endorsed for use with child suspects. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that highly leading interrogative interviews can lead to false confessions in juveniles (Drizin & Colgan, 2004; Redlich et al., 2004). And although much of the research on child victim/witnesses has focused on the very young (i.e., preschoolers), evidence has indicated that older children and adolescents involved in the legal system—as alleged victims or suspects—share some of the same limitations as younger children (e.g., insufficient knowledge of the legal system; Bruck &

³Throughout this paper, we use the terms *juvenile*, *youth*, and *child* to describe individuals of tender years, specifically age 17 and younger, in the legal system. We recognize that, depending on the context and age, certain terms are more common than others (e.g., the term *juvenile* is rarely applied to child victims). However, because all such individuals are legally children, the terms are largely used interchangeably. Of importance, when specifically discussing the present study, we use the generic term *child* consistently to describe the 7-, 11-, or 14-year-old being questioned.

Ceci, 2004; Grisso et al., 2003; Warren, Hulse-Trotter, & Tubbs, 1991) and susceptibility to highly leading interview tactics (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Roebbers & Schneider, 2002) and, therefore, may require some of the same accommodations that are used with young children (Owen-Kostelnik, Repucci, & Meyer, 2006).

One particularly important question concerning child victims and suspects is whether fact finders perceive the two groups of children's capabilities, suggestibility, and veracity differently. That is, do individuals believe that children stop being children because they commit a crime? Are "superior" abilities (e.g., lower suggestibility, increased understanding) attributed to child suspects more so than their peer counterparts who are alleged child victims? When questioned in an identical manner, are child suspects more likely to be perceived as having been involved in the crime than are alleged child victims?

In the present study, we seek to address these questions. This comparative focus on alleged victims and suspects is significant because both are groups involved in the legal system and are subject to the perceptions of fact finders, yet the presumption of capabilities of these two groups appears to be quite distinct. Research is needed to clarify precisely when and how perceptions vary based on children's legal status, as either victims or suspects, the findings of which have important implications for actual cases involving both types of children in the justice system.

Police Interviewing of Children

Regardless of whether a child is brought to the attention of the authorities as a suspected victim of, witness to, or perpetrator of a crime, the police typically conduct an interview. If the child is an alleged victim or witness to a crime, numerous precautions are advised when conducting the forensic interview (see Poole & Lamb, 1998). These precautions stem from a large body of psychological research and several high-profile cases indicating that children can be led to make gross errors in their eyewitness reports and even claim that fictitious (and sometimes bizarre) events occurred (e.g., Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1998; Garven, Wood, & Malpass, 2000).

Interview techniques that are deemed inappropriate and to be avoided include pursuit of a single hypothesis (e.g., that a crime had been perpetrated); use of leading, suggestive questions (e.g., "Mr. X did this to you, right?"); and repeated questions. In fact, if it is shown that the pretrial interview was conducted with inappropriate and suggestive questioning, it is possible that a child's description of events can be considered so "tainted" that the child is precluded from testifying further (Myers, 1995; *State v.*

Michaels, 1994). Of importance, the list of techniques to be avoided by interviewers emerged from research that took into account the social and cognitive developmental abilities of children. The techniques were not based on, and in fact did not take into account, the victim status per se of the children.

Lessons learned regarding the interviewing of child victim/witnesses have not been applied to child suspects, despite evidence indicating that children accused of crimes have deficits in legal knowledge and capabilities that are largely comparable to same-age victims (Grisso et al., 2003). Instead of being taught to avoid highly leading interview tactics, interrogators are trained to proceed under the assumption of guilt (see Meissner & Kassin, 2004), an assumption that, when applied to child victim/witnesses, has led to disastrous consequences in real-life cases of suspected abuse. Interrogators also commonly use questions that would be considered highly suggestive in interviews of alleged child victim/witnesses, such as explicitly informing the suspect that he or she in fact committed the crime (Drizin & Colgan, 2004). Other techniques potentially shared in the interviews of child victim/witnesses and the interrogations of child suspects (for a review, see Redlich et al., 2004) include supportive and nonsupportive interviewers (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; framed as minimization and maximization techniques in the interrogation literature, see Kassin, 1997), and positive and negative reinforcement (Billings et al., 2006; Garven et al., 2000).

Another critical shared legal feature between child victim/witnesses and child suspects is the potential for jurors to consider pretrial interviews when rendering decisions. What occurs during a police interrogation or interview—or perhaps more accurately stated, what jurors perceive to have occurred—can significantly affect decisions of guilt. If the interview was recorded, jurors may have the opportunity to view it and see firsthand what occurred during questioning. If the interview was not recorded, jurors may nonetheless hear about its content from the police officer, or perhaps from child victim or child suspect himself or herself.

In light of the fact that jurors may be presented with evidence of suggestive, inappropriate interview tactics, it is imperative to determine whether they evaluate that evidence differently on the basis of the child's role in the interview (i.e., alleged victim or suspect). Little is known about jurors' perceptions of child suspects during interrogations or whether jurors' perceptions vary between child suspects and victims. However, biases generally exist against those accused of crimes (Flanagan & Longmire, 1996; Weld & Roff, 1938), and sympathy is generally held for those victimized by crimes (Gault & Sabini, 2000). Because of these biases, we expect that child suspects will be viewed as more legally capable and more likely to be involved in a particular crime than their same-aged victim counterparts, even when the questioning

tactics employed are identical. However, as we discuss next, beliefs about child suspects versus victims may depend further on the age and perceived suggestibility of the child and the gender of participants.

Research on Perceptions of Children's Legal Capabilities

A large portion of the extant research on child victim/witnesses has been devoted to perceptions of children during interviews and trials (e.g., Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Goodman, Golding, Hegelson, Haith, & Michelli, 1987). A similar vein of research on perceptions of child suspects (especially during the interrogation process) while begun, is much less advanced (see Redlich et al., 2004). In the following section, we review findings on perceptions of children involved in the legal system, dividing our discussion in terms of child age, child suggestibility, and participant gender because these factors consistently affect perceptions of child victim/witnesses.

Child Age

One of the most common findings in the field of children's eyewitness and child defendant capabilities concerns age differences. With age, children's memory reports become more complete and accurate, and their suggestibility decreases. They also better understand what occurs in legal contexts (see Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Goodman, Emery, & Haugaard, 1998; Grisso et al., 2003; Quas, Goodman, Ghetti, & Redlich, 2000; Redlich, Silverman, & Steiner, 2003). Fact finders recognize these age differences and perceive older children and adults to be more accurate, complete, and competent than younger children in legal contexts (e.g., Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Goodman et al., 1987; Quas, Thompson, & Clarke-Stewart, 2005).

However, research also has suggested that general beliefs regarding age differences in capabilities can be overridden in certain circumstances. For example, in child sexual abuse cases, mock jurors perceive younger child victims as more credible than older victims when they believe that the young victims possess age-inappropriate sexual knowledge (Bottoms & Goodman, 1994). Additionally, for child defendants, Ghetti and Redlich (2001) found that although participants correctly attributed increased legal understanding to 14- and 17-year-old defendants in comparison to 11-year-old defendants, these age-related differences in perceptions disappeared when the crime was severe and the victim died (as opposed to the victim being injured).

Because factors such as the severity of the crime eliminate perceived age-related differences concerning legally relevant abilities, we expect that

when perceptions of child victims and child suspects are compared directly, children accused of crimes will be viewed as more legally sophisticated than those who are allegedly victimized by crimes, the reason being primarily that biases against suspects exist. However, an open question is whether these anticipated biases against those accused of crimes will also be evident with particularly young suspects (i.e., 7-year-olds). Specifically, the majority of juveniles arrested are in their mid to late teens (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). If individuals rely on an availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) when retrieving images of criminals—and associated biases—it may be easier to imagine older than younger juveniles as criminals. Such a possibility would lead to differences in perceptions between victims and suspects to depend on the age of the child. Differences would then be evident when comparing older victims to older suspects, but not when comparing younger victims and suspects.

Child Suggestibility

Within the study of child victim/witnesses, suggestibility has been a primary area of investigation because of its significant applicability to legal situations. A highly suggestible victim could be led into falsely accusing an innocent person. Although suggestibility is of equal import in the field of child interrogations, it has not received equal attention as a potential predictor of inaccuracies in suspects' reports. Yet, it is possible that a highly suggestible suspect could be led to falsely confessing. Indeed, numerous case examples are available of suggestible persons falsely confessing to crimes (see Gudjonsson, 2003), and empirical support reveals positive relations between suggestibility and memory errors and false confessions, both in child witnesses and suspects (Redlich & Goodman, 2003; Scullin & Ceci, 2001).

Moreover, research has indicated that both mock and actual jurors are sensitive to suggestibility as an important contributing factor to errors in memory reports, particularly among child victims (e.g., Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Quas et al., 2005). In fact, jurors may be overly sensitive to suggestibility, rating alleged victims as suggestible even when no or only minimally suggestive questions are asked (Quas et al., 2005). Because of this sensitivity to suggestibility and because of biases toward suspects, we expect that individuals will perceive victims as more suggestible than suspects, especially when younger children are considered.

A major factor influencing perceptions of suggestibility concerns how consistent a child is during an interview. Children who change their statements, particularly in response to leading interview questions, appear to be more suggestible and less consistent (Berman, Narby, & Cutler, 1995; Leippe,

Manion, & Romanczyk, 1993), which can affect perceived child credibility and defendant guilt verdicts.

To our knowledge, no study has ever compared perceived suggestibility and credibility of children who as suspects or victims maintain denial versus admitting to criminal involvement. Thus, in the present study, we manipulate the child's level of consistency to examine the extent to which this variable also affects perceptions of child suspects. Specifically, we varied whether the child steadfastly denied involvement in the crime, or admitted involvement to the interviewing police officer but then immediately recanted the admission. Perceptions of child consistency are likely to influence the weight placed on a child suspect's pretrial statements, with individuals perceiving children who admit involvement, particularly alleged victims, as more suggestible than children who never admit involvement.

Juror Gender

Another major area of study in the child witness literature concerns how the perceiver's (i.e., fact finder's) gender affects perceptions of child victim/witnesses. Most often, gender has been examined in the context of child sexual assault cases. Results have revealed consistently that women are more pro-child/victim; while men are more skeptical of child victims, more pro-defendant, and more likely to render not-guilty verdicts (e.g., Bottoms, 1993; Bottoms, Nysse-Carris, Harris, & Tyda, 2003; Castelli, Goodman & Ghetti, 2005; Quas et al., 2005; Schmidt & Brigham, 1996). Reasons for differences in men's and women's views typically include that women are more empathetic toward abuse victims (Bottoms, 1993; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000). Women are more likely to have trait empathy, and trait empathy is positively related to support for victim-focused organizations (Gault & Sabini, 2000). Women also tend to react more positively toward child victims and may be more empathetic toward children generally, which would lead to their greater belief in and endorsement of child victims' statements.

In contrast to studies of mock and actual jurors' perceptions of child victims, juror gender has not consistently related to perceptions of child defendants, although some studies have suggested that women's more favorable views of children extend to child defendants (Redlich, Quas, & Ghetti, in press). Stalans and Henry (1994) found that women, compared to men, were less likely to recommend criminal court for first-time juvenile offenders who were accused of killing a stranger. Similarly, Haegerich and Bottoms (2000) found that women were less likely to find juvenile defendants guilty, less likely to view them as culpable, and more likely to view them as credible. However, other studies have failed to uncover participant gender differences

(e.g., Ghetti & Redlich, 2001). In the present study, consistent with a large body of research concerning child victims, we expect that women will view child victims more favorably than will men (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2003; Quas et al., 2005). We further expect women to hold favorable views for child suspects, based largely on the suspects also being children, but we expect men's and women's judgments of child suspects not to differ.

The Present Study

In the present study, we examine differences in perceptions of children accused of committing versus children allegedly victimized by a crime. We also investigate perceptions of police fairness in the context of a suspect interrogation versus victim forensic interview.

A between-participants design was used. Participants read a scenario in which a 7-, 11-, or 14-year-old was suspected of either being threatened with a gun at school or of having brought the gun to school and threatening another child (i.e., victim-suspect status manipulation). Because of zero-tolerance attitudes and recent societal concerns about school-related shootings, bringing weapons to school is considered a serious offense. Thus, it is entirely possible that an individual allegedly transporting a weapon in school could lead to a criminal case to be heard by a jury. These ages were chosen because of previous research findings on the perceived and actual capabilities of child victims and defendants (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Grisso et al., 2003) and because of their relevance to the legal system (i.e., 7 years is the minimum age one can be considered criminally responsible, and 14 years is often a state-eligible age for transfer to the criminal justice system; see Heilbrun, Leheny, Thomas, & Huneycutt, 1997).

After reading the scenario, participants read a transcript of the police interview with the child. The transcript was identical for both children described as victims and as suspects. At the end of police questioning, the child either did not admit involvement in the crime or admitted involvement, but immediately recanted. We manipulated this latter factor to influence the perceived suggestibility of the child.

Method

Participants

Participants were 229 undergraduates (92 male, 137 female) from two large public universities. Their ages ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 20.12$,

$SD = 3.71$), and their ethnic breakdown was as follows: European American = 26%, Asian American = 53%, Hispanic = 11%, Other/Mixed = 10%. The ethnic breakdown was representative of the two universities. All participants were eligible to serve on a jury.

Materials

Scenario and interview transcript. A scenario involving two school-age boys was created (Appendix A). The scenario included two components: an overview section and a written interview transcript. The overview section for the child-suspect condition explained that the boy allegedly brought a gun to school. The overview section for the child-victim condition explained that the boy was allegedly threatened with the gun. In both overviews, reasons for and against the likelihood of the crime were provided, so that participants did not automatically assume that a crime had occurred. For example, the scenario stated that the suspect/victim had been acting strangely and was getting into more and more troublesome situations, and that the person who called the police had twice before called the police in situations that turned about to be false alarms (see Appendix A).

The interview transcript, developed for the present study, involved a police officer questioning the child about his involvement in the gun incident (Appendix B). The questions were drawn in part from an actual legal case involving a police officer questioning an 11-year-old female suspect (the actual transcript was 90 pages in length, but a small subset of questions was included here; see Redlich et al., in press).

Unlike the scenario description, which made clear that the child was either a victim or a suspect, the police interview was identical for both victims and suspects. Thus, half of the participants were informed that they were reading the police officer interrogation of a possible child suspect and the other half were informed that they were reading the police officer interview of a possible victim to a crime, despite the interview being identical. Because many of the techniques employed by police when questioning children accused of crimes are similar to those at times employed with alleged child victims (even despite recommendations to avoid such techniques for child victims), the interview was appropriate for both and is ecologically valid.

Throughout the interview, the child denied involvement in the incident, despite attempts from the police officer to elicit an admission. The interview ended in one of two conditions: the child continued to deny involvement, or the child admitted involvement to the police officer but then immediately recanted to his mother (who had not been present during the interview).

Questionnaire. The post-transcript questionnaire began with demographic questions (e.g., age, gender). Next were questions about the child, the police officer, and the interview, which were identical, regardless of victim–suspect status (see Table 1). The latter questions first concerned the credibility, accuracy, confidence, suggestibility of the child and the police officer, and perceived fairness of the interview, and were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*). Another question concerned the child’s likelihood of involvement with the gun incident, which was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 6 (*extremely likely*). A set of “understanding” questions was asked to determine whether participants perceived the child to have understood the intent and other aspects of the interview (e.g., why the interview was being recorded). Finally, participants’ sympathy for offenders in general was examined on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*no sympathy*) to 6 (*a lot of sympathy*).

Procedure

All study procedures were approved by the universities’ Institutional Review Boards. Participation in the study occurred in small groups ranging from 2 to 25. A research assistant briefly explained the study to participants and then distributed the scenario, transcript, and questionnaire. Distribution of the different conditions occurred randomly within groups. Participants then read the materials and answered questions. Total time of participation was approximately 30 min, for which participants received course extra credit.

Results

The study conformed to a 2 (Child Status: victim vs. suspect) \times 3 (Child Age: 7, 11, or 14 years) \times 2 (Admission Status: did not admit vs. admitted then recanted) \times 2 (Participant Gender) between-subjects design. Preliminary analyses reveal that participants’ perceptions did not differ across the two data-collection sites, which were not considered further.

To reduce the number of questions included in the analyses, composite variables were created among questions that tapped the same underlying construct. We focused on three constructs: child credibility (e.g., perceptions of child credibility, child accuracy, child consistency), police fairness (e.g., perceptions of police credibility, interview fairness, use of suggestive questions), and child interview understanding (e.g., perceptions of how well the child understood aspects of the interview).

Table 1

*Composite Scores*Child Credibility

How credible do you find the child?

How believable do you find the child?

How consistent do you think the child was during the interview?

How confident do you think the child was during the interview?

How accurate do you think the child was in recalling the events of the day in question?

How much sympathy do you feel for the child?

How likely is it that the child was truthful with the officer?

How likely is it that the child intentionally lied to the police officer during the interview? (R)

Police Fairness

How credible do you find the police officer?

How likely is it that the police officer was truthful with the child?

How likely is it that the police officer lied to the child during the interview? (R)

How likely is it that the police officer was trying to confuse the child during the interview? (R)

How fair do you think the interview was?

How manipulative do you think the police officer was? (R)

How manipulative do you think the interview questions were? (R)

How suggestive do you think the interview questions were? (R)

Child Interview Understanding

How likely is it that the child understood the questions being asked?

How likely is it that the child understood the original intent of the interview?

How likely is it that the child understood he could stop the interview any time he wanted?

Do you think the child understood why the interview was being recorded?

Note. R = reverse-scored. For each measure, higher scores indicate more positive values of the trait. Question order in the actual survey materials was mixed.

First, for child credibility, the eight questions listed in Table 1 formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$; inter-item correlations ranged from .16 to .71). The question concerning participants' perceptions of the child's suggestibility was not included (when it was included, $\alpha = .82$). Although inclusion of the suggestibility question did not substantively affect the results, for theoretical reasons, participants' ratings to this particular question were analyzed separately.

For police fairness, eight questions were included, with inter-item correlations ranging from .17 to .65 (see Table 1). The question concerning participants' confidence in the police was included, but the scale's reliability was slightly greater with the latter question removed (α s = .84 and .81 with and without participants' ratings of police confidence, respectively).

Finally, the four questions that comprised the Child Interview Understanding scale concerned how likely the child understood the interview questions and intent, as well as whether the interview could be stopped and why it was being recorded. Cronbach's alpha was .72, with inter-item correlations ranging from .20 to .64 (Table 1). Deleting any one item did not change the strength of the scale in a meaningful way.

Perceptions of the Child and the Police

To examine ratings of the child and the police, we conducted a 3 (Child Age: 7, 11, or 14 years) \times 2 (Child Status: victim v. defendant) \times 2 (Admission Status: did not admit vs. admitted then recanted) \times 2 (Participant Gender) between-subject MANOVA.⁴ As shown in Table 2, the three composite scores and child suggestibility were significantly correlated. Thus, we entered these four scores as concurrent dependent measures into the MANOVA. Means and standard deviations across the groups for the dependent measures are presented in Table 3. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) are reported for significant group differences.

The MANOVA reveals significant main effects of child age, admission status, and a marginally significant effect of participant gender (see Table 3). In addition, the interaction between child age and admission status, $F(4, 199) = 2.69$, $p < .05$; and the three-way interaction between child status, admission status, and participant gender were statistically significant, $F(4, 198) = 2.62$, $p < .05$. There was also a nonsignificant trend for the Child Status \times Admission Status interaction, $F(4, 198) = 2.02$, $p = .09$.

⁴The MANOVA was conducted again, controlling for participants' ratings of their general level of sympathy for offenders, similar to previous studies controlling for potential prosecution/defense biases when analyzing mock juror perceptions (e.g., Kassin & Wrightsman, 1983). Results remained identical; thus, these results are not reported in the main text.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among Dependent Measures

	1	2	3
1. Child credibility	—		
2. Police fairness	-.41***	—	
3. Child interview understanding	-.35***	.37***	—
4. Child suggestibility	.26***	-.23***	-.17**

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Next, we discuss the significant univariate analyses that emerged. Of note, however, although the independent variables influenced ratings of child credibility, child interview understanding, and child suggestibility, ratings of police fairness were unaffected.

Child age. The significant univariate main effects of child age emerged for child credibility and child interview understanding scores. As shown in Table 3, the 7- and 11-year-olds were viewed as significantly more credible and as having significantly more understanding than were the 14-year-olds. For child credibility, Cohen's d effect sizes between 7- and 14-year-olds, and between 11- and 14-year-olds were .43 and .39, respectively. For child interview understanding, Cohen's d effect sizes between 7- and 14-year-olds, and between 11- and 14-year-olds were .60 and .37, respectively.

Child status. No main effects of victim-suspect status emerged. However, child status interacted with admission status and participant gender to influence perceptions, the results of which are described next.

Admission status. Significant univariate main effects involving admission status emerged for child credibility and child suggestibility ratings. Children who admitted involvement and then recanted were viewed as significantly less credible ($d = .56$), but significantly more suggestible ($d = .35$) in comparison to children who never admitted involvement in the crime (Table 3). However, these main effects were subsumed by several interactions.

First, a significant interaction between child age and admission status qualified the main effect of child suggestibility, $F(4, 199) = 2.69$, $p < .05$. Simple effect analyses reveal that, among children who were 11 years of age, those who admitted and recanted were viewed as significantly more suggestible ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.17$) than were those who never admitted involvement ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(1, 79) = 12.26$, $p \leq .001$ ($d = .78$). The same pattern of results emerged for 14-year-olds, but did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 73) = 2.95$, $p = .09$ ($d = .40$). For 14-year-olds who never admitted

Table 3

MANOVA Results

	Multivariate	Univariate	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Child age	$F(4, 398) = 3.06^{**}$			
Child credibility		$F(2, 201) = 6.68^{**}$		
7-year-old child			3.65 _a	0.88
11-year-old child			3.60 _a	0.78
14-year-old child			3.27 _b	0.89
Police fairness		$F(2, 201) = 2.18$		
7-year-old child			2.71	0.79
11-year-old child			2.87	0.98
14-year-old child			3.02	0.85
Child interview understanding		$F(2, 201) = 7.68^{***}$		
7-year-old child			2.68 _a	0.97
11-year-old child			3.10 _a	0.88
14-year-old child			3.43 _b	0.92
Child suggestibility		$F(2, 201) = 0.00$		
7-year-old child			3.69	1.30
11-year-old child			3.75	1.19
14-year-old child			3.68	1.20
Child status	$F(4, 198) = 0.30$			
Child credibility		$F(1, 201) = 0.11$		
Victim			3.54	0.86
Suspect			3.47	0.87
Police fairness		$F(1, 201) = 0.12$		
Victim			2.87	0.86
Suspect			2.86	0.91
Child interview understanding		$F(1, 201) = 0.32$		
Victim			3.11	1.01
Suspect			3.16	0.88
Child suggestibility		$F(1, 201) = 0.79$		
Victim			3.77	1.14
Suspect			3.65	1.29
Admission status	$F(4, 198) = 11.57^{***}$			
Child credibility		$F(1, 201) = 14.56^{***}$		
Never admit			3.75	0.82
Admit and then recant			3.28	0.84

Table 3

Continued

	Multivariate	Univariate	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Police fairness		$F(1, 201) = 2.45$		
Never admit			2.95	0.90
Admit and then recant			2.79	0.87
Child interview understanding		$F(1, 201) = 2.57$		
Never admit			3.04	0.96
Admit and then recant			3.22	0.93
Child suggestibility		$F(1, 201) = 7.46^{**}$		
Never admit			3.49	1.07
Admit and then recant			3.91	1.32
Participant gender	$F(4, 198) = 2.15^{\dagger}$			
Child credibility		$F(1, 201) = 3.68^{\dagger}$		
Men			3.38	0.96
Women			3.59	0.79
Police fairness		$F(1, 201) = 0.56$		
Men			2.88	0.90
Women			2.86	0.88
Child interview understanding		$F(1, 201) = 0.26$		
Men			3.11	0.97
Women			3.15	0.94
Child suggestibility		$F(1, 201) = 1.30$		
Men			3.81	1.38
Women			3.63	1.10

Note. Higher scores indicate more positive and higher likelihood values of the desired trait. Means with different subscripts indicate significant differences according to planned comparisons. Significant interactions and Cohen's *d* effect sizes are reported in the text.

$^{\dagger}p < .10$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p \leq .001$.

involvement and for those who admitted and recanted, the means (*SDs*) were 3.42 (1.11) and 3.89 (1.27), respectively. The mean difference by admission status for 7-year-olds was nonsignificant, $F(1, 71) = 0.11$, *ns* (7-year-olds who never admitted involvement, $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.04$; 7-year-olds who admitted and then recanted, $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.50$). Age-group differences were not significant within either admission status condition.

Second, a significant three-way interaction emerged among child status, admission status, and participant gender for child suggestibility ratings, $F(1, 201) = 4.38, p < .05$ (see Figure 1). Simple effect analyses reveal that women viewed suspects who did not admit involvement ($M = 3.10, SD = 0.98$) as significantly less suggestible than victims who also did not admit involvement ($M = 3.73, SD = 0.81$), $F(1, 68) = 8.65, p < .01 (d = .79)$ and than suspects who admitted and then recanted ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 63) = 9.60, p < .01 (d = .73)$. Men, however, did not significantly differ in their ratings based on child or admission status and did not differ from women.

Third, the combination of child status and admission status significantly influenced child credibility ratings, $F(1, 201) = 5.52, p < .02$. Simple effect analyses indicate that victims who never admitted involvement ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.81$) were perceived as significantly more credible than were suspects who never admitted involvement ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.85$), $F(1, 112) = 3.71, p < .05 (d = .34)$. Thus, victims who stood their ground and did not yield to the police officer were seen as more credible, believable, accurate, and so forth, in comparison to suspects who also stood their ground. Additionally, the alleged victim who never admitted involvement was seen as significantly more credible than was the alleged victim who admitted and then recanted ($M = 3.16, SD = 0.77$), $F(1, 117) = 22.20, p < .001 (d = .92)$. When the child was a suspect, however, perceived credibility was not influenced by admission status ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.88$), $F(1, 116) = 2.24, ns$.

Participant gender. The multivariate main effect of participant gender approached significance, with the univariate gender effect approaching significance for child credibility ratings ($p = .06$; see Table 3). Men viewed the children as slightly less credible than did women.

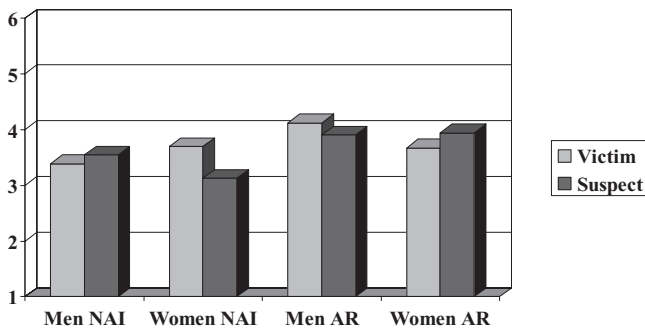


Figure 1. Three-way interaction among child status, admission status, and participant gender for child suggestibility ratings. NAI = never admitted involvement. AR = admitted and then recanted.

Likelihood of Involvement in the Crime

We next examined predictors of perceptions of the child's involvement with the gun incident, which corresponds to guilt for suspects and actual victimization for the alleged victims. Because we were interested in relations between likelihood of involvement, our independent variables, and the composite scores, we conducted a logistic regression. We created a *Yes/No* likelihood of involvement score, which is more common to a guilt verdict that might be rendered in a court, to serve as the dependent measure. Specifically, the likelihood rating, which was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely to be involved*) to 6 (*extremely likely to be involved*), was dichotomized such that participants who rated the child's likelihood of involvement as a 1, 2, or 3 (47%) were coded as 0 (i.e., did not perceive the child as involved) and participants who rated the child's likelihood of involvement as a 4, 5, or 6 (53%) were coded as 1 (i.e., perceived the child as involved). The three experimental manipulations and participant gender were entered first, followed by the three composite scores and child suggestibility ratings.

The regression model was significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 223) = 93.48, p < .001$, and correctly classified 79% of the participants (see Table 4). Admission status, perceptions of child credibility, and perceptions of police fairness emerged as significant predictors. Participants were twice as likely to rate a child who admitted and then recanted as having been involved than a child who never admitted involvement.⁵ Also, increases in participants' perceptions of the police as fair and decreases in participants' perceptions of the child as being credible were both associated with a greater likelihood of perceiving the child to be involved in the crime.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of the present study was to investigate the extent to which individuals perceive children interviewed by police differently when the children are alleged victims versus suspects. Of particular interest was whether the effects of children's age, consistency in admission of involve-

⁵To examine whether the study factors interacted to influence perceptions of likelihood of involvement, we also conducted a 3 (Child Age) \times 2 (Child Status) \times 2 (Admission Status) \times 2 (Participant Gender) ANOVA with participants' ratings of the child's likelihood of involvement in the crime as the dependent measure. Results of this analysis reveal a significant main effect of admission status, $F(1, 203) = 10.10, p < .01$ ($d = .51$), a finding observed in the logistic regression. Children who never admitted involvement ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.11$) were viewed as significantly less likely to have been involved in the crime than those who admitted and then recanted their involvement ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.24$). There were no other significant main or interaction effects between the independent measures.

Table 4

Logistic Regression With Dichotomized Likelihood of Involvement Ratings

	Wald (1)	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval
Step 1			
Child age	0.23	1.11	0.72–1.67
Child status	3.25†	0.53	0.26–1.01
Admission status	3.90*	2.11	1.01–4.41
Participant gender	2.70†	0.56	0.27–1.07
Step 2			
Child credibility	18.36***	0.32	0.19–0.53
Police fairness	19.88***	3.18	1.92–5.29
Interview understanding	0.22	1.10	0.75–1.65
Child suggestibility	3.38†	1.36	0.97–1.86

Note. Likelihood of involvement: 0 = not perceived to be involved; 1 = perceived to be involved. Child age: higher is older. Child status: 0 = victim; 1 = suspect. Admission status: 0 = no admit; 1 = admit and then recant. Participant gender: 0 = male; 1 = female. Child credibility: higher is more credible. Police fairness: higher is more fair. Interview understanding: higher indicates more understanding. Child suggestibility: higher indicates more suggestible.

† $p < .10$. * $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$.

ment, and participant gender depended on whether the child was described as a suspect or as a victim. We predicted that participants would rate child suspects as more savvy (i.e., perceived as having more understanding, less suggestible, less credible) and as more likely to have been involved in the gun incident than child victims. Although main effects of child victim–suspect status on perceptions did not emerge, child status interacted in meaningful ways with participant gender and admission status, suggesting that individuals may make decisions differently according to whether they think that they are considering a suspect or a victim of a crime. Next, we discuss possible reasons for these differences.

Perceptions of Alleged Victims and Suspects

Whether the child was described as a victim or suspect—along with whether the child admitted and then recanted or never admitted

involvement—influenced ratings of child credibility. Arguably, the credibility of suspects and victims would be expected to differ because suspects have presumably more reason to deceive than victims. Of course, the latter point depends on whether the suspects indeed committed the crime, an issue that was intentionally ambiguous in the present study. We found that whereas child age influenced perceptions of the child suspect's credibility, child age did not influence perceptions of actual involvement in the crime, although lower perceptions of credibility in general were related to greater beliefs that the child was involved in the gun incident.

Our findings are consistent with several studies concerning child victim/witnesses that have reported similar trends: Child victim age was related to perceptions of child credibility, but not to overall differences in guilt judgments (e.g., Goodman et al., 1987). But perceptions of credibility in turn are then predictive of judgments of guilt (e.g., Crowley, O'Callaghan, & Ball, 1994).

However, credibility ratings were influenced by victim–suspect status, depending upon whether the child denied or admitted and then recanted involvement in the crime. Specifically, whereas inconsistencies (i.e., admitting and then recanting involvement) did not influence credibility perceptions for child suspects, these same inconsistencies significantly lowered credibility perceptions for child victims. That is, when the child consistently denied involvement, victims were rated as significantly more credible than were suspects. This pattern emerged despite the basis for participants' ratings—the transcript of the interview—being identical between victims and defendants. In addition, when the child was inconsistent, the victims' perceived credibility decreased to a level comparable to that of the suspects. Among suspects, inconsistency (i.e., denying vs. admitting and then recanting) was unrelated to their perceived credibility.

One possible explanation for why individuals failed to take admission status into account when evaluating the credibility of child suspects is because suspected criminals are not believed to be trustworthy individuals. Thus, regardless of their actual behavior during the forensic interview and regardless of whether they provide truthful information, suspects are not perceived as credible. This idea is consistent with another result of the present study. Namely, admitting and then recanting was associated with a higher likelihood of guilt than was never admitting. That is, although perceptions of suspects' credibility were unaffected by admission status, participants believed that when the suspect admitted involvement and then recanted, the original admission was truthful (as opposed to the recantation)—a finding that supports the commonly held fallacy that people do not confess to crimes that they did not commit. Although the same pattern was found for alleged child victims, the act of admitting and

then recanting was sufficient to significantly lower their perceived credibility to that of a suspect.

Further, we found that victim–suspect status, in conjunction with participant gender, influenced perceptions of suggestibility. Unlike credibility, which may vary based on different motivations between victims and suspects, actual suggestibility would not be expected to differ based on victim–suspect status, especially when individuals are questioned in an identical manner. In our study, women rated suspects who never admitted involvement as less suggestible than victims who never admitted involvement. Thus, women’s perceptions of the child’s suggestibility depended on the status of the child. As reflected in recent controversial legislation for juvenile offenders (e.g., facilitating options to try juveniles as adults) that presume higher levels of sophistication than may be warranted (see Grisso et al., 2003), certain individuals—in this case, women—viewed suspects as less suggestible than same-aged victims (though only when the child never admitted involvement). Men’s perceptions of child suggestibility were unaffected by victim–suspect status and by admission status, and overall were similar to women’s perceptions.

Our hypothesis concerning a significant interaction between participant gender and victim–suspect status for child ratings was not directly upheld. Previous research into perceptions of child victim/witnesses in sexual assault cases (Bottoms, 1993; for a review, see Schutte & Hosch, 1997) has generally revealed that (a) women view children more favorably than do men; and (b) men are more likely than women to find for the defendant. However, in these studies, the victim was a child and the defendant (i.e., suspect) was an adult. In the present study, we compared perceptions of victims and suspects who were children. When such comparisons are made, men’s and women’s beliefs appear to be much more similar than different, at least for perceptions of children’s credibility, police fairness, and children’s interview understanding.

Finally, significant differences did not emerge between participants’ perceptions of child interview understanding for alleged victims and suspects. This pattern is somewhat surprising, given considerable differences in the current recommendations and treatment of child victims versus suspects in the legal system (e.g., for victim/witnesses, special accommodations when testifying, Myers, 1995; for suspects/defendants, increasingly harsh, zero-tolerance attitudes and practices; Fagan & Zimring, 2000).

In previous research (Ghetti, 2002; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001), characteristics of the crime led individuals to attribute higher levels of legal competence to juveniles described as having committed the most violent act, relative to juveniles described as having committed a less severe act with less severe consequences. As such, we expected this effect to be even larger when the attributed capabilities were compared between a child suspect and an alleged

victim. It is possible that because in the present study actual involvement in the offense was ambiguous (while it was a given fact in previous studies) implicit theories about criminals' abilities were not activated, especially for younger suspects, a possibility consistent with the aforementioned credibility victim/suspect credibility findings. Moreover, the criminal act described in the present study may have been too mild. Main findings concerning attributions of competence in Ghetti and Redlich (2001) were linked to crime severity. In the future, it will be important to examine perceptions of different aged victims and suspects involved in a more severe crime, such as attempted murder or a gun incident that resulted in actual injury.

Factors Predicting Involvement With the Crime

A second focus of the present study concerned factors related to ratings of involvement in the crime, either as a victim or as a perpetrator. Not surprising, admitting involvement and then recanting significantly predicted perceptions of involvement. Thus, consistent with a large body of research, recantations are not believed (e.g., London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005). Lower perceptions of child credibility and greater perceptions of police fairness also predicted increases in participants' beliefs about the likelihood of the child having been involved in the crime.

Previous research with adult defendants has found that conviction rates decrease when police use strong-arm, intimidating tactics to elicit a confession during an interrogation, but that conviction rates remain high when police use softer, sympathetic techniques to elicit a confession (Kassin & McNall, 1991; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980). The latter techniques, employed both in interrogations and forensic victim interviews and used in the present study (see Appendix B), can lead and have led to gross errors (Garven et al., 2000; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). Individuals who nonetheless perceived these techniques as fair were more likely to view the child as having been involved. In contrast, at least some participants recognized the unfairness of the subtle techniques and, in doing so, were less likely to believe that the child was involved in the crime.

Caveats and Conclusions

Results from the present study are intriguing and begin to shed light on an important area of research concerning perceptions of children involved in legal cases. However, some limitations to the study should be noted. First of all, the number of participants in individual cells was somewhat small (e.g.,

$n = 10$). Thus, we may have failed to detect significant differences because of lack of power. However, meaningful and predicted effects still emerged, demonstrating the adequacy of the sample size to test our main hypotheses.

Second, consistent with a large body of decision-making research, participants were undergraduate students, and thus were not representative of the wide range of ages and other characteristics (e.g., parental status) that can influence legal decision making. Yet, studies have reported no or few differences in legal perceptions between student and actual juror (or community member) populations when evaluating victims and defendants (Bornstein, 1999; Goodman et al., 1987; Lassiter, 2002; Quas et al., 2005). As such, findings that emerge in college-student samples remain informative and important.

Third, the crime in the present study involved a boy bringing a gun to school and threatening another boy with it. Whether the findings generalize to other types of crimes (e.g., child sexual abuse, attempted murder) or to girls is heretofore unknown, but is important for future research to consider. Fourth, the means of presenting and the content of the transcript could have affected the results. For instance, the interview transcript was identical across victim/suspect status and child age, therefore precluding the possibility of making age-appropriate modifications to the statement. Of course, it is unknown whether the police are sufficiently cognizant of age-related changes in children's capabilities and knowledge to change questions based on the age of the child victim or suspect. Relatedly, only the pre-interview scenario description described the victim versus defendant status of the child. Because the transcript was identical, it will be important to assess, in subsequent research, whether participants retained knowledge of the original manipulation adequately when answering the study questions. Finally, the transcript was presented in written form. Perceptions may differ when individuals observe (e.g., via videotape) an interview directly (cf. Lassiter, 2002), a question that is worthy of empirical study.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide insight into a previously unstudied topic. Children who are possible victims versus perpetrators of a crime are treated quite differently in forensic pretrial interviews and in the courtroom. Our findings indicate that even if their actual capabilities and performance do not differ, perceptions of them sometimes do. Thus, a possible implication of this result is that when jurors are confronted with same-aged child victim and child suspect, the child suspect automatically may be perceived as less credible and less suggestible, despite the two having the potential for similar capabilities in actuality. Nevertheless, we also found perceptions to be affected by such factors as the age of the child and the gender of the perceiver. Therefore, because fact finders are increasingly exposed to situations that involve older child victims and concurrently

younger child suspects, it is imperative to determine the extent to which perceptions are accurate, versus biased. This knowledge will ensure that all individuals—adults, children, victims, and suspects—are treated fairly and appropriately when they are questioned about their involvement in alleged criminal wrongdoing.

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Appendix A

Study Scenario

Mrs. White is an elementary [middle] school teacher. She had been hearing rumors around school about an incident involving a gun. Mrs. White had heard that a male student had brought a gun to school and threatened another male student with it. Mrs. White suspected that the boy who had been threatened with the gun [who had the gun] was her 7- [11- or 14-] year-old student Jack because Jack had been acting very strangely and was getting into more and more troublesome situations.

Mrs. White questioned Jack, and he refused to either confirm or deny the incident. Although she did not know if the rumor was true or not, she thought it was a serious matter deserving investigation. Mrs. White called the police.

The police began to investigate. They found out that Jack did not get along well with a fellow student named Mark. They also found out that Jack and Mark were seen huddled close together during recess on the day in question and that usually the two boys never had anything to do with each other. Furthermore, the police discovered that Mrs. White had called the police on two previous occasions for matters that turned out to be false alarms.

The police then called Jack's mother and asked that she and Jack come to the police station. The police had no other information than the rumor that Mrs. White had heard and what they had learned themselves.

The police brought Jack into a police interrogation room and questioned Jack without his mother present.

Appendix B

Interview

Below is a verbatim transcript of a portion of the interview between Jack (J) and the Police Officer (PO). The interview was videotaped and then transcribed. At this point, the police officer had questioned Jack for 20 minutes.

PO: So why don't you tell me what happened at school on Thursday? I'd like to hear your side of the story.

J: Nothing happened.

PO: That's not what I heard. I heard about something with a gun at school.

J: [shakes head "No"]

PO: Jack, like I told you earlier, when you're answering something, you might want to just say "Yes" or "No" rather than just shake your head. 'Cause we're being recorded, and the recording will not pick up your nods; you understand me, right?

J: Yeah, I guess so.

PO: Things happen, and we can't control those things sometimes. But if we get to understand why these things happen, we can get solutions to those things. If we keep it inside, I won't be able to help, and that's why I'm here to help. Okay. I'm here to help you; I'm here to help your mom; I'm here to help your family; and I'm just here to help everyone; and if you keep things inside of you, that's no good for you. You understand that?

J: Yes.

PO: You don't like what happens when you keep things inside of you; it just keeps building and building and building, and you can't take it anymore.

J: Huh.

PO: The best thing is to bring it out and talk about it.

J: But I don't have nothing inside of me.

- PO: What? Well, that's okay. I'm going to help you here. Okay. I'm going to go back over it; I'm going to go over and over it until it comes back into your mind. Oh, I know it's really hard, but we need to talk about it. We can't hold it in.
- J: But I don't have nothing.
- PO: See, that's not what I heard. People at your school have told me that they saw you with Mark in the schoolyard during recess, things looking kind of suspicious and all.
- J: I haven't even seen Mark for two days!
- PO: A lot of people think you're involved, and they can't all be wrong, can they?
- J: I don't know.
- PO: Jack, I've been a police officer for more than 10 years now. Did you know what that means? That means I have a lot of experience talking with people, and it means that I can sense when someone is not being completely truthful with me. And to me, you look nervous and moving all around in your chair. Jack, I feel like there is something you have to tell me. If you tell me what happened, things will be a lot better for you. You'll feel free.
- J: I have to go to the bathroom.
- PO: In a few minutes you can go. Right now, we are talking.
- J: I don't know what you want me to say.
- PO: I just want you to tell me what happened between you and Mark.
- J: I don't know what you're talking about.
- PO: I'm talking about you and something happening with a gun.
- J: [shrugs shoulders]
- PO: People jump to conclusions all the time when they don't really have the facts, right? And that's my job here is to get all the facts. I don't want to jump to conclusions here. I need to find out from you all the facts, so when your mom asks me or Mrs. White asks me or other people ask me, I can tell them, well this is what happened, you see. I'll know the truth, and the only person that can do that . . .
- J: Is me?
- PO: Yeah, but nobody else, you know. There are problems among kids all the time. That happens all the time. I don't know what happened, you see? And you know, people are thinking the worst. You're the only person that can clear those things up, and nobody else. Everybody else is going to assume the worst, but when you talk to me and tell me the truth, then I can explain things to people. You know what I'm saying?

And that's what I want to do, that's why I want to help you and I want to help your family. I want to help your family. But you know, it's up to you when you explain things, then I'll be able to explain to others, okay, because people are thinking the worst—they're saying this happened, that happened, you know how people start talking, and you know how that goes. A lot of times, it's just a rumor, you know, and I don't want people to talk about you or your family, but something did happen, and I need for you to explain it to us. That way, I can clear things up for everybody. You're a smart boy, you know what I'm saying, Jack.

J: Hmm, hmm. Yes.

PO: So, what I want is for you to start talking about what happened at that point so I can explain it.

J: When I was at what point?

PO: When you were in the schoolyard during recess with Mark.

J: [remains silent]

PO: Are you embarrassed to tell me what happened?

J: No. Nothing happened.

PO: Are you scared?

J: [shrugs shoulders and then shakes head "No"]

PO: 'Cause you don't have to be scared. I just want to help you and your family and get at the truth. Okay?

J: [visibly becoming upset]

PO: What's wrong? Why do you look so upset? You like you're going to cry.

J: I don't know. I want to go home.

PO: You can't go home right yet; you have to tell me what happened first.

J: If I tell you, can I go home?

PO: Yeah, but only if you tell me the truth.

J: I've been telling the truth. **[END OF INTERVIEW FOR NO-ADMIT CONDITION]** Everything you said is right.

PO: What did I say? I need to hear in it your own words.

J: You were right. There was a gun, but nothing bad happened! Me and Mark are friends again. Can't we just drop the whole thing?

PO: See, don't you feel better now?

The interview continues for another 20 minutes. **[END OF NO-ADMIT CONDITION]** When Jack leaves the room, he runs immediately over to his mother and recants his statement. Specifically, he tells his mother that there was no incident involving a gun and that he just told the police officer what he thought he wanted to hear.