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Eliciting children's recall regarding home life and relationships

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ABSTRACT

Child interviews form an important component of custody evaluations. Yet, research on children's responses to questions about home life and relationships is lacking. In the present study, children ($N = 47$) aged 6 to 10 years were interviewed about their daily routines and family relationships. Responses to four categories of questions were compared: open and specific questions about routines, and negative and positive aspects of family relationships. Responses were coded for amount of information, informativeness, topic pertinence, and refusals to answer. Results suggested that questions about everyday routines and relationships elicit relevant and informative responses from children. It is suggested that interviewers begin with open-ended questions regarding daily routines to structure family law interviews with children.

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Interviewing children is arguably one of the most difficult areas of practice for custody evaluators (Powell, 2002; Stahl, 2011). It is a task that requires specialized knowledge, skills, and training (Lamb et al., 2002; Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005). Decades of research on children's testimony, language, and cognitive skills has revealed interview methods that maximize children's potential to provide detailed and accurate information (e.g., Nicol, La Rooy, & Lamb, 2017; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2017; Zajac & Brown, 2018). This research has been translated into semistructured protocols and guidelines that assist interviewers in forensic settings to conduct child interviews using best-practice interviewing techniques (see Poole, 2016, for a review).

Current guidelines for interviews with children are typically tailored to investigations of child abuse or other criminal incidents. Child interviews, however, also play an important role in the family law context. In contested parenting disputes, mental health professionals are often called upon to

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provide a family assessment/report (otherwise known as a child custody evaluation) to assist in decision-making. Child interviews can form a central part of these assessments, and research has continually found that most children want to be given an opportunity to share their views and perspectives with regard to parenting disputes (e.g., Ackerman & Brey Pritzl, 2011; Birnbaum, Bala, & Cyr, 2011; Darlington, 2006; Gollop, Smith, & Taylor, 2000; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2011). The focus of these interviews is different to forensic interviews. Interviews for family law purposes tend to seek general information about the child, their home life and relationships, rather than information about a particular incident (Turoy-Smith, Powell, & Brubacher, 2018). As such, the recommendations for interviewing may be different in a family law matter compared to a forensic interview. There is, however, no empirical research to date that has specifically focused on interviews in the family law context (see Turoy-Smith & Powell, 2017, for a review).

Guidelines for interviews with children

The principal goal of a best-practice investigative interview is to obtain a comprehensive narrative account of the alleged offense (or offences), with minimal specific prompting from the interviewer (Newlin et al., 2015). Most major protocols and guidelines for interviews with children contain semistructured phases that help to facilitate this goal (La Rooy et al., 2015; Poole, 2016), such as establishing rapport, explaining/practicing ground rules, narrative training, a substantive phase, further questioning (if necessary), and closure of the interview. Common to research-based protocols is the idea that the substantive phase of the interview should focus on obtaining a free narrative account of the alleged incident/s using primarily open-ended questions. Responses to open-ended questions are typically more elaborate and more accurate than responses to specific, or closed, questions (Orbach & Pipe, 2011).

In the family law arena there are no structured protocols for child interviews, and, in fact, minimal research on interviewing children exists at all (for a review, see Turoy-Smith & Powell, 2017). Yet, within the small body of literature that does exist, there is consistency with regard to what should be the main elements of a child interview in custody cases: rapport-building, explaining the purpose of the interview/assessment, providing a clear overview of the process and ground rules, explaining the interviewer's role, explaining the court process and limits to confidentiality, and giving the child realistic expectations of the outcome (e.g., Ackerman, 2006; Family Court of Australia, Federal Circuit Court of Australia & Family Court of Western Australia, 2015; Fuhrmann & Zibbell, 2011; Gould & Martindale,

Table 1. Sample child interview questions from child custody literature.

Interview topics	Sample questions
Information about the child and their developmental needs	"Tell me something about your friends." "What do you do when you need help?"
Current parenting arrangements and the impact of separation	"How has the separation/divorce affected you?" "If there was anything you could change about [the current plan] what might it be?"
Family relationships	"Tell me about Mum/Dad." "What do you like to do with Mum/Dad?"
Home environments and daily experiences	"What happens if you break the rules?" "Tell me about weekends at [parent]'s house."
Pertinent issues	"Does anyone get hurt at home?" "What kind of things did your parents argue or fight about?"

2007; Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010; Stahl, 2011). A recent qualitative study supported the notion that family law practitioners include these interview topics and process elements in their interviews with children. The same study also found that practitioners felt that an interview with a child for family law purposes should be highly flexible in comparison to interviews for criminal cases. Family law cases are diverse, and each case is likely to have different issues of importance, which may necessitate the use of targeted questioning about various topics (Turoy-Smith et al., 2018).

Question topics in family law interviews

There appears to be general consensus in the child custody literature (industry guidelines, professional practice books, and guidance articles) around what topics or subject areas should be covered in an interview. These topics include information about the child (e.g., school, friends, etc.) and their developmental needs, current parenting arrangements and the impact of separation, family relationships (e.g., child-parent, siblings, and parent-parent), home environment, daily experiences, and pertinent issues such as family violence or trauma (Ackerman, 2006; Fuhrman & Zibbell, 2011; Galatzer-Levy, Kraus & Galatzer-Levy, 2009; Gould & Martindale, 2007; Rohrbaugh, 2008; Saywitz et al., 2010; Stahl, 2011; Turoy-Smith et al., 2018). Beyond procedural issues (e.g., explaining the role of the interviewer), sample questions provided for interviewers throughout the child custody literature, particularly professional practice books, generally focus on the aforementioned topic areas (see Table 1 for sample questions; Ackerman, 2006; Fuhrmann & Zibbell, 2011; Rohrbaugh, 2008; Saywitz et al., 2010; Stahl, 2011).

Relationships are a particularly important aspect of family law assessments. In Australia, family relationships form a significant portion of the considerations that decision-makers must consider in determining the best interests of the child (s60CC, Family Law Act, 1975; e.g., the benefit to the

child of a meaningful relationship with both parents, the nature of the relationship of the child with others, the attitude to the child demonstrated by the parents). In understanding the nature of a child's relationships with others, evaluators will want to know as much as possible about all aspects of those bonds. Asking children both positive and negative questions (e.g., "Tell me something you like [don't like] about Mum/Dad") will also give an indication of their ability to talk openly regarding their feelings toward others (Stahl, 2011).

Many guidance publications highlight the value of asking children to talk about events and daily routines in their lives as a way to gain insight about their experiences (Crossman, Powell, Principe, & Ceci, 2002; Saywitz et al., 2010). Questions about routines and the home environment can provide a range of information about the child's life and focus the interview on the child themselves. This process is likely to provide more information than asking children directly about their living preferences, against which some of the literature cautions (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997; Stahl, 2011; Crossman et al., 2002; Powell & Lancaster, 2003). Children involved in parenting disputes have indicated they did not wish to be responsible for ultimate decisions, but they did want to have a say in the matters that affect them and be involved in the overall process (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2007). While the industry guidelines and relevant legislation focus on the importance of information about relationships and routines in decision-making, a minimal amount is known about the quality of children's responses to these types of questions about their lives. As such, a main goal of the present study was to describe children's responses to questions regarding routines and relationships in a family law-style interview.

Open versus specific questions

Best-practice guidelines for interviewing children in the forensic context are clear that using nonleading, open-ended questions is the preferable way to elicit information from children (e.g., "Tell me about..."; Poole, 2016). Open-ended questions do not suggest any particular response and provide the best opportunity to obtain a narrative account of the child's experiences in the child's own words. These questions elicit memories from free recall. Therefore, they are more likely to be answered accurately as compared to specific questions (e.g., "What did John say?"), which restrict the information that can be recalled (Powell & Snow, 2007). Research has shown that children as young as four years old can provide accurate and informative responses to open questions, although children's ability to do so does improve with age (Lamb et al., 2003). In contrast to forensic interviews, it

is unclear whether open-ended questions are more beneficial than specific questions in family law interviews. Family law interviews may require specific questions about non-narrative topics (e.g., asking a child what time she goes to bed) in order to elicit relevant information that a child may not otherwise think to disclose. The present study aimed to compare children's responses to open versus specific questions about their everyday lives in order to provide more information regarding the utility of different types of questions in this interview context.

Current study

Some previous studies on children's narrative development have involved questioning about naturalistic events in children's lives like school ("What happens when you go to school?") and excursions ("Tell me what happens when you go to a museum") (e.g., Fivush, 1984; Fivush, Hudson, & Nelson, 1984; Hudson & Nelson, 1986). Generally, researchers have found that these questions elicited useful information and the majority of children answered them. They also found that older children provided longer and more elaborate responses than younger children. Beyond this research, no studies to our knowledge have assessed the quality and quantity of information children provide to questions about home life and relationships such as those suggested for interviews with children in family law assessments. It is important to understand how children respond to different types of questions about home life and everyday experiences under ideal circumstances, as where there are any difficulties with responses these are likely to be exacerbated in conflict situations. This knowledge will assist family law interviewers to use the best possible interview practices and aid development of more specific guidelines for interviews in this context.

The aim of the current research was to examine how children of different age groups respond to questions about their home life and relationships. Children aged 6 to 10 (not currently involved in a separation or parenting dispute) were asked a series of 20 questions about their daily lives. Questions were based on suggested topics from the child custody literature with a focus on two subject areas: Routines/Home Environment and Family Relationships. Based on best-practice guidelines in the forensic context the questions were predominantly open-ended, although some questions were necessarily specific in order to reflect the question types family law interviewers may use. The Routine-based questions (i.e., questions about common daily activities such as mealtimes and before/after school routines) were divided into Open-ended and Specific categories while the Family Relationship questions (which were primarily open-ended) were divided into Negative and Positive categories. Thus, there were four

overall categories: Routines-Open, Routines-Specific, Relationships-Negative, Relationships-Positive. Children's responses to the various question categories were coded for the amount of information provided, informativeness, topic pertinence, and refusals to answer. The design of the study was a 4(Category: Routines-Open, Routines-Specific, Relationships-Negative, Relationships-Positive) \times 2(Age group: 6- to 7-year-olds, 8- to 10-year-olds) mixed factorial design, with the latter factor between-subjects.

Hypotheses

We predicted that the Open-ended questions regarding Routines would be the most beneficial in terms of low rates of refusals, high proportions of on topic and informative responses, and that they would elicit the lengthiest responses compared to other types. We expected that the Negatively-valenced questions regarding Relationships would garner the most refusals, but that responses to these would be as frequently on topic and informative as responses to Positively-valenced questions regarding Relationships and Specific questions regarding Routines. Specific questions regarding Routines were expected to elicit the lowest average units of information per question. Older children were expected to answer more questions, stay on topic, be more informative, and provide more units of information per question than were younger children.

Method

Participants

A sample size of 20 per age group was our intended target as samples of this size have frequently been used in related literature (e.g., Hudson & Nelson, 1986; Lamb et al., 2003). The final sample comprised 47 children (23 girls and 24 boys) and 27 parents. Eleven were the only children in the family to participate. Of the remaining 36 children, either two or three siblings in the family participated in the study. Where siblings were involved in the study, they completed the interviews separately, and parents assessed the accuracy of each child's report individually.

Children were 6 to 10 years old ($M = 7.94$, $SD = 1.48$). Surveys have found that recently separated families commonly involve children of this age range (Kaspiew et al., 2015) and so would often be interviewed for family assessments. To test for age differences in children's responses, the sample was divided into two age groups with the goal that the groups be as even as possible; 6- to 7-year-olds ($n = 21$), and 8- to 10-year-olds ($n = 26$.)

Table 2. Number of units of information reported and overall refusals per question.

Category	Question	No. of units reported		Overall refusals percentage (%) of participants that refused
		Mean units	Range	
Routines- Open questions	Q1: "Tell me about what happens in the morning before school?"	6.43 (4.15)	1–21	0
	Q4: "What happens at dinner time?"	2.82 (1.95)	1–11	4
	Q5: "Tell me about what happens when you come home from school?"	4.15 (3.00)	1–13	2
	Q9: "What do you do when you get ready for bed?"	4.30 (2.29)	1–11	0
	Q17: "Tell me about what happens on the weekends at home?"	4.87 (4.15)	1–23	2
	Q18: "What usually happens when you use the computer/tablet/iPad?"	3.42 (2.20)	1–9	2
Routines- Specific questions	Q2: "What do you usually eat for breakfast?"	1.23 (.53)	1–3	9
	Q3: "What do you usually eat for dinner?"	2.08 (1.39)	1–7	15
	Q6: "Who do you go to when you get hurt?"	2.16 (2.49)	1–16	9
	Q8: "What time do you usually go to bed?"	1.67 (1.36)	1–8	9
	Q19: "How long do you use the computer/tablet/iPad for?"	2.13 (2.28)	1–13	9
	Q20: "How much TV do you watch?"	2.24 (1.76)	1–9	9
Relationships- Negative questions	Q7: "Tell me about what happens when you get hurt?"	3.5 (2.48)	1–10	15
	Q12: "What things do you do with Mum/Dad that aren't so fun?"	2.52 (1.90)	1–9	34
	Q14: "What happens when you break the rules or are naughty at home?"	2.56 (1.70)	1–9	4
	Q16: "What happens when you fight with your brother/sister/s?"	3.30 (1.84)	1–8	4
Relationships- Positive questions	Q10: "What kinds of things do you do with Mum/Dad?"	3.66 (2.32)	1–12	13
	Q11: "What kind of fun things do you do with Mum/Dad?"	3.68 (2.62)	1–10	15
	Q13: "What does Mum/Dad do when she/he gets home from work / or when you get home from school (if parent doesn't work outside the home)?"	3.68 (2.45)	1–11	15
	Q15: "What games or activities do you do with your brother/sister/s?"	4.46 (2.66)	1–13	11

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Mean units of information only includes children who answered the question.

Families were recruited through print and social media advertising in a large-sized city with all parents contacting the first author to volunteer for the study. The only criteria for participation were that children were between 6 and 10 years of age and families were not currently involved in a separation. Legal and ethical concerns for children involved in family separation meant that we did not want to question children about their family life during a potentially difficult time. Parents provided signed consent on behalf of their children, and children also assented to participate. Prior to commencing the interview children were informed about the details of the

study and given the opportunity to decline to participate. Families were provided a \$20 store voucher for each child participating in the study as compensation for the families' time in taking part.

Procedure

The study design was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Children were interviewed individually as part of a larger study on interviewing children for family law matters (Author, unpublished dissertation). They were asked 20 questions about their daily lives with regard to typical days (e.g., "What happens in the morning before school?") and specific exemplars (e.g., "What happened yesterday before school?"). The focus of the present study is on children's responses to questions about their typical days (see [Table 2](#) for a list of questions). The questions were asked in the same order for all children. Some children were not asked all questions as some questions did not apply to their circumstances (e.g., the child had no siblings or did not use a computer, tablet, or iPad). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Question categories

Interview questions were divided into four categories: Routines-Open, Routines-Specific, Relationships-Negative, and Relationships-Positive (see [Table 2](#) for full list of questions in each Category). Routines-Open questions were open-ended questions that asked about neutral, routine occurrences (e.g., "What happens on the weekends at home?"). Routines-Specific questions were nonelaborative questions that asked about specific routine information (e.g., "What time do you usually go to bed?"). Relationships-Negative questions asked about negative topics (e.g., "What happens when you break the rules or are naughty at home?"), while Relationship-Positive questions focused on activities children engaged in with others or the actions of others as perceived by them (e.g., "What kind of things do you do with [parent]?"). Relationship questions were predominantly open-ended.

Coding

Children's responses to each question were divided into units of information. At minimum, units had to contain a verb (e.g., "I go swimming," "the water is warm"). Units usually contained one or more subjects, but sometimes the subjects were implied. For example, "I pack my lunch, eat breakfast, and walk the dog" was coded as three units of information even though the subject only appears once. Units could also contain adjectives, adverbs, and objects (e.g., "The bus gets me home from school really fast").

Subjects/objects involved in the same actions were coded as one unit of information (e.g., “Dad, J and I go to the beach on the weekends”), but subjects/objects involved in different actions were counted as an additional unit (e.g., “but Mum usually stays home.”). Where the child could not recall, did not know the answer, or asked to pass the question, the response was coded as “don’t remember,” “don’t know,” or “pass,” and these responses were not coded further. For analyses these responses were collapsed into one overall coding category termed *refusals*. Each unit of information was otherwise coded using the following procedures.

Topic pertinence. Units of information that related reasonably directly to the question posed were coded as on-topic. Units of information that did not relate to the question were coded as off-topic. For example, in response to the question, “Tell me about what happens in the morning before school” all of the following units were coded as on-topic: “I wake up, have breakfast and go to school.”

Informativeness. This coding category was used to determine whether or not the information provided by children was useful from the perspective of gaining a general understanding of the child’s daily life and experiences. In response to, “What kind of things do you do with Mum/Dad?” an example of an informative response would be, “Sometimes we go to the movies and out for dinner.” However, an answer such as, “cool stuff” in response to the same question was not regarded as informative, even though it was coded as on-topic. Questions that were not on-topic with regard to the specific question asked could still be coded as informative if they provided an understanding of the child’s daily life.

Reliability

Interviews were coded by the first three authors. Five interviews were used for training purposes and a different five (10%) of the interviews were double coded to ensure inter-rater reliability. Cohen’s Kappa was calculated for the refusals responses. Agreement ranged from .82 to 1.00. Percentage agreement (number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements) was used to assess inter-rater reliability for the division of units of information and the categories of informativeness and topic pertinence. Agreement ranged from 80 to 100%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion by all coders.

Results

Data preparation and analytic plan

First, in order to control for some children receiving fewer than 20 questions and because there are fewer questions in the Relationship categories

compared to the Routine categories, all scores were converted to proportions of the total asked for each type. Next, we screened the data for outliers and tested the assumptions of planned statistical techniques. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests revealed that the data were non-normal, $p \leq .026$ (except for the average units of information provided to Relationships-Positive questions), because children were mostly on-topic and informative, accurate, and refused few questions. No other violations were detected in the data. As such, we conducted all inferential analyses with both parametric (ANOVA) and non-parametric tests (Friedman tests with Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests for post-hoc comparisons for repeated-measures data, and Mann-Whitney U tests to compare age differences). In every instance, the nonparametric tests yielded the same results as the parametric tests; therefore, for ease of interpretation we report the parametric results. The results are divided into two sections: descriptive results for overall sample and individual questions, and inferential analyses for effects of Age Group and Question Category.

Descriptive results: individual questions

Across the whole sample, the majority of questions were answered by most children ($M = .91$). Likewise, the overall results for topic pertinence ($M = .97$) and informativeness ($M = .92$) were also high across all questions. On average, questions elicited 3.2 mean units of information.

Question 1 (“Tell me what happens in the morning before school”) elicited descriptively the highest mean units of information while question 2 (“What do you usually eat for breakfast”) elicited the lowest mean units of information. The most frequently unanswered question was 12 (“What things do you do with Mum/Dad that aren’t so fun?”), while question 1 and question 9 (“What do you do when you get ready for bed”) had zero refusals. [Table 2](#) shows the number of units of information reported (mean and range) and the percentage of participants who refused to answer each individual question.

All responses to questions 6 (“Who do you go to when you get hurt?”), 8 (“What time do you usually go to bed?”), and 16 (“What happens when you fight with your brother/sister/s”) were coded as on-topic, while question 18 (“What usually happens when you use the computer/tablet/iPad”) had the lowest proportion of on-topic responses. Question 1 had the lowest proportion of informative responses, while all responses to question 8 (“What time do you usually go to bed”) were coded as informative. [Table 3](#) reports the average proportion of on-topic and informative detail for each individual question.

Table 3. Mean proportion of on-topic and informative responses per question.

Category	Question	On topic	Informative
Routines-Open questions	Q1	.95 (.18)	.81 (.22)
	Q4	.94 (.23)	.70 (.31)
	Q5	.98 (.08)	.97 (.09)
	Q9	.95 (.19)	.91 (.12)
	Q17	.94 (.15)	.92 (.15)
	Q18	.92 (.23)	.93 (.20)
Routines-Specific questions	Q2	.98 (.15)	.95 (.21)
	Q3	.98 (.11)	.95 (.20)
	Q6	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.03)
	Q8	1.00 (-)	1.00 (.03)
	Q19	.96 (.14)	.89 (.31)
	Q20	.99 (.08)	.70 (.44)
Relationships-Negative questions	Q7	.98 (.08)	.92 (.27)
	Q12	.97 (.13)	.98 (.12)
	Q14	.99 (.08)	.97 (.16)
	Q16	1.00 (-)	.96 (.14)
Relationships-Positive questions	Q10	.98 (.12)	.98 (.07)
	Q11	.99 (.04)	.96 (.11)
	Q13	.94 (.20)	.98 (.06)
	Q15	.99 (.04)	.97 (.10)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Effects of age group and question category

Analyses were based on the questions being divided into four thematic categories; Routines-Open, Routines-Specific, Relationships-Negative, and Relationships-Positive. All of the following analyses were 4(Category) \times 2(Age Group) mixed ANOVAs, with the last factor between-subjects. Alpha was set at $p < .05$. A Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied wherever Mauchley's test of sphericity was significant. Post hoc tests are LSD $p < .05$.

Refusals. To compare the number of refusals to different question categories, we conducted a Category \times Age Group mixed ANOVA which revealed main effects of Category, $F(2.49, 112.07) = 7.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$, and Age Group, $F(1, 45) = 15.28, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .13$. There was no significant Category \times Age Group interaction, $F(3, 135) = 1.30, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Post-hoc tests revealed that Routines-Open questions ($M = .02, SD = .01$) had significantly fewer refusals compared to all other categories, while the proportion of questions refused did not differ among the Routine-Specific ($M = .10, SD = .02$), Relationships-Negative ($M = .15, SD = .03$), and Relationships-Positive questions ($M = .14, SD = .04$). Six- to 7-year olds ($M = .15, SD = .03$) refused significantly more questions than 8- to 10-year olds ($M = .06, SD = .03$).

Topic pertinence. To assess the proportion of responses that were on-topic, we conducted a Category \times Age Group mixed ANOVA which revealed a main effect of Category, $F(1.91, 85.78) = 4.40, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .01$. No other results were significant, $F < 1.17, p > .07, \eta_p^2 < .25$. Post-hoc tests demonstrated that Routines-Open questions ($M = .94, SD = .02$) were

Table 4. Category \times age interaction on mean proportion of informative responses per question.

Age	Category			
	Routines-Open	Routines-Specific	Relationships-Negative	Relationships-Positive
Younger (6–7)	.85(.03) ^a	.84(.03) ^a	.94 (.03) ^b	.97 (.01) ^b
Older (8–10)	.89 (.01) ^a	.97 (.01) ^b	.96 (.02) ^b	.98 (.01) ^b

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means sharing the same subscripts across rows (analyses) are not significantly different.

proportionally less on topic than Routines-Specific ($M = .99$, $SD = .01$) and Relationships-Negative ($M = .99$, $SD = .01$) questions, the latter two not differing from each other. Relationships-Positive questions ($M = .98$, $SD = .01$) did not differ from any other category.

Informativeness. To assess overall how informative the responses to questions in each category were, we conducted a Category \times Age Group mixed ANOVA on the proportion of informative units of information. This revealed main effects of Category, $F(3, 145) = 10.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, and Age Group, $F(1, 45) = 11.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, which were subsumed by a Category \times Age Group interaction, $F(3, 135) = 3.24$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$ (see Table 4 for means).

To test the Category \times Age Group interaction, we examined the patterns within each age group in two 4 (Category) repeated-measures ANOVAs. Category was significant in the younger age group, $F(2.44, 48.88) = 5.78$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. Answers to both Routine Category questions were significantly less informative than to both Relationship Category questions. In the older age group, Category was also significant, $F(2.07, 51.71) = 7.85$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$. Post-hoc analyses indicated that Routine-Open questions elicited significantly less informative responses than all other Categories, which did not differ from one another.

Quantity of Information. To assess overall how much information was given in response to the questions in each Category, we conducted a Category \times Age Group mixed ANOVA on the average units provided per question asked. Both main effects were significant: Category, $F(2.44, 109.90) = 43.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .49$ and Age Group, $F(1, 45) = 8.46$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. There was no Category \times Age Group interaction, $F(3, 135) = .31$, $p = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. For Category, post-hoc tests indicated all pairwise comparisons were significant. Routines-Open questions ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.32$) elicited the most units of information per question, followed by Relationships-Positive ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.26$), then Relationships-Negative questions ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.18$). As predicted, Routines-Specific questions ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.16$) were the least fruitful questions in terms of units of information elicited per question. For Age Group, older children ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.26$) reported overall significantly more units of information per question asked than did younger children ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.29$).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to assess children's responses to questions about home life and relationships such as those suggested for interviews with children in family law assessments. The goal of the current study was to examine how children respond to questions about routines and relationships in terms of the amount of information provided, rate of refusals, and whether the information provided was informative and pertinent to the question asked. The findings will be discussed first in relation to the routine and relationships question categories as well as developmental differences where observed. These sections will be followed by a discussion of the overall findings with regard to implications for family law interviews, limitations and future directions.

Routine questions

We hypothesized that the Open-ended Routine questions would be generally superior to the other question Categories in the sense that these questions would generate more information, fewer refusals, and the responses would be more informative and on-topic. We found this to be the case for two of the coding categories, while the other two coding categories produced differing results. As predicted, children provided more information per question in response to the Open-ended Routine based questions than they did in response to the other three question Categories. In line with our hypotheses, Specific Routine based questions elicited the least amount of information per question. Routine-Open questions also had significantly fewer refusals compared to the other question Categories. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on investigative interviewing of children and in-line with best-practice guidelines (Powell & Snow, 2007).

Unexpectedly, the Open-ended Routine questions were not advantageous for topic pertinence and informativeness. These questions elicited proportionally fewer on-topic answers compared with the Routine-Specific and Relationships-Negative questions. This may reflect the types of questions within these Categories; the open-ended questions about general routines allowed a child to provide their own account of their daily experiences. Within a narrative account a child is more likely to diverge from the question topic and provide other information. In contrast, the Routine-Specific questions asked for very specific information, often eliciting one word or list type responses. Similarly, although the Relationship-Negative questions were open-ended in nature (e.g., "What happens when you break the rules or are naughty at home?"), they are narrower in scope compared to broad questions about routines.

The category of informativeness produced interesting findings. For the younger age group (6- to 7-year-olds), both of the Routine Categories elicited significantly fewer informative responses than both of the Relationship Categories. For the older age group (8- to 10-year-olds), only the Routine-Open questions yielded significantly fewer informative responses. The differences in informativeness for different question categories may have resulted from a slight tendency by children to provide general responses to the Open-ended Routine questions. For example, in response to a question about what happens in the morning before school, some children's responses contained the units of information, "wake up" and "go to school." In response to a question about weekend activities, some children gave responses such as "do different sorts of things," "it would just be normal," or "we go to whatever's on." As these responses did not provide information about a child's experiences or environment, they were coded as uninformative. With respect to the Routine-Specific questions, the additional differences for younger children may have been due to the content of the questions asked. There were two questions in the Routine-Specific category that were based on measurements of time ("How much TV do you watch?" and "How long do you use the computer/tablet/iPad for?"). The results showed these two questions had descriptively lower rates of informativeness (.89 and .70) compared to the other questions in this category (.95 and 1.0). From a developmental perspective, the children in the younger age group may not have mastered the ability to judge the duration of events and activities (Tillman & Barner, 2015, Experiment 3), thereby providing more ambiguous answers (e.g., "random times," "a lot of TV," or "a little bit at a time"). However, even though there were significant differences in informativeness between question categories, it should be noted that informativeness overall was still high and that all question categories elicited mostly informative responses.

Relationship questions

We hypothesized that Relationships-Negative questions would produce significantly more refusals than the other question Categories, but that responses to the Relationship and Routine-Specific questions would be otherwise similar with regard to topic pertinence and informativeness. Unexpectedly, Relationship-Negative questions did not prompt significantly more refusals, although they did elicit significantly less information than the Routine-Open and Relationships-Positive questions. It is worth noting that the single negative question concerning parents ("What things do you do with Mum/Dad that aren't so fun?") was the most frequently unanswered question with 34% of children refusing to answer. It may be

that negative questions about parents are especially difficult. As predicted, the responses to both Relationship Categories and the Routine-Specific questions were similar with regard to topic pertinence. There were also no differences between the Relationship Categories with respect to informativeness, although there were significant differences between the Routine and Relationship Categories as outlined above. Overall the Relationship-based questions prompted good quality responses across both age groups in terms of the aspects of children's reports that we coded.

Developmental differences

As expected, younger children answered fewer questions and older children provided overall more information in response to questions they did answer. This finding is in keeping with previous research on children's recall of routine experiences (e.g., Hudson & Nelson, 1986). Unexpectedly, there were no age differences in the proportion of children's responses that were on-topic. Overall, the findings revealed that, despite older children providing more information, children aged 6- to 10-years tended to respond in similar ways to the different question categories.

Implications for family law interviews

On the whole, the questions in this study resulted in responses that were relevant, informative and provided a reasonable amount of information. Based on the findings in this study, we suggest interviewers initially use Open-ended Routine-based questions when structuring their interviews with children. It may be that a small percentage of the information provided in response to these questions is uninformative from the perspective of gathering information about the child's life. Nevertheless, these questions should yield the most information overall and are most likely to be readily answered by children, which can also assist with building rapport (Stahl, 2011). Interviewers may worry that inclusion of open-ended questions about routines may lengthen the interview. However, the longest interview conducted for this study was 32 minutes; as a result, even with the inclusion of these types of questions the interviews were not excessive in length.

Open-ended Routine questions can be followed up with Relationship-based questions and Specific questions that consider the information already provided by the child. Although Negatively-valenced Relationship questions performed similarly to other questions in terms of questions answered, informativeness and topic pertinence, it is possible that negative questions concerning parents will be less fruitful and so may be best placed later in the interview once rapport is established and to avoid the possibility of

impeding the interview early on. Given that the children in this study, without any overt family conflict, were reluctant to answer negative questions about parents, any reluctance by children to answer such negative questions in family law assessments cannot solely be attributed to the family conflict they may be involved in. Finally, as highlighted by many others (e.g., Powell & Snow, 2007; Stahl, 2011), it is important to be aware of a child's language and developmental capacity when conducting interviews. Asking younger children about concepts they have not yet mastered will produce vague and possibly inaccurate information, as was evidenced in the responses to the Routine-Specific questions regarding time and duration.

Limitations and future directions

Due to ethical reasons, this study did not involve children currently involved in a custody dispute and the nature of the questions we could ask about home life were restricted. To improve the applicability of findings, we used topics and questions suggested in the child custody literature. This included questions regarding negative events or interactions such as discipline at home ("What happens when you break the rules?") and activities done with parents that were "not so fun." To extend these findings and counter this limitation, it would be valuable to conduct research with children from separated families, such as examining recorded interviews with children for family law assessments and dividing the questions used into similar or relevant categories. Given the high conflict nature of family law, there will be obvious difficulties in designing and conducting such studies (e.g., obtaining consent from both parents when separated, anonymizing recorded interview data). Despite the aforementioned limitation, it is nonetheless important and useful to examine the responses to these questions with children who are not involved in family disputes. The differences found in this study, where there is no overt conflict or emotional tension for the children involved, would be expected to also occur for children in disputed parenting matters. Developmentally, children in family disputes will be responding in a similar way as other children, but with exaggerated differences given the added stressors for these children.

While the observed effect sizes in the current study were frequently in the medium to large range (Richardson, 2011), the sample consisted of a small number of children compared to how many may annually be interviewed for family assessments. Furthermore, the sample was limited to the geographic location of one Australian city where participating parents were required to contact the research team to participate. This may have attracted a particular demographic of participants which might influence

the findings. While demographic information about children's ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family composition was not available in the present study, future research could benefit from including this information to ensure the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrated that asking children questions regarding home life and everyday events, as is suggested in the child custody literature, is likely to provide family law interviewers with useful information. While we expected that Open-ended Routine-based questions would be superior to other types, these questions were only superior in terms of eliciting more information and fewer refusals. The remaining question categories were equal or superior with respect to topic pertinence and the informativeness of responses. Except for the Routine-Specific category, the remaining questions were primarily open-ended. As such, the findings are generally consistent with best-practice interviewing guidelines that promote the use of open-ended questions to obtain an accurate, detailed account from children (Powell & Snow, 2007). While further work is necessary in this area, overall, the current findings showed that questions about routines and relationships in family law interview with children will elicit relevant and informative responses from elementary school-aged children.

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Disclosure of interest

All Authors declare that they have no conflicts to report.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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