

# 1 **Police interviewers' perceptions of child credibility in forensic**

## 2 **investigations**

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18

## 19 **Ethical standards**

20 Declaration of conflicts of interest

21 Author A (Hannah Cassidy) has declared no conflicts of interest.

22 Author B (Lucy Akehurst) has declared no conflicts of interest.

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26 Ethical approval

27 All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with  
28 the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki  
29 declaration and its later amendment or comparable ethical standards.

30

31 Informed consent

32 Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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51 Abstract

52 During investigative interviews, police practice can influence key aspects of child credibility,  
53 namely the accuracy, competency, reliability and truthfulness of their testimonies. To date,  
54 police interviewers' perceptions of how best to assess child credibility at interview, and how  
55 practice impacts credibility, have been overlooked. We conducted a qualitative study that  
56 examined data from focus groups with sixteen English police officers, who regularly  
57 interview children. The focus group transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, and  
58 four main themes were identified – the *4E's*: *Eliciting* information, *evaluating* credibility,  
59 *empowering* the interviewee, and a high-quality *end product*. Within these themes, police  
60 officers acknowledged some responsibility for the perceived credibility of child victims. Poor  
61 interviewing practice could decrease the *accuracy* of the information *elicited* and cross-  
62 examined in court. Registered Intermediaries could *empower* child interviewees and increase  
63 their *competency*. A lack of *reliability* contributed to *evaluating* credibility, but this  
64 relationship was not straightforward. Finally, obtaining the most *truthful* account from child  
65 victims was not always possible because there are many barriers to overcome. The  
66 implications of our findings suggest a continued focus on interview protocols that facilitate  
67 disclosure from child victims and a review of the professional relationship between those  
68 who interview children and prosecutors.

69

70 *Keywords*: Child disclosure; investigative interviewing; field study; thematic analysis;  
71 interviewers' perceptions; child interviewing

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74 Police interviewers' perceptions of child credibility in forensic investigations

75 Perceived victim credibility can significantly impact the outcome of court cases of  
76 child maltreatment. Studies have found that when child victims are perceived to be less  
77 credible, mock jurors are less likely to find the defendant guilty (e.g., Goodman-Delahunty,  
78 Cossins & O'Brien, 2010; Castelli, Goodman & Ghetti, 2005) and, in real life cases, the  
79 defendant is more likely to receive a shorter sentence (Lewis, Klettke & Day, 2014). Voogt,  
80 Klettke and Thomson (2017) developed the first conceptual model of perceived victim  
81 credibility (PVC) in child sexual assault cases. A systematic review of previous measures of  
82 PVC resulted in thirty-three items that were then thematically analysed into five sub-  
83 constructs: *accuracy*, *competency*, *reliability*, *truthfulness* and *believability*. *Accuracy* refers  
84 to children's ability to provide responses that are both correct and consistent with the events  
85 that occurred. *Competency* refers to children's ability to remember the event as well as their  
86 understanding of the defendant's behaviour and the law surrounding the whole legal process.  
87 Similar to accuracy, *reliability* is concerned with consistency. However, it focuses on the  
88 internal consistency of children's testimony and to what extent the court can depend on  
89 children's accounts. *Truthfulness* refers to how honest children are when giving testimony  
90 and the perception that they might be intentionally telling a false story. Finally, *believability*  
91 can refer to perceptions of how willing children are to provide a false account, but also the  
92 extent to which their stories are believed from a more subjective and emotional standpoint.  
93 Previous research suggests that the first four of these sub-constructs can be influenced by  
94 police interviewing practice.

95 Firstly, the investigative interviewing protocol used and adhered to by a police  
96 interviewer can have a significant impact on the *accuracy* of the information elicited. For  
97 example, some European countries use the National Institute for Child Health and Human  
98 Development (NICHD) Investigative Interview protocol (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin  
99 & Horowitz, 2007). The NICHD protocol does not always elicit longer accounts than a

100 standard interview but it does result in an increase in appropriate questions, which, in turn,  
101 are anticipated to achieve higher accuracy (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 2009; Sternberg,  
102 Lamb, Orbach, Esplin & Mitchell, 2001). In England and Wales, an official set of guidelines,  
103 ‘Achieving Best Evidence’ (ABE, Ministry of Justice, 2011), are used. These include a  
104 suggestion to use the Enhanced Cognitive Interview mnemonics (ECI, Fisher & Geiselman,  
105 1992). The limited research on the effectiveness of ECI with child witnesses consistently  
106 reports an increase in correct information elicited from child witnesses compared to the  
107 standard interviews. Sometimes this also results in an increase in incorrect information,  
108 although overall *accuracy* is not affected (McCauley & Fisher, 1995). Sometimes this does  
109 not increase reporting of erroneous information and *accuracy* is marginally improved  
110 (Akehurst, Milne & Köhnken, 2003). It is important to investigate whether police  
111 interviewers will identify the positive impact of using such interview protocols on the  
112 accuracy, and subsequent credibility, of the testimonies that they elicit from the child victims.

113         Secondly, in England and Wales, police interviewers can refer child interviewees to  
114 Registered Intermediaries (RIs) who help to enhance the children’s *competency* to provide a  
115 good quality account of what they have witnessed (ABE Guidance, MoJ, 2011; Section 29 of  
116 Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999). Children’s ability to remember and recall  
117 past events develops with age (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Orbach, Katz & Horowitz, 2012), so  
118 interviewers should adapt to children’s developing communication skills (Lamb, Malloy &  
119 La Rooy, 2011). Based on a formal assessment of the witness’ communication needs, RIs  
120 provide written recommendations on how ‘normal’ interviewing practices should be adapted  
121 – sometimes meeting with the interviewer, prior to interview, to assist with question  
122 formulation and then being present during the interview to monitor questions asked  
123 (Henderson, 2015). Their presence during the interview means that they can intervene and  
124 rephrase certain questions to avoid any miscommunication or repeat witness’ answers to

125 avoid any misinterpretation (MoJ, 2011). With regards to cross-examination in courts, RIs,  
126 lawyers and judges have all reported the positive impact of RIs on facilitating access to the  
127 justice system for vulnerable witnesses (Henderson, 2015). That said, police interviewers'  
128 use of, and perception of the impact of, RIs during investigative interviews remains  
129 overlooked.

130         Thirdly, police interviewers can, and do often, conduct repeat interviews with child  
131 witnesses (La Rooy, Katz, Malloy & Lamb, 2010). Repeated recall attempts have resulted in  
132 some details being lost (oblivescence) and added (reminiscence) over time (Erdelyi, 2010),  
133 ultimately affecting the perceived *reliability* of that information. A repeated interview  
134 conducted shortly after an initial interview, soon after disclosure by a child, can result in  
135 significant increases in new and accurate information (La Rooy, Pipe & Murray, 2005).  
136 However, there are mixed findings regarding the benefits of repeated interviews after longer  
137 delays, with some research showing no increase in recall (La Rooy, Pipe & Murray, 2007).  
138 Following a review of the literature, La Rooy et al. (2010) concluded that, when interviewers  
139 adhere to best-practice guidelines by asking more appropriate, open-ended questions rather  
140 than inappropriate, closed and leading questions, repeated interviews should be used to obtain  
141 more complete accounts. It is unclear whether police interviewers are aware of this  
142 recommendation in the literature and how they weigh up the benefits of eliciting a more  
143 complete account against the costs of that account becoming more unreliable (in terms of  
144 credibility).

145         Finally, a reluctance of children to talk about alleged events in detail at interview is a  
146 recurring issue that police interviewers face (Leander, 2010; Magnusson, Ernberg &  
147 Landström, 2017). For example, eliciting abuse-related information at interview can be very  
148 difficult when a child does not wish to talk. Disclosure is important because it increases the  
149 likelihood of a case being referred for prosecution (Stroud, Martens & Baker, 2000) and

150 reduces the likelihood of the case being withdrawn (Christensen, Sharman & Powell, 2016).  
151 A systematic review of the literature on child sexual assault cases (Lemaigre, Taylor &  
152 Gittoes, 2017) identified three barriers to eliciting a disclosure at interview from child  
153 victims: perceived negative consequences for self, perceived negative consequences for  
154 others, and the emotional response to the abuse (e.g., shame, guilt, self-blame). Rapport-  
155 building can facilitate disclosure of stressful or embarrassing events (Larsson & Lamb,  
156 2009). To resolve ongoing issues of non-disclosure, the aforementioned NICHD interviewing  
157 protocol was revised to put a greater emphasis on rapport-building at the start of the interview  
158 (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz & Malloy, 2015). For children interviewed using the revised  
159 protocol, this resulted in more cooperation and more willingness to talk about their  
160 experience than those interviewed using the original protocol (Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb,  
161 Blasbalg & Winstanley, 2014; Hershkowitz, Lamb & Katz, 2014). By increasing the amount  
162 of abuse-related information elicited and making children feel comfortable to share an honest  
163 account of what happened, police interviewers can increase the *truthfulness* of children's  
164 testimonies.

165         The current study was the first to take a qualitative approach to understanding how  
166 police interviewers conceptualise child credibility as a whole, with an emphasis on how they  
167 assess child credibility at interview, and how they perceive that their practice impacts  
168 credibility. Previous research studies using qualitative methodologies to investigate police  
169 interviewers' professional experiences (Cherryman & Bull, 2001; Hanway & Akehurst, 2017;  
170 Wright & Powell, 2016) have yielded rich data with small samples. It was anticipated that the  
171 findings of the current study would highlight whether police interviewers conceptualise child  
172 credibility in line with the aforementioned psychological literature and whether they use the  
173 evidence-based tools and procedures associated with increasing child victims' perceived  
174 credibility. In England and Wales, child victims' video-recorded investigative interviews can

175 act as evidence-in-chief in subsequent court proceedings (MoJ, 2011). The impact of police  
176 interviewing practice on a child's perceived victim credibility can, therefore, have serious  
177 legal implications in court.

## 178 **Method**

### 179 **Participants**

180 Police officers who regularly interview children were recruited from two English  
181 police forces: one in the North of England and one in the South of England. Emails about the  
182 research were sent to all officers working in the Child Protection Units of the two police  
183 forces and stipulated that volunteers should be regularly interviewing children. The e-mail  
184 included contact details for the Principal Investigator. Three focus groups were organised,  
185 each for a maximum of 5 participants. As officers volunteered, they were allocated to a  
186 group, when each group was full, recruitment for that group ceased (in the end we over  
187 recruited for one focus group and so 6 officers attended). Therefore, 16 eligible police  
188 officers (10 women, 6 men), from two English police forces, who regularly interview child  
189 witnesses participated in the study. The age of the interviewers ranged from 31 to 60 years  
190 ( $M = 41.53$  years,  $SD = 8.37$  years). Overall, our interviewers had 3 to 40 years of experience  
191 working for the police ( $M = 17.09$  years,  $SD = 8.16$  years) and 5 months to 22 years of  
192 experience in interviewing children as part of their police role ( $M = 8.56$  years,  $SD = 6.16$   
193 years). The first focus group (FG1) consisted of six female interviewers, the second group  
194 (FG2) consisted of 5 interviewers (3 men, 2 women), and the third focus group (FG3)  
195 consisted of 5 interviewers (3 men, 2 women). There were no differences between focus  
196 groups for overall police experience,  $F(2, 13) = .10, p = .90$ , or for experience interviewing  
197 children,  $F(2, 13) = .41, p = .67$ . All interviewers had undergone a specialist interviewing  
198 course. The age of the children that our interviewers routinely interviewed ranged from 2 to  
199 17 years for the majority of the sample (62.5%). The rest of the sample interviewed



200 adolescents (13- to 17-year-old children) only. When asked the reason for their most recent  
201 interviews with children, 70.8% were cases of alleged child sexual abuse. Other recent cases  
202 included neglect, physical assault and witness to a murder.

### 203 **Procedure**

204 Police interviewers, who had received specialist interview training (for interviewing  
205 child witnesses) and who regularly interview child witnesses, were contacted via e-mail to  
206 invite them to attend a focus group; they were each sent a participant information sheet with  
207 details of the study. Participation was on a voluntary basis (i.e., informed consent was  
208 obtained from all individual participants) and participants took part in one of three focus  
209 group sessions that all followed the same procedure. Upon arrival, police officers were  
210 provided with an opportunity to ask any questions before providing informed consent to  
211 participate in this study. Following this, the focus group facilitator outlined the structure of  
212 the session and the ground rules for the focus group discussions (e.g. to avoid interruptions).

### 213 **Focus groups**

214 The focus groups in this study, which took about 40 minutes each, were moderated by  
215 the facilitator and conducted in a quiet environment on police premises. The focus groups  
216 were semi-structured discussions. Police interviewers were asked: (i) what training do you  
217 currently receive to assess child credibility?, (ii) what techniques do you currently use to  
218 assess child credibility?, (iii) what do you think about techniques informed by psychological  
219 research?, (iv) how does the age of the child affect assessments of their credibility?, and (v)  
220 what has been overlooked by research? All questions were open-ended, with the facilitator  
221 asking follow-up questions to clarify participants' responses if necessary (e.g. 'explain to me  
222 what you mean by that'). The questions were framed to be broad regarding child credibility  
223 and its assessment so that the interviewers' responses were not influenced by the researchers'  
224 knowledge of the current literature.

225 **Analysis**

226           The focus groups were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone and later transcribed  
227 verbatim. Transcription meant that interviewers' responses were anonymised as names were  
228 replaced by letters. The focus group transcripts were coded inductively using thematic  
229 analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it does not prescribe a method of data  
230 collection nor a theoretical position (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its flexibility enabled all the  
231 data across all three focus groups to be compiled ready for coding for broader themes. The  
232 focus group transcripts were, firstly, summarised and reduced down to smaller "packets" of  
233 information, which were then analysed for themes in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Emerging  
234 themes had to reflect similarities across multiple interviewers' responses (Braun & Clarke,  
235 2006). Themes were presented by the first researcher to the second researcher in terms of  
236 their description and keywords. The second researcher then checked the presence of these  
237 themes against the verbatim transcript excerpts to assure that the findings were representative  
238 of the original data. Four main themes were identified – the 4E's of child interviewing – with  
239 each structured into two sub-themes: (1) Eliciting information with sub-themes, *Techniques*  
240 and *Barriers to disclosure*, (2) Evaluating credibility with sub-themes, *Indicators of*  
241 *deception* and *Exceptions to the rule*, (3) Empowering the interviewee with sub-themes,  
242 *Planning and preparation* and *Flexibility*, and (4) End product with sub-themes, *Preparing*  
243 *the evidence* and *Cross-examination*. See Supplementary Materials for a table displaying  
244 which participants endorsed which sub-themes and the overall proportion of endorsement per  
245 sub-theme.

246 **Results**

247           In this section, we present the interviewers' thoughts and experiences regarding child  
248 credibility with an emphasis on how they assess child credibility at interview, and how they  
249 perceive that their practice impacts credibility. For the following quotes, to protect privacy,

250 'FG' refers to the focus group number and 'P' refers to the participant letter that was assigned  
251 to each member of each focus group. To give an overview of the main themes and sub-  
252 themes, a map has been provided (see Figure 1).

### 253 **Eliciting information**

254 This theme reflected many interviewers' views that the interview was first and  
255 foremost an information-gathering procedure. Within this theme, police interviewers  
256 recognised their own responsibility for eliciting information from child interviewees through  
257 the use of specific techniques. They also highlighted potential personal barriers that child  
258 interviewees might encounter when asked to disclose abuse.

### 259 **Techniques**

260 Our interviewers talked about general interview strategies for encouraging child  
261 interviewees to talk about their experiences, such as asking them to concentrate and making  
262 interviewees feel as comfortable as possible. Interviewers from two focus groups also  
263 mentioned a specific technique that they use at the beginning of interviews to elicit longer  
264 responses later on:

265 I'll give them an example of how much detail I need. I might say to them, 'so tell me  
266 what you see about that cup' and they'll say, 'oh it's a cup, you know it's cream in  
267 colour' and I'll say, 'but if you look at it now, the detail that I need is that it's cream  
268 in colour, it's got red writing on it, it's got 'wibble wobble' and a picture of a jelly.  
269 Inside it's dirty'. So, I'd explain to them that that's the detail that I'd want (FG1, PE).  
270 I often provide an example and I try and tailor it to the individual. So, if it's a child,  
271 often I've picked the child up so I will talk about the journey we've taken to get there  
272 so it's something they'll identify with and often they'll chip in with bits that I've  
273 missed out but I try to get them to consider all the senses and explain that as well [...]  
274 which gives them an idea of the level of detail I'm looking for (FG3, PD).

275 Overall, interviewers agreed that anything that increases the chances of a child  
276 disclosing more details is good, with fewer questions being particularly beneficial.

277 The best one is where you don't have to ask them an awful lot of questions [...]   
278 something that would get people to give more information without asking [...] too  
279 many questions (FG3, PC).

280 Our interviewers understood that children are able to disclose information without  
281 much prompting from the interviewer, but that, sometimes, the level of detailed disclosure  
282 required for the investigation needed to be outlined at the beginning of the interview.

### 283 **Barriers to disclosure**

284 Our interviewers mentioned that, while some child interviewees, young children  
285 especially, unintentionally forgot key information, some children also intentionally excluded  
286 certain details from their accounts. It was recognised that several emotional factors, such as  
287 shame, self-blame and embarrassment might preclude children from talking about their  
288 abuse.

289 It's just they're either ashamed of what's happened, they realise it was wrong what's  
290 happened to them and they don't want to talk about it (FG1, PE).

291 They miss bits out [...] where they think they may have been part of, you know,  
292 partly to blame or something because they put the blame on themselves (FG1, PB).

293 They'll just be some words that they can't say [...] but we need them to actually say  
294 what that body part is and that's sometimes a real barrier (FG3, PC).

295 Also, in terms of willingness and readiness to talk, interviewers stated that children  
296 who are sometimes not the origin of the disclosure, may not wish to talk about what has  
297 happened to them.

298 Often the allegations that come to us haven't come from the child themselves so it's  
299 not that the child's been ready to talk about it [...] so we go out with our tick list of

300 lines of inquiry [...] but actually for that person, if we go in there too soon [...] then  
301 they'll just drip feed you a tiny bit of information and they won't actually be telling  
302 you everything that's happened to them (FG3, PC).

303 Interviewers mentioned that it can even be difficult in the first instance to get children  
304 to assent to an interview;

305 You've got people that crikey it's enough getting them through the door...they don't  
306 want to be there in the first place (FG3, PA).

307 A reluctance to be interviewed was considered by our interviewers to be partly  
308 attributable to feelings of loyalty towards an alleged offender, who is often a close family  
309 member.

310 I had a teenage girl who was sexually abused by her biological dad [...] he got  
311 convicted but she, all the way through, found it so difficult talking about it 'cause she  
312 still loved her dad [...] very loyal (FG1, PA).

313 Furthermore, interviewers suggested that children can also understand the  
314 consequences for disclosing abuse and may wish to avoid these negative outcomes by  
315 keeping quiet.

316 Younger children, they'll cover up for their parents [...] it has happened to them but  
317 they don't want to be removed and they know the consequences if they tell us things  
318 so they try and hide as much as possible (FG2, PB).

319 Interviewers in the current study suggested that children's loyalty towards their family  
320 and peers can also produce a 'them-and-us' mentality towards the police creating negative  
321 attitudes about talking to police officers.

322 They'll call us pigs and they won't talk to us and it's how they have been brought up  
323 and the perception they have of police [...] they won't tell us what's happened 'cause

324 they've learnt from a young age, don't talk to police officers [...] it's quite bizarre  
325 when we get little ones telling us to f\*\*k off (FG1, PA).

326 Our interviewers recognised that children might encounter a variety of barriers when  
327 it comes to disclosing information about what has happened to them. They highlighted the  
328 diversity of motivations to deceive police into believing a false negative (i.e., that nothing has  
329 happened when, in truth, it has).

### 330 **Evaluating credibility**

331 Whilst all interviewers in all focus groups agreed that it was not the role of the police  
332 interviewers to judge the veracity of an individual child, there were comments about getting a  
333 feeling for whether a child is telling the whole truth or not;

334 We get a feeling straightaway when we're interviewing children. I had one the other  
335 day and I thought she's not telling me the truth (FG1, PA).

336 The question is, therefore, what protocol do interviewers follow when they get this  
337 'gut feeling'? Although interviewers reported that they did not receive any official training on  
338 assessing children's credibility, they did talk about general cues that might indicate a  
339 deceptive account. Our interviewers also believed that there were 'exceptions to the rule':  
340 factors regarding a child witness or an incident that would explain the presence or absence of  
341 certain perceived indicators of deceit.

### 342 **Indicators of deception**

343 Interviewers suggested that a reliable indicator of deceit was a lack of detail in  
344 children's responses. This could be a less detailed statement overall or few details regarding  
345 a specific aspect of the incident:

346 It is hard to get detail from someone that may be lying and they do sort of tie  
347 themselves up in knots and you will come out with not a lot of information (FG1,  
348 PB).

349 They can tell you details about everything around it but actually when you come to  
350 the act, that's where you can often detect the lie because the detail within that is  
351 usually small (FG3, PD).

352 Interviewers suggested that the use of probing questions following the free recall  
353 phase of an interview could be particularly revealing.

354 People who prepare a story that they're prepared to give you do not anticipate us  
355 going into the depth we do and the finer grain detail and you sometimes see elements  
356 of vagueness arising [...] and it does then start to initiate your thought process [...] I  
357 find some of the techniques about detail are where I get indicators, where I start to  
358 become uncomfortable about what somebody's saying (FG2, PA).

359 Another possible indicator of deception mentioned by our interviewers was the age-  
360 appropriateness of the language used by children.

361 They might use a word that you think they wouldn't normally use at their age, you  
362 know, that's come from the mum or the dad or whoever [...] it's normally quite  
363 obvious (FG1, PB).

364 Children might also provide inconsistent information across the course of an  
365 interview. Interviewers reported that they were taught to make brief notes during interviews  
366 of inconsistencies that they should clarify, not challenge, at the end of the interview.

367 If there's an issue it would be [...] 'I don't quite understand, I'm a little bit confused  
368 about what you said earlier on so can we just go through that again' and try and  
369 clarify it, never challenge (FG1, PB).

370 Our interviewers pointed out that they cannot directly accuse a child of lying and  
371 cannot be biased at interview. Interviewers have to strike a delicate balance between  
372 sufficiently clarifying the information provided sufficiently to satisfy the defence team but  
373 not so much that the prosecution can accuse them of treating the interviewee as if s/he was  
374 deceitful.

375 We're trying to test [their] account at the very end without saying, 'you haven't told  
376 me the truth or you've told me different things'. We've got to be very careful (FG1,  
377 PA).

378 Another difficulty highlighted was when children's statements appeared to contain  
379 indicators of both truths and lies. Our interviewers mentioned that teenage girls sometimes  
380 report that an ex-boyfriend, who they have recently split up from, has raped them.

381 They'll give you information about a time when they had sex, which you know is all  
382 truthful, and it's the 'how it was forced or 'how they didn't consent' [...] which is the  
383 difficult bit (FG3, PC).

384 One interviewer recalled a case of a girl who reported a catalogue of sexual offences  
385 against her, some of which were confirmed and some of which were not confirmed.  
386 However, the addition of false information discredited her entire account.

387 She used elements of truthfulness and confabulated lies around that [...] and what  
388 exposed her was when she was telling us about events we were then able to check  
389 those events and recover CCTV footage. When we viewed the CCTV what she was  
390 saying happened, which came across very plausible and understandable, was actually  
391 something completely different from the CCTV [...] the frustrating thing is we  
392 believed that some of it was truthful but she did so much damage to the investigation  
393 by telling us stuff we were able to show didn't happen [...] (FG2, PA).



394 Interviewers recognised that inconsistencies could also arise after interviews have  
395 finished. Interviewers were inclined, when making credibility assessments, to take a step  
396 back and look at all the information elicited during interviews with multiple people. They  
397 reported that this allows them to see where corroboration occurred.

398 That's about getting accounts from different people. From the suspect, from the  
399 witness, stuff like that and then it builds a bigger picture rather than trying to work out  
400 if that individual's being truthful or not (FG1, PD).

401 In summary, our interviewers identified multiple potential indicators of deception as  
402 well as ways in which they might actively test these indicators. For example, asking more  
403 specific questions and comparing the information provided by a child with other case  
404 information.

#### 405 **Exceptions to the rule**

406 Our interviewers put forward alternative explanations for brief statements that lack  
407 detail (that might originally be construed as fabrications). If children were young, they were  
408 expected to give shorter statements and would need prompting more often compared to older  
409 children. In other words, it was suggested that it might take more questioning to elicit the  
410 same amount of detail from very young child truth-tellers compared to when older child  
411 truth-tellers were being interviewed. Interviewers also considered it unlikely that very young  
412 children would lie in the first place because they have yet to develop an understanding of the  
413 concept of lying. It was felt that, as children become more capable of lying as they get older,  
414 they would be more likely to lie.

415 They [young children] are often brutally honest at that age. It's not until they are sort  
416 of four/five that their minds, you know, allow them to [lie] and I think a lot of that  
417 comes from maybe being at school with older children that are able to lie about things  
418 (FG1, PF).

419           On their own, very young children were considered to be incapable lie-tellers who  
420 required more mature models through whom they could learn vicariously the ability to lie.  
421 This idea of innocence for younger children was also related to them reporting topics that  
422 were age-inappropriate and this being an indicator of truthfulness.

423           You know, if they're describing seeing [...] their dad's penis or something and  
424 they're saying, 'well it was pointing up and doing this', the only way they would  
425 know that information is if they'd seen it (FG3, PC).

426           Another reason for a lack of information was suggested to be the effect of the trauma  
427 of the incident on the ability of the children to recall everything that happened:

428           Given that we're often dealing with serious sexual offences that [saying they can't  
429 remember part of the incident] might be as a result of trauma. So actually, they can't  
430 piece together things in a structured, chronological order, that it twists things in their  
431 mind or they can't talk about it because it's purely too traumatic (FG3, PD).

432           Finally, interviewers also spoke about how lies could contain lots of details. For  
433 example, children coming from negative home environments may embellish or exaggerate  
434 their stories to escape their current living situation.

435           Every time she's been interviewed she's added more and added more [...] she's  
436 developed this thing where six different men have apparently abused her to make sure  
437 she never goes back in and, I'm not saying it's a definite lie, but it's not really that  
438 plausible and she's done it because, I suppose, in her life that's her way to get out  
439 (FG2, PB).

440           Here, interviewers demonstrated a sensitivity towards contextual factors that might  
441 explain a lack of detail and were also able to highlight examples of where a lot of detail  
442 might not necessarily reflect a truthful account. These 'exceptions' combined with the

443 'barriers' listed under the previous theme highlight the sheer complexity of assessing  
444 credibility in child maltreatment cases.

#### 445 **Empowering the interviewee**

446 Many of our interviewers commented on how the usefulness of interview techniques  
447 for eliciting information depended on each child interviewee. In other words, one size does  
448 not fit all. Interviewers stressed that it was very important to tailor their interviews to each  
449 child interviewee to get as much information as possible:

450 Ultimately, we need to safeguard the children that we're interviewing, and that's the  
451 most important thing. So, if they want to tell [us] something, it's got to be the way  
452 they want to tell us (FG1, PB).

453 Interviewee empowerment referred to tailoring their techniques to avoid false denials  
454 or the omission of key abuse-related information for a prosecution. Interviewers stated that  
455 enabling interviewees required much preparation prior to interviews to ascertain the best  
456 interview strategy, but flexibility was also required during interviews to adapt to any  
457 unforeseen individual differences that may arise.

#### 458 **Planning and preparation**

459 Interviewers mentioned the importance of supporting child interviewees by preparing  
460 prior to their interviews so that they could tailor their interview techniques to get as full and  
461 as accurate an account as possible from interviewees. They considered that the best way to  
462 conduct pre-interview preparation was by facilitating Intermediary Assessments. There was  
463 overall consensus that Intermediary Assessments are a good source of information for  
464 assessing each child's suitability for interview and how best to phrase questions.

465 When the Intermediaries do the assessment [...] we're often present [...] so you get a  
466 feeling as to how they respond to certain types of questions and, you know, the  
467 number of sort of key words you put in a question (FG3, PC).

468           Our interviewers felt that an Intermediary Assessment was also beneficial for  
469 highlighting a child’s suggestibility and for recommending how best to interview a child with  
470 learning disabilities.

471           I had one the other day and there was a picture of summer and she [the Intermediary]  
472 kept saying to the child, ‘in the winter so this is winter’ and the child was just  
473 agreeing (FG1, PA).

474           You [have] got to assess the individual [...] and depending upon the learning  
475 disability, and perhaps in consultation with an Intermediary as well, you might only  
476 do five minutes ‘cause their attention span is so short (FG3, PD).

477           External input from a Registered Intermediary helps to shape their questions to be  
478 more specific to individuals. Avoiding suggestive questioning was considered key for  
479 preventing the elicitation of false information (i.e., false allegations) from child interviewees  
480 who may simply acquiesce to what an interviewer says.

481           It was also mentioned by our interviewers, however, that a delay whilst waiting for  
482 the right Registered Intermediary (i.e. one that is specialised in assessing a particular child  
483 interviewee) can have a negative effect on a young child’s recall ability. One interviewer  
484 discussed this issue in relation to interviewing very young children.

485           For little children, they [Intermediaries] can’t help them remember. So, we will still  
486 have to interview them a lot later down the process and if they’re struggling to  
487 remember something then the Intermediary, although they can give us how we should  
488 be forming our questions, it can’t help them remember (FG1, PB).

489           This relates back to the aforementioned unintentional withholding of truthful  
490 information (i.e., false denials) due to young children’s forgetfulness. If interviewers  
491 considered this particular population of children to already be at risk of forgetting, then  
492 interviewers suggested that they might choose to forego an Intermediary Assessment.

493           **Flexibility**

494           Despite preparing for the interview, our interviewers discussed the need to be flexible  
495 and to be able to adapt to any individual differences that are not covered during the  
496 Intermediary Assessment. For example, a child's background may make it difficult to predict  
497 how s/he will behave during an interview.

498           The kids we're going to get, whether they've been abused or not, whether they're  
499 truth- or lie-tellers, are going to be chaotic people who are in deprived backgrounds,  
500 don't know where their next meal's coming from, no discipline (FG2, PC).

501           It can be predicted that a generally chaotic child might behave unpredictably at  
502 interview, so it is up to interviewers to use their expertise and experience to react  
503 accordingly. The best advice mentioned by our interviewers was just to 'roll with it',  
504 demonstrating that, to some extent, the interviewer should just go with how the interviewee  
505 wants to present themselves and their story. Interviewers also mentioned that a child's  
506 personal disposition may also mean adapting the flow of the interview to that child.

507           We might be going in and going out of the subject, you know, if you're seeing that  
508 you're upsetting them (FG3, PA).

509           Interviewers recognised that the sensitive subjects of many interviews with child  
510 witnesses may have an effect on their willingness to recall a target incident. However, as  
511 much as interviewers reported trying to construct a safe and encouraging environment to  
512 increase the likelihood of disclosure, sometimes this is not always possible. One child  
513 interviewer stated,

514           I had one years ago and I did three attempts 'cause they were just struggling to talk  
515 about it and they wouldn't talk about the offence. Like you say they would talk about  
516 everything around it but it was just too horrific for them to talk about. So, three times  
517 we tried and, in the end, we never got it (FG1, PF).

518           The interviewer must, therefore, accept that being flexible for an interviewee also  
519 includes terminating an interview before sufficient evidence has been gathered which may  
520 mean that a case cannot be progressed. Interviewers must sometimes accept that, despite their  
521 best efforts, a child will continue to falsely deny that any abuse has occurred.

## 522 **End product**

523           The final theme was the importance of ensuring a good ‘end product’ (i.e. a high-  
524 quality video recorded interview) that can be played in court to ensure that children can be  
525 safeguarded and potentially achieve justice.

526           The whole idea is we’re trying to help that child get this to the courtroom and get that  
527 offender convicted. If we do something wrong [...] they’ll throw the interview out  
528 and the case is lost and we haven’t protected that child (FG1, PB).

529           In other words, interviewing child interviewees is a ‘high stakes’ business and  
530 interviewers in our study recognised that if they put a foot wrong, then there can be serious  
531 legal and safeguarding implications. Interviewers must carefully prepare the evidence for the  
532 Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) so that it is admissible in court and will stand up to cross-  
533 examination from the defence team.

## 534 **Preparing the evidence**

535           Across all focus groups, comments regarding evidence were mainly about the pitfalls  
536 of interviewing children that may render evidence inadmissible in court. Our interviewers  
537 noted that police interviewers must do what is right for the children at the same time as doing  
538 what is right for the court. Interviews, therefore, need to be in sync, and not at odds, with all  
539 of the components of the judicial system. Interviews need to be conducted according to  
540 national guidelines:

541           We have to show that we did everything to the book” (FG1, PA)

542 But, taken to the extreme, this resulted in some interviewers showing resentment  
543 towards the system;

544 We avoid transporting children to interviews and having conversations with them in  
545 the car because [...] you have to write down the whole conversation in the white book  
546 so that they know. Obviously, we're police officers, we can't be trusted. We have to  
547 write down to show what topics we've spoken about so that we've not been coaching  
548 them in the car (FG3, PC).

549 Interviewers reported that they regulated their behaviour to try to avoid the mistrust of  
550 court officials at trial and to ensure that the children's evidence was not considered tainted.  
551 However, interviewers did express how unnatural this regulated behaviour felt when  
552 confronted with children in obvious distress.

553 They'll [the defence lawyers] say things like [...] 'it's not a fair trial', you've got to  
554 be so careful [...] and it's awful when you've got a five-year-old or six-year-old that's  
555 sitting there crying, especially being a female as well, you want to comfort that child  
556 (FG1, PA).

557 Indeed, this lack of comforting also extended to avoiding verbal encouragements and  
558 neutralising all aspects of their behaviour;

559 We're not even allowed to say, 'well done, thank you' nothing. They sit in that  
560 interview and we are like a robot (FG1, PD).

561 These comments reflect the constraints that interviewers perceived the court system to  
562 impose upon their practice. There was also a sense of 'walking on eggshells', especially  
563 when interviewers did not agree with changes in procedural guidelines. One child  
564 interviewer reflected on the contrast between previous and current practice in terms of  
565 empathic responsiveness.

566 Before if a victim used to cry, we'd be able to put our arms around the victim and  
567 we'd given them a bit of comfort. Now, it's just about getting them a box of tissues,  
568 'are you okay to continue? Would you like a break? Would you like to go and see  
569 whoever is downstairs?' (FG 1, PA).

570 Interviewer behaviour aside, difficulties also arose from the politics of getting  
571 evidence to court. One child interviewer described a case where a boy told a story that was  
572 only half supported by eyewitness evidence; other parts of the child's account were not  
573 supported by other evidence. They described that, in the end, the courts only looked to  
574 prosecute the mother for what was supported, ignoring all the other detail given by the child,  
575 about other crimes that were not supported. They could not understand what decision rules  
576 the CPS had used to make their judgements:

577 CPS [...] what are their qualifications to make these decisions? 'Cause that's what  
578 they do, day in day out, is make decisions about whether a kid is telling the truth  
579 based on pretty much nothing I can establish (FG2, PC).

580 To summarise, the interviewers acted proactively when preparing evidence for court;  
581 they attempted to pre-empt the criticism that the CPS would make and tried to resolve these  
582 issues earlier on in the investigative process rather than reacting to CPS feedback when the  
583 evidence had already been submitted. Their responses suggested a discordance between how  
584 police interviewers evaluate credibility and how the CPS might evaluate credibility.

### 585 **Cross-examination**

586 Our interviewers spoke about their experiences in court when they are cross-examined  
587 about how they have elicited evidence from their child witnesses. This experience was  
588 resoundingly negative across all focus groups. In particular, they expressed a lot of  
589 negativity regarding defence barristers.



590           You've got your horrible defence barristers who will just throw anything. They  
591           haven't got to prove anything. They've got that luxury where they can just stand  
592           there and make a suggestion (FG3, PD).

593           The interviewers explained how the defence team are more likely to question their  
594           interview techniques rather than the actual content of the interviews themselves.

595           They look at procedure, not necessarily the content and product of the interview itself  
596           because invariably there is good material in that [...] the last thing the defence team  
597           want to do is touch the evidence because it's usually pretty compelling (FG2, PA).

598           Interviewers' understanding of the court dynamics explained their caution when  
599           preparing their evidence for trial. If they are the most likely to come under fire when the  
600           court is examining child witness' testimonies, they need to be able to demonstrate that they  
601           made defensible decisions throughout the investigative process. Interviewers talked about  
602           trying to avoid criticisms, which would later occur in court, at the time of interviewing  
603           children. Anything that could be seen to be leading child interviewees was avoided because  
604           it might taint the information elicited from the children:

605           We have to be totally transparent and impartial and we could get criticised that we're  
606           goading or that we're influencing or that we're preparing them for the interview (FG1,  
607           PA).

608           In addition, our interviewers explained how often nowadays they cut the length of the  
609           recorded interview material down before it is sent to the CPS, as 'length interviews' was  
610           perceived to be another constant criticism from the courts:

611           We get criticised enough for how long our interviews are (FG3, PC).

612           However, shorter interviews are not always possible due to the nature of the incidents  
613           that children are talking about:

614 We always argue you know if somebody has come to talk to you about a sequence of  
615 events that have been happening to them over a period of years, you can't get that  
616 person to give you all that information in a half an hour interview, 'cause somebody  
617 that's talking about one event would come and take twenty, twenty-five minutes to  
618 tell you that information (FG3, PC).

619 In other words, it was perceived by our interviewers that the courts were not  
620 sympathetic to the diversity of child witnesses; that they didn't understand that one size (or  
621 duration, in this case) did not fit all. Overall, it was very clear that the cross-examination  
622 process in courts means that police interviewers have to conform and adjust to the standards  
623 of the courts and not the other way around. With regard to children's credibility, it was  
624 suggested that this judgment was more likely to be based on whether the interviewer had  
625 adhered to best practice guidelines rather than on the cross-examination of the child witnesses  
626 themselves.

## 627 **Discussion**

628 The aim of the current study was to explore police officers' perceptions of child  
629 credibility with an emphasis on how they assess child credibility at interview, and how they  
630 perceive that their practice impacts credibility. In particular, our interviewers highlighted the  
631 importance of eliciting information, evaluating its credibility, empowering the interviewee  
632 and having a high-quality end product.

### 633 **Eliciting information**

634 Our interviewers agreed with researchers (e.g., Milne & Bull, 2006; Vrij, Hope &  
635 Fisher, 2014) that investigative interviews are primarily an information-gathering procedure.  
636 They recognised that it is possible to facilitate detailed disclosure through the use of specific  
637 interview techniques and that, sometimes, the level of detail disclosed by a child interviewee  
638 was a function of the expectations that the interviewer did or did not outline. Although

639 interviewers reported being able to elicit more detail from child interviewees using a certain  
640 technique, giving an example of a detailed statement, they did not comment on whether this  
641 increase in detail impacted the *accuracy* of the additional information elicited. When  
642 gleaning information from interviewees, it is important to ensure that there is not a trade-off  
643 between quantity of detail and *accuracy* (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Koriat, Goldsmith,  
644 Schneider & Nakash-Dura, 2001). The specific technique mentioned has yet to be researched  
645 with child interviewees, so its impact on increasing correct and incorrect information is  
646 unclear.

647 Interviewers identified other barriers to disclosure that might prevent child victims  
648 from being completely *truthful* and disclosing everything that happened, such as negative  
649 emotions (e.g., shame, self-blame), concerns around negative consequences for others, and  
650 non-disclosure before interview. These perceived barriers were consistent with the findings  
651 of previous research (e.g., Collin-Vézina, De La Sablonnière-Griffin, Palmer & Milne, 2015;  
652 Lemaigre et al., 2017; Magnusson et al., 2017) and continue to demonstrate an awareness that  
653 children can consciously make false denials about serious crimes, such as child sexual abuse  
654 (Leander 2010). Interviewers reported that they tried to make interviewees feel as  
655 comfortable as possible, which could refer to rapport-building. The sample in the current  
656 study were all from English police forces where ABE Guidance (MoJ, 2011) and the ECI  
657 (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992) form the basis of conducting interviews with children. Although  
658 both of these protocols include the use of rapport-building, it could be that further revisions  
659 are required to better emphasise the importance of rapport-building when breaking down  
660 barriers to disclosure.

### 661 **Evaluating credibility**

662 Even though our interviewers reported that they receive no official training regarding  
663 the detection of children's deception, they held certain beliefs about what cues could indicate

664 deceit but were mindful that these beliefs should not bias their practice. Their belief that a  
665 low level of detail indicates deceit is consistent with research that shows that truth-tellers do  
666 tend to include more detail in their accounts than lie-tellers (DePaulo et al., 2003). The use  
667 of age-inappropriate language by child witnesses was also perceived to be a likely indicator  
668 that a child had been coached by an adult or an older child. To our knowledge, there are no  
669 studies that have looked directly at the effects of coaching by adults on the vocabulary used  
670 by child witnesses of different ages. Our interviewers also suggested that children describing  
671 events that they do not understand (e.g. describing an erect penis without understanding why  
672 it is erect) would only occur if the children had actually witnessed the event they are  
673 describing (because such an event could not be fabricated by a child who has no knowledge  
674 that penises can become erect). This finding relates to the Criteria-Based Content Analysis  
675 (CBCA) criterion, ‘Accurately reported details misunderstood’ (Steller & Köhnken, 1989).  
676 This suggests that child’s lack of *competency* to understand the defendant’s behaviour  
677 indicates their *truthfulness*.

678 Interviewers also referred to low consistency of child victim testimonies as a sign of  
679 potential deceit. This is in line with previous research (DePaulo et al., 2003; Global  
680 Deception Research Team, 2006). A lack of internal consistency within an interview or  
681 across repeated interviews (i.e., poor *reliability*) and/or a lack of external consistency  
682 between the testimony and other evidence (i.e., low *accuracy*) could indicate deceit. In these  
683 instances, it was important to clarify, rather than challenge, any inconsistencies. This  
684 investigative, rather than interrogative, approach is important because memory is subject to  
685 change over time (Erdelyi, 2010). Indeed, our interviewers understood that the relationship  
686 between cues to deceit and credibility was not straightforward and that there could be  
687 exceptions to the assumption that a lack of consistency equates to a lack of credibility.

688 Our interviewers also took into consideration some of the barriers to disclosure  
689 identified in the first theme when evaluating whether or not a child is purposefully  
690 withholding information, or if they simply cannot remember any more information about the  
691 target event. Young children were considered to provide shorter statements compared to older  
692 children, which is in line with previous findings (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010).  
693 Interviewers were also sensitive to the negative effects of the trauma of events on the level of  
694 detail in children's statements. Indeed, forgetfulness may not be the result of a memory  
695 error, but rather deliberately triggered to avoid negative emotions related to the incidents in  
696 question (Leander, Granhag & Christianson, 2005; Leander, Christianson & Granhag, 2007).  
697 Furthermore, maltreatment can result in poor encoding of the traumatic event (Gordon,  
698 Baker-Ward & Ornstein, 2001) resulting in children not being able to recall many details  
699 during a free recall (Eisen, Goodman, Qin, Davis & Crayton, 2007). This demonstrates that  
700 our interviewers identified factors that might impact on children's *competency* to recall what  
701 happened.

#### 702 **Empowering the interviewee**

703 Our interviewers' experiences with Registered Intermediaries (RIs) mirrored the  
704 benefits outlined in the ABE Guidance that RIs help interviewers to understand children's use  
705 of language and to help them to design appropriate questions to improve the quality of the  
706 children's evidence (MoJ, 2011). In particular, it was noted that RIs were able to highlight a  
707 child's suggestibility and provide guidance on how to word questions so that the interviewer  
708 did not elicit any incorrect information, which would reduce the *accuracy* of their testimony.  
709 This contributes to the previous research on RIs by demonstrating that they are perceived to  
710 be beneficial during the investigative process as well as during cross-examinations in court  
711 (Henderson, 2015). It was also reported that an Intermediary is not always readily available  
712 and, as a result, a time delay may occur. Delays between a target incident and an

713 investigative interview can result in less accurate and less complete accounts of what  
714 happened (Akehurst et al., 2003; Larsson, Granhag & Spjut, 2003). It can also decrease the  
715 effectiveness of interview protocols (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000; Memon, Meissner &  
716 Fraser, 2010). It is reassuring that interviewers did identify the potential negative effects of a  
717 delay on children's ability to recall (i.e., their *competency*) and sometimes, for this reason,  
718 this resulted in them foregoing an Intermediary Assessment.

719         General flexibility to account for individual differences not assessed by RIs, such as a  
720 chaotic home life, emotional predisposition and non-responsiveness, was also highlighted.  
721 Interviewers described how they change their own behaviour dependent on the characteristics  
722 of the witness (e.g., adjusting to chaotic behaviour, going in and out of the topic if it is  
723 upsetting) to allow children to tell their stories in their own way. Facilitating disclosure is  
724 important because it can reduce the likelihood of cases being withdrawn from the criminal  
725 justice system (Christensen et al.; Stroud et al., 2000) and, even in the absence of any  
726 supporting evidence, can result in defendants being convicted (Walsh, Jones, Cross &  
727 Lippert, 2010). Nevertheless, it was highlighted that, despite all attempts to tailor an  
728 interview to empower an interviewee and repeated opportunities to disclose, some children  
729 will simply deny, sometimes falsely (i.e., affecting *truthfulness*), that abuse has occurred.

### 730 **End product**

731         Our interviewers focussed on avoiding any negative effects that their interviewing  
732 practice could have on the admissibility of children's testimony. Despite their awareness of  
733 good practice guidelines, interviewers still found it difficult to understand exactly what the  
734 CPS considered a *credible* end product. Interviewers were very aware of the need to be  
735 transparent about their interviewing practice to explicitly demonstrate that they had remained  
736 impartial and had not asked inappropriate questions that might lead to *inaccurate* accounts.

737 However, our interviewers also highlighted the lack of constructive criticism received from  
738 the CPS. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 2013) have published *Advice on*  
739 *the Structure of Visually Recorded Witness Interviews* that aims to strike a balance between  
740 the investigative needs of the police officers and the judicial needs of prosecution services.  
741 However, it would seem that more exploration is required to understand how the  
742 investigators and the CPS work together to increase the likelihood that a case will see its day  
743 in court. Our interviewers wished to know more about how the CPS decides whether a case is  
744 prosecuted or not.

745           When the CPS did put cases forward to prosecution, interviewers were already  
746 prepared for the cross-examination that they would receive in court. Our interviewers noted  
747 that defence lawyers were more likely to try to discredit a child's testimony by demonstrating  
748 poor interviewing practice (which would decrease the *accuracy* of the testimony) rather than  
749 by directly accusing the child of lying (i.e., targeting the *reliability* and *truthfulness* of the  
750 testimony). To avoid criticism from the defence team, interviewers tried to ensure that their  
751 interview style was impartial. They were aware of interviewer bias and that knowledge of  
752 the wider investigation could influence their questioning style (Brown & Lamb, 2015).  
753 Overall, they felt responsible for the investigation, as was the case for the interviewers in  
754 Hanway and Akehurst's (2017) investigation, and the need to protect children from potential  
755 revictimisation. The emphasis in court on interviewers' questioning suggests that the  
756 perceived credibility of child witnesses might rest primarily on the shoulders of the officers.

### 757 **Limitations**

758           Our sample may not be generalisable to both national and international populations of  
759 investigative interviewers. The use of three focus groups from a sample of police officers  
760 based in two English police forces does not necessarily represent the thoughts and

761 experiences of all English police officers who interview children. Furthermore, the themes  
762 highlighted in this study may not all be relevant for other countries where different interview  
763 protocols, such as the NICHD protocol, are used to interview children. As noted in the  
764 Introduction, the NICHD protocol has already been revised to enhance child cooperation and  
765 increase disclosure (Hershkowitz et al., 2015); however, ABE Guidance and the ECI have  
766 not. That said, in Sweden, where the NICHD protocol is used, similar barriers to disclosure  
767 are still being found for cases of child sexual abuse (Magnusson et al., 2017), which suggests  
768 that the revised NICHD protocol has yet to eliminate all shortfalls. Furthermore, the use of  
769 Intermediary assessments is a UK-specific initiative, so other countries might cite other  
770 resources that empower the interviewee and facilitate communication for vulnerable  
771 witnesses.

772         Variability within the data (e.g., years of experience interviewing children was wide  
773 ranging across the participants) may have had an impact on findings. For ethical reasons, to  
774 protect anonymity, the demographic data of the participants was not linked to their  
775 transcribed data. It was, therefore, not possible to explore how certain demographic  
776 characteristics, such as years of experience interviewing children or whether they interviewed  
777 children of all ages or just adolescents, impacted the study's findings. The sub-themes with  
778 higher levels of endorsement across participants and focus groups (Indicators of Deception –  
779 75%, and Barriers to Disclosure – 63% - see Supplementary Materials for all sub-themes) are  
780 likely to be less affected by the heterogeneity of the sample.

### 781 **Future research and practical implications**

782         The findings of the current study present many ideas for future research. It seems  
783 there may be some discrepancies in how police interviewers and the CPS evaluate credibility.  
784 Future studies should explore their differing perceptions of perceived victim credibility and



785 what makes a *credible* high-quality end product for presentation in court. A recent review of  
786 the CPS Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) units by Her Majesty's Crown  
787 Prosecution Service Inspectorate (2016) found that the poor quality of files put forward by  
788 police officers is the biggest contributory factor to the reworking of cases of serious sexual  
789 offences. This could have potential negative implications for having to re-interview witnesses  
790 who find it difficult to talk about what has happened to them. The review reported that a trial  
791 process of embedding police officers in RASSO teams or lawyers in police investigative units  
792 was underway. It would be of interest for future research to report on how police interviewers  
793 and CPS lawyers working together might resolve some of the issues mentioned in this study.  
794 The comments of our interviewers suggest that it would be helpful for the police to have  
795 further guidance on the decision rules that the CPS use when deciding whether to prosecute a  
796 case of alleged child maltreatment. Ultimately, both investigators and prosecutors are  
797 aiming for the same goal: an opportunity to achieve justice for child victims. A more specific  
798 and constructive feedback loop between investigators and prosecutors might help to make  
799 this legal process more effective.

## 800 **Conclusion**

801 Despite our interviewers acknowledging that assessing credibility is not the primary  
802 focus of their investigative role, they highlighted many ways that their practice could impact  
803 on the perceived credibility of the child victim. *Accuracy* could be negatively affected by the  
804 techniques and types of questions that the interviewers posed. Participants suggested that it  
805 was important to avoid poor interviewing practice, particularly because this would be  
806 targeted during cross-examination and could potentially have an impact on the court's  
807 perceptions of the child victim's testimony. *Competency* could be facilitated by the use of  
808 RIs, although our interviewers highlighted there are some factors, such as trauma and time  
809 delay, which negatively impact on children's ability to recall what happened, that cannot be

810 overcome through Intermediary Assessment. *Reliability*, in terms of the internal consistency  
811 of a child's testimony, was identified as a sign of potential deceit. That said, our interviewers  
812 understood that they should clarify these inconsistencies, rather than jumping to the  
813 conclusion that a child was not telling the truth. Finally, *truthfulness* (i.e., eliciting an honest  
814 account) was not always possible, despite our interviewers' best efforts. They suggested that  
815 when child interviewees did disclose information, it was important to reflect on whether this  
816 information was elicited according to best practice guidelines and whether there were any  
817 potential indicators of false information. If abuse-related information could be elicited, our  
818 child interviewers reported taking steps to ensure that the evidence would be both admissible  
819 in court and unlikely to come under fire from defence lawyers who might suggest that the  
820 children's evidence was falsely elicited through poor interviewing practice. Overall, our  
821 interviewers' responses demonstrate that they do acknowledge some responsibility for the  
822 perceived credibility of child victims.

#### 823 **Declaration of interest**

824 The authors report no conflict of interest.

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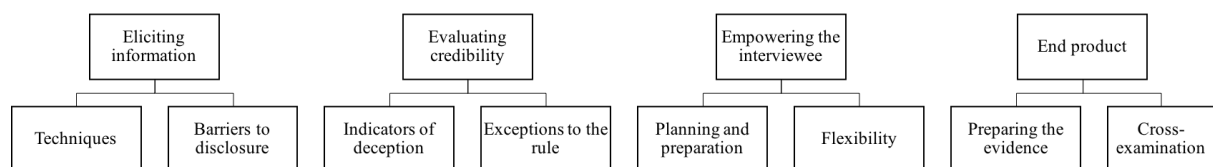
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**Figure**



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*Figure 1.* Main themes and sub-themes – the 4E’s

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