

ARTICLE

Police officers' perceptions and experiences of promoting honesty in child victims and witnesses

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Abstract

Purpose: This two-phase study employed a mixed-methods design to explore UK police officers' perceptions and experiences of promoting honesty in child witnesses with a special focus on the recommended inclusion of Truth-Lies Discussions (TLDs) at the start of interviews with children.

Method: In Phase 1, police officers completed an online survey designed to cover their experiences and perceptions regarding truth-promotion with child witnesses. In Phase 2, police officers were individually interviewed to elicit an in-depth understanding of current practice relating to this aspect of investigative interviews with children.

Results: Around half of the survey respondents believed that TLDs promote honesty in children. The majority reported always using TLDs during interviews to ensure compliance with UK best-practice guidance. There was evidence of a misconception among some police officers that children's performance on TLDs was related to their subsequent truth-telling behaviour. Following analysis of the interview transcripts, we found a main theme of police officers' *uses of TLDs*, which included (i) gauging children's conceptual understanding of truths/lies, (ii) ensuring no deviation from guidance and (iii) communicating children's credibility to the court. A second main theme revealed the *challenges and obstacles* police officers perceived when embarking on TLDs. These were that (i) one type of TLD is not suitable for all children, (ii) the training is insignificant and the application is inappropriate and (iii) participants sometimes use alternative strategies to promote honesty with children.

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Conclusion: Police officers reported following guidance because a failure to do so would jeopardise children's testimony and provided recommendations for future practice-informed research designs to test techniques for the promotion of honesty in child witnesses.

KEY WORDS

achieving best evidence, child interviewing strategies, interviewers' perspectives, promoting honesty, truth-lies discussions

Children's lying abilities emerge at around 3 years old and are, at first, self-protective and not intended to harm others (Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002). Whilst children's early lies are easily detected with further probing (Talwar & Lee, 2002), these lies develop along with children's cognitive functioning (Talwar & Crossman, 2012; Talwar & Lee, 2008). Thus, as children get older, their lie-telling becomes more elaborate and they can maintain their lies over a longer period of time (Talwar & Crossman, 2012). This skill develops further as children's executive functioning abilities, such as their working memory, inhibitory control (Lee, 2013; Talwar & Crossman, 2011; Talwar et al., 2009) and Theory of Mind (Sai et al., 2021) develop.

Adults are poor at accurately detecting deception in children, with studies reporting that adults perform slightly above chance levels (Domagalski et al., 2020; Edelman et al., 2006; Gongola et al., 2017; Talwar et al., 2009; Wyman et al., 2019). A meta-analysis revealed that adults' accuracy rates for detecting deception in children were around 47.5% (Gongola et al., 2017). Adults have a tendency to exhibit a truth bias by taking reports at face value and believing child senders (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Domagalski et al., 2020; Vrij et al., 2010). Moreover, police officers are generally no better than laypeople at accurately detecting deception in children (Leach et al., 2004; Vrij et al., 2006). When undetected in an investigative interview, children's lies can bear important socio-legal implications. For example, falsely believing the testimony of a child who denies experiencing abuse, despite having been abused, may have harmful consequences for the child, such as experiencing repeated abuse. Conversely, believing a child who falsely reports an event that did not occur may be harmful to innocent suspects. Together, these factors highlight the importance of investigating evidence-based strategies that assist child victims and witnesses in providing truthful reports during police investigations. The aim of this study was to explore, for the first time, UK police officers' perceptions and experiences of using interview strategies that promote honesty in child witness.

Researchers and psychologists have extensively studied the optimum conditions that assist vulnerable victims and witnesses, including children, in providing their best evidence (during police interviews and in the courtroom). In the UK, the "Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings" guidance, also referred to as ABE guidance, was created as a safeguard to protect vulnerable witnesses (Ministry of Justice, 2022). This investigative protocol recommends that police officers end the rapport-building phase of interviews with a Truth-Lies Discussion (TLD) involving narratives suited to the child's age. The aim of a TLD is to assess a child's conceptual understanding of the difference between truths and lies, to emphasise the importance of telling the truth and to serve as a reminder of the consequences of lying (O'Connell et al., 2020). In the UK, children cannot be asked to swear an oath, so TLDs also help relay to the court that a child has been made aware of the importance of telling the truth and is competent to testify (Lyon, 2011; Ministry of Justice, 2022). The underlying assumption is that children who understand the difference between truths and lies and who appreciate the consequences of lying, will provide a truthful and accurate statement. See [Appendix 1](#) for an example of a script for a TLD as recommended in the ABE guidance (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

Contrary to the ABE guidance, previous research has failed to find a significant relationship between children's conceptual understanding of truths and lies and their subsequent truth/lie-telling

behaviour during an interview (Huffman et al., 1999; London & Nunez, 2002; Lyon et al., 2008; Talwar et al., 2002, 2004). All the research conducted to this date support the notion that children who demonstrate a correct understanding of truths and lies will not necessarily be more likely to report truthfully during their interview. Similarly, children who fail to demonstrate a correct understanding of truths and lies will not necessarily be more likely to tell a lie during their interview. Despite this evidence, TLDs are still recommended as best practice in the UK.

The Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate; CJI, 2014) published their findings of the evaluation of six UK police forces regarding their use of ABE guidance in child sexual abuse cases. The authors deemed compliance with ABE guidance in relation to TLDs to be poor. Interviewers assessed the witnesses' understanding of truth and lies and used the suggested example text in 59.4% and 36.2% of the reviewed interviews, respectively. Truth and lies assessments were not consistent across all inspected police services. It was common for police officers to replace the recommendations given in the ABE guidance with, for example, simple statements about the importance of telling the truth or acting out a transgression to use as an example to gauge a child's understanding of truths and lies. The report did not explore the reasons behind poor compliance with regard to TLDs and, to date, there is no qualitative data investigating police officers' perceptions of using TLDs. Therefore, the current study will address the gap in the literature by exploring police officers' beliefs about TLDs and explanations for their (non-)compliance with guidance around TLDs.

In line with the CJI report (2014), research suggests that, despite the available recommendations, there is a tendency for investigative interviewers, worldwide, to deviate from best-practice guidelines (Hill & Davies, 2013; Powell et al., 2010; Powell & Barnett, 2015; Richardson et al., 2019; Wright & Powell, 2007). For example, in the UK, some interviewers continued to use statements termed as “misstatements”¹ (Hill & Davies, 2013) and deviated from guidelines by eliciting confirmations² rather than initiating TLDs (Richardson et al., 2019), despite being trained. This non-adherence to ABE guidelines and the use of other techniques could negatively impact a child's perceived credibility in the courtroom if they respond “incorrectly” (Lyon et al., 2008; Westcott & Kynan, 2006). Indeed, according to the ABE guidance “... a lack of understanding of truth and lies by a witness during an interview [...] could have an impact on the weight given to their evidence by the court” (Ministry of Justice, 2022, p. 81). In contrast, communicating a child's positive performance on a TLD and their competence to testify has been found to increase children's perceived credibility (Connolly et al., 2008).

Police interviewers have acknowledged that, despite their best efforts, the elicitation of truthful reports is not always possible when interviewing children. They viewed interviews as an information-gathering procedure rather than a credibility assessment (Cassidy et al., 2020). Further, research suggests that police officers' perceptions of the efficacy of investigative interviewing techniques are likely to influence their application of those techniques (Dando et al., 2008; Kebbell et al., 1999). As such, whilst interviewers do not believe that detecting deception per se is part of their role as an investigator, they may however appreciate that there is a place, likely at the beginning of interviews, for techniques to promote honesty in child interviews. These perceptions of police officers have not yet been explored. It was therefore also necessary for the current study to gain insight into police officers' perceptions of the utility and effectiveness of recommended honesty-promoting interview strategies.

In sum, we aimed to address the gap in the literature by exploring, via an online survey and semi-structured interviews, UK police officers' perceptions and experiences of promoting honesty with child victims and witnesses and their adherence to the strategy recommended by the ABE guidance. The aims of this study were twofold. First, understanding practitioners' perceptions of how they believe they promote honesty in child witnesses. Second, gaining insight into practitioners' reports of (non-)compliance with best-practice guidelines and their self-reported reasons for doing so.

¹For example, “I'm wearing white socks. If I said I was wearing blue socks would that be the truth or a lie?” (Hill & Davies, 2013, p. 67).

²For example, “Can you just confirm that we spoke about being truthful?” (Richardson et al., 2019, p. 779).

PHASE 1: AN ONLINE SURVEY

Method

Participants

The sample of survey respondents comprised 45 police officers trained in the ABE guidance who had experience of conducting interviews with child victims and witnesses. Electronic invitations to participate in the study were sent to 31 police constabularies of the 45 across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland that the research team could access. Ten constabularies agreed to participate in the study by sharing the survey with police officers who interview children. Ultimately, to ensure participants' anonymity, it was not possible to see how many officers from each constabulary completed the survey. There were 29 female officers, 13 male officers, and 3 participants who did not report their gender. Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 55 years ($M=43.08$ years, $SD=7.62$ years, 6 participants did not report their age) and their years of experience interviewing child victims and witnesses ranged from 1 to 25 years ($M=7.77$ years, $SD=6.11$ years, 2 participants did not provide an answer). Participants had attended between one and eight ABE training courses ($M=2.97$ courses, $SD=1.77$ courses, 6 participants did not provide an answer) and had conducted between 4 and 100 interviews with child victims and witnesses per year ($M=19.45$ interviews/year, $SD=21.01$ interviews/year, 7 participants did not provide an answer). A total of 51 participants were excluded from the study; 14 of them did not attempt the survey, 8 did not complete the screening questions, 12 did not continue past the screening questions and 18 did not complete 100% of the Likert-type questions (our originally planned threshold for inclusion). Ethical approval (SHFEC 2022-046A) was granted by the Science and Health Faculty Ethics Committee at the University of Portsmouth.

Materials

Participants completed an online survey designed via Qualtrics. The first page of the survey was a Participant Information Sheet detailing the nature and purpose of the study. On the second page, participants were asked to give their informed consent and were asked two screening questions to determine their eligibility to complete the survey. The first screening question asked participants if they were trained in the ABE guidelines. The second screening question asked if participants had experience of regularly conducting interviews with child victims and witnesses as part of their current role. Participants who answered "no" to either of the questions were thanked for their interest in the study and informed that they were not eligible for participation. Participants who answered "yes" to both screening questions proceeded to the survey.

The first part of the survey contained Likert-type scales and open-ended questions (see [Table 1](#) for a more detailed view of the questions). Participants were asked to justify each of their ratings on the Likert-type scales in corresponding open text boxes.

Participants were asked to give open-text responses regarding (i) their understanding of the purpose of TLDs, (ii) perceived advantages of using TLDs and (iii) obstacles encountered whilst using TLDs. They were also asked to provide examples of how they apply TLDs during interviews with child victims and witnesses, to explain how a child victim/witness is considered to have "passed" a TLD and how, in their experience, a child victim/witness's performance on a TLD is communicated to the court.

Finally, participants were asked to provide examples of other interview strategies they have used to promote honesty in child victims and witnesses, as well as any interview strategies they believe might be effective at promoting honesty, even if they had not previously used those strategies.

The latter part of the survey was optional and contained demographic questions about participants' age, gender, job role and years of experience interviewing child victims and witnesses. Participants were

TABLE 1 Police officers' perceptions of truth-lies discussions (TLDs).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How helpful was the ABE training you received in relation to TLDs with child victims/witnesses? (1 = <i>Extremely unhelpful</i> to 7 = <i>Extremely helpful</i>)	5.24	1.5
How effective do you think TLDs are at promoting honesty in child victims/witnesses? (1 = <i>Strongly ineffective</i> to 7 = <i>Strongly effective</i>)	4.22	1.54
How frequently do you use TLDs during interviews with child victims/witnesses? (1 = <i>Never</i> to 7 = <i>Always</i>)	6.44	1.25
How important is it for a child to "pass" a TLD? (1 = <i>Not at all important</i> to 7 = <i>Extremely important</i>)	4.62	2.03
How honest do you think child victims/witnesses are after "passing" a TLD? (1 = <i>Very dishonest</i> to 7 = <i>Very honest</i>)	4.96	1.3

also asked to indicate the number of ABE training courses they had attended, the year in which they attended their most recent ABE training course, and whether they attended any additional training in honesty-promoting strategies for child victims and witnesses. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had conducted an interview with a child victim/witness using the ABE guidelines in the last 6 months, the number of interviews they have conducted with child victims and witnesses in the last year and to make an estimate of the number of interviews they conduct with child victims and witnesses each year. At the end of the survey, participants had the option to participate in a follow-up individual interview conducted online via Zoom. Participants who agreed to take part in this second phase of the study were asked to provide their email addresses so that they could be contacted by the Principal Investigator (PI). The study was pre-registered and the material can be found in the OSF repository (<https://osf.io/d2q6r>).

Procedure

The study was advertised on several social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn). Support for recruitment was also sought from police constabularies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The PI sent emails to Research Leads and gatekeepers in several constabularies explaining the details and nature of the study. The PI completed and submitted application forms to the constabularies that expressed an interest in participating in the study. Gatekeepers then shared the link to the online study with police officers who regularly interview child victims and witnesses.

Coding responses to open-ended questions

For each open-ended question in the survey, the PI conducted a content analysis to ascertain the frequency of similar responses. Similar responses were grouped together and given a label resulting in an exhaustive list, for all questions, that took account of all responses. A second coder was then provided with the labels for each response type for each open-ended question and was asked to independently assign each response to a label. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for inter-rater agreement was 0.89, indicating substantial agreement among the raters.

Results

Descriptive statistics from the Likert-style questions can be found in Table 1. Table 2 contains the top four responses for each open-ended question.

TABLE 2 Police officers' most frequently self-reported experiences of using truth-lies discussions (TLDs) (N = 45).

	<i>n</i>	%
Participants' reasons for not always using TLDs with child victims and witnesses		
Older children know the difference between the truth and a lie	9	81.8
Better to emphasise the importance of telling the truth to older children in a different way	3	27.3
TLDs are not effective	2	18.2
TLDs can be patronising for older children	1	9.1
Participants' understanding of the purpose/goal of TLDs		
To gauge children's ability to differentiate between the truth and a lie	21	46.7
To gauge children's understanding of truths and lies	17	37.8
To emphasise the importance of telling the truth	15	33.3
To show a child's performance at court	14	31.1
Modes of delivery of TLDs		
Showing videos of a TLD scenario	17	37.8
Creating a hypothetical scenario	12	26.7
Reading a verbal scenario	11	24.4
Using a storyboard	9	20
Advantages of using TLDs		
Gauges children's conceptual understanding of truths and lies and the consequences of lying	22	48.9
Lays out to the child the expectations of an ABE interview	19	42.2
Gauges the child's ability to differentiate between the truth and a lie	9	20
Demonstrates the child's understanding to the court	8	17.8
Obstacles		
Children do not understand the TLD scenarios in the ABE guidance	11	24.4
Children's age – TLDs are not always age appropriate	9	20
Children become confused during TLDs	6	13.3
The examples provided are irrelevant to the child's experience	4	8.9
How is a child considered to have “passed” a TLD?		
Successfully identifying truths and lies ^a	28	62.2
Successfully differentiating between a truth and a lie ^b	8	17.8
Children do not “pass” or “fail” a TLD	5	11.1
Rationalising the answers given on the TLD questions	3	6.7
Importance of children “passing” a TLD		
A child's evidence can be called into question if they do not pass a TLD	12	26.7
A child's performance affects the perceptions of the court if they do not pass a TLD	9	20
Officers proceed with the ABE interview regardless of a child's performance on a TLD	9	20
A child's performance on a TLD does not affect their report	5	11.1
Communication of a child witness/victim's performance during TLD to the court		
Through video-recorded interviews	22	48.9
The performance is not communicated to the court	14	31.1
Upon request from the court or the defence team	3	6.7
Not enough experience to comment on that	2	4.4

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	<i>n</i>	%
Other strategies used to promote honesty with child victims/witnesses		
Emphasising the importance of telling the truth	9	40.9
Laying ground rules (i.e., using "I do not know" and "I do not understand")	7	31.8
Offering reassurances and building rapport	5	22.7
Asking children to describe the event by thinking about their own senses	3	13.6
Future recommendations for honesty-promoting interview strategies		
Do not know	15	36.6
Building rapport and offering reassurances	7	17.1
Emphasising the importance of telling the truth	6	14.6
Laying ground rules	3	7.3

^aThe child is capable of correctly labelling an example of the truth as the truth and an example of a lie as a lie.

^bThe child understands that the truth and a lie are two distinct concepts.

Around half of the participants considered TLDs to be an effective honesty-promoting strategy, with 35.6% and 17.8% reporting that TLDs are somewhat effective and effective at promoting honesty in children, respectively. The majority of participants (75.6%) reported always using TLDs during interviews with child victims and witnesses. We conducted a two-tailed Pearson's correlation to explore the relationship between participants' perceived effectiveness of TLDs and their frequency of using TLDs. Participants' perceived effectiveness of TLDs was moderately positively correlated with their self-reported frequency of using TLDs, $r(43) = .36, p = .015$. Participants who reported not always using TLDs with children were asked to provide an explanation for their rating. Age was the most common explanation given as to why participants do not always use TLDs with children. More specifically, participants thought that older children know the difference between the truth and a lie, therefore it was believed unnecessary to present to them a TLD scenario.

The most frequently reported answer for participants' understanding of the purpose of TLDs was to gauge children's ability to differentiate between truths and lies. The most frequently reported example of participants' use of TLDs was the presentation of a video clip of a TLD scenario.

Participants' most frequently reported advantage of using TLDs was to gauge children's conceptual understanding of truths and lies and the consequences of lying. In contrast, the most frequently reported obstacle faced when using TLDs with children was that they did not always understand the TLD scenario or questions.

The most commonly reported explanation for how children are considered to have "passed" a TLD was children's ability to successfully identify a truth and a lie. Most participants acknowledged the importance of a child "passing" a TLD, with 17.8%, 22.2% and 20% reporting that it was moderately important, very important and extremely important for a child to "pass" a TLD, respectively. Around half of the participants (51.1%) reported that children were neither honest nor dishonest after "passing" a TLD. Participants were asked to explain why they believed it was important, or not, for children to "pass" a TLD. The most frequently provided responses were that a child's performance on a TLD affects the credibility of their statement and the way they are perceived in court. It was most often reported that a child's TLD performance during an interview was communicated to the court via a video-recorded interview.

Almost half (48.9%) of the participants reported using strategies, other than TLDs, to promote honesty with child victims and witnesses. The most commonly reported alternative strategy was emphasising to the child the importance of telling the truth. However, most participants were reluctant to recommend alternative interview strategies that might effectively promote honesty.

PHASE 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Method

Participants

Of the survey respondents, 21 participants indicated their interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Only 5 participants responded to the PI's email invitation and scheduled slots for their interviews. An additional participant was interviewed but was excluded from the analysis as they were currently an ABE trainer rather than a child interviewer. Participants were from four different constabularies from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The sample consisted of four female police officers and a male police officer. Their ages ranged from 27 to 49 years ($M=40.2$ years, $SD=9.25$ years) and their years of experience interviewing child victims and witnesses ranged from 3 to 12 years ($M=5.4$ years, $SD=3.71$ years). Participants had attended between two and four ABE training courses ($M=2.4$ courses, $SD=0.89$ courses), and, in the last year, had conducted between 6 and 15 interviews with child victims and witnesses ($M=11.4$ interviews, $SD=3.29$ interviews).

Materials

A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared for this phase of the study to explore police officers' perceptions of using TLDs in child interviews. The protocol was designed to provide an in-depth exploration of investigative interviewers' experiences and perceptions of promoting honesty with child victims and witnesses. The interview consisted of open-ended questions, such as "Please tell me everything you know about the purpose of TLDs" and "What is your understanding of why ABE guidance recommends the use of TLDs during interviews with child victims and witnesses?", and additional follow-up prompts, such as "Can you tell me more about that?". The same interview protocol was followed for all the interviews, but the flow and pace of each interview were guided by the participant. The discussion enabled rich and meaningful conversations between the PI and the participants. The interviews were conducted online on the video conferencing platform Zoom. This allowed the PI to recruit participants across the UK.

Procedure

The PI sent emails to participants who provided their e-mail addresses at the end of the online survey to invite them to the online interviews. The emails contained a Participant Information Sheet and a consent form. Once participants returned their signed informed consent forms to the PI, they were invited to schedule a slot for their interview session at a time and date convenient for them. Both the PI and the participants attended the online interviews in quiet and private spaces, to ensure the participants' confidentiality was maintained.

At the beginning of each interview, the PI reiterated to each participant the purpose and nature of the study. The PI ensured all participants were aware of the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews and reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interviews and for 2 weeks after participation. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before the PI began the video recording of the interview. At the end of each interview, the PI terminated the video recording, verbally debriefed the participants and thanked them for their time.

Analysis

All interviews were video recorded via Zoom. The PI transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and included utterances from both herself and the participants. All transcripts were analysed

according to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) principles (Smith et al., 2021). IPA adopts an idiographic approach that focuses in-depth on each particular case with the aim to provide a detailed analysis of each participant's contribution to the study (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA is also interpretative in that it recognises the role of the researcher in trying to make sense of their participants' experiences. To this extent, IPA offers insight into participants' unique perspectives and affords the researcher an attempt to make sense of how each participant perceives and reports their experiences. IPA follows a stepwise iterative cycle; therefore, the PI looked at each transcript separately and analysed it according to the steps described below before moving on to the next transcript. The PI started the analysis by reading and re-reading the first transcript. Then, initial notes and exploratory comments (e.g., "use of an example of a child performing well on a TLD but not going on to tell the truth") were made regarding the content of the transcript. The aim was to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments for each transcript. Then, experiential statements were constructed that reflected the participant's experiences, such as "TLDs can be perceived as patronising for older children". Then, the PI searched for connections across the experiential statements generated within a transcript, and grouped them into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and sub-themes. In conforming to IPA's iterative cycle, this entire process was repeated for each transcript, one at a time, resulting in an in-depth individual analysis, identification of corresponding PETs and generation of a PET table unique to each case. Once all the PETs had been identified, the PI developed Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and group-level sub-themes across all cases by looking at patterns of similarities and differences across the PETs generated within each transcript. Each GET and group-level sub-theme was given a label representing its main characteristics. The end result represented the shared and unique features of experiences and perceptions reported across all police officers regarding the promotion of truth with child victims and witnesses.

Results

The PI identified two GETs, each with three sub-themes. Pseudonyms were chosen to protect the confidentiality/anonymity of the participants.

Group experiential theme 1: Uses for TLDs

TLDs gauge children's conceptual understanding of truths and lies: All participants emphasised that the purpose of TLDs was to gauge children's understanding of truths and lies and the consequences of lying, rather than to promote honesty in child victims and witnesses. For example, Becky said:

"To make sure that the child understands the difference between truth and lies. To gauge, to try and assess their understanding of it. So, you know where you are, and you can sort of tailor the questions you ask around their understanding of it then."

In addition to assessing a child's understanding of truths and lies, Becky reported that TLDs helped her tailor interview questions to her interviewee's level of understanding. Charles echoed that:

"They're there to establish the person or a child's knowledge of the understanding of the truth and a lie, and also to test their level of understanding of honesty and, if used properly they're there as a kind of means to emphasise that what follows should be the truth."

Here, Charles added that the aim of TLDs is to remind children that they are expected to tell the truth during the interview. Eve had a similar opinion:

“The purpose is to understand, make sure that you understand that they do know the difference between the truth and a lie. And it, I guess also as sort of backup purpose, to give them the impression, the idea that it's important that they do tell the truth.”

Therefore, it was acknowledged that the primary aim of TLDs was not to promote honesty in child victims and witnesses but, if carried out correctly, TLDs were used to bring to children's attention that they are expected to be truthful during their interview. Participants thought TLDs offered a reminder to provide truthful statements. However, participants reported that the conceptual questions recommended for the end of TLDs (e.g., “Did John tell a truth, or a lie, or you don't know?”) were straightforward and easy to answer, therefore it was rare to encounter a child who was unable to provide the correct answers to these questions. This proved to be a problem for some of the participants who pointed out that a child who answered the TLD questions correctly could still provide untruthful statements:

“But I think most twelve-year-olds, unless they have, you know, a severe learning disability or something like that, will know the difference between a truth and a lie. And maybe that's why I don't think it's particularly effective, I suppose.”

Eve agreed that TLDs informed police officers about a child's understanding of truths and lies, but she thought they were not effective because older children generally have a good understanding of truths and lies and this understanding does not necessarily lead to truthful accounts.

TLDs ensure there is no deviation from ABE guidance: All the participants reported always using TLDs during their interviews with child witnesses. Indeed, they all perceived it necessary to ensure they were not deviating from the ABE guidance. There was a sentiment throughout all the interviews that participants would be wary of conducting an ABE interview without including a TLD, as shown in Amy's statement:

“It's just the thought of if it goes to court and I haven't used it and a judge or a solicitor said in court “well you've gone against guidance, why?” If you don't have a really good reason, then they could pull apart the rest of your interviews. They could say “well you've not followed guidance there so actually maybe the rest of your interview isn't valid.”

Amy clarified that not following guidance could negatively affect the overall interview and the outcome of the case. Some participants considered it highly important to use TLDs at the beginning of their interviews, even if they did not believe TLDs to be effective in promoting honesty:

“I wouldn't want to try and submit an interview without ever having done it. I don't think it would reach court, I think it would be challenged so it's vital. Even though it's almost like something you have to do.”

Here, Charles likened TLDs to a checklist item that police officers have to tick off. He suggested that, in a way, ensuring they were sticking to the guidance offered police officers a standardised procedure for interviewing vulnerable witnesses. As Becky said:

“We all do it the same because you've got a base level there, everyone's doing the same practice.”

Following recommended guidelines, even if they are not mandatory, ensures that all police officers are interviewing children in the same way.

TLDs communicate the child's credibility to the court: Not all participants had experience with cases going to Court, but more experienced participants provided mixed reviews on this topic. Some participants believed that a child's performance during a TLD would affect the child's perceived credibility or the outcome of the case, as portrayed by Demi's answer:

“If it's somebody who struggles with telling the difference between truth or lies it will never go near court. Because one of your biggest asset[s] as a witness is that you're credible and reliable, you know, how reliable is somebody['s] evidence who doesn't know what the truth is? That's just completely unreliable, you can't convict somebody based on an evidence of someone who doesn't understand the difference between truth and lies.”

On the one hand, Demi believed that the case of a child who did not demonstrate a good understanding of truths and lies would not be prosecuted because the credibility of the witness would be questioned. On the other hand, she also claimed that a child's performance during a TLD should not contribute to a judgement of their credibility as a witness:

“I wouldn't use this truth or lies thing as some sort of like an ultimate judgment on somebody's credibility. It is just a wee test, it's just a small test. It's something that has to be there. [...] it doesn't necessarily reflect somebody's abilities.”

Demi evoked that children's performance during TLDs could cast a negative light on their perceived credibility, even though she did not think that children's performance during TLDs accurately reflected their knowledge or influenced whether they would go on to tell the truth. She believed that children could provide incorrect answers during a TLD but proceed to give a truthful account. Charles held a similar belief. For him, children's performance during a TLD did not influence their interview:

“I would still carry on and interview them and try and give them their voice [...] if the child is there and wants to talk, whether they sailed through truth and lies is immaterial.”

Charles stated that he would still interview a child regardless of whether or not they demonstrated a good understanding of truths and lies during the TLD questions. In Charles' view, the aim is to give the child a chance to provide a statement, regardless of whether or not it is truthful, as it would then be followed by an evidence-gathering phase where police officers could search for independent evidence.

Group experiential theme 2: Challenges and obstacles inherent when embarking on TLDs

One type of TLD does not suit all children: A common obstacle for all the participants was that TLDs (in the form recommended in the UK) were not perceived to be suitable for all child victims and witnesses. Participants reported that TLDs did not consider children's ages nor developmental abilities. Eve acknowledged the effect TLDs might have on younger children:

“I guess if you were interviewing a five-year-old, they might not know the difference between the truth and a lie. Like, they might not be cognitively aware of what the difference is. And so, it's important from a police perspective that you know whether that child knows the difference between a truth and a lie before you start to interview them.”

Eve acknowledged that TLDs were helpful in assessing younger children's understanding of truths and lies. However, she did not believe TLDs were effective in gauging understanding for older children:

“You don't want to insert the sort of idea that you might think that they're lying because that's not good for rapport-building.”

TLDs were perceived to be challenging because they can negatively impact the relationship police officers try to build with their interviewees to aid the elicitation of full and accurate accounts. Demi expressed similar concerns:

“I just feel that the training described [is] sort of patronising towards a child [...] a teenager, a 16–17 [year old] will be thinking along the same lines as an adult. So, for them to play a silly game bit I would feel, you know, the child will be patronised.”

Demi's repetition of the word “patronising” emphasised her concern that TLDs hinder her efforts to build rapport with older children. Participants also perceived TLDs to be challenging when interviewing children with learning disabilities:

“Maybe some children that have got sort of additional learning needs, maybe they don't understand the story sometimes or they've gotten a bit confused with what you're asking them, I don't know [...] whether it's the truth and the lies that they've got the difficulty with or thinking about the example you've given.”

In this example, Becky demonstrated how TLDs might not be effective in gauging the understanding of truths and lies for children with learning disabilities. In this instance, it was suggested that TLDs lose their intended purpose.

The training is insignificant and the application is inappropriate: Participants argued that they did not receive, during their training, clear guidance on how to use TLDs with child victims and witnesses. They agreed that TLDs were only covered very briefly in their ABE training:

“I don't remember my training around truth and lies. I probably did the course, maybe three years ago, and I've done a lot of interviews since then, so it would have been a very small part of it, the training itself.”

The fact that Eve reported not remembering any discussion or training around the use of TLDs reflected the idea that perhaps TLDs were somewhat inconsequential and banal and that the training aspect around them was “forgotten.” Charles reflected the idea that TLDs were used in a checkbox-like manner and no proper guidance was given during training:

“It's not something that's specifically touched upon [...] it's just widely accepted that you will do truth and lies and that you will use those examples. There's not discussion about them or not specific training, again, which is why I think it's important that you're raising it because it needs a bit of thought.”

Charles believed that TLDs went against the purpose of the ABE guidance, which is to critically think about the type of question used and to tailor interviews to individual differences.

It was challenging for other participants to communicate to children the consequences of lying without scaring them from providing a full report of what happened. For example, Demi said:

“Most adults will understand if you're not telling the truth, you can be prosecuted for it. But with children you know, would you have that discussion? I think they would get scared. I would just do something very, very simple.”

Finding the right balance between communicating the consequences of lying to children and ensuring that children are not scared of providing a detailed statement is challenging. There was an overall notion across the interviews that participants faced challenges during child interviews and that they required

additional, more thorough guidance to help them overcome some obstacles. There was a general sentiment that change away from TLDs would be welcomed:

“I think anything you do to test truth and lies [...] will be worth thinking about. [...] You will have a kind of ‘this is easy to do’, ‘this is what the police can do under all the constraints that they have’ and then ‘this is what would be ideal in an ideal world.’”

As evident in Charles' statement, it was deemed most important to ensure that any future recommendations were feasible and that proposed guidance could be followed with the interviewers' available resources.

There are alternative strategies to promote honesty with children: When interviewing older children, several participants preferred to build rapport and to engage in open communication with their interviewees around the expectation of being honest during an ABE interview. Demi said:

“I think whenever, you know you're talking about older kids you can just simply tell them, you know ‘you're here to tell me the truth, okay, and you understand what truth is, what actually happened.’ I think that should be enough.”

Participants believed that emphasising the importance of telling the truth at the beginning of an interview effectively promoted honesty in older children. For example, Charles said:

“I do the truth and lies, because I feel that I have to, and I'll press home that what they need to tell me is the truth, but thereafter my focus is enabling this child to tell me what they want to tell me.”

In addition to laying out the ground rule, at the beginning of interviews, that interviewees need to tell the truth, participants also reported making efforts to maintain rapport throughout interviews by reassuring children that they will not get into trouble for reporting truthful events:

“I will then say, you know “it's okay to say that” you know “you're not going to get in any trouble for that”.”

Eve described maintaining rapport throughout her interviews, as an honesty-promoting strategy, by offering reassurances to children to make them feel at ease, as well as by conducting her interviews with openness and honesty:

“if you're truthful, if you act with honesty and integrity, then that probably does promote other people to do the same.”

It seemed that interviewers who approached interviews with openness and honesty expected their interviewees to reciprocate that behaviour by being open and honest with them in exchange, thus promoting more truthful reports from the interviewees.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore UK police officers' perceptions and experiences of promoting honesty in child victims and witnesses, with a focus on the use of TLDs as recommended by the ABE guidance (Ministry of Justice, 2022). In an online survey (Phase 1), we explored a range of participants' perceptions regarding promoting honesty in child victims and witnesses, specifically in relation to their

reported use of TLDs during investigative interviews. In semi-structured interviews (Phase 2), we recorded, in more depth, participants' self-reported experiences of using TLDs during child interviews and reasons for their (non-)compliance with guidance.

Putting aside the issue of the efficacy of using TLDs to promote honesty in child witnesses, the majority of participants reported always using TLDs, possibly reflecting a move in the right direction in terms of adherence to best-practice interviewing guidelines. This marked an improvement from the findings of the Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate report (2014). However, it is possible that participants' self-reports differ from their actual practice. Indeed, Richardson et al. (2019) found that it was common for police officers to initiate conversations about truth and lies in an inappropriate way. It remains necessary for future research to explore police officers' actual use of TLDs in child interviews.

It was important to understand what police officers thought about the usefulness of TLDs, how this relates to the scientific evidence in the field, and why some officers deviate from the ABE guidance. Participants who reported not always using TLDs with child victims and witnesses identified the child's age as the most common reason for not doing so, explaining that older children were more likely to understand the difference between truths and lies, a notion supported by research (Lyon et al., 2013; Talwar et al., 2016). This suggests that the deviation from best-practice guidelines might stem from police officers' knowledge of current research and the impact of harmful interviewing techniques rather than from an express intention to ignore the guidance. For example, participants claimed that presenting a TLD scenario to older child interviewees would come across as patronising. There is no clear threshold for the age at which children might perceive TLDs as patronising and, as reported by participants in this study, TLDs may in fact hinder rapport-building. As such, more research is required to explore children's (4–17 years) perceptions of this strategy.

Half of the survey respondents in Phase 1 perceived TLDs to be effective at promoting honesty in child victims and witnesses, indicating that while some police officers still considered there to be a relationship between children's understanding of truths and lies and their subsequent truth and lie-telling, others rejected this misconception. This non-uniform knowledge base among police officers emphasises the need for more specialised, evidence-based training programmes.

Even though half of the respondents believed that children were neither honest nor dishonest after "passing" a TLD, most participants still considered it important for children to "pass" a TLD. This seemed to be because they believed that children's performance on the TLDs would impact their perceived credibility in court, not because they believed that the child would tell the truth. Notwithstanding that some police officers may fully understand the lack of relationship between children's understanding of truths and lies and their actual truth and lie-telling behaviour, there remains the problem that judges and juries in courtrooms may perceive a link. An evidence-based training programme for police officers, judges and jurors that clarifies the lack of relationship between children's understanding of truths and lies and their subsequent truth and lie-telling behaviour should be considered. Also, expert witnesses could be called to relay accurate information to the court regarding the lack of research evidence that TLDs are a valid tool for assessing children's credibility and promoting honesty.

The significant relationship between participants' perceived effectiveness of TLDs and their self-reported frequency of use of TLDs supports previous research findings that police officers report more frequently using interview strategies they believe to be effective (Dando et al., 2008; Kebbell et al., 1999). Wolfe et al. (2022) proposed a recent training model to increase police officers' motivation and receptivity to training programmes. They found that police officers who believed training on a particular topic would effectively improve practice were more motivated to engage in the relevant training programmes. In the future, training programmes that highlight the effectiveness and rationale of evidence-based honesty-promoting strategies would likely motivate police officers to use those strategies more often. Refresher trainings and ongoing specific feedback on the quality of police officers' interviews ensure they continue to perform high-quality interviews (Lamb et al., 2002, 2007). Future training programmes should also be accompanied by frequent refreshers and regular peer feedback to ensure officers' continued adherence to best-practice guidelines.

All of the participants in Phase 2 reported that, for them, the main uses of TLDs were to (i) gauge children's understanding of truths and lies, (ii) ensure there is no deviation from ABE guidance and (iii) communicate a child's credibility to the court. It was reassuring to find that participants' understanding of the aim of TLDs was in line with the Ministry of Justice's (2022) guidelines.

During the interviews, and echoing the findings of Phase 1, it was apparent that participants' reported tendency to adhere to the ABE guidance was most likely due to the potential negative outcomes that deviating from the guidance might trigger. All of the participants reported being worried that omitting a TLD at the beginning of an interview might call into question their adherence to best-practice guidelines throughout the remainder of the interview. Thus, TLDs might be used during child witness interviews in a checklist manner.

Our findings echoed researchers' worries about the impact that children's performance on a TLD has on their perceived credibility in court (Lyon et al., 2008; O'Connell et al., 2020; Westcott & Kynan, 2006). Our participants' experiences of communicating a child's TLD performance to the court demonstrated that the testimonies of children who fail to evidence an understanding of truths and lies could be perceived as untrustworthy. It seems likely that participants reported using TLDs in interviews, not because they believed the strategy promoted honesty in children, but because they acknowledged the harmful implications of not adhering to guidance. Indeed, although they reported using TLDs, participants likely understood that children who incorrectly answer the conceptual questions during a TLD may be trustworthy, just as children who provide correct answers may not be reliable or trustworthy.

Our participants also reported that the main challenges and obstacles they faced when using TLDs were that (i) one type of TLD was not suitable for all children, (ii) the training received in relation to TLDs was insignificant and the application of TLDs in practice is inappropriate and (iii) there are other interviewing strategies that can promote honesty in children.

Several honesty-promoting interview strategies were reported by the participants during the first and second phases of the study. Initiating TLDs through video clips and storyboards was a frequently reported method. There is no research available on whether or not TLDs in a video format are an effective method of promoting honesty in children. Additional research is required to evaluate the effect of varying the medium of presentation of TLD scenarios on the promotion of honesty in children. Emphasising the importance of telling the truth was another frequently reported strategy that has not yet been empirically investigated. Future research could examine whether simply informing children, at the start of investigative interviews, of the importance of telling the truth might increase children's truth-telling behaviour. Another evidence-based interview strategy recommended by the National Institution of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol and used in several countries involves asking children to promise to tell the truth (Bala et al., 2010; La Rooy et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2002, 2004). Asking children to promise to tell the truth at the start of their interview has been found to significantly decrease their lie-telling behaviour throughout the interview, even in cases with maltreated children (Quas et al., 2018). In line with this, a revision of best-practice guidance is needed in the UK to ensure investigative interviewers are using evidence-based strategies to promote honesty in children.

Promoting honesty through building and maintaining rapport was a strategy emphasised by all police officers who took part in Phase 2. Recently, researchers have investigated the effect of rapport-building on the promotion of honesty (Foster et al., 2022). They found that Interactional Rapport-building, where the focus is on building rapport through mutual attentiveness and positivity between the child and interviewer, increased truthful disclosures of witnessed transgressions compared to Narrative Practice Rapport-building where children are asked to describe various experienced events in detail. It is possible that participants in the current study who rely on open communication, reassurances and reciprocity during their interviews are, as a consequence, indirectly promoting honesty with children. Whilst this is still a novel area of research, the role of rapport-building and reciprocity in promoting honesty with child victims and witnesses dovetails with the reports from participants in this study and requires further investigation.

A limitation of both phases of the current study was social desirability bias. It is possible that participants reported in a way that deliberately or unconsciously portrayed them in a favourable light (Razavi, 2001). Further, it is possible that only police officers who were interested in sharing their opinions on TLDs opted to participate in this study. Therefore, we acknowledge that the current findings are not necessarily representative of all UK police officers' perceptions of TLDs. Nevertheless, self-reports are an important way to shed light on participants' experiences. Future research could look at ABE-interview transcripts to examine the frequency with which police officers actually use TLDs.

Phase 2 of the present study allowed for an in-depth understanding of police officers' personal experiences of interviewing child victims and witnesses with a focus on promoting honesty. The sampling method recommended for IPA research has resulted in the recruitment of a small sample of police officers who are trained in ABE and who regularly interview child victims and witnesses. True to IPA's idiographic focus, we aimed to achieve a "detailed examination of personal lived experience" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 193). The findings of this study were not intended to be generalised to the wider population of child investigative interviewers but rather to give an invaluable "snapshot" of experiences that had been thus far overlooked. To this end, more extensive research is required to explore a wider range of police officers' perceptions and experiences of promoting honesty with child witnesses. Nonetheless, we believe that the results of this study remain vital and novel as this study is the first of its kind to explore this topic.

CONCLUSION

In sum, most participants agreed that the aim of TLDs was to gauge children's understanding of truths and lies. The majority of participants reported always using TLDs in practice. The exception was interviews with older children where this strategy might seem patronising to the interviewee. Around half of the participants believed that TLDs effectively promote honesty in children, a link that is, however, a misconception and not borne out in the research literature. Participants' reasons for their adherence to guidance seemed to be two-fold. First, officers voiced their worries regarding the perceived lack of credibility by the Court of any child victims and witnesses with whom a TLD is not undertaken. Second, officers seemed wary that omitting TLDs at the start of the interview might render their adherence to best-practice and the quality of their interview, as a whole, questionable. As well as using the TLD strategy advocated in the ABE guidance, participants gave examples of using alternative honesty-promoting strategies that are not recommended by best-practice guidelines and that need to be further investigated. As such, it was clear that there is no uniformity of practice for this consequential phase of investigative interviews with children in the UK. The lack of consistency in practice, as reported by police officers and the lack of a clear evidence-based methodology for promoting honesty in children indicates that future research is vital in this area to ensure full and accurate children's testimonies are heard during criminal investigations and court proceedings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Gadda Salhab: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; resources; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Lucy Akehurst:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Hannah Cassidy:** Conceptualization; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Victoria Talwar:** Conceptualization; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data, Open Materials and Preregistered Research Design badges. Data, materials and the preregistered design and analysis plan are available at <https://osf.io/d2q6r/> and <https://osf.io/pd3wc>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the OSF repository at <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/D2Q6R>.

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APPENDIX 1

Example of a TLD script provided in the ABE guidance

The following paragraph is an extract from the Ministry of Justice's (2022) ABE guidance regarding the use of TLDs:

It is inadvisable to ask children to provide general definitions of what is the truth or a lie (a task that would tax an adult); rather, they should be asked to judge from examples. The interviewer should use examples suitable to the child's age, experience and understanding. Secondary school-age children can be asked to give examples of truthful statements and lies, while younger children can be offered examples and be asked to say which are true and which are lies. It is important that the examples chosen really are lies, not merely incorrect statements: lies must include the intent to deceive another person. An example of one approach is shown in Appendix G. Different examples are suggested for different ages of children (p. 80).

The following excerpt is an example of a TLD script provided in the Appendix of the ABE guidance (Ministry of Justice, 2022):

EXAMPLES INTENDED TO EXPLORE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRUTH AND LIES

G.1 Preamble

'Now [name], it is very important that you tell me the truth about things that have happened to you. So, before we begin, I want to make sure you understand the difference between the truth and a lie.'

G.2 Example for younger children

‘Let me tell you a story about John. John was playing with his ball in the kitchen and he hit the ball against the window. The window broke and John ran upstairs into his bedroom. John's mummy saw the broken window, and asked John if he had broken the window. John said, ‘No mummy.’

‘Did John tell a lie or the truth, or don't you know?’ [Child responds].

‘What should he have said?’ [Child responds] (p. 196).