

1 **Police interviewers' perceptions of child credibility in forensic**  
2 **investigations**

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4 **Word count: 9,223 words**

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Abstract

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

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

Police interviewers' perceptions of child credibility in forensic investigations

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

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

75 standard interview but it does result in an increase in appropriate questions, which, in turn,  
76 are anticipated to achieve higher accuracy (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 2009; Sternberg,  
77 Lamb, Orbach, Esplin & Mitchell, 2001). In England and Wales, an official set of guidelines,  
78 ‘Achieving Best Evidence’ (ABE, Ministry of Justice, 2011), are used. These include a  
79 suggestion to use the Enhanced Cognitive Interview mnemonics (ECI, Fisher & Geiselman,  
80 1992). The limited research on the effectiveness of ECI with child witnesses consistently  
81 reports an increase in correct information elicited from child witnesses compared to the  
82 standard interviews. Sometimes this also results in an increase in incorrect information,  
83 although overall *accuracy* is not affected (McCauley & Fisher, 1995). Sometimes this does  
84 not increase reporting of erroneous information and *accuracy* is marginally improved  
85 (Akehurst, Milne & Köhnken, 2003). It is important to investigate whether police  
86 interviewers will identify the positive impact of using such interview protocols on the  
87 accuracy, and subsequent credibility, of the testimonies that they elicit from the child victims.

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

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

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

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

125 reduces the likelihood of the case being withdrawn (Christensen, Sharman & Powell, 2016).  
126 A systematic review of the literature on child sexual assault cases (Lemaigre, Taylor &  
127 Gittoes, 2017) identified three barriers to eliciting a disclosure at interview from child  
128 victims: perceived negative consequences for self, perceived negative consequences for  
129 others, and the emotional response to the abuse (e.g., shame, guilt, self-blame). Rapport-  
130 building can facilitate disclosure of stressful or embarrassing events (Larsson & Lamb,  
131 2009). To resolve ongoing issues of non-disclosure, the aforementioned NICHD interviewing  
132 protocol was revised to put a greater emphasis on rapport-building at the start of the interview  
133 (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz & Malloy, 2015). For children interviewed using the revised  
134 protocol, this resulted in more cooperation and more willingness to talk about their  
135 experience than those interviewed using the original protocol (Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb,  
136 Blasbalg & Winstanley, 2014; Hershkowitz, Lamb & Katz, 2014). By increasing the amount  
137 of abuse-related information elicited and making children feel comfortable to share an honest  
138 account of what happened, police interviewers can increase the *truthfulness* of children's  
139 testimonies.

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

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

## 153 **Method**

### 154 **Participants**

155 Police officers who regularly interview children were recruited from two English  
156 police forces: one in the North of England and one in the South of England. Emails about the  
157 research were sent to all officers working in the Child Protection Units of the two police  
158 forces and stipulated that volunteers should be regularly interviewing children. The e-mail  
159 included contact details for the Principal Investigator. Three focus groups were organised,  
160 each for a maximum of 5 participants. As officers volunteered, they were allocated to a  
161 group, when each group was full, recruitment for that group ceased (in the end we over  
162 recruited for one focus group and so 6 officers attended). Therefore, 16 eligible police  
163 officers (10 women, 6 men), from two English police forces, who regularly interview child  
164 witnesses participated in the study. The age of the interviewers ranged from 31 to 60 years  
165 ( $M = 41.53$  years,  $SD = 8.37$  years). Overall, our interviewers had 3 to 40 years of experience  
166 working for the police ( $M = 17.09$  years,  $SD = 8.16$  years) and 5 months to 22 years of  
167 experience in interviewing children as part of their police role ( $M = 8.56$  years,  $SD = 6.16$   
168 years). The first focus group (FG1) consisted of six female interviewers, the second group  
169 (FG2) consisted of 5 interviewers (3 men, 2 women), and the third focus group (FG3)  
170 consisted of 5 interviewers (3 men, 2 women). There were no differences between focus  
171 groups for overall police experience,  $F(2, 13) = .10, p = .90$ , or for experience interviewing  
172 children,  $F(2, 13) = .41, p = .67$ . All interviewers had undergone a specialist interviewing  
173 course. The age of the children that our interviewers routinely interviewed ranged from 2 to  
174 17 years for the majority of the sample (62.5%). The rest of the sample interviewed

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

## 178 **Procedure**

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

## 188 **Focus groups**

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



200 **Analysis**

201           The focus groups were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone and later transcribed  
202 verbatim. Transcription meant that interviewers' responses were anonymised as names were  
203 replaced by letters. The focus group transcripts were coded inductively using thematic  
204 analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it does not prescribe a method of data  
205 collection nor a theoretical position (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its flexibility enabled all the  
206 data across all three focus groups to be compiled ready for coding for broader themes. The  
207 focus group transcripts were, firstly, summarised and reduced down to smaller "packets" of  
208 information, which were then analysed for themes in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Emerging  
209 themes had to reflect similarities across multiple interviewers' responses (Braun & Clarke,  
210 2006). Themes were presented by the first researcher to the second researcher in terms of  
211 their description and keywords. The second researcher then checked the presence of these  
212 themes against the verbatim transcript excerpts to assure that the findings were representative  
213 of the original data. Four main themes were identified – the 4E's of child interviewing – with  
214 each structured into two sub-themes: (1) Eliciting information with sub-themes, *Techniques*  
215 and *Barriers to disclosure*, (2) Evaluating credibility with sub-themes, *Indicators of*  
216 *deception* and *Exceptions to the rule*, (3) Empowering the interviewee with sub-themes,  
217 *Planning and preparation* and *Flexibility*, and (4) End product with sub-themes, *Preparing*  
218 *the evidence* and *Cross-examination*. See Supplementary Materials for a table displaying  
219 which participants endorsed which sub-themes and the overall proportion of endorsement per  
220 sub-theme.

221 **Results**

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

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

## 228 **Eliciting information**

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

### 234 **Techniques**

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

240 I'll give them an example of how much detail I need. I might say to them, 'so tell me  
241 what you see about that cup' and they'll say, 'oh it's a cup, you know it's cream in  
242 colour' and I'll say, 'but if you look at it now, the detail that I need is that it's cream  
243 in colour, it's got red writing on it, it's got 'wibble wobble' and a picture of a jelly.

244 Inside it's dirty'. So, I'd explain to them that that's the detail that I'd want (FG1, PE).

245 I often provide an example and I try and tailor it to the individual. So, if it's a child,  
246 often I've picked the child up so I will talk about the journey we've taken to get there  
247 so it's something they'll identify with and often they'll chip in with bits that I've  
248 missed out but I try to get them to consider all the senses and explain that as well [...]  
249 which gives them an idea of the level of detail I'm looking for (FG3, PD).

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

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

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

### 258 **Barriers to disclosure**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 305   **Evaluating credibility**

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

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

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

### 317   **Indicators of deception**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 380 **Exceptions to the rule**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 420 **Empowering the interviewee**

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

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

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

#### 433 **Planning and preparation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

468           **Flexibility**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 497 **End product**

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

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

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

#### 509 **Preparing the evidence**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 560 **Cross-examination**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## 602 **Discussion**

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

### 608 **Eliciting information**

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

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

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

### 636 **Evaluating credibility**

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

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

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

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

#### 677 **Empowering the interviewee**

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

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

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

## 705 **End product**

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

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

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

### 732 **Limitations**

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

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

747         Variability within the data (e.g., years of experience interviewing children was wide  
748 ranging across the participants) may have had an impact on findings. For ethical reasons, to  
749 protect anonymity, the demographic data of the participants was not linked to their  
750 transcribed data. It was, therefore, not possible to explore how certain demographic  
751 characteristics, such as years of experience interviewing children or whether they interviewed  
752 children of all ages or just adolescents, impacted the study's findings. The sub-themes with  
753 higher levels of endorsement across participants and focus groups (Indicators of Deception –  
754 75%, and Barriers to Disclosure – 63% - see Supplementary Materials for all sub-themes) are  
755 likely to be less affected by the heterogeneity of the sample.

#### 756 **Future research and practical implications**

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

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

## 775 **Conclusion**

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



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

#### 798 **Declaration of interest**

799 The authors report no conflict of interest.

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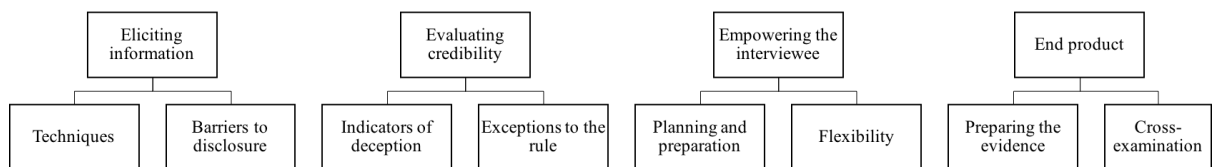
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**Figure**



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

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