

[Parental Alienation Support](#)

Parental Alienation Support: Resources & References.

- [Home](#)
- [DSM](#)
- [Journals](#)
- [Parents](#)
- [Peer Review](#)
- [Professionals](#)
- [Public Distortion](#)
- [Resources](#)
-

Type text to search here...

[Home](#) > [Peer Review](#) > Children's Courtroom Testimony: The Sam Stone Study

Children's Courtroom Testimony: The Sam Stone Study

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Do Stereotypes and Suggestive Questioning Influence Children?

Michelle D. Leichtman of the Psychology Department at Harvard University, along side of her cohort Stephen J. Ceci from the Department of Human Development at Cornell University skillfully underwent an experiment in which children's suggestibility was questioned both in "theoretical issues surrounding memory development and applied issues surrounding children's courtroom testimony (pg. 1)." For many years psychologists have argued the validity of children's memory development, especially in courtroom testimony. The experimenters hypothesized that the younger preschoolers would be more susceptible to being influenced by certain stereotypes and that suggestive questioning may influence their opinions toward Sam Stone.

The Sam Stone Study (1995) included one hundred and seventy-six preschoolers (male and female) including a variety of ethnic groups, with different social backgrounds were split into two groups by age. The younger children (3- and 4-year-olds) and older preschoolers (5- and 6-year-olds) were assigned a classroom consisting of eight children in all, yet they were not randomly chosen from the whole group. The children were not tested individually, and "were assigned to one of four conditions, denoted as follows:

(a) control, (b) stereotype, (c) suggestion, and (d) stereotype plus suggestion (pg. 2)." The main event was the visit of an unfamiliar person named Sam Stone who visited all of the preschoolers in each of their separate conditions.

The control condition consisted of no stereotypes and no suggestions, while the stereotype condition was manipulated by particular advice given to the child by the experimenter one

month before Sam Stone visited. Sam Stone was said to be very kind, yet a little clumsy. The suggestion condition, on the other hand, used probing questions with suggestive meaning put forth after Sam Stone's visit. The questions asked if the child saw Sam Stone do anything in particular to a teddy bear or book. The stereotype plus suggestion group was a combination of the two prior conditions mentioned. Now the ad to log certain erroneous statements that each child recalled from Sam Stone in every different condition.

This study was created with great detail and by Leichtman and Ceci proved that preschoolers stereotypes or led on by suggestive probing questions children made false allegations throughout the interview, and only ten percent of the young children saw Sam Stone do something with either the teddy bear or book. Within the suggestive condition, the children damage either item in their narrative. The false answers rose when the probing questions were asked. Children held more mistaken answers by the children than when subjected to both of the manipulations without outside influence.

Throughout this research, the conclusion should stand to prove that children's suggestibility could be manipulated. Therefore, children should not be used in courtroom testimony, especially younger preschoolers. The memory development of children is not up to its full potential, thus children in these conditions could give many erroneous answers. If professionals could not tell the difference between the children who were telling the truth, then the judge should think twice before letting testimony from children be credible.

References

[Leichtman, M. D. & Ceci, S. J. \(1995\). "The Effects of Stereotypes and Suggestions on Preschoolers' Reports." Developmental Psychology, 31\(4\), 568-578.](#)

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