Response to 'No evidence against Sketch Reinstatement of Context, Verbal Labels or Registered Intermediaries'.

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Letter to the Editor

Response to 'No evidence against Sketch Reinstatement of Context, Verbal Labels or Registered Intermediaries'.

Dando and colleagues' letter regarding our recently published paper (Henry, Crane, Nash, Hobson, Kirke-Smith, & Wilcock, 2017) calls for caution before rejecting investigative interviewing techniques for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In this response we highlight that this important message was, in fact, emphasised in the original paper. We also provide additional information about our methodology and results to further substantiate our conclusions. Importantly, we highlight that these null results do not mean that these techniques should be rejected for children with ASD. We acknowledge that beneficial effects of these investigative interview adaptations may not be in relation to the parameters measured in our study - volume and accuracy of recall (also see Maras & Bowler, 2010, and Maras, Mulcahy, Memon, Picariello, & Bowler, 2014, for data suggesting that alternative interview techniques may not improve recall in autistic adults). We further acknowledge that some of the interview adaptations investigated may actually be the critical factor in determining whether a child with ASD can give any evidence at all.

A key aspect of Dando and colleagues' letter was the erroneous suggestion that our paper was*'rejecting [Verbal Labels, Sketch-Reinstatement of Context, and Registered Intermediary] techniques'* for children with ASD. Throughout the paper, we were careful to provide a balanced view about the efficacy of these interventions. For example, at the beginning of the discussion: *'…none of the interview interventions increased the number of correct details recalled about a witnessed event;* ***although neither did any of these interview interventions hamper their performance***.' (page 2359). Further we considered carefully why levels of correct recall in children with ASD did not differ across interview conditions. In relation to the Registered Intermediary (RI) condition, we emphasised how the beneficial effects of RIs may not be measurable in terms of volume of recall, but rather in terms of allowing the child to give any evidence in the first place: *'In some cases, the presence of an RI can be the critical factor in determining whether a witness can be*

called to give evidence at all.' (page 2359). Regarding Verbal Labels interviews, we noted that: *'further research is required to explore the increases in confabulations…in line with previous studies that have reported Verbal Labels interviews to increase error rates.'* (page 2360). Finally, we explained that the Sketch-Reinstatement of Context interview may not have been maximally effective in our study because both the staged event and the interview took place in the same familiar context, noting that the: *'unique contextual cues may have been limited in the current study'* (page 2360). Hence, these techniques were not rejected, and recommendations for further research were made.

Dando et al. stated that *'Assertions that research mirrors real life must be clearly evidenced, otherwise there is a serious risk that professionals will 'seize and freeze' on results that do not paint a complete picture'*. Much of the literature on eyewitness memory, including the work on which our study was based, has used similar paradigms that mimic real cases using a staged event and mock witnesses (e.g., Brown & Pipe, 2003; Dando, Wilcock, & Milne, 2009a, 2009b; Dando, Wilcock, Milne, & Henry, 2009; Mattison, Dando, & Ormerod, 2015, 2016). To ensure this was clear, we were transparent in describing the methodological constraints of the study, highlighting several key issues: the use of a staged 'mild crime' event; the fact that the children were observers and not active participants; and the experimental nature of the study [pages 2359-2360].

The remainder of Dando and colleagues' letter centres on aspects of the experimental methodology, on which we are pleased to provide further clarification. First, Dando et al. raised concerns that the study encompassed two investigative interviews. This was not the case – our witnesses gave a brief evidence gathering statement on the day of the event, followed by a full investigative interview a week later (see page 2352 for full details of the protocol). This design corresponds with police practice (e.g., in the largest police service in the UK) and was developed after seeking specialist advice from legal professionals. As there is very little research adopting this type of methodology - capturing both initial statement taking and full investigative interviews - this is a valuable addition to the literature, and enhanced the ecological validity of the study.

Dando et al. also queried the children viewing two comparable to-be-remembered events, each involving slightly different details. We were careful to explain that these events were highly similar (e.g., same actors, same script) and that the minor differences in details (e.g., the theft of keys instead of a phone) did not impact on the results. In fact, this aspect of the methodology is a strength of the paper, providing a measure of generalisability.

We also made it clear that the use of live and video presentations (with some children viewing the event live, and others watching it on a video) did not affect the results (page 2351). Allocation to the four interview conditions was almost exactly even across live and video presentations in the ASD group (Best Practice = 5 live vs 13 video; Verbal Labels = 6 live vs 12 video; Sketch Plan = 5 live vs 13 video; RI = 6 live vs 11 video), providing reassurance that differences (or not) between interview conditions were not a function of presentation method. Further, whilst Dando et al. suggested that children with ASD are more attentive to computer presentations, a higher percentage of children with ASD in our study saw the video version of the event. This would potentially favour the group with ASD if a video advantage does exist.

The training of the interviewers, as well as the qualifications and procedures followed by the RIs (Registered Intermediaries), was raised by Dando et al. Regarding the interviewers, we stated on page 2353 that the three investigative interviewers had all attended a one week training course provided by the largest UK police service. Much research in this area does not provide any official police training for interviewers, so this can be regarded as an additional strength of the study. Regarding the RIs, Dando et al. questioned whether they followed the guidance in the Registered Intermediary Procedural Guidance Manual (Ministry of Justice, 2015). We can confirm that the RIs did follow this guidance within the constraints of the study. First, the two RIs were highly experienced (with 11 and 8 years' service as RIs, respectively; and both were experienced in training new RIs). They were also suitably qualified with a specialist background to assess children, particularly those with ASD (one worked as a speech and language therapist and the other as a special educational needs teacher, for many years prior to training as RIs). Second, the RIs

kept records of their assessments and, importantly, had an opportunity to discuss their findings and recommendations with the interviewer prior to each interview - as would occur in a real case. Third, the interviewer was present during each RI assessment and during the interview, again as would happen in a real case. The only area that could be improved upon was in respect of the RI assessments being limited to one occasion - although this was fully acknowledged in the Discussion: *'…in practice, RIs would have had more time for discussion with those who know the witness best and more time to build rapport - and such information could have led to them using additional strategies to enable children with ASD to give best evidence'*. (page 2359). Nevertheless, the RIs confirmed that the strategies they used in the current study were all entirely appropriate for the individual children's needs.

Finally, Dando et al. raised concerns about data transformations. These were applied after initial data screening because some variables were not normally distributed. We contend that this was the correct approach to data analyses. However, to provide extra reassurance, we re-analysed the key data without data transformations and - for both the typically developing (TD) and ASD groups – the results remained identical.

The methodological points raised by Dando et al. should be considered within the context of the broader results of our study. Whilst there were no differences as a function of interview condition in the ASD group, the TD children who participated in the research showed significant improvements in the volume of information recalled in two of the three interview conditions (Registered Intermediaries and Verbal Labels). This suggests that the methodology employed did not compromise the research (otherwise, we would not expect to see any effects in our TD sample). The key question is: why did these strong effects of different interview interventions not emerge in children with ASD? This is the topic that future research should address as a matter of urgency.

In conclusion, making legal professionals aware of the limitations of experimental research and its applicability to real life practice is very important, and our paper provides a balanced

consideration of the results (carefully noting limitations to our study). It should be emphasised, again, that it is not unusual to find that interventions that appear to work well for TD children and adults may not have the same results in those with ASD (cf. Maras & Bowler, 2010; Maras et al., 2014). We finish by highlighting an important inaccuracy in Dando and colleagues' letter. They asserted that our findings might *'undermine the testimony from children with ASD'*. However, we clearly stated that: *'Findings suggested that children with ASD can perform as well as TD children in certain types of investigative interviews'*. Our paper also concluded by noting that: *"children with ASD demonstrated consistently high levels of accuracy, suggesting that they can be reliable witnesses."*

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Ethical Approval: In the original study to which this letter refers, all procedures performed in relation to the human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

Informed consent: In the original study to which this letter refers, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study.

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