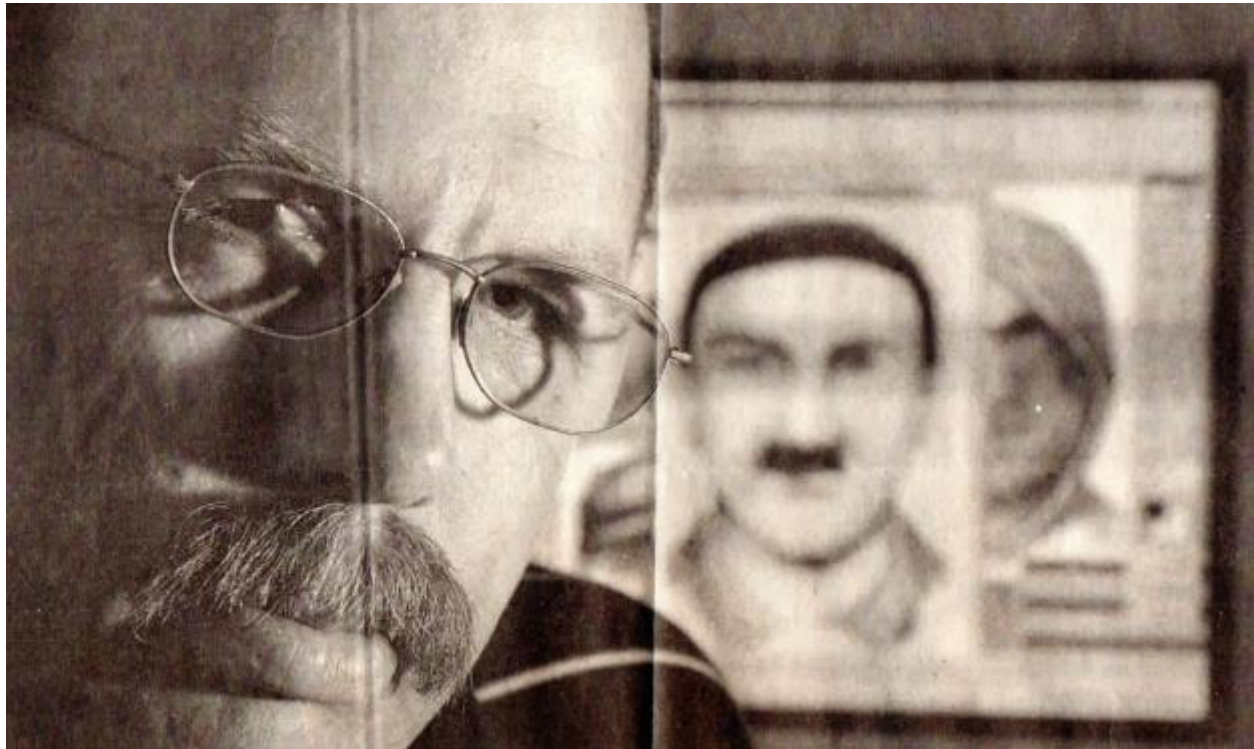# A 5-Year-Old's Words, an Officer's Art

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In the hours after Samantha Runnion's kidnapping, police fanned out in the hunt for clues. When Michael Streed was called in, he armed himself with a pencil, a pad of paper and the memory of a 5-year-old witness to the crime. "I was nervous, just sick to my stomach knowing this girl was out there," said Streed, 44, an Orange Police Department patrol officer and one of only a handful of trained police sketch artists in Southern California. "I just wanted to do the best job I could."

Streed's drawing of the suspect--a Latino male with slicked-back black hair and a mustache--was based solely on the description given by a 5-year-old girl named Sarah, who was with Samantha when she was snatched from outside her Stanton condo July 15.

"It was the only link we had to try to track this man down," Orange County Sheriff Mike Carona said.

Four days later, 27-year-old Alejandro Avila was in jail, charged with kidnapping, sexual assault and murder. Sarah's detailed description--and

the sketch it produced--is likely to be a key piece of evidence as Avila goes to trial.

Authorities said the sketch led to tips that led to Avila.

"If any hero comes out of this, it's her," Streed said of Sarah. "She showed a lot of bravery, a lot of poise and presence of mind. She's an average 5-year-old with above-average skills."

Eyewitness identification is far from a perfect police tool. But experts who study the psychology of human memory say that descriptions provided by children aren't any better--or worse--than those given by adults.

"I would much rather have the observation of a 5-year-old who was paying attention than a 20-year-old who wasn't paying attention," said Robert William Shomer, a psychologist who has worked as an expert witness in more than 300 criminal trials.

One advantage children have is that their description of events and suspects are less likely to be cluttered by bias or fear.

"I think a lot of people make too big a deal of problems with children as eyewitnesses," said former FBI agent Kenneth Lanning, a consultant on crimes against children. "There is an unbelievable honesty and a lack of any kind of slanting ... with a child."

What's crucial, Lanning and others said, is that the child is interviewed correctly with open-ended--not leading--questions.
Studies show that child witnesses are much more susceptible to suggestion than adults. If interviewed by authorities not trained in pulling unbiased information out of children, anything can happen, experts say.

"That's how you end up with a zillion people at the McMartin Pre-School saying, 'I was abused,'"--something prosecutors never proved, said Elizabeth Loftus, a leading expert on memory and a psychology professor at the University of Washington.

The 1980s McMartin case, in which workers at the Manhattan Beach school were accused of molesting dozens of children, ended in the acquittal and dismissal of charges after the longest trial in the nation's history. The case

changed how children are interviewed by authorities.

"The biggest thing is to make people comfortable with you so that they will be comfortable in accessing their memory," Streed said.

Trained in the forensic interviewing of children, Streed sat in a small chair for two hours questioning the soft-spoken, 3-foot witness. "I have a lot of faith in the ability of kids to recall things and give truthful testimony," he said.

But studies also show that children as young as 6 have already developed a "cross racial deficit"--a handicap in accurately describing people who are not of their own race.

Sarah, who is of Korean heritage, described a man whom authorities labeled an "Americanized Hispanic."

"Kids have less experience with a broad range of racial differences," said Roy Malpass, who runs the Eyewitness Identification Research Laboratory at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"But if a kid comes from a neighborhood where half the population is Asian and half the population is Hispanic, she probably knows the difference."

The 2000 Census depicts the area around the Smoketree Condominiums where Sarah lives as a microcosm of multiethnic Southern California: 56% white, 22% Asian and 28% Latino.

"She was able to describe for us a Korean accent, an English accent and a Hispanic accent," Carona said.

Still, there are hurdles to overcome with children, experts say. Child witnesses have less developed cognitive skills.

Because of that, they have a harder time specifying characteristics such as height, color and age.

"In general, we're much more accurate identifying people who look just like us--not just in regards to race and culture, but age," Shomer said. "Kids will be much more accurate describing other kids, rather than adults."

In the recent kidnapping of 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart, Salt Lake City police say they've been unable to assemble a composite sketch of the suspect because her 9-year-old sister can't sufficiently describe his face. But Sarah could, and authorities credit her with giving them a huge leg up in making a quick arrest in the Runnion case.

"I've got to thank Sarah," Carona said. "She is an incredible witness."
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**Times staff writers Greg Krikorian and Christine Hanley contributed to this report.**