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Child Forensic Interviewing

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APSAC PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Forensic Interviewing of Children

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Author: APSAC Taskforce

Title: Forensic Interviewing of Children

Publication Date: 2023

Publisher: The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC)

Retrieved from: <https://www.apsac.org/guidelines>

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INTRODUCTION

A child forensic interview is an investigative interview conducted by a specially trained objective professional, for the purpose of gathering reliable information from children regarding allegations of maltreatment, exploitation, or exposure to violence. Such interviews aim to minimize trauma to children, are developmentally sensitive, and utilize research and practice-informed techniques. An effective child forensic interview is all about **learning to listen** more effectively to children.

Forensic interviewing is a specialized skill. It is part of a larger investigation and used to gather evidence about what a child may have experienced or witnessed in cases involving allegations of maltreatment, exploitation, neglect, or other crimes.

Forensic interviews should be conducted by specially trained child forensic interviewers who might also have other roles on the multi-disciplinary team. This evolving skill requires on-going training and peer review. These interviews are evidence that can be utilized in criminal child abuse proceedings, civil child protection proceedings, domestic proceedings, and other court settings. Systems should be in place to protect their content and accessibility during the legal process, regardless of who conducted the interview. Information from the interviews may help identify other victims and perpetrators, assist professionals responsible for assessing risk and safety needs of children and families, and facilitate case management decisions. Forensic interviews should inform follow-up investigative activities and other interventions.

These Guidelines are an update of the 2012 **APSAC Practice Guidelines** on “Interviewing in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse.” They reflect current knowledge about best practices related to forensic interviews and should be considered in conjunction with the 2018 **APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment – 4th Edition** (see especially Chapter 19, “*When Interviewing Children: A Review and Update*” by Saywitz, Lyon & Goodman). They are aspirational and intended to encourage the highest level of interview proficiency and to offer direction for training professionals who conduct child forensic interviews. These Guidelines are not intended to establish a legal standard of care or a rigid standard of practice to which professionals are expected to adhere in all cases. They provide a framework for professionals who conduct forensic interviews and are not an all-inclusive guide. For example, these Guidelines, while informative, are not meant to provide specific guidance for medical providers, who may follow different standards when they obtain medical incident history as part of a medical examination. Nor are they meant to provide specific guidance for forensic mental health evaluations (see 2022 **APSAC Practice Guidelines** on “Forensic Mental Health Evaluations When Child Maltreatment Is at Issue”).

Based on practical experience and empirical research that began in the late 1980s, these Guidelines are offered with the understanding that there is no single correct way to conduct a forensic interview. Best practices will continue to evolve and change as new research becomes available. There are some aspects of interviewing for which there is limited or no empirical research. Interviewers should utilize ethical standards, critical thinking, consultation, and professional judgment in individual cases and stay informed about the latest research and developments. As experience and scientific knowledge expand, further revision of these Guidelines is expected.

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While many forensic interviews involve children who have previously disclosed, many recommendations contained in these Guidelines can be utilized in exploratory (e.g., at-risk, precautionary, screening) situations where there has not been a previous disclosure. The skills presented in these Guidelines are transferable in other contexts such as interviewing vulnerable adults. These Guidelines are not designed for first responders conducting preliminary questioning (sometimes referred to as ‘minimal facts’ interviews). First responder contacts should be limited to the information necessary to make short-term safety decisions and accurate medical decisions. ‘Minimal facts’ interviews meant to assess the child's immediate safety when there is an allegation of serious maltreatment should be focused on caregivers' ability and willingness to protect the child and the alleged offender's relationship with and access to the child. Their purpose is not to determine what happened and they should not go beyond the information necessary to generate further investigation by the appropriate agency and a referral for a forensic interview. As a bridge to the forensic interview, they can be invaluable in helping to assess and address possible barriers to disclosure by a maltreated child, especially in cases where recantation or minimization of actual maltreatment is a high risk.

Legislation, court decisions, and local practices, as well as case characteristics, may require interviewers to adjust interview practices. Interviewers should remain flexible in applying these Guidelines and continuously seek new knowledge. Interviewers should adhere to the **APSAC Code of Ethics** and be prepared to justify their decisions about particular practices in specific cases.

A child who does not disclose maltreatment in an interview may not have been victimized. On the other hand, a child's lack of disclosure in an interview or a subsequent recantation cannot be considered as definitive proof that maltreatment did not occur. A lack of civil or criminal action does not mean there was no maltreatment. Additionally, just because a disclosure does not rise to the state definition for substantiation does not mean there was no maltreatment. Research and practice experience indicate that there are multiple reasons maltreated children may not disclose maltreatment they have experienced. The field has increased its focus on effectively recognizing and motivating reluctant children to talk about their experiences (e.g., by providing non-suggestive support, assessing for and addressing any barriers, and giving children more than one opportunity to be interviewed). However, there is no definitive strategy that will result in disclosure from all maltreated children or witnesses to crimes. Despite best efforts or attempts, some children who have experienced maltreatment may not disclose.

These Guidelines refer to forensic interviews conducted with minors of all ages, from preschoolers to adolescents, and the words “child” or “children” will be used throughout to denote these minors.

These Guidelines use the term “primary language” to refer to the language in which a person is most comfortable. It may or may not be the language they first learned or the language they use in school or in their current home.

PURPOSE OF A CHILD FORENSIC INTERVIEW

1. Ethical Obligation to Focus on ‘Best Interests of the Child’

The purpose of a forensic interview is to elicit as much reliable information as possible from the child to inform the investigation and guide case planning. Interviewers attempt to collect facts in a neutral, supportive, and objective way. In keeping with the **APSAC Code of Ethics**, the interview should be conducted “in a manner consistent with the best interests of the child.” The goal is to provide a trauma-informed opportunity for a child to talk about their experiences while minimizing negative impact. At their core, forensic interviews are non-leading, non-suggestive, non-blaming, and non-shaming.

2. Focus on Children as Witnesses and Possible Victims

A forensic interview is intended for victims and witnesses and not for suspect interrogation, although some skills may be transferable. The forensic interviewer should focus on victimization, not suspect interrogation. Protocols or policies should be in place to assure that the child’s interview or disclosure cannot be used against them in any other proceeding.

3. A Child Forensic Interview is Only One Part of a Complete Investigation

No interview is perfect. No matter how good an interview is, the child interview is only part of a complete child protection or criminal investigation. Further investigation and collection of evidence should be conducted to confirm or refute the allegations, and to see if details supplied by the child can be corroborated. Interviewers should always attempt to elicit information about specific facts that can be verified later such as during a search of the scene or during interviews with other witnesses and the suspect. Additional investigation may corroborate facts elicited during the interview and thus prove the reliability of those facts, even at times when the interview was not conducted in a manner consistent with these Guidelines.

INTERVIEWER ATTRIBUTES

Forensic interviewers come from a variety of disciplines, agency affiliations, and educational backgrounds. Even though interdisciplinary goals may differ, effective forensic interviewers utilize similar skills and techniques. Specialized knowledge is necessary. This knowledge can be acquired through a combination of training, experience, peer review, supervision, and independent learning. Gender of the interviewer is less important than skill. However, if the child demonstrates a strong preference, then the child's preference should be accommodated when possible.

The following are recommended interviewer attributes, competencies, and practice behaviors:

1. Engage in Practice that is Research-Informed

Interviewers should have a mechanism to remain up to date on new and existing research relevant to forensic interviewing, and should use this knowledge to improve practice.

2. Participate in Ongoing Training and Peer Review

- A. Complete specialized child forensic interview training and supervision prior to assuming primary responsibility for conducting forensic interviews.
- B. Take advantage of opportunities to reinforce best practice interviewing skills and participate in continuing education on a regular basis.
- C. Seek periodic review, evaluation and consultation from peers and more experienced colleagues to enhance skills.

3. Exhibit an Interviewer Stance Aimed at Eliciting Accurate and Reliable Information

- A. Convey a warm, friendly, and respectful manner.
- B. Be open-minded and explore known reasonable alternative explanations.
- C. Attempt to equalize power and de-emphasize authority.
- D. Provide non-contingent supportive comments and behaviors.
- E. Avoid stereotype induction (negative or positive characterizations of suspected abusers or the events disclosed).
- F. Be patient and comfortable with silence.
- G. Consider plausible explanations for unusual or seemingly inexplicable elements in the child's account; do not automatically dismiss the child's report when these are present.

4. Use Language that is Developmentally Appropriate

- A. Tailor vocabulary, sentence structure, and complexity of prompts to the child's developmental level.
- B. Continue to assess and clarify the child's understanding and use of language throughout the interview.

5. Adapt to the Individual Child

- A. If possible, find out what the child was told and how the child is reacting prior to the interview.
- B. Let the child set the pace for the interview and adjust accordingly.
- C. Listen to the child; allow the child's responses to guide the questioning process, and use the child's words whenever possible in follow-up questioning.

6. Demonstrate Respect for Cultural Diversity and Strive to Be Culturally Informed

- A. Interviewers and interviewees who share the same race, ethnicity, gender expression or identity, or other similarities, do not necessarily share cultural norms; however, observable differences between an interviewer and a child may present an initial barrier.
- 1) Culturally informed interviewing, whether from a perspective of cultural competence or cultural humility, requires openness, respect for each person's uniqueness, and recognition that people can best define the meaning of their own cultural views and experiences.
 - 2) Be aware of cultural biases in your own interviewing practices and interview setting (such as artwork or materials used in the interview).
 - 3) Develop the ability to accommodate children with diverse needs.
 - 4) Do not rely on stereotypical notions about members of any cultural group; rather, expect that members of groups manifest their culture in a wide variety of ways.
 - 5) Remember cultures are in flux; how individuals and groups live their culture regularly changes in the larger context of societal change.
 - 6) Engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection regarding personal responses and possible biases in order to cultivate greater cultural awareness and avoid stereotyping.
 - 7) Remember that interviewers, children, and their families are all cultural beings who bring their own definitions, nonverbal behavior, preferred phrasing, and habits of formality/informality to the interview process.
 - 8) Culturally informed interviewing is essential to interviewing competence. Interviewers who fail to connect with the children they are interviewing or who unwittingly offend the child or their families, are less likely to conduct a successful interview.
- B. Learn as much as possible about the child's cultural background, practices, and language proficiency prior to the interview, and adapt the interview accordingly.
- 1) If the child's family has recently immigrated, try to ascertain the degree to which the child and family have assimilated into the dominant culture.
 - 2) Learn about relevant cultural values such as parenting practices related to child discipline, hygiene, and sleeping and bathing arrangements; cultural definitions and expectations regarding child maltreatment, violence, and sexual assault; and actions that might be expected when maltreatment, violence, or sexual assault is suspected.
 - 3) Determine whether the child is a native speaker of English. If not, find out their level of English proficiency and primary language. Provide an interviewer who can conduct the interview in the child's primary language whenever possible.
 - 4) Note any cultural or family norms that may inhibit reporting of maltreatment or impede the interviewer's ability to develop rapport with the child.
 - 5) Cultural practices related to eye contact and pacing (e.g., longer pauses and more silences, or rapid overlapping speech) may vary and be apparent during the interview.

7. Be Aware of Potential Barriers When There Are Religious, Ethnic, Social Class, and/or Linguistic Differences Between the Child and Interviewer

- A. Establishing rapport and trust may require more time and effort.
- B. Kinship terms may not have the same meaning to the child as they do for the interviewer.
- C. The child's culture may strongly discourage disagreement with or correction of adults; thus, the child may agree more readily with suggestive questioning. Giving permission to correct interviewer mistakes and assessing the child's willingness to do so, as well as

asking open-ended questions and encouraging narrative responses, becomes even more crucial in such circumstances. When children are unwilling to correct the interviewer, the interviewer should explore the reason for their unwillingness, then attempt to address that barrier, perhaps by providing more encouragement (e.g., *"It is fine to correct me in this room today, because I am learning from you,"* or *"It is important to correct me if I make a mistake. Should we check with your mom to make sure she agrees before we get started?"*)

- D. The child's cultural norms may prohibit or discourage revealing sensitive, family-related information, resulting in the child's reluctance to disclose such information.
- E. It might be helpful to consider requesting that a respected elder or the child's non-offending caregiver, in the presence of the interviewer, give the child permission to talk with the interviewer and tell the truth about what happened. It can also be helpful to explore with the child during the interview what they were told by elder(s) and caregiver(s) prior to the interview.

8. Use Qualified Bilingual Interviewers Who Are Able to Accommodate the Child's Primary or Preferred Language Whenever Possible

If a bilingual interviewer is not available, use qualified interpreters when the child is not proficient in English, or whenever the child is deaf/hard of hearing. When children who have a different primary language prefer to be interviewed in English, try to have an interpreter available to help with occasional missed words, or in case the child uses their other language.

- A. Keep in mind that just because a child is capable of participating in a school setting where English is spoken does not necessarily mean this is the best language for a child to communicate about potentially traumatic experiences. All children should be afforded the opportunity to speak in whatever language or languages are best for them.
- B. Family and friends should not be used as interpreters.
- C. An experienced professional interpreter should interpret interview questions and responses as close to verbatim as possible for the interviewer and child, recognizing that some things can't be interpreted exactly in different languages.
- D. The interpreter should be prepared for the sensitive and sometimes triggering nature of the information that might be disclosed.
- E. The interpreter should be instructed to interpret exactly everything said by the interviewer and child, to not add or change anything, and to not dialogue with either party during an interview. The interpreter should be instructed to interpret in 'first person' (i.e., verbatim what each party says, as opposed to *"She said X"* or *"She is asking X."*) The interviewer should speak directly to the child in first person language, as they would in any English language interview (e.g. the interviewer should not say to the interpreter, *"Ask her if X"*).
- F. As much as possible, the child's attention should be focused on communication with the interviewer. It may be helpful to have a spoken language interpreter sit behind or beside the child with the interviewer facing the child. The interviewer should speak directly with the child and not direct questions to the interpreter.
- G. A sign language interpreter should sit next to the interviewer. Be aware that professional deaf/hard of hearing interpreters often work in pairs, with one person who is deaf and one who is hearing.
- H. Be aware of the impact of having additional people in the room with the child and be prepared to address this possibility, especially if multiple interpreters are needed.
- I. If challenges arise during the interview related to interpretation, the interviewer and the interpreter should step outside the interview room to address them.

- J. If the interviewer leaves the interview room for any reason, the interpreter should also leave to minimize the potential that there will be conversation between the child and interpreter.

9. Accommodate Any Unique Needs the Child May Have, Including Physical, Intellectual, and Developmental Disabilities

- A. Find out whether the child requires any accommodations or has any unique or special needs or disabilities that should be considered before an interview begins including physical accessibility of the interview location.
- B. Because the range of unique needs and possible disabilities is so wide, it is beyond the scope of these Guidelines to address all recommended accommodations. The following are general recommendations for interviews with children who have special needs.
- C. Interviewers should learn as much as possible in the time available before an interview about the individual child they will be interviewing. Whatever the unique needs of the child, interviewers should have access to information from teachers, parents, caregivers, medical professionals, or others familiar with the child to learn as much as possible about those needs. General information about the child's unique or special needs and/or disabilities from reputable sources may also be helpful. At the same time, interviewers should be careful to keep an open mind and not make negative assumptions about the child's ability to communicate. Careful assessment about whether the interviewer and child are communicating effectively should take place throughout the entire interview.
- D. Whenever possible, interviewers should take advantage of opportunities to attend training related to effective strategies when interviewing children with special needs and specific disabilities.
- E. Ascertain if any medications the child may be taking are likely to affect the child's behavior, communication, and ability to relate to others, perhaps in consultation with medical personnel, and schedule an interview accordingly.
- F. Because adaptive equipment (e.g., wheelchair, helmet, hearing aid, and computer) is typically regarded as an extension of the child's body, ask permission before attempting to touch or adjust the equipment. Evaluate how, if at all, this may affect an interview, ideally in consultation with others who know the child (e.g., medical and school personnel, case managers, and non-offending caregivers).
- G. Interview instructions may be especially helpful with some children with special needs who may aim to please adults. See INTERVIEWER ATTRIBUTES, section 7.C., pp. 5 to 6 and INTERVIEW COMPONENTS, section 1.B. Interview Instructions, pp. 20 to 22.
- H. Increased time may be necessary to develop rapport, assess baseline development, and accommodate sensory needs for some children with special needs or disabilities; consequently, multiple interview sessions may be appropriate.

10. Actively Participate as Part of a Multidisciplinary Team, If Available

Whenever possible, the interviewer should consult with other professionals involved with the child, the child's family, or the investigation before, during (if they are observing), and after an interview.

INTERVIEW CONTEXT

The circumstances surrounding a forensic interview can influence its outcome and should be carefully considered.

1. Preparation

It is helpful to know as much as possible beforehand about the child (e.g., cultural, developmental, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive abilities) and about the reason for an interview. This can include reviewing the specifics of the referral and police report as well as considering information from the child's non-offending caregiver, other witnesses, and other professionals involved in the case. Such information will assist the interviewer to better meet individualized needs, and to understand the child's reactions and statements. It will orient the interviewer and direct possible avenues of inquiry. The interviewer should keep in mind that the background information may be incomplete or inaccurate or both. Rather than being used to confirm a particular belief, report, or hypothesis, the information should be used to encourage the child to provide as many details as possible in their own words. It should also be used to facilitate the development and exploration of reasonable alternative explanations for the allegation as well as for pre-planning specific transition prompts and additional questions.

2. Timing and Duration

The initial child interview should occur as close in time to the event in question, disclosure, or reason for referral as feasible. Whenever possible, the child interview should also be timed to maximize the child's capacity to provide accurate and complete information. This often involves consideration of the child's physical and mental state (e.g., alert, rested) as well as immediate safety.

As a general rule, it is preferable to make the length of an interview match the child's abilities and stamina and not make assumptions about the child's attention span based on age. The interviewer should listen to the child's cues and be mindful of signals indicating fatigue, loss of concentration, or need to use the bathroom. When breaks are taken, what occurs with the child during break time should be documented. Multiple interview sessions are an option when children are unable to engage in longer interviews.

3. Caregiver Notification

Interviewers should consult local procedures and legal requirements to determine if and how to notify parents, caregivers, and guardians prior to and after the forensic interview. Notification may be inadvisable when parents, caregivers, or other family members are suspects, or when notification may result in attempts to influence the child's report, prevent an interview, or cause destruction of evidence.

4. Location/Setting

It is recommended that an interview occur in a neutral environment whenever possible. The setting should be private, informal, free from distractions, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant. Children's Advocacy Centers and other specialized interview rooms are advantageous because they are generally child-friendly and allow for observers as well as audio-visual recording. If the child is to be interviewed at school, prior arrangements should be made with school officials regarding an appropriate interview room, the child's availability, and who else will be present during the interview. If at all possible, law enforcement officers should arrive for interviews in unmarked cars and wear plain clothes. In the rare case that it is necessary to conduct an interview where maltreatment may have occurred, the interviewer should confirm that the suspected

offender is not in the vicinity and that the child's psychological, physical, and confidential safety has been addressed.

5. Documentation

Audio-visual recording is the best practice to document the forensic interview. Care should be taken in setting up the recording equipment to ensure the interview is accurately documented from start to finish. If possible, the recording should capture both the interviewer and child, including what was said, as well as facial expressions, movements, and positions. If audio-visual recording is not possible for logistical or local policy reasons, audio recording is still recommended. It is important to carefully follow local policy and requirements to keep interview recordings secure and confidential. Options to prevent copying and inappropriate use or distribution of recordings include protective orders, as well as state and federal laws, and local protocols.

If neither audio-visual nor audio recording is available, written notes should be as close to verbatim as possible for both interviewer prompts and the child's responses. If another professional is observing the interview, that person may be a good choice for note taking.

6. Number of Interviews

A rigid, single-session-only forensic interview policy is no longer accepted practice. It has long been recognized that additional interviews are usually appropriate when a break would be beneficial to allow the child to continue the interview at another time, or when further investigation or subsequent disclosures indicate there may be additional abusive incidents or offenders. However, those are not the only circumstances that justify more than a single interview. While professionals should attempt to share information so as to minimize unnecessary multiple interviews, they should also carefully consider whether and how more than a single interview with the child should occur.

The number of interviews and interview sessions should be governed by the number necessary to elicit more complete and accurate information from the child, recognizing that the dynamics of abusive situations often make it difficult for children to disclose maltreatment. One interview is sometimes sufficient, but multiple interviews may produce additional relevant information, as long as they are open-ended and non-leading. To minimize the child's distress as well as the risk of acquiescence to perceived interviewer expectations, careful consideration should be given to who should conduct subsequent interviews. A decision to speak with a child again or make a referral for a forensic mental health evaluation may be appropriate in situations where the child has not disclosed during a forensic interview, but concern remains as to whether maltreatment may have occurred.

7. Participants

Children may be influenced by or concerned about the reactions of others, and this could affect their responses during an interview. Consequently, except in situations where a qualified interpreter is needed, it is recommended that only the interviewer and child be present in the interview room.

A. Number of Interviewers

A single interviewer is the standard best practice. Audio-visual equipment can be used to enable other members of the multidisciplinary child maltreatment investigative team (MDT) to observe an interview and to request additional investigative information. The interviewer should have a means of receiving feedback and ideas for possible elaboration from observers and should take a break to consult with them prior to concluding an interview. The interviewer is ultimately responsible for choices made regarding whether, how, and when specific questions

are asked during the interview. The interviewer should consider suggestions from MDT members and determine the most appropriate way to seek the information requested and may decide to pose suggested questions after open-ended techniques have been exhausted.

B. Advocates or Support Persons

Advocates have an important role to serve in providing support for children and families outside the interview room. They should not, however, routinely be present during child forensic interviews. In rare and exceptional situations where the child wants an advocate or support person present, and where their presence will not interfere with the course of the investigation, the interviewer should meet with the advocate/support person ahead of time to establish clear rules of conduct and the importance of refraining from direct involvement in the interview. It is best to have the advocate/support person sit behind the child and to instruct the support person not to say anything, and not to assist the child in responding.

C. Parents

In general, parents (or other relatives and caregivers) should not be present during an interview. If a child refuses to separate, it may be appropriate to allow the caregiver to be present during the initial stages of the interview. The caregiver should be instructed not to influence the child in any way. The caregiver should leave the room prior to discussion of maltreatment and/or the allegations. The interviewer or another member of the multidisciplinary team may discuss crucial issues regarding safety or other concerns with the parent or caregiver following the interview.

D. Suspected Offender

The suspected perpetrator(s) of child sexual abuse should not be present nor in the vicinity during an interview. This recommendation would also preclude the suspected sex offender from accompanying the child to or from an interview site. Ideally the same practice should guide interviews of children being interviewed as suspected victims of physical abuse, neglect, and psychological maltreatment or as witnesses to violence; however, when such is not possible, it should not preclude a child from being interviewed.

E. Other Children

Siblings and other suspected victims and child witnesses should be interviewed separately. Additionally, information obtained from another alleged victim or witness should generally not be shared with the child.

8. Structure

There is general agreement among nationally and internationally recognized models regarding the structure and components of a forensic interview. A phased approach is recommended, with an introductory component (e.g., introductions, explanation of documentation and observers, interview instructions, narrative event practice), an information gathering component (e.g., transition to topic of concern followed by prompts aimed at gathering details about the child's experience), and a closure component (e.g., final clarification questions, opportunity for child to provide additional information and ask questions, assessment of safety, and re-establishing child's equilibrium). Within this structure, there should be flexibility for the interviewer to adapt to the individual child.

9. Importance of Establishing /Maintaining Rapport

Rather than being a discrete phase of the interview, interviewers should be attentive to rapport throughout the entire interview. Interviewers should attempt to establish and promote rapport by exhibiting genuine interest in the child's well-being and offering content-neutral support, which can

include supportive statements, smiling, nodding, using the child's name, and adopting a relaxed and open posture. Rapport can diminish, especially when a child becomes uncomfortable talking about maltreatment. By paying attention and recognizing when rapport has decreased, the interviewer can explore how the child is feeling and attempt to re-establish rapport before continuing.

The pace of an interview is primarily established by the child. The interviewer must be sensitive to the child's needs and appreciate how difficult it may be for the child to talk about events, especially with a stranger. The child should not be pressured to respond to questions.

10. Linguistic and Developmental Considerations

Interviewers should be trained and knowledgeable about basic concepts of child development and linguistics. Although age-related developmental norms exist, there are variations among children and within age groups. Each child should be approached as an individual. The best way to gauge the developmental and linguistic capacity of the child being interviewed is to pay close attention to the child's use and understanding of language. Consequently, it is essential to encourage narrative responses from the beginning of an interview and assess the child's ability to respond to open-ended invitations. It is also important to remember that a child who cannot fully narrate in English might be very competent and able to provide a clear and complete account in their primary language. The child's linguistic and developmental abilities should be assessed in the language they prefer.

Memory source monitoring is the ability to recognize the source of a memory for an event. It is an important developmental consideration during a forensic interview. School-age children are better able to differentiate between events they have personally experienced and events that they have heard about or been told about. If there is a concern about the source of a memory, interviewers should consider asking the child to clarify and expand on where the information originated (though this may be difficult for preschoolers and children with developmental disabilities):

"How do you know that?"
"Tell me everything you heard when ____."
"Tell me everything you saw when ____."

Appendix A contains additional information related to basic developmental and linguistic concepts.

11. Questioning Techniques and Types of Prompts

A. General Considerations

Interviewers should always think about the best way to phrase questions and prompts, 'frame' prompts to clearly indicate what they relate to, listen carefully to the child's responses, and whenever possible, 'anchor' subsequent inquiries with the child's words. Interviewers should take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about a child's experiences and request additional information (e.g., by using *"What happened next?"* and *"Tell me more"* prompts) before moving on to other aspects of events.

1) Avoid Inappropriate Suggestion

Interviewers should use questioning techniques most likely to enhance the production of reliable information from children. It is widely recommended that interviewers avoid inappropriately suggestive techniques including questions in which the interviewer introduces key allegation-related information and details that are not externally verifiable and have not yet been mentioned by the child (e.g., *"Did it hurt when [name] touched you?"* when the child hasn't mentioned being touched). Examples of additional questions that are

discouraged are coercive or tag questions (e.g., “*He touched your privates, didn’t he?*”) and questions that invite children to pretend or to speculate about matters they do not have direct knowledge about (e.g., “*What was your coach thinking when she messed with you?*”).

2) Script and Episodic Memory

When phrasing questions, interviewers should be deliberate and pay careful attention to the tense they use. If seeking details about what happened during a specific instance or episode (episodic memory), past tense should be used, e.g., “*Tell me everything that **happened** when__.*” If seeking general ‘script’ memory information about common features of a repeated event, present tense is most appropriate, e.g., “*Tell me what **usually happens** when__.*” Likewise, interviewers should listen carefully for clues in the language used by children that may indicate they are providing either script memory for a repeated event (e.g., present tense or words like “[name] **would...**” “**always**” “**usually**” “**most of the time**”), or episodic memory (e.g., past tense or words like “**one time**” “**the first time**”). Whenever possible, interviewers should attempt to determine if a child who has experienced multiple incidents can provide descriptions about specific episodes. Some children who have experienced repeated maltreatment may be unable to provide details regarding distinct events.

B. Types of Prompts

Although there are a number of ways to categorize and define types of questions and prompts, the following distinctions are useful for interviewers to keep in mind:

- **Most preferred: Invitations** - broad open-ended prompts that encourage narrative responses
- **Preferred Wh- questions:** Wh- questions that probe recall memory and encourage narrative responses
- **Less preferred Wh- questions:** more narrow Wh- questions that can easily be answered with one or two words and/or a guess
- **Least preferred: option-posing** recognition questions – yes/no and multiple choice

1) Most Preferred Prompts – Broad Open-ended Invitations

Interviewers should begin with and maximize the use of broad open-ended invitations because they encourage more complete narrative responses from recall memory and elicit the most accurate information. These include various types of open-ended prompts such as initial invitations and breadth and depth prompts.

While age, developmental capabilities and motivation will affect the length of the child’s answers, invitations consistently produce the most detailed and informative responses, especially when narrative practice about a neutral event is included early in an interview.

Invitations that **focus on actions** (e.g., “*Tell me everything that happened.” “*What happened?” “Tell me everything [name] did.” “Tell me all about the touching”) generate more detailed responses than those that request descriptions (e.g., “*Tell me everything about the man.*”). They are also recommended and effective since actions are the aspects of experiences children remember best, as well as the most important features of suspected maltreatment situations.**

a) Breadth, Depth, and Cued Recall Invitations

The following open-ended invitations are universally recommended. They should be used to invite a child to provide an initial narrative account and to elaborate with additional details throughout the interview.

- **TMETH:** *“Tell me everything that happened when [repeat child’s words].”*
- **TWH/WHN:** *“Then what happened?/What happened next?”*
- **TMM:** *“Tell me more about [repeat child’s words].”*
- **TMEA/TMAA:** *“Tell me everything about/tell me all about [repeat child’s words].”*
- **WHW:** *“What happened when [repeat child’s words]?”*

i. ‘Breadth’ Invitations

Often referred to as ‘breadth’ prompts, **TMETH** and **TWH/WHN** are action-oriented recall prompts used to invite an initial chronological narrative from a child. They also can and should be repeated often during the entire interview. They contain the word *“happen,”* which generates the longest and most detailed responses from children. Even children who are unable to provide information sequentially may be able to respond informatively to **TMETH**.

ii. ‘Depth’ and ‘Cued Recall’ Invitations

TMM, **TMEA/TMAA**, and **WHW** are sometimes referred to as ‘depth’ prompts since they are used to ‘dig deeper’ for additional information. Because they often incorporate previous words, phrases, or actions (i.e., “cues”) mentioned by the child, they are also often referred to as **cued recall prompts**. They are effective in encouraging the production of more details about topics the child has already mentioned and should be used extensively following the child’s initial narrative.

Interviewers often find it helpful to take notes about specific words, actions and phrases provided by the child that can be used to help formulate later breadth and depth invitations.

For example:

- *“You said [child’s words earlier in interview]. **TMETH.**”*
OR
“Tell me everything [name] did when they [repeat child’s words about what happened.]”
- *“Earlier you said [repeat child’s words]. **TMM** about that.”*
OR
“Earlier you said [repeat child’s words]. Help me understand.”
OR
“Earlier you said [repeat child’s words]. Say more about that.”
- *“**TMEA** [repeat child’s words].”*
- *“**TMAA** [repeat child’s words].”*
- *“**WHW** [repeat child’s words]?”*

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“Tell me **everything about...**” (TMEA) and “Tell me **all about...**” (TMAA) are recommended over “Tell me about...” because of their inclusion of the exhaustive terms “everything about” and “all about” which increases the amount of responsive information and details provided by children.

EXAMPLE: Using TMETH & Action Cues to Invite an Initial Narrative

As soon as a child provides any information related to the topic of concern in response to a ‘transition’ prompt (e.g., the child mentions an action and/or the suspect’s name), an open-ended invitation, preferably **TMETH**, should be posed to encourage an initial narrative from the child.

For example, a child who indicates they are there to talk “... about my coach messing with me,” can be asked to “**TMETH** when your coach messed with you.” Children who have difficulty responding to **TMETH** can be asked “What was the first thing that happened [when your coach messed with you]?” followed by **TWH** and **WHN** questions to build the narrative.

b) Time Segmentation and Time Framing Invitations

A more specific type of open-ended invitation is a ‘time-segmentation’ prompt. With children eight years of age and older, it can be a valuable strategy to request more details by breaking an event into smaller segments of time.

For example:

- “**TMETH from** [some action already mentioned by the child] **until** [another action mentioned by the child].”

A related type of prompt, sometimes referred to as ‘time-framing,’ requests information from the child about what happened before or after a specified action. For example: “What happened right before/right after [action mentioned by the child]?”

Interviewers should use *before* and *after* prompts with caution however, keeping in mind that young children may have difficulty with these concepts, especially with what happened “before.”

c) Descriptive Invitations

Descriptive invitations use nouns to invite elaborate recall/narrative responses about a person, place, or thing. Interviewers should wait until action-based invitations have been exhausted, since research has shown descriptive invitations are less productive.

For example:

- “**TMEA/TMAA/TMM** about the person who did that.”
- “**TMEA/TMAA/TMM** about the place where it happened.”
- “Tell me everything you remember about the car.”

Note that these prompts go beyond simply adding “Tell me” to a Wh- question (e.g., “Tell me where it happened” is the same as “Where did it happen?”). As noted above, adding “all about/everything about” to the question invites a multi-word response and descriptive detail about the person or place.

2) Wh- Questions and Prompts

Wh- prompts are more specific and focused than invitations and produce fewer details per prompt (among children aged 5 and above), so their use should be kept to a minimum and usually delayed until after open-ended invitations have been exhausted. Carefully formulated Wh- prompts in the preferred categories described below are often useful in eliciting specific types of information children may otherwise fail to report when responding to more general open-ended invitations. Wh- questions in the less-preferred category discourage narrative responses and encourage guessing.

a) Preferred Wh- Prompts

Wh- prompts that rely on recall memory and encourage multi-word responses are preferred and appropriate after invitations have been exhausted, particularly those focused on the following specific topics. Preferred Wh- prompts are worded so that they do not suggest specific answers and can be easily rejected by the child (e.g., by answering “nothing”).

i. Sensory Focus Prompts

Focusing a child on relevant sensory perceptions – what they saw, heard, tasted, smelled or felt (physical sensations) – can be a helpful way to elicit additional salient details. See [Appendix D](#) for examples of possible sensory focus prompts.

ii. Thoughts and Feelings Prompts

Wh- prompts that ask the child to describe emotional feelings, reactions, and thoughts often produce forensically relevant details or shed light on the child’s frame of mind, and thus can be helpful in assessing allegations of maltreatment. See [Appendix D](#) for examples of possible thoughts and feelings prompts.

Keep in mind that children often give single word responses to prompts such as “How did you feel?” (e.g., “Bad”), and it is helpful to pair these prompts with an invitation (e.g., “You said you felt bad. *TMM* about that.”)

iii. Prompts about Clothing and What Occurred with Hands and Mouths

Because of their central importance in understanding the abusive event, Wh- questions about clothing and actions with the hands and the mouth are often productive. See [Appendix D](#) for examples of possible prompts about clothing and what occurred with hands and mouths.

iv. Prompts About Conversations, Disclosures, and Motivations

Another category of preferred Wh- prompts includes questions about conversations between the child and suspect, about motivations for the child to reveal abusive conduct or delay disclosure, and about related statements made by the child to others and their reactions. These questions are often asked near the end of an interview. Children (and adults) may have difficulty recalling verbatim what was said in conversations, so their answers are more likely to reflect the general meaning of what was said. See [Appendix D](#) for examples of possible prompts about conversations, disclosures, and motivations.

b) Less Preferred Wh- Prompts

Wh- questions that can easily be answered with one word or a guess are less preferred and interviewers should limit their use as much as possible. Children may believe an answer is expected simply by virtue of the fact that the question was asked, and in an effort to be cooperative, they will often respond with their best guess.

Examples of less-preferred Wh- questions:

- *“Who was there?”*
- *“Where does he live?”*
- *“How old were you?”*
- *“What is her name?”*

Within this category, some questions are more problematic than others, for instance questions seeking temporal information (e.g., *“When did it happen?”* *“What time?”*), number (e.g., *“How many?”*), and color (e.g., *“What color was the car?”*). Even very young children are often familiar with these general concepts and have learned related words, making it especially easy for them to come up with a guess.

Furthermore, ‘when’ is an abstract concept, and a young child’s temporal response to a question about ‘when’ is much less likely to be reliable than responses to questions that focus on concrete information related to the context of the maltreatment and on what occurred immediately before or immediately after. Responses to such contextual prompts may generate information that can be used during follow-up investigations to help narrow the time frame for the event in question.

For example:

- *“Tell me everything you remember about where it happened.”*
- *“Where was [e.g., family member] when it happened?”*
- *“What happened right before...?”*
- *“What happened right after...?”*

Interviewers should also be alert to a related ‘**pseudo-temporal**’ issue - the possibility that a child may misinterpret prompts that use the word “time” when inquiring about a specific incident (e.g., *“Tell me about the last time it happened.”*) as requests for temporal information such as the day, date or time on the clock. These issues are less likely if interviewers clarify or re-phrase to emphasize that they are interested in *what happened* rather than *when* (e.g., *“**T**METH [Tell me everything that happened] the last time ____”).*

For some Wh- questions, pairing them with invitations may generate narrative responses that ameliorate many of the potential problems associated with closed-ended questions. For example, *“Who was the first person who found out about what happened?”* could be paired with *“**T**METH when [person’s name] found out.”* *“Where did it happen?”* could be paired with *“**T**MM/**T**MEA/**T**MAA [name of the place].”*

3) Least Preferred – Option-Posing Questions (Yes/No and Multiple Choice)

Option-posing questions are closed-ended and include yes/no and multiple-choice questions. These questions ask the child to confirm, reject or choose from information presented by the interviewer. They tap recognition memory, and although it is easier to recognize than to recall, option-posing questions increase the risk of inaccurate, inconsistent, misleading, and unconvincing responses. Interviewers should strive to replace option-posing questions with invitations and preferred Wh- questions that encourage narrative responses.

There are a number of potential problems with option-posing questions:

- Option-posing questions encourage a limited response from the child that includes little or no information beyond that provided by the interviewer. The interviewer ends up saying much more than the child.
- A child's brief response may obscure a lack of understanding of the words used by the interviewer.
- A child's minimal response is unlikely to contain idiosyncratic or novel details and is therefore unlikely to lead to evidence that may confirm or refute allegations.
- Interviewer-supplied information in option-posing questions may be incorrect.
- Option-posing questions may lead to response biases (such as a 'yes' or 'no' bias, or a last item bias in response to multiple choice questions).
- Because option-posing questions are easy to answer even when the child doesn't know or is unsure, they encourage guessing, which leads to inconsistency and inaccuracy.
- A child who is reluctant to talk about what happened can easily provide brief responses, or even more misleading, give false "no" responses.

For all these reasons, option-posing questions are the least preferred question type.

Yes/no questions rarely elicit more than a simple "Yes" or "No" response and are particularly susceptible to various response biases. They raise the risk of eliciting both false positive and false negative responses. False negatives are even more likely when the yes/no question includes a negative polarity term such as the word "any" (e.g., "Did anything else happen?") and for that reason should be avoided.

Multiple-choice questions are similar to yes/no questions in that children seldom elaborate. A child is likely to choose one of the options offered, even if misleading or incorrect. Analog research suggests that inclusion of an "open-choice" (e.g., "or something/someone/somewhere else") does not eliminate the problem - children still tend to choose one of the concrete options and provide minimal responses.

Despite these drawbacks, most interviews will likely contain some yes/no or multiple-choice questions. If used, yes/no or multiple-choice questions should be phrased carefully to reduce the amount of information suggested. Whenever a child gives a brief reply to a multiple-choice question or responds affirmatively to a yes/no question, pairing with an open-ended follow-up request for elaboration is recommended. Sometimes an open-ended follow-up may also be appropriate when the child answers "No" to a yes/no question. An example of this would be when an interviewer has asked, "Did your uncle say something?" and the child responds "No." The interviewer can follow up by saying, "Tell me more about that," and the child might respond, "He didn't say anything, but he made funny noises."

12. Accommodations for Engagement and Communication

Formerly called “media” or “interview aids” in previous APSAC Guidelines, offering alternative means for communication and engagement will be referred to as “accommodations” in these Guidelines.

Each child has a combination of communication style and information-processing abilities. These Guidelines support a narrative approach, recognizing that some individuals might require specific accommodations. A variety of interview aids have been used by interviewers over the years, especially with young children and those with developmental disabilities. Two important goals of forensic interviewing are to maximize information gathering while minimizing negative impact on children. Each child enters the forensic interview with their unique set of circumstances and ability to communicate their life experiences. Sometimes children may benefit from having alternative ways to communicate.

Use of accommodations should be purpose-driven, culturally sensitive, and not interrupt narratives from children. Accommodations should be used with caution to clarify information obtained and rely heavily on open-ended, free recall prompts. Accommodations are not diagnostic tools. Drawings made by children and their interactions with accommodation materials should not be interpreted by the interviewer, but instead used to encourage further narration by the child about what they have drawn or shown. A purpose-driven approach can guide an interviewer on when and how to offer an accommodation.

These Guidelines emphasize prompts that elicit free recall. When accommodations for communication are made, the goal is to access recall memory whenever possible. Some accommodations create a supportive environment and can reduce or diffuse stress, while others provide children an opportunity to explain or clarify something being discussed in a forensic interview. When evaluating whether to incorporate an accommodation, one consideration is whether its use is child-led or interviewer-led. Interviewer-led accommodations should remain non-leading and non-suggestive and access free recall as much as possible. Accommodations can be employed throughout all stages of a forensic interview.

In the early stages of an interview, a child might be afforded an opportunity to draw or color in order to build rapport, increase comfort, and engage in conversation with the forensic interviewer. This comfort drawing is voluntary, child-led, and can be started and stopped during an interview. Analog research indicates that the use of comfort drawing has little impact on children’s performance in interviews and does not significantly increase (or decrease) the amount or accuracy of information recalled.

Because some accommodations tap less accurate recognition memory rather than free recall, they should be used with caution to clarify information obtained using open-ended prompts. Therefore, interviewers and investigators should have less confidence in the information gathered using only an accommodation. The use of accommodations should be carefully documented (by audio-visual recording if at all possible) and accompanied by requests for verbal elaboration from the child whenever possible.

In some cases, a child may find it easier to write their responses as an accommodation. In this situation, an interviewer can offer the writing accommodation and should use the child’s writing in follow-up narrative prompts to gain a fuller understanding of what the child is communicating. The interviewer can ask the child to read aloud what is written, or the interviewer can read aloud, and additional questions should be asked about the content that was written. This activity is child-led

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and can be used in conjunction with free recall prompts to minimize interpretation, leading, or suggestion.

The same is true for child-led drawings of an event, a location, a person, or a thing. The child's drawing is akin to verbally inquiring about a reconstructed memory. This accommodation should be coupled with free recall prompts for explanations from the child while being devoid of interpretation by the interviewer or investigators. Child-led demonstrations of actions or events should be treated in the same manner: coupled with free recall prompts and not interpreted.

Interviewer-led accommodations should be used only after exhausting attempts to access free recall from the child. If the interviewer-led accommodation taps recognition memory, the interviewer should move to free recall prompts as soon as possible.

As forensic interviews should be conducted "in a manner consistent with the best interests of the child" (**APSAC Code of Ethics**), accommodations provide children an opportunity to tell what they know in their own way and in their own words. Interviewers should incorporate accommodations when needed and not merely as a matter of course. Accommodations should be purposeful and rely on free recall prompts whenever possible.

INTERVIEW COMPONENTS

Experts recognize that a narrative interview approach with an emphasis on research-based free recall techniques aimed at eliciting reliable narratives is best practice. Throughout an interview, interviewers are encouraged to listen more and talk less, and prioritize invitations and preferred Wh- prompts over less preferred Wh- questions and option-posing questions. The following structure reflects components appropriate for many forensic interviews.

1. INTRODUCTORY COMPONENT

A. Introduction

1) Introducing Self, Role, and Purpose of the Interview

Interviewers should introduce themselves and provide a brief neutral explanation of their role and the purpose of an interview, using simple, non-suggestive, developmentally appropriate language, e.g., *“My name is _____. My job today is to ask you some questions and listen to what you say.”* Interviewers should strive to immediately help the child feel safe and at ease, and to empower the child with information about the process.

2) Informing Child About Documentation Method and Observers

Interviewers should inform all children, in a developmentally appropriate and matter-of-fact way, that the interview is being recorded (and/or about any other method of documentation). If applicable, the child should also be informed that the interview is being observed by other professionals – *“people I work with”* can be used but not *“friends.”* Any questions the child has about why the interview is being recorded or who is observing, should be answered honestly. Interviewers should consult their local legal counsel to determine whether explicit consent for audio or video recording of an interview is required and proceed accordingly.

3) Brief Rapport

A brief request for the child to *“Tell me something about you,” “Tell me something you want me to know about you,”* or *“Tell me about things you like to do,”* may help convey interest in the child and facilitate rapport. Depending on the child’s concerns and frame of mind, it may be appropriate to provide reassurance that the child is not in trouble with the interviewer and that an interview is not taking place because the child has done something wrong. Interviewers should be careful, however, not to inadvertently suggest such concerns to the child.

B. Interview Instructions

Interview instructions should occur near the beginning of an interview and be reinforced throughout an interview where relevant or needed. Instructions serve to orient the child to the unique expectations of a forensic interview, empower the child, and encourage accurate responses. When properly presented, instructions reduce the inclination to guess, increase willingness to ask for clarification, and increase resistance to suggestion. Instructions also serve to preemptively correct miscommunication. When good interviewing techniques are utilized in the rest of an interview, this can increase the accuracy of information generated from the child.

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Interview instructions are most effective when presented one at a time and phrased simply and succinctly. The first three instructions listed should be accompanied by age-appropriate practice examples with feedback that allow and encourage the child to demonstrate understanding and ability to comply. Practice examples may not be necessary for older children. Instructions should be efficient, concise and take no more than a few minutes. Many interviewers are successful using age-appropriate scripted instructions. The examples that follow in these Guidelines are ideas for possible phrasing and practice examples to use when informing young children about key interview instructions.

1) ‘Don’t Guess’ Instruction (‘Don’t guess, but tell me if you do know’)

The interviewer should explain that when the child knows the answer to a question, they should answer, but if the child does not know, not to guess. Age-appropriate practice examples should reinforce both aspects of this instruction.

EXAMPLE: DON’T GUESS

Explain: “[Child’s name], I’m going to ask you some questions. If you know the answer, tell me. But if you don’t know, please don’t guess. You can just say, ‘I don’t know.’”

Practice: “Let’s practice. What did I have for breakfast today? [Response: “I don’t know.”] “Okay, because you don’t know what I had for breakfast.”

Feedback/Counter-example: “What did **you** have for breakfast today?” [Response: “Cereal.”] “Okay, because you **do** know. It’s important to tell me when you know the answer.”

2) ‘Don’t Understand’ Instruction (‘Tell me if you don’t know what I mean’)

The interviewer should tell the child, in age-appropriate language, to inform the interviewer when a question or word doesn’t make sense so that the interviewer can rephrase for the child to understand. Keep in mind when explaining the instruction that ‘understand’ is a big word that may not be understood by young children. Also, practice examples used with young children should be concrete, easy to explain when the child indicates they don’t understand, and easy for the child to answer after explained. Pay attention and don’t expect younger children to explicitly say that they don’t understand or don’t know what you mean; they often express incomprehension in other ways, such as saying “I don’t know,” looking away, shrugging shoulders, or making a face indicating lack of comprehension.

EXAMPLE: DON’T UNDERSTAND

Explain: “If I say something & you don’t know what I mean or what I’m saying, please tell me & I’ll ask it a different way.”

Practice: “Let’s practice. Where is your patella?” [Response: “I don’t know what that means” or “I don’t know.”]

Feedback/Explanation: “Thanks for letting me know. Patella is another word for knee. Let me ask it a different way – where is your knee?”

If the child knows the meaning of your first practice example, be prepared with one or two other options. For example: “How many siblings do you have?”/ “That’s a hard word for brothers and sisters. How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

3) 'Correct Me' Instruction ('Tell me if I make a mistake')

Children should be encouraged to correct interviewer mistakes. Many children are raised to think it is unacceptable to correct adults and to believe adults are all-knowing. This instruction empowers the child to correct the interviewer and a practice example allows them to demonstrate their willingness to do so.

EXAMPLE: CORRECT ME

Explain: *"Sometimes I make mistakes or get something wrong. When I do, you can tell me that I'm wrong."*

Practice: *"Let's practice. You're 30 years old. [Response: "I'm not 30."]*

Feedback/Request Correct Information: *"Thank you for correcting me. How old are you? Please tell me if I make other mistakes."*

4) Un-informed/Naïve Interviewer Instruction ('You're the expert')

It is important for the interviewer to convey that the interviewer does not know what happened to the child and thus doesn't know the answers to the questions being asked. Practice examples are not necessary, but this is a message that should be reinforced as appropriate during the interview.

EXAMPLES: NAÏVE INTERVIEWER

- *"Since we just met, I don't know about you or things that have happened in your life."*
- *"I'll be asking questions about things you know about, but that I don't know about."*
- *"I'll be asking you some questions and since I wasn't there, I don't know what happened."*
- *"I don't know what's happened in your life. I won't be able to tell you the answers to my questions."*
- *"You're the expert about what's happened in your life, and I don't know about those things."*

Reinforce during an interview: *"The reason I keep asking you to tell me more is because I wasn't there and I need your help to understand what happened."*

5) Promise to Tell the Truth

Interviewers should ask the child to promise to tell the truth during an interview since analog research shows when a child does promise to tell the truth, it increases (though does not guarantee) honesty. It is not necessary to include truth/lie comprehension tasks; research demonstrates there is no benefit to doing so during an interview. Refer to the prosecutor in jurisdictions where specific demonstration of truth/lie understanding may be required, and in those jurisdictions this demonstration can be done at the end of the interview. Because young children understand "will" before they understand "promise," a good way to request a promise to tell the truth from a child is to ask, *"Do you promise that you will tell the truth?"*

If the child expresses reluctance or seems hesitant to promise to tell the truth, the interviewer should inquire about the reasons, explore the child's concerns, and attempt to help the child overcome barriers without making promises the interviewer cannot keep.

C. Narrative Event Practice

Narrative event practice (also known as ‘episodic memory training’) is a critical element of a forensic interview that should not be skipped since it significantly increases details provided by the child later in the interview. It consists of eliciting episodic memory about a neutral or positive event in a way that maximizes invitations, encourages narrative responses, and teaches the child what to expect and how to respond during the rest of the interview. Narrative event practice provides an opportunity for the child and interviewer to learn how the other communicates. At the same time, rapport is enhanced.

Basic testimonial competency of children can be demonstrated during narrative practice, through their ability to accurately perceive, remember, and communicate about an innocuous event. See [Appendix B](#) for suggested strategies for how to conduct narrative event practice.

2. INFORMATION-GATHERING COMPONENT

A. Transition to the Topic of Concern

Before attempting to transition to the topic of concern (i.e., suspected maltreatment or the event the child may have witnessed), interviewers should consider the child’s readiness and determine whether there appear to be possible barriers that should be addressed. The transition to the topic of concern should be as open-ended and non-suggestive as possible. Prior to an interview, interviewers should plan for potential transition prompts based on the individual child and situation.

When the child is likely to be aware of the reason for an interview, the following are examples of transition prompts that are often productive:

- *“Tell me what you’re here to talk about today.”*
- *“Tell me why/how come you came to talk to me today.”*
- *“Tell me what you know about being here today.”*

Sometimes the child has mentioned something related to the reason for concern earlier in the interview. If so, the interviewer can repeat the child’s words and prompt a narrative. (e.g., *“Earlier you said... - **TMETH.**”*)

When the child has made a statement prior to the interview about what happened, a prompt referencing that disclosure (without describing the specifics of the statement) can be useful (e.g., *“I heard you talked to [name/“someone”] about something that happened - **TMETH.**”*)

If the child does not respond with information about the topic of concern, the interviewer can use other open-ended non-suggestive prompts, for example:

- *“What did [name] tell you about coming to talk to me today?”*
- *“I heard something might have happened. **TMWH** (Tell me what happened.)”*

Other general prompts or carefully considered questions based on the specific circumstances of the case may be necessary. See [Appendix C](#) for ideas related to additional useful transition prompts.

B. Substantive Questions

The goal of this phase of an interview is to allow the child to provide as many details as possible about what they witnessed or experienced and the circumstances and dynamics relevant to their experiences. The details elicited often serve as a basis for collection of relevant evidence in the follow-up investigation and to guide case planning. Throughout an interview, but especially in this component, the interviewer should continue to keep an open mind and explore reasonable alternative explanations.

1) Gathering Information About What Happened and the Child's Experiences

As soon as the child indicates something happened, the interviewer should invite the child to provide a narrative about what happened with **TMETH** - ***"Tell me everything that happened (from beginning to end)."***

The child's response often makes it clear if they are talking about a single incident or multiple episodes. In the case of multiple episodes, interviewers should be intentional about how they proceed and careful how they phrase prompts to convey whether they are seeking script memory or episodic memory. Allowing the child to provide an initial generic account or script memory about what usually happens may be helpful to provide a broader picture of what the child experienced before moving on to specific episodes. The child's generic account may provide episodic cues or labels which can then be used to anchor and explore specific events. If the initial narrative is unclear about whether more than one episode has occurred, interviewers should consider open-ended prompts that might clarify if there were multiple incidents, e.g., *"Tell me everywhere it/something happened," "Tell me everything that happened another time/the time you remember most."* (Interviewers should **not** ask, *"How many times did it happen?"*) A forced choice question such as *"Did it happen one time or more than one time?"* should be a last resort only after more open-ended prompts are tried and unsuccessful in clarifying whether there were multiple incidents.

When the child has experienced more than one incident, the interviewer should not spend the entire time in script memory unless that's all the child is able to provide. Using previously provided episodic cues or labels to request narratives from the child is a good place to start exploring specific events. Whenever possible, allow the child to choose and label episodes. One at a time, the interviewer should begin by framing each incident with the child's words and prompting for an initial narrative about what happened with a prompt such as, *"You said one time it happened [child's words] - **TMETH.**"*

Interviewers may also want to direct the child's attention to specific episodes by beginning with **TMETH**, followed by:

- *"...another time."*
- *"...the time you remember most."*
- *"...a time it was different."* (this prompt might help isolate an event)
- *"...the last time."/ "...the first time."*

Start with **TMETH** rather than *"Tell me about..."* to reduce the potential for 'pseudo-temporal' misunderstandings discussed on [page 16](#). After eliciting an initial episodic narrative about a specific event, the interviewer should continue with invitations and consider appropriate preferred Wh- questions before moving on to another event. **TWH/WHN** (*"Then what happened?"/ "What happened next?"*) prompts can help establish a linear narrative about what happened (breadth). **TMM** (*"Tell me more"*) is especially useful to go into more detail about things the child has described (depth).

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Sometimes simply repeating what the child has just said (without raising your voice to make it a question), using ‘facilitators’ as the child is talking (e.g., “okay,” “uh-huh,” “I see,”), or sitting silently, will be enough to keep the child talking. If less preferred Wh- questions or option-posing questions are asked, they should be delayed until late in the interview and ‘paired’ with invitations to provide more information.

In addition to gathering details about what happened during specific incidents, the interviewer should explore the context of the child’s experiences. These include but are not limited to:

- Dynamics
- Conversations
- Who knows, how they know, and what they said/did
- Circumstances that led to the initial disclosure

If not already mentioned by the child, interviewers should also consider screening for the use of technology and screening for other types of maltreatment. Whenever possible, interviewers should screen with prompts that encourage narrative responses, rather than using a list of yes/no questions. It is often advisable to wait to pose these questions, which tend to be more closed, until after the break to consult with observing MDT members.

See **Appendix D** for suggestions for some possible questions and prompts during the substantive phase of an interview. These suggestions are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be used as a checklist; rather, they are offered to provide examples and options that may be appropriate depending on the particular interview.

2) Presenting a Child with Physical Evidence

Forensic interviews provide children with an opportunity to put information and concerns in context. In some cases, whether or not a child has previously disclosed, there might be evidence of abuse or exploitation that the multidisciplinary team needs to understand. As mentioned in *Interview Components*, section 2. A. (Transition to the Topic of Concern, p.23), there are occasions when knowledge of prior activities or situations can be framed as a cued invitation to offer the child an opportunity to explain. (e.g. “I heard you talked to a doctor/police officer last week. Tell me what you talked about.”) This verbal presentation of information is stated in a non-leading way and the child is invited to narrate. The same technique can be offered to a child when the information to be discussed is in the form of physical evidence (see *Transitioning with Physical Evidence* below).

As technology evolves, the types of evidence associated with abuse and exploitation become more prolific. There are occasions where evidence is found prior to a child making a disclosure. Whether a child has disclosed or not, careful consideration must be given to the impact the presentation of evidence may have on the child. It is essential to coordinate with the multidisciplinary team in planning exactly how to handle the situation. The decision about whether or not to present evidence during an interview is fluid and based on the best interest of the child. A child should never be pressured or forced to look at evidence.

As is the case with interview accommodations, presenting evidence to a child is in conjunction with free recall prompts. Evidence is not merely presented to identify something with a yes/no inquiry. Interviewers should always know the purpose for presenting any type of evidence. An interviewer can avoid negatively impacting a child by advising them early in the interview that there is evidence that might be discussed. At the beginning of the interview during the introduction, the interviewer should add a statement that notifies the child of the evidence by using a high-level label of the type of evidence

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(such as *pictures, screen shots, texts, documents, etc.*) and then put the evidence aside so as not to draw continuous attention to it. It should be noted that there is no requirement or expectation that evidence be shared once it is briefly mentioned at the beginning. While introducing self, role, purpose and documentation, the interviewer can incorporate a statement about the evidence to empower the child before brief rapport by saying, *“I have some pictures/screen shots/chat logs that we might talk about later. But first I want to get to know you.”*

The interviewer should continually assess the child throughout the interview and offer supportive, non-suggestive utterances, as needed. After covering instructions and narrative practice, the interviewer can decide the best transition approach. Interviewers should take great care to minimize denial by transitioning with narrative prompts rather than yes/no questions.

Evidence can be presented at any time in the later components of the forensic interview and should be coupled with free recall prompts.

Transitioning with Physical Evidence

In order to use the physical evidence in the same way as a cued recall invitation, a child can be reminded about the evidence, e.g., *“Earlier, I said there are some pictures/screen shots/chat logs that we might talk about. I would like to talk about them now.”* The interviewer should show only one piece of evidence at a time, cuing the content and inviting a narrative from the child. There are several approaches to consider when presenting evidence and each is predicated on the needs of the child. For some children, it is advisable to explain the concrete details of the evidence before offering it to the child to give the child time to process what they are about to see. This is true whether or not there is graphic content. In addition, an interviewer should prompt the child to let the interviewer know if and when the child is ready to look at the evidence, thus providing an extra layer of assessment of the child’s readiness to view the physical evidence. E.g., *“The first screen shot is from a video that was taken outside of the mall. The screen shot shows two people sitting next to each other in the front seat of a car. The person in the driver’s seat has dark hair and a mustache and is wearing glasses. The other person has long, blonde hair and a red top. Tell me when you are ready to see it.”* Once the child acknowledges being ready, the interviewer hands the screen shot to the child and asks the child to narrate about it, *“Tell me everything you know about what is happening in this picture.”* Other similar prompts can be used, but interviewers should refrain from asking a yes/no question that allows for a simple denial, such as *“Is this you?”* Interviewers should also refrain from suggesting that the image is the child, but instead allow the child to put the evidence in context by inviting narrative. Follow-up questioning should draw out as many details as possible about the child’s knowledge regarding the evidence using the techniques recommended in these Guidelines. Once evidence is presented, it should be put back in the folder and not left in plain view. The same process is followed for each piece of evidence presented.

If a child denies knowing anything about the evidence, the interviewer can still ask questions related to surrounding details. For example, when a child denies they are in a picture or screen shot, consider these approaches:

- *“Tell me what you know about this place. Do you recognize this place/room? Where is it? Have you been there before? Tell me all about that.”*
- [Pointing to each person pictured] - *“Tell me about this person. How do you know them? What do you know about them?”*

The interviewer will need to arrange with law enforcement to have temporary access to copies of the evidence during an interview. Law enforcement is responsible for preparing copies of the evidence and providing it for the interview. In the case of child sexual abuse material (a visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor or lascivious exhibition of the genitals, anus or pubic area), law enforcement should maintain care, custody, and control over the evidence during the interview process. This means that the law enforcement officer should be actively observing the interview while the forensic interviewer is handling the evidence with the child. Law enforcement should manage the evidence once the interview is completed. Discuss the presentation of evidence with the local prosecutor's office.

In the case of video evidence, law enforcement can print representative still images, rather than showing a video to the child. Part of the evidence may be covered or masked if a child demonstrates a need to do so. A child can also be asked what they prefer, and an interviewer can cover a portion of the image as needed. Any covering or masking of an image should be documented for the record so that image modifications are captured for court purposes. The interviewer should continuously assess the child throughout the process. This can be done through supportive statements and inquiries, such as, *"How are you doing so far? Do you have questions for me? Let me know if you need to take a break."* Continuous assessment and routine check-ins will guide if, when and how evidence is presented. Supportive services should also be available immediately following an interview if the child requires them.

3. CLOSURE COMPONENT

Closure is the final component of a forensic interview and provides an opportunity for the interviewer to review hypotheses and assess concerns, safety, and level of support, as well as the child's readiness to end. The interviewer should aim for the child to leave the interview in a state of equilibrium.

A. Break

Before ending an interview, the interviewer should take a break to check with observers and consider additional topics that should be raised with the child. The child can be provided with a bathroom break if needed. Some interviewers ask the child to think about something else they want the interviewer to know during the break. Recording and observation of the child in the interview room should continue during the break. After the break, additional and clarifying questions can be asked before ending an interview.

B. Concluding the Interview

During this last component of an interview, it is preferable to ask, *"Is there something else you want to tell me?"* It is often possible to get an indication of the level of support for the child and possible recantation risk by asking questions such as:

- *"How do you feel about talking to me?"*
- *"How do you feel about leaving with [name of person who brought child to interview]?"*
- *"What do you think [names of caregivers, and possibly suspect] will say/think about you talking to me today?"*

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The interviewer can also invite the child to ask questions (e.g., *“Do you have questions for me about what we talked about?”*). The child may have questions about what is likely to happen next, and the interviewer can briefly describe expected next steps, taking care to do so in a developmentally appropriate way and not to make any promises that are beyond the interviewer’s control. The child can also be prepared for any referrals that will be made as a result of an interview. For example, *“Maybe we can get someone for you to talk to about this,”* or *“I’m going to ask another person to try to help you.”*

It may be informative to also ask the child to talk about the last time they saw or communicated with the suspect. If there are still concerns about possible maltreatment or the child’s safety, especially when the child has not made a disclosure, the interviewer should help the child identify an appropriate adult or adults with whom the child could talk. Some interviewers will provide their contact information to the child, perhaps a business card, and some refer the child and their family to other members of the multidisciplinary team for ongoing support or if they need to initiate contact again.

It is important to conclude on a positive note, usually by shifting the discussion to more neutral topics. The child can be thanked for their effort. For instance, *“Thank you for talking to me today,”* and the interviewer may then return discussion to another neutral activity. It is important for the child to regain composure and leave feeling as good as possible about their participation in an interview.

The interviewer should leave the option open for the child to be seen again and provide information regarding that process, for example, *“If you think of something else, you can let [name] know and we can set up another time to talk.”*

CONCLUSION

Effective child forensic interviewing is about learning to really listen to children. It requires constant attention to emerging research, openness to continual improvement based on experience and feedback, and a primary focus on the best interests of the child. This complicated and delicate balance is worth it so that child forensic interviews do the best possible job informing investigations, case planning decisions, and judges and jurors. Achieving the best possible outcomes for children is the ultimate goal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These Guidelines were prepared by the ad hoc APSAC Forensic Interviewing Practice Guidelines Committee chaired by Viola Vaughan-Eden, PhD, with Patti Toth, JD, Julie Kenniston, MSW, and Stacie LeBlanc, JD, and are an update to the 2012 APSAC Practice Guidelines.

Similar to previous editions, this version is based on the knowledge and experiences of a large number of colleagues throughout the child forensic interviewing field. Additionally, it reflects advances in research-informed best practices over the last 11 years. We would like to express special thanks to our colleagues listed below who generously shared their time and expertise to provide ideas for these revised Practice Guidelines. Although we did not incorporate all the suggestions we received, we greatly appreciated and carefully considered them all. We also appreciate the entire APSAC Board of Directors and the many APSAC members who contributed their feedback on drafts during this process.

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APPENDIX A: Developmental and Linguistic Concepts

The following points are important to keep in mind with regard to linguistics and the developmental capacity of children.

- Young children are concrete, egocentric, and make idiosyncratic use of language. Simply because a child uses a word (or fails to express lack of understanding) does not mean that they know what the word means. Language is acquired gradually and unevenly; therefore, interviewers need to listen and clarify the child's meaning and understanding of words throughout an interview. The interviewer's language should mirror the child's.
- In general, children as young as preschoolers can accurately recall core aspects of significant, emotionally salient, participatory events. At the same time, young children, especially preschoolers, tend to be the most susceptible to suggestion. They might need more focus and cues in order to access their memories.
- Interviewers should not make assumptions about a child's potential attention span based on age alone.
- In general, the younger the child, the shorter their attention span and the more quickly they may drift from one topic to another completely unrelated topic.
- Interviewers should tolerate silences and be prepared to wait after a question has been asked, giving the child time to process and respond.
- Interviewers should use simple words and keep questions and probes short.
- Concepts of number and time develop gradually and are difficult for young children to understand and use accurately. Questions asking younger children about what happened "before" another event should be used with care. Interviewers should use caution in asking children of all ages "when" or "how many times?" something happened. See INTERVIEW CONTEXT section 11.B.1) and 2), especially pp. 14 and 16, and INTERVIEW COMPONENTS section 2.B.1) on page 24 for additional related discussion and ideas.
- It is important to avoid pronouns and other 'pointing' or 'shifting' words that have no meaning without referring to another part of the conversation, (e.g., words such as "he," "she," "him," "her," "they," "it," "there," and "that"). Instead, whenever possible, interviewers should try to use people's names, place names, and specific nouns to avoid confusion and clarify what is meant when the child uses such words.
- Negation takes longer to process, and a child may not yet understand that a simple negative, such as "no" or "not," does not always imply a negative. Therefore, negatives should be avoided (not just double negatives) or used very carefully to be sure the child and interviewer have the same understanding.
- Be aware of the implications of using "something/someone" versus "anything/anyone." "Some" usually implies a neutral or positive and "any" usually implies a negative. Often, questions containing the words "some" or "any" are yes/no questions, which are closed option-posing questions and thus the least preferred question types. See INTERVIEW CONTEXT section 11.B.3) p. 17). A more open-ended prompt should be considered whenever possible to elicit the information sought. If these terms are included in questions, it may be helpful to use "some" instead of "any" to avoid steering the child to provide a negative answer.
- When ready to change the subject or move on to another issue, it is recommended the interviewer signal the child by 'framing' or 'scaffolding.' Examples include the following:
 - "Now that I know you better, I want to talk about why you're here today."
 - "Now I want to talk to you about ____."
 - "All right, we just talked about _____. Now I want to ask you about something different."
 - "You told me _____. Tell me everything that happened when _____."

APPENDIX B: Suggestions for Narrative Event Practice

The interviewer may begin by stating they would like to get to know the child better, and/or that they would like to show the child the kinds of questions they'll be asking, followed by a request that the child tell about what happened during a specific event (possibly "from the beginning to the end") such as the following:

- "Earlier you said you like to [activity described by the child possibly during brief rapport at the beginning of the interview]. **TMETH** the last time you [name activity] from the beginning to the end."
- "What's your favorite thing to do (outside)? **TMETH** the last time you [activity described by the child]."
- "Think about something you did this week that made you happy and **TMETH**."
- "Where's your favorite place to go? **TMETH** the last time you went to [place mentioned by child]."
- "Think about your last birthday and **TMETH**."

Another option would be to ask the child's caregivers or another adult familiar with the child to identify a recent neutral or positive memorable event (e.g., holiday, school activity, vacation activity, or other special occasion) in which the child participated. If the interviewer cannot easily identify a memorable innocuous event, the interviewer might ask about the child's day leading up to an interview as an event to explore for narrative practice.

Including initial invitations to tell everything that happened, the interviewer should use a variety of invitations to further explore the child's memory for the event being explored, so the child clearly understands they are expected to do most of the talking and elaborate in their own words. Some children can speak in detail for several minutes about a single event; others may need to be prompted to provide narratives about a second or third event in order to maximize the effectiveness of narrative event practice. In circumstances where a child is reluctant to provide information about a neutral or positive event, the interviewer may want to spend more time with narrative event practice. The child's responsiveness to the interviewer's efforts to engage them in discussing neutral or positive events during narrative event practice is often a good indication of how willing and likely the child is to disclose possible maltreatment later in an interview.

APPENDIX C: Formulating Case-Specific ‘Transition’ Prompts

If the general suggestions discussed in INTERVIEW COMPONENTS, section 2.A. Transition to the Topic of Concern, p.23, do not elicit relevant information from the child, most experts recommend using a series of general prompts and/or formulating additional questions based on the specific circumstances of the case that are as non-suggestive as possible, and that only gradually become more focused. It is best to do so by mentioning the most innocuous aspect that is likely to cue the child and pairing it with an invitation.

Possible phrasing:

- *“I heard something about [minimally suggestive cue]. **TMETH/TMEA that/TMAA that/TMM about that.**”*

The following examples illustrate some other options for potential ‘transition’ prompts:

- When the child has an observable injury – *“I see you have [a bruise, a broken arm, etc.]. **TMETH.**”*
- When the child has been seen by another professional prior to the forensic interview – *“I heard you saw [the doctor, a police officer, etc.] last week. Tell me how come./Tell me what you talked about./**TMETH.**”*
- When the child has been removed from their home and placed in protective custody – *“Where do you live/stay right now? How come you’re living/staying there?”*
- *“Is [your mom, someone, etc.] worried about something that happened? Tell me what they’re worried about.”*
- Referencing the location of possible abusive conduct may be productive and is not unduly suggestive – *“I heard something happened at [location]. **TMETH.**”*
- If the suspected offender is someone routinely in the child’s life, the interviewer may want to say, *“I heard something about [person’s relationship to child, e.g., “your brother,” your coach]. **TMETH.**”* The child can easily respond with innocuous information if there is nothing abusive to report.

If the child still has not disclosed, the interviewer should carefully consider whether to continue an interview and ask more direct questions, whether to stop an interview and perhaps try to talk to the child another time, or whether to spend more time trying to develop rapport through narrative event practice. As a general rule, interviewers should avoid linking a particular suspect with specific abusive conduct.

APPENDIX D: Ideas for Prompts During Substantive Phase

These suggestions for possible questions and prompts during the substantive phase of an interview are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be used as a checklist. They are offered to provide examples and options for consideration depending on the particular interview.

'Breadth' Invitations

- **TMETH:** *Tell me everything that happened when* [repeat child's words].
- **TWH/WHN:** *Then what happened? /What happened next?*
- **TMETH** *from the beginning to the end.*
- **TMETH,** *even the little things you don't think are important.*
- *What was the first thing that happened?*
- *What was the last thing that happened?*

'Depth' Invitations

- **TMM:** *Tell me more about* [repeat child's words].
- **TMEA/TMAA:** *Tell me everything about.../Tell me all about...* [repeat child's words].
- **WHW:** *What happened when* [repeat child's words]?
- *I'm confused, tell me again about* [repeat child's words].
OR
- *I'm trying to understand. Since I wasn't there, please tell me again about* [repeat child's words].
- *I heard you say* [repeat child's words]. *Tell me all about that./Say more about that.*
- *Help me understand more about* [repeat child's words].
- *Tell me everything you remember about* [repeat child's words].
- *What did* [name] *do when* [repeat child's words]?
- *What did you do when* [repeat child's words]?

Time Segmentation and Time-Framing Prompts

- *Tell me everything that happened from* [child's words describing one portion of the event] *until* [another portion].
- *What happened right before* [repeat child's words]?
- *What happened right after* [repeat child's words]?

Sensory Focus Prompts

- *Think about what it looked like – what did you see before/when/after* [child's words]?
- *Tell me everything you saw before/when/after* [child's words].
- *Tell me everything about what* [name] *looked like.*
- *Think about the sounds – what did you hear before/when/after* [child's words]?

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- *Tell me everything you heard.*
- *How did your body feel when/after [name] touched you?*
- *How did it feel when you went to the bathroom afterwards? (if appropriate)*

Possibly:

- *Tell me what you smelled.*
- *How did it taste?*

Thoughts and Feelings Prompts

- *Tell me everything you felt.*
- *How did you feel when [child's words describing event]? (e.g., "How did you feel when [name] touched you?")*
- *What did you think/What were you thinking when [name] touched you?*
- *How did you feel/What were you thinking after [name] touched you?*
- *How do you feel about everything that has happened?*

Prompts About Conversations, Disclosures, and Motivations

- *What did you say before/when/after [child's words describing event]?*
- *What did [name] say before/when/after [child's words describing event]?*
- *What happened the first time you told someone?*
 - *What did you do/say?*
 - *What did [disclosure recipient's name] do/say?*
 - *What happened after you told?*
- *How come you decided to tell?*
- *What helped you tell now?*
- *What made it okay to tell now?*
- *What kept you from telling other people about what happened?*
- *What did you think would happen if you told other people?*

Prompts About Actions with Hands and Mouth

- ***TMETH*** *with your hands. / What did you do with your hands?*
- ***TMETH*** *with [name's] hands. / What did [name] do with their hands?*
- ***TMETH*** *with your mouth. / What did you do with your mouth?*
- ***TMETH*** *with [name's] mouth. / What did [name] do with their mouth?*
- *How did you know what to do?*

Prompts About Clothing

- **TMETH** with your/[name's] clothes.
- Where were your/[name's] clothes.

Dynamics Prompts

- What did [name] tell you about what they were doing?
- What did [name] say when/after they touched you/hit you?
- How did you feel about [name] when you first knew them?
- How did you feel about [name] before they touched you/hit you?
- What were you thinking when it happened?
- What did you think after it happened?
- How do you feel about [name] now?
- What has happened with you since you told?
- How do you feel about what happened to you?

Other Abuse Incidents or Types of Maltreatment

- Tell me the worst thing [name] did.
- Tell me something different [name] did.

Prompts About Others Who Know or Were Told

It is advisable for every interview to include questions about who else knows about the maltreatment, who else has been told, the circumstances leading to the others' knowledge, and the child's motivation for disclosing, some of which have already been described. The child may also be asked if anyone else was present before, during, or immediately after the concerning event(s). This can potentially identify other victims or witnesses and thereby lead to valuable corroborative evidence.

- **TMAA** who else was there...
 - ...before it happened.
 - ...when it happened.
 - ...after it happened.
- Who knows what happened? /How do they know?/How did they find out?
- Who was the first person who found out about what happened?
- How did [name] find out?
OR
- **TMEA** how [name] found out.
- Do you know if something like that happened to someone else? How do you know? **TMAA** that.

Other Prompts

When further information about key facts is needed, more focused questions may be necessary during the substantive phase. Information about the context of the maltreatment (e.g., when and where it occurred, information about any instruments or items present or used in the maltreatment) can lead to potential corroborative evidence. The nature of the case (e.g., sexual abuse or exploitation, physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence), together with what the child has said so far will point toward additional specific areas an interviewer may want to explore. For instance, in sexual abuse situations, if the child has not already provided this information, interviewers will likely want to inquire about facts such as the type of touching involved, what part of the child's body was touched, observations that may indicate whether the suspect, if male, had an erection or ejaculated, and what implements or other objects or strategies were used to facilitate the abuse. In a physical abuse case, facts related to articles or weapons used to inflict the abuse may be important. It is often relevant and useful to find out if the suspect used technology in any way before, during, or following the abuse (e.g., to take pictures, to record or show videos, and/or to communicate with the child via cell phone, computer, or otherwise).

The interviewer must be careful at this point to phrase additional prompts in the least suggestive way and continue to pose open-ended follow-up requests for the child to provide elaboration from recall memory. The use of option-posing questions, including yes/no and multiple choice, should be careful and limited.

The following are examples of some potential additional prompts.

- *Tell me everything [name] did/you did when_____.*
- *I heard something about [minimally suggestive cue]. **TMETH/TMEA/TMAA/TMM** about that.*
- *Exactly what part of your body did [name] touch? **TMM** about that.*
- *What did [name] touch you with? **TMETH**.*
- ***TMETH** with their [child's name for body part].*
- *What did [name] use to [repeat child's words describing what happened]? **TMM** about that.*
- ***TMEA/TMAA**/Tell me everything you remember about [name's] phone/computer, etc.*
- *Where does [name] keep their phone/etc.?*
- *Tell me all the ways [name] talked to you – on-line, phone calls, video calls, apps, texting. Tell me their/your user names.*
- *What happened with the pictures/videos/phones/computers/apps?*
- *Did [name] have a cell phone/computer/tablet? How do you know? What did [name] do with the cell phone/computer/tablet?*
- *Think about the last time you saw/talked to [name] & **TMETH**. Tell me everything [name] said.*



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CHILD FORENSIC INTERVIEW STRUCTURE**

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Preferred citation: National Children's Advocacy Center. (2012). National Children's Advocacy Center's Child Forensic Interview Structure. Huntsville, AL: Author.

**NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER
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CHILD FORENSIC INTERVIEW STRUCTURE**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) has developed a model for the forensic interview of a child. The model's flexible structure can be adapted to children of different ages and cultural backgrounds, and is useful for interviewing children who may have experienced sexual or physical abuse or who may be a witness to violence against another person. The NCAC forensic interview model emphasizes a flexible-thinking and decision-making approach throughout the interview, as opposed to a scripted format.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW

A forensic interview is a structured conversation with a child intended to elicit detailed information about a possible event or events that the child has experienced or witnessed. The purposes of a forensic interview are multiple: obtaining information from a child that may be instructive in a criminal investigation, assessing the safety of the child's living arrangements, and obtaining information that will either corroborate or refute allegations or suspicions of maltreatment (American Prosecutors Research Institute [APRI], 2003; American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], 2002; Cronch, Viljoen, & Hansen, 2006; Faller, 2007; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Such an interview is conducted when there are concerns that the child has been a victim of physical or sexual abuse or when a child has been a witness to a violent or abusive act perpetrated on another victim. The interviewer must adopt a hypotheses-testing approach and maintain objectivity throughout the conversation (Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011).

3.0 CONTEXT OF THE INTERVIEW

3.1 Timing

The interview should follow as closely in time to the targeted event as feasible. The interview should also be timed to maximize the child's capacity to provide accurate and complete information, which may involve consideration of the child's physical and mental state, immediate safety concerns, and possible impact of delays in the interview process on the child's ability to recall and report his/her experience (APSAC, 2002; Faller, 2007; Pipe & Salmon, 2002; Wattam & National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 1997).

3.2 Location

It is recommended that the interview be conducted at a Child Advocacy Center or other child friendly facility. When a designated facility is not accessible, the interview should occur in a safe and neutral environment. The setting should be private, informal, and free from unnecessary distractions (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg, Broderick, Falgor, Kelly, & Ervin, 1999; Jones, Cross, Walsh, & Simone, 2005; National Children's Alliance Standards for Membership [NCA], 2001a; State of Michigan, 2011; Sorenson, Bottoms, & Perona, 2002; Yuille, 2002).

When it is necessary to conduct the interview at the child's school, arrangements should be made with school officials concerning the child's availability and need for privacy (Pence & Wilson, 1994; State of Michigan, 2011). Every attempt should be made to avoid conducting an interview at the location where abuse is thought to have occurred. If no other option exists, steps should be taken to ensure that family members do not exert influence on the child and that the alleged offender is not on the premises (Bourg et al., 1999; State of Michigan, 2011; Yuille, 2002).

4.0 DOCUMENTATION

Forensic interviews must be accurately and thoroughly documented (Bourg et al., 1999; Faller, 2007; Pence & Wilson, 1994; Myers, 1992, 1998). Electronic documentation (DVD, video, or audio taping) is considered to be the most accurate and complete form of documentation (Jones et al., 2005; Myers, 1992, 1998; Perry, Pollard, Blakely, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995; Sorenson et al., 2002; Yuille, 2002) as it provides thorough documentation of all behaviors and statements from the child and the interviewer. Such documentation can ensure and validate appropriate interview techniques (Berliner, 1992, 2000; Broderick, Berliner, & Berkowitz, 1999; Cronch et al., 2006; Faller, 2007; MacFarlane & Krebs, 1986; Pence & Wilson, 1994); but also leaves the interview open to intense scrutiny (Faller, 2007; Myers, 1992, 1998; Pence & Wilson, 1994).

Written documentation should be as close to verbatim as possible (Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Hershkowitz, & Horovitz, 2000) and may be facilitated by having one professional conduct the interview and a second take notes (Bourg et al., 1999; Faller, 2007; Sorenson et al., 2002; State of Michigan, 2011). Every attempt should be made to maintain the accuracy and integrity of all recordings of the forensic interview.

4.1 Number of Interviews

Prevailing practice during an investigation of child abuse is to conduct one official interview of the child (Bourg et al., 1999; Lamb & Sternberg, 1999; Merchant & Toth, 2006). Multiple interviews, when conducted by different interviewers, are often duplicative and may result from a lack of coordination among investigating agencies. This practice may increase the child's distress and perception of the investigation as harmful, as well as increase the number of inconsistencies as a result of different interviewer's style and focus (APSAC, 2002; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Cross, Jones, Walsh, Simone, & Kolko, 2007; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; NCA, 2011b; Tedesco & Schnell, 1987).

The decision about the number of interview sessions with a particular child should be based upon the minimum number of sessions needed to elicit complete and accurate accounts of events and to insure the well-being of the child (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP] 1990; APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Carnes, Wilson, & Nelson-Gardell, 2000; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Faller & DeVoe, 1995; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007). Multiple sessions of an interview, conducted by a single interviewer and avoiding the use of leading or suggestive questions may be appropriate for a very young child, a severely traumatized child, or a child with intellectual or communicative disabilities (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; La Rooy, Lamb, & Pipe, 2009; La Rooy, Katz, Malloy, & Lamb, 2010). A structured extended interview approach may be

preferable for a child identified as fitting one of the aforementioned categories (APSAC, 1997; Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001; Cronch et al., 2006; Faller, 2007; Faller, Cordisco Steele, & Nelson-Gardell, 2010).

4.2 Participants

A trained interviewer designated by the investigative team should conduct the interview with other investigators observing by closed circuit television, one-way mirror, or some other unobtrusive means. A provision for communication between the interviewer and investigators is essential, so that questions from all members of the investigating team are considered (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg et al., 1999; Cronch et al., 2006; Jones et al, 2005; Pence & Wilson, 1994; Perry et al., 1995; Sorenson et al., 2002; Van Eys & Benneke, 2011). Communication with team members can include breaks during the interview, transmission of questions via electronic devices worn by the interviewer, or the passage of hand written notes; but the method selected should not be disruptive for the child. If more than one investigative interviewer is present in the room, a lead interviewer should be designated and a plan for questioning should be developed before beginning the interview. The observing interviewer should hold questions until the lead interviewer reaches a logical stopping point (Bourg et al., 1999; Pence & Wilson, 1994; Yuille, 2002; State of Michigan, 2011).

4.3 Pace and Duration

The child's age, physical needs, emotional state, and culture should be considered and determine the pace of the interview, with the interviewer providing structure and focus in a sensitive manner (Bottoms, Quas, & Davis, 2007; Fontes, 2008a; Faller & Hewitt, 2007; Lamb et al., 2008; Mordock, 2001; Saywitz & Camparo, 2009). The interviewer should proceed slowly without displaying frustration and annoyance if the child is reluctant to talk or attend to the topic. The child should not be pressured to respond to questions (APSAC, 2002; Davis & Bottoms, 2002; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lamb et al., 2008). The interviewer should be aware of signals indicating fatigue, distress, or loss of concentration. Breaks can be taken as needed. If the interview is being electronically recorded, recording equipment should continue to run during any break.

5.0 QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

The goal of forensic questioning is to elicit a complete and accurate account of the child's experience(s), while minimizing the introduction of specific information or influence from the interviewer (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Faller, 1999, 2003, 2007; Lamb et al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Reed, 1996; Saywitz, Esplin, & Romanoff, 2007). Empirical research and consensus standards in the field concur that information obtained through the use of recall or open-ended prompts is more likely to be accurate and to include greater detail (APRI, 2003; Lamb et al., 2008; Lyon, 2002; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Orbach & Lamb, 2007; Poole & Lindsey, 2002; Saywitz et al., 2002; Saywitz & Geiselman, 1998; Sternberg, Lamb, Esplin, Orbach, & Hershkowitz, 2002). However, practice experience and research also acknowledge that some children require more direct probes and scaffolding of their responses to be able to organize their accounts into a "story model" format and to be able to talk about embarrassing topics (APRI, 2003; Faller & Hewitt, 2007; Saywitz et al., 2002; Walker, 1999). The interviewer must consider both the structure (i.e. narrative prompt, 'wh' question, multiple-choice question) and

the purpose of the questions (substantive intent) when posing questions (Faller, 2007; Saywitz, et al., 2002).

The interviewer should implement the continuum of questions discussed below throughout the interview, even when discussing non-abuse topics (Bourg et al., 1999; Brown & Lamb, 2009; Faller, 1999; Lamb et al., 2008; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz et al., 2002).

5.1 Narrative Invitation

Narrative invitations, also known as open-ended questions, open-ended prompts or free recall questions, encourage the child to talk at length about a topic with a minimal number of questions, topic changes, or input from the interviewer. Non-verbal attention, facilitative responses, or additional invitational questions provide acknowledgement of the child's narrative, and encourage elaboration. Some children can provide substantial amounts of information in response to narrative invitations and before the first option-posing utterances (Lamb et al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Lyon, 2005; Sternberg et al., 2002).

Narrative invitations include statements such as "Start at the beginning and tell me everything about..." and "Tell me more about..." Narrative invitations can incorporate different structural formats such as "describe..." or "explain how that happened" or "what happened next?" The use of narrative invitations is recommended throughout the interview with any child who responds to such prompts, as they best elicit the child's idiosyncratic description of events and the use of their own words (Lamb et al., 2008, 2011; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Lyon, 2005; Sternberg et al., 2002; Saywitz et al., 2002; Yuille et al., 1993).

As children benefit from permission and practice in narrative exchanges with adults, this style of conversation should begin early in the interview and should not be reserved for the abuse-specific portion of the interview (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Orbach & Lamb, 2007; Sternberg et al., 2002; Yuille et al., 1993).

5.2 Focused Narrative Request

Focused narrative requests employ the same invitational format while cueing the child to a specific topic (person, location, activity, object, time frame) and can serve a variety of purposes in an interview. The intent of the focused narrative format is to tap free recall memory and gather as much information as possible from the child in their own words, while providing structure to the conversation (Bourg et al., 1999; Cronch et al., 2006; Faller, 1999, 2007; Yuille, 2002). The form of the focused narrative question can vary. "Tell me about..." is the format most frequently used. However, a request for the child to "explain" or "describe" can also be used; and some 'wh' questions may actually be a focused narrative request (i.e. "What do you do for fun?"). Open-ended 'wh' questions work well with younger children, such as "What work do you do at school?" or "Who is in your family?" (Bourg, et al., 1999; Faller, 2007; Fivush, Peterson, & Schwarzmuller, 2002).

Focused narrative requests are an effective way both to introduce a new topic: as well as to ask for additional information about a person, place, or activity previously mentioned by the child. It may be helpful for the interviewer to reflect or repeat back a portion of the child's earlier

statement and follow with the question focusing on the topic of interest (i.e. “You said that the man had messy hair. Tell me about his messy hair” or “Describe his messy hair.”) (Evans & Roberts, 2009; Kadushin & Kadusin, 1997).

5.3 Detail/”wh” Question

Children are not raised to be witnesses and often do not relate all stored information about a remembered event without the direction of specific questions. Additionally, a child may be reluctant to reveal certain information for a variety of reasons, including lack of understanding of the task, embarrassment, fear, or minimization of the event (Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 1999, 2003; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Saywitz et al., 2002; Walker, 1999).

The purpose of “wh” questions is to invite the “who”, “what”, “where,” “when” and “how” information about particular aspects of a topic when this information was not included in the child’s narrative. Such information is highly relevant in a forensic interview; but not typically included in everyday conversation. The interviewer should maintain the “funnel” approach and not resort to ”wh” questions before a thorough use of narrative prompts. The interviewer should avoid barraging the child with a series of “wh” questions (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2001; Pence & Wilson, 1994; Saywitz et al., 2002; Yuille et al., 1993).

A child will not have encoded all descriptive information and peripheral details about even well-remembered salient events. Detail questions should always be framed in such a way as to give the child permission to say that they do not know the answer to a detail question.

5.4 Multiple-Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions are sometimes described as option-posing questions. Their use should only be considered after other questioning alternatives have been unsuccessful. A multiple-choice question may clarify the intent of a detail question when the child seems confused by the question. The recommendation is to offer the child a couple of specific choices and to end with an open prompt. As young children may not be able to make use of multiple-choice prompts, the use of this technique should be tested in earlier non-disclosure questioning (Bourg et al., 1999; Faller, 1990, 2000, 2007) and used cautiously with younger children.

5.5 Yes/No Question

Yes/no questions serve a number of purposes in a forensic interview. Yes/no questions can be used to cue the child’s memory about specific information not addressed in the child’s narrative description in a manner that checks whether or not the child actually has information to share (i.e. “Did he say anything to you?”) as opposed to (“What did he say to you?”). The initial yes/no question reminds the child that they should only answer questions where they know the information (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Yuille et al, 1993). To be of benefit, these questions should be followed by an invitation to elaborate, (i.e. “Tell me more about that”) (Faller, 2007; Saywitz & Camparo, 2009; Saywitz et al., 2002).

Interviewers should be cautious about using yes/no questions to address salient elements of abuse (i.e. specific acts or people); though with some children they are employed as a last resort (APRI, 2003; Boat & Everson, 1988; Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Peterson et al., 1999). Without additional narrative description or clarification, a singular response to a yes/no question is

inconclusive. Interviewers should be particularly cautious about employing yes/no questions with a preschool child (Faller & Hewitt, 2007; Peterson, Dowden & Tobin, 1999).

5.6 Leading Question

The terms “leading” and “suggestive” are often used interchangeably and fall into the category of a least preferred question, especially when questioning a child about essential elements of a crime. However, leading questions are sometimes unavoidable if the interviewer wishes to learn the full scope of the child’s experience (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg et al., 1999; Faller, 2007; Saywitz et al., 2002).

A leading question introduces information not previously provided by the child, sometimes referred to as externally-derived information. This information may have been gained from another source in the course of the investigation or may be a follow-up question to information implied, but not stated by the child. The introduction of a leading question is less risky with a child who has already demonstrated that they can provide narrative description and is not prone to suggestion (i.e. can say “No” or “I don’t know” or can correct the interviewer.)

The interviewer is advised to pose the least information possible in a question and to follow the child’s response to that question. Questions that direct the child to respond in a specific way or merely ask for affirmation or denial are not recommended (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg et al., 1999; Bruck et al., 2001; Faller, 1993, 2003; Home Office, 2002; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Yuille, 2002).

6.0 USE OF MEDIA AND INTERVIEW AIDS

There is little empirical research on the use of media in forensic settings and the findings are mixed. Professionals also hold differing opinions about the influence of simple media on a child’s participation in a forensic interview with some voicing concern that media may be a distraction, influence the child’s responses, or encourage play and fantasy (Merchant & Toth, 2006; Pipe & Salmon, 2009; Poole & Lamb, 1998; State of Michigan, 2011). Conversely, evidence from the clinical field indicates that media can be helpful in establishing comfort, lessening anxiety, extending a child’s attention span, and providing multiple modes of communication (Bourg et al., 1999; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Everson & Boat, 2002; Faller, 1993, 2003, 2007; Kendall-Tackett, 1992; Pipe & Salmon, 2009; Salmon, Roncolato & Gleitzman, 2003). The decision to allow or disallow access to simple media (paper, markers, play-doh) is most often a decision made jointly by the forensic interviewer and multidisciplinary team (MDT) members.

6.1 Drawings

Paper and markers are the most flexible media that can be provided to a child and allows for different kinds of drawing during a forensic interview. Free drawing can serve to increase rapport and diminish anxiety, while providing useful developmental information (Bourg et al., 1999; Faller, 1993, 2003; Hiltz & Bauer, 2003; Pipe & Salmon, 2009). The interviewer can observe the impact of drawing on the child’s narrative ability and attention span, assessing whether the drawing facilitates narrative, substitutes for narrative, focuses the child, or serves as

a distraction. Children's drawings should always be used as tools of communication rather than as a medium to be interpreted by the interviewer (Carnes et al., 2000).

During the allegation-focused portion of the interview, drawing can serve a number of purposes. Drawing may provide a form of context reinstatement that can facilitate the recall of details through the production of drawing of the location, a specific person, the event, or elements of the event (Hiltz & Bauer, 2003; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010; Salmon & Pipe, 2009; Salmon, Roncolato & Gleitzman, 2003; Wesson & Salmon, 2001). The interviewer most skillfully facilitates the use of drawing during a child's disclosure by keeping the focus on the child's verbal descriptions with the drawing in an assisting role.

6.2 Anatomical and Body Drawings

Body drawings vary in the amount of "anatomical" detail included, ranging from "gingerbread" drawings to human figure outlines with minimal details to diagrams of human figures with facial and age-appropriate body features. Research on the incorporation of anatomical drawings in the forensic interview is limited; but indicates that the safest use of an anatomical drawing is for purposes of clarification of details about an event already under discussion (Aldridge et al., 2004; Brown, Pipe, Lewis, Lamb, & Orbach, 2007; Pipe & Salmon, 2009; Poole & Dickinson, 2011; Steward et al., 1996, Teoh, Lang, Lamb, & Larrison, 2010; Willcock, Morgan, & Hayne, 2003). An anatomical drawing is a tool that may be introduced when a child's account is confusing or complex and difficult to organize. The drawing can serve as a demonstrative aid that the child uses to describe a variety of acts in a variety of contexts. Additionally, a reluctant child may be able to communicate body touch information or clarify specific body parts through the use of the drawings when an attempt to gain that information verbally has failed (Faller, 2007; Hiltz & Bauer, 2003; Holmes & Finnegan, 2002; Pipe & Salmon, 2009).

6.3 Dolls or Anatomical Dolls

The dolls are only used after a child's verbal disclosure, to allow a child to "show" rather than "tell" details which may be verbally challenging (i.e. the positioning of bodies or the state of clothing). Dolls should be presented fully clothed and be removed once they have been used for demonstrative purposes. Interviewers should choose reputable dolls, follow anatomical doll protocols, and should seek training in the use of dolls (APSAC, 1995; APRI, 2003; Boat & Everson, 1986, 1993; Carnes, et al., 2000; Faller, 1993, 2003, 2005, 2007; Holmes, 2000). The use of dolls is not recommended with preschool children for purposes of eliciting or clarifying disclosure (Bourg et al., 1999; DeLoache & Marzolf, 1995; Pipe & Salmon, 2009; Thierry et al., 2005).

7.0 PRE-INTERVIEW PREPARATION

It is customary for the interviewer to have limited background information about the child and the allegations prior to the interview. Relevant child information can include age, developmental functioning, school status, cultural background, family make-up, health status, and special needs (i.e. disabilities, compromised language, medication, emotional issues or diagnoses, recent or monumental losses) which may affect the child's ability to participate in the interview (APRI, 2003; Bourg et al., 1999; Myers, 1992, 1998; Smith & Milne, 2011; Sorenson et al., 2002).

With preschool children or children with disabilities, the interviewer may want to gather additional information about the child's language, environmental circumstances and daily life, as well as recommendations for successful communication (Bourg et al., 1999; Cordisco Steele, 2011; Hewitt, 1999; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Consultation and additional preparation may be needed for children with special issues (Davies & Faller, 2007; Lamb et al, 2008.)

A minimal amount of case-specific information can assist the interviewer in structuring the interview, anticipating complicating factors (multiple events, jurisdictions, perpetrators, traumagenic concerns) and considering alternative hypotheses which may need to be explored. Reluctant children may require a tailored approach to substantive topics; and such information can assist the interviewer in developing a funneled approach without resorting to overly direct or leading questions. The interviewer must be mindful not to introduce information or topics to the child in a manner designed to confirm or disconfirm prior information from others or interviewer's suspicions. (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg et al., 1999; Cronch et al., 2006; Faller, 2003, 2007; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Myers, 1998; Poole & Lamb, 1998).

8.0 CHILD FORENSIC INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

8.1 Introduction

The interviewer should provide a brief, neutral explanation of their role, using language and terminology that is appropriate to the child's developmental level and culture, being attentive and responsive to any verbal and non-verbal cues indicating anxiety, embarrassment, anger, or fear, which may affect the child's ability or willingness to participate in the interview. The interviewer should inform the child and the family about the means of documentation and observation, and respond to any questions or concerns. This stage of the interview is generally not lengthy, but may be adapted to the needs of the child and family (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Bourg et al., 1999; Fontes, 2008a, 2008b; State of Michigan, 2011; Sorenson et al., 2002; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997; Yuille, 2002).

8.2 Developmental & Cultural Perspective

Developmentally and culturally sensitive interviewing does not refer to a discreet stage of an interview; but a principle and approach that is evident throughout the interview. A working knowledge of the basics of child development (motor, cognitive, language, emotional), cultural differences (linguistic style and family normative behaviors) and the potential impact of traumatic experiences on development will assist the interviewer in accomplishing this goal (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Gaskill & Perry 2012; Heath, 1989; Price, Roberts & Jackson, 2006; Rogoff, 2003, Stein & Kendall, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Tang, 2006). Developmental and cultural adaptations begin in conjunction with introductions, rapport-building and narrative practice as the interviewer closely observes the child and adapts topics, follow-up questions, and any use of media to the child's temperament and demonstrated level of functioning. Developmental accommodations continue throughout the interview process as the interviewer attempts to stay within the child's developmental capacity when requesting information or clarification (Bourg et al, 1999; Cronch et al., 2006; Imhoff & Baker-Ward, 1999; Perry et al., 1995; Sorenson et al., 2002; Tang, 2006; Wood & Garven, 2000).

8.3 Rapport Building

Establishing rapport, an essential component of the forensic interview is also not a discreet stage of the interview, but rather a style of interaction that continues throughout the conversation. Children will vary in their openness to a conversation with an unfamiliar adult. Initially, the interviewer should engage the child in conversation about neutral or positive topics in as open a way as possible. A request to “tell me some things about yourself” or “tell me about what kind of things you like to do” invites the child to talk about comfortable and familiar topics and begins to establish the child as the informant/expert and the interviewer as the listener. The interviewer has the opportunity to observe the child’s linguistic patterns, interaction with the environment, and comfort level with an unfamiliar adult. The interviewer should demonstrate good verbal and non-verbal attending behaviors, which may serve to increase the child’s confidence in the interviewer’s ability and willingness to listen (Bottoms et al., 2007; Bourg et al, 1999; Cordisco Steele, 2004; Cronch et al., 2006; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 2007; Hershkowitz, 2001; Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Sorenson et al., 2002; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997; Wood, McClure, & Birch, 1996). As the interview progresses and topics of conversation may become more stressful, good listening, paraphrasing, and non-coercive support may assist the interviewer in maintaining rapport with a child (Bottoms et al., 2007a; Faller, 2007).

8.4 Ground Rules/Guidelines

The expectations that govern a forensic interview differ from the implicit rules of most adult/child conversations. An explanation of the rules of the interview can enhance the child’s understanding of the requirements and participation in the interview (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Cronch et al., 2006; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 2003, 2007; Mulder & Vrij, 1996; Reed, 1996; Pence & Wilson, 1994; Russell, 2006; Saywitz et al., 2002; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997; Yuille et al., 1993). The rules for the interview may be provided immediately following introductions or may follow a period of rapport building. Younger children may benefit from an opportunity to practice the rules (Lamb & Sternberg, 1999; Lyon, 2002b; Merchant & Toth, 2006, Poole & Lamb, 1998; Reed, 1996; Russell, 2006; Saywitz et al., 2002).

Rules that may be included in this portion of the interview are as follows:

- The purpose of the interview is to talk about “true things” and about things that really happened. It is important to “tell the truth.”
- The child knows more about what happened than the interviewer, since the interviewer was not present during the event. The child should be encouraged to correct the interviewer if the interviewer makes a mistake.
- The interviewer will be asking a lot of questions. It is okay if the child does not know or remember all of the answers. It is okay to say, “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember.”
- If the interviewer asks a question that is hard to understand or doesn’t make sense, the child should say, “I don’t understand.”

The process of providing rules may be confusing or overwhelming to a young preschooler or developmentally delayed child. In such cases, this step may be eliminated or adapted to the perceived needs of the child. Interviewers may use knowledge gained about the child during the

earlier phase of the interview when deciding how or if the guidelines should be presented (APSAC, 2002; Hewitt, 1999; Walker, 1999).

8.5 Narrative Practice

Research demonstrates that the inclusion of narrative practice in the rapport-building phase of the interview improves the quantity and quality of information shared by the child during the substantive portion of the interview (Davies & Westcott, 1999; Geiselman, Saywitz, & Bornstein, 1993; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lamb et al., 2003, 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz et al., 2002; Sternberg et al., 1997; Yuille et al., 1993). Narrative practice helps to inform and prepare the child for the differences of this unique conversation (informed child and uninformed adult) by providing the child an opportunity to describe a non-abuse event in detail from the beginning until the end of the event. The interviewer employs facilitative responses and narrative invitations to prompt the child for information, thus modeling the forensic conversation. This “training session” allows the child an opportunity to practice providing detailed narratives; while providing the interviewer an opportunity to become familiar with the child’s language and narrative style, as well as the effectiveness and limitation of particular questioning approaches (Hershkowitz, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Orbach & Lamb, 2007; Lyon, 2002; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Reed, 1996; Sorenson et al., 2002; State of Michigan, 2011; Sternberg et al., 1997; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997).

8.6 Family

It can be helpful to have a brief discussion about members of the child’s family, as well as people who live with or interact frequently with the household, in preparation for understanding a child’s description of personal life events. Particularly when interviewing a child where the allegations are about a family member or friend, this brief conversation may give some indication of the child’s comfort and willingness to talk about people and household events. Indications of reluctance from a child may indicate that they are not ready to transition into more difficult topics (Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Malloy, Lyon & Quas, 2007; Orbach, Shiloach & Lamb, 2007).

8.7 Transitioning to the Allegation Portion of the Interview

Children come to a forensic interview through a variety of pathways. Some children will have made concerning, sometimes descriptive, statements (an outcry) to an adult who made a report to the appropriate authorities. However, for a subset of children the referral for a forensic interview comes as a result of other kinds of information, such as physical evidence, a confession, or witness statements, resulting in an allegation of child abuse (Alaggia, 2004; Bottoms, Rudnicki & Epstein, 2007; Bradley & Wood, 1996; Bruck et al., 2001; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Cederborg, Lamb & Laurell, 2007; Davies & Westcott, 1999; DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Hershkowitz, Horowitz & Lamb, 2007; Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Lyon, 2007; Lyon & Ahern, 2011; Malloy et al., 2007; Olafson & Lederman, 2006; Orbach, Shiloach, & Lamb, 2007; Pipe et al., 2007; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005; Wyatt, 1999). In such cases, the child may never have made any statements or allegations.

For purposes of the model we will consider children who are participating in a forensic interview as falling into a variety of categories.

- (1) No maltreatment – no allegations
- (2) No maltreatment - making allegations
- (3) Maltreatment - willing to talk (active disclosure)
- (4) Maltreatment - reluctant to talk (tentative disclosure)
- (5) Maltreatment - denial

Consequently, interviewers must be prepared to use a range of strategies for transitioning to the allegation portion of the interview, adapting their approach to the history and demonstrated needs of the child being interviewed. The strategies allow for a “funneled” approach, as the interviewer moves incrementally from open-ended prompts to more focused prompts to direct prompts (APSAC, 2002; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 1999, 2007; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lamb et al., 2008; Sorenson et al., 2002).

A child who is in “active disclosure,” may initiate discussion about the allegations during the rapport building/narrative practice phase. In such cases, the interviewer should follow the child’s lead. When the interviewer must initiate the transition to substantive topics, they should begin with the most open-ended prompts such as “Who told you about coming here today? What did they tell you? What are you here to talk to me about?” This open invitation allows the child to initiate discussion about concerning events in their own way. If the child does not respond to the most open invitation, the interviewer can try a sequence of slightly more focused prompts such as, “Has someone/your mother been worried about you?” or “Have you been worried about something?” or “Has something happened to you?” Again, the interviewer should be prepared to follow the child’s lead (Lamb et al., 2008, 2011; Lyon, 2005; Olafson & Kenniston, 2004; Sorenson et al., 2002; Saywitz et al., 2011; State of Michigan, 2011; Yuille, 2002.). The interviewer can also reference the child back to an earlier contact with a social worker, or doctor, or police officer and inquire about the reason for that conversation (APSAC, 2002; Faller, 2000, 2007; Lamb et al., 2008, 2011; Yuille, 2002).

When a child is non-responsive to the open prompts, the interviewer may choose to engage the child in more in-depth conversations on topics such as care routines, family members, activities and hobbies, recent events, or other topics that may form the contextual background of the allegations; thus providing an opportunity to recall information in response to open-ended, focused prompts. This approach can encourage some reluctant children to “ease” into discussion of concerning topics. It also allows the interviewer to engage in conversations about the child’s experiences without making assumptions about maltreatment or resorting to leading questions. This approach may uncover sources of reluctance or confusion for the child. The focused topics approach is also appropriate when the allegations are unspecific (behavioral or medical concern with no outcry) and there has been no direct outcry from the child (APSAC, 2002; Faller, 1999, 2007; Yuille, 2002).

The least preferred, but sometimes necessary, prompts are more direct and may incorporate the use of externally derived information. This approach may be more justified when the interviewer and investigators have a high degree of certainty that abuse has occurred (based on

photographic evidence, medical evidence, suspect confession, etc.) and there are serious concerns about a child's safety. Once again, the funnel approach should be implemented, as the interviewer attempts to introduce the minimal amount of information needed to focus the child on the topic of the allegations (APSAC, 2002; Carnes et al., 2000; Olafson & Kenniston, 2004; Yuille et al., 1993, 2002).

Preschoolers may require a more direct prompt tailored to specific elements of the allegations or context, such as inquiring about a particular person, location, activity, an element of the outcry scenario, or follow-up responses (doctor, law enforcement or social services response) while the interviewer is especially mindful of avoiding leading questions about substantive issues (Carnes, et al., 2000; Faller & Hewitt, 2007; Hewitt, 1999).

8.8 Allegation-Specific Questioning

Once the transition to the allegation topic has occurred, the free recall phase begins (Faller, 2007; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997). Observations of the child's language and narrative ability during the earlier phase of the interview should inform the interviewer's approach to encourage the greatest amount of narrative description from the child. Prompts that encourage the child to "Start at the beginning and tell me everything that you can remember about what happened" allow the interviewer to encourage full description from the child by attentive listening, pausing, reflection, and the use of facilitative prompts (i.e. "Tell me more about that" and "What happened next?") without interrupting the child. The interviewer can also cue the child to particular elements previously mentioned and invite description or elaboration (i.e. "You said that you were in the bathroom. Tell me more about that.") Missing elements in the child's description of an event can be elicited through the use of "wh" questions or request for clarification. The interviewer should adapt the free recall phase to the child's linguistic style (APSAC, 2002; Davies et al., 1997; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 2007; Home Office, 2002; Lamb et al., 2003, 2008; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Myers, Saywitz, & Goodman, 1996; Orbach et al., 2007; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz et al., 2002; State of Michigan, 2011; Sternberg et al., 1997; Walker, 1999).

With a reluctant child or a child with limited narrative abilities, the interviewer should provide appropriate scaffolding through use of the full continuum of questions and consideration of the incorporation of media or tools. Interviewers should still gather as much detail (who, what, where, when, & how) about the allegation topic as the child can provide, being mindful of limitations demonstrated in the earlier phase of the interview. Specific closed questions, including yes/no questions and multiple-choice questions, should be used with caution and paired with an open invitation to gain detail in the child's words. Interviewers should avoid barraging the child with a series of direct "wh" questions to gather details about an event under discussion; approaching those questions with focused narrative request and moving to "wh" questions only as needed and coming back to a "tell me about..." prompt (APSAC, 2002; Cronch et al., 2006; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Geiselman et al., 1993; Faller, 2007; Poole & Linsay, 2002; Quas, Davis, Goodman & Myers, 2007; Walker, 2001; Wattam & NSPCC, 1997; Yuille, 2002).

When the child alleges multiple incidents of abuse, the interviewer can first obtain a description of what would usually happen (the script memory); then move to specific incidents (i.e. “a time that you remember well,” “a time that something different happened,” “a time it happened in a different place,” “the last time,” “the first time,” etc.). The interviewer strives to use the child’s labels for distinguishing events. With each event, the interviewer should attempt to clarify descriptions of acts, terminology or ambiguous statements (APSAC, 2002; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Yuille et al., 1993).

8.9 Closure

Once the substantive portion of the interview is complete, the interviewer should turn the conversation back to neutral topics. If the conversation has been upsetting to the child, the interviewer may decide to spend more time with the child in the closure phase or may reconnect the child to the caregiver or a victim advocate. A brief explanation about the next steps can be offered and any of the child’s questions should be answered as directly and honestly as possible. The interviewer should not make promises about events that are beyond the interviewer’s control. The interviewer should thank the child for their participation in the interview, regardless of the outcome of the interview (Bourg et al., 1999; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Faller, 2003, 2007; Merchant & Toth, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998; State of Michigan, 2011; Yuille, 2002).

9.0 SUMMARY

The NCAC does not assume that the work of child abuse investigation is done in exactly the same way in all communities. Many factors influence the investigation, including demographics, specialization within professions, cultural concerns, resources, and standard of practice within courts with jurisdiction over criminal and child protection decisions. The presence or absence of multidisciplinary teams and child advocacy centers also affects the manner in which interviews and investigations are conducted (APRI, 2003; APSAC, 2002; Jones et al, 2005; National Children’s Alliance Standards for Accredited Chapter Members [NCA], 2011a; Pence, 2011). The NCAC Child Forensic Interview Structure provides guidelines for best practice as influenced by research and standards of practice in the field. The NCAC model provides a flexible structure that allows for discretion in matters decided by state statutes and community practices.

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OJJDP

Working for Youth Justice and Safety

JUVENILE JUSTICE

BULLETIN

September 2015

Robert L. Listenbee, Administrator

From the Administrator

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is committed to preventing the victimization of children and ensuring the well-being of all youth. In suspected abuse or maltreatment cases, law enforcement, medical, court, and other child protection professionals must respond swiftly and effectively and in a manner that avoids retraumatizing the affected youth.

To assist those who work in this field, the National Children's Advocacy Center convened experts from the major national forensic interview training programs to identify best practices in child forensic interviewing in cases of alleged abuse or exposure to violence.

The resulting discussions led to this publication, which provides guidance on topics, such as interview timing and setting, question type, rapport-building between the interviewer and the victim, interview aids as well as vicarious trauma and self-care.

This bulletin represents commendable collaboration across multiple entities and is an effort to build consensus within the field. We hope that the information contained within it will aid practitioners' efforts to protect children from abuse and bring those who prey upon them to justice.

Robert L. Listenbee
Administrator

Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices

Chris Newlin, Linda Cordisco Steele, Andra Chamberlin, Jennifer Anderson, Julie Kenniston, Amy Russell, Heather Stewart, and Viola Vaughan-Eden

Highlights

This bulletin consolidates the current knowledge of professionals from several major forensic interview training programs on best practices for interviewing children in cases of alleged abuse. The authors discuss the purpose of the child forensic interview, provide historical context, review overall considerations, and outline each stage of the interview in more detail.

Among the topics that the authors discuss are the following:

- No two children will relate their experiences in the same way or with the same level of detail and clarity. Individual characteristics, interviewer behavior, family relationships, community influences, and cultural and societal attitudes determine whether, when, and how they disclose abuse.
- The literature clearly explains the dangers of repeated questioning and duplicative interviews; however, some children require more time to become comfortable with the process and the interviewer.
- Encouraging children to give detailed responses early in the interview enhances their responses later on.
- Forensic interviewers should use open-ended questions and should allow for silence or hesitation without moving to more focused prompts too quickly. Although such questions may encourage greater detail, they may also elicit potentially erroneous responses if the child feels compelled to reach beyond his or her stored memory.





SEPTEMBER 2015

Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices

Chris Newlin, Linda Cordisco Steele, Andra Chamberlin, Jennifer Anderson, Julie Kenniston, Amy Russell, Heather Stewart, and Viola Vaughan-Eden

During the last quarter of the 20th century, the United States began to fully recognize the incidence of child abuse and neglect affecting our country. Increased public awareness and empirical literature have improved efforts to intervene effectively on behalf of children. One of the most significant interventions has centered on how to elicit accurate information from children regarding abuse and neglect—a process commonly referred to as “forensic interviewing” (Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011). Following two decades of research and practice, professionals have gained significant insight into how to maximize children’s potential to accurately convey information about their past experiences. Yet, as this effort continues and practice evolves, professionals face new challenges in standardizing forensic interviewing practice throughout the country.

A relative lack of both research and practice experience challenged pioneers in the field. As such, protocols and training efforts underwent significant revisions as more research was conducted and people began gaining practice-based experience, which informed further training. Additionally, given the dearth of resources at the time, geographically diverse training programs began to develop naturally throughout the United States, emanating from frontline service providers who struggled to provide quality services themselves and who also wanted to help fellow professionals. Different case experiences, contextual perspectives, and community standards influenced these training efforts. In addition, these service providers were not directly communicating with one another about the content of their training or their theoretical approaches. This further supported the existence of various approaches and the lack of standardized training language regarding forensic interviewing.

It is now widely accepted that professionals should have formal initial and ongoing forensic interview training (National Children’s Alliance [NCA], 2011). However, the field has yet to determine one standardized practice to follow throughout the country. Although national training programs are generally based on the same body of research, some differences exist. Focusing on the variations among them often obscures consistencies within the various forensic interview models. In some cases, the veracity of the child’s statement or the performance of the forensic interviewer has been questioned solely on the basis of the model being used. However, forensic interviewers often receive training in multiple models and use a blended approach to best meet the needs of the child they are interviewing (Midwest Regional Children’s Advocacy Center [MRCAC], 2014). Furthermore, the model being used and any subsequent adaptations to it are often rooted in jurisdictional expectations. State statutes and case law dictate aspects of interview practice, further demonstrating that no one method can always be the best choice for every forensic interview.

In 2010, representatives of several major forensic interview training programs—the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, the CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center, the Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center, the National Children’s Advocacy Center, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development—gathered to review their programs’ differences and similarities. The resulting discussions led to this bulletin, which consolidates current knowledge on the generally accepted best practices of those conducting forensic interviews of children in cases of alleged abuse or exposure to violence.

This nation must remain committed to consistently putting the needs of children first. It is the authors' hope that this document will become an essential part of every forensic interview training program and will be widely used as an authoritative treatise on the implementation of best practices in forensic interviewing.

Purpose of the Child Forensic Interview

The forensic interview is one component of a comprehensive child abuse investigation, which includes, but is not limited to, the following disciplines: law enforcement and child protection investigators, prosecutors, child protection attorneys, victim advocates, and medical and mental health practitioners. Although not all of the concerned disciplines may directly participate in or observe the forensic interview, each party may benefit from the information obtained during the interview (Jones et al., 2005).

Most child abuse investigations begin with a forensic interview of the child, which then provides direction for other aspects of the investigation. Although forensic interviewers are trained to conduct quality interviews, it is important to note there is no “perfect” interview.

For the purposes of this bulletin, and in an effort to build consensus within the field, the authors offer the following definition of a child forensic interview:

A forensic interview of a child is a developmentally sensitive and legally sound method of gathering factual information regarding allegations of abuse or exposure to violence. This interview is conducted by a competently trained, neutral professional utilizing research and practice-informed techniques as part of a larger investigative process.

Historical Context

In the 1980s, several high-profile cases involving allegations that daycare providers had sexually abused multiple children in their care became the subject of considerable analysis because of the interview techniques that were used (Ceci and Bruck, 1995). Law enforcement depended on mental health practitioners because of their ability to establish rapport with children. However, mental health practitioners often used therapeutic techniques that were later deemed inappropriate for forensic purposes, primarily because of concerns regarding suggestibility. The courts scrutinized the interview procedures used in these early cases and found that techniques that invited

make-believe or pretending were inappropriate for criminal investigations.

As awareness of child abuse grew, professionals realized that it might take special skills to interview children. Sgroi (1978) was the first medical/mental health professional to address the issue of investigative interviewing in the literature. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) wrote the first practice guidelines—*Psychosocial Evaluation of Suspected Sexual Abuse in Young Children* (APSAC, 1990)—the title of which reflects the initial focus of these interviews: mental health. Today, the focus has shifted from the mental health or clinical perspective to a forensic perspective. Even the nomenclature changed to include terms such as “forensic interview” and “child forensic interview training.”

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, substantial empirical literature discussed children’s developmental capabilities and appropriate ways of engaging them in the interview process. The Cognitive Interview (Fisher and Geiselman, 1992) and Narrative Elaboration (Saywitz, Geiselman, and Bornstein, 1992) models included specific strategies that applied memory-based techniques to elicit detailed information from witnesses. Traces of both models remain in current approaches to evidence-based forensic interviewing (Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011).

Considerations Regarding the Child

Many influences have an impact on a child’s experience of abuse and on his or her ability to encode and communicate information. These influences interact in a uniquely individual manner, such that no two children will ever engage or relate their experiences in the same way or with the same level of detail and clarity. This section describes the major influences on children’s memory, language abilities, and motivation to converse.

Development

All of the forensic interviewing models agree that considering the age and development of the child is essential. Lamb and colleagues (2015) state that “age is the most important determinant of children’s memory capacity.” A child’s age and developmental abilities influence his or her perception of an experience and the amount of information that they can store in long-term memory (Pipe and Salmon, 2002). Infants and toddlers can recall experiences, as demonstrated through behavioral reactions to people, objects, and environments; however, these early memories are not associated with verbal descriptions. Even as they begin to develop their language



capabilities, young children are less able to make sense of unfamiliar experiences, have a more limited vocabulary, and are less accustomed to engaging in conversations about past experiences than older children. As children age, their attention span improves and they are better prepared to comprehend, notice unique elements, and describe their experiences verbally. This, in turn, allows them to store more information and also allows them to discuss remembered events with others, which further serves to consolidate and strengthen memories. Children of all ages are more likely to recall salient and personally experienced details rather than peripheral details (Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006).

Metacognition—the ability to recognize whether one understands a question and has stored and can retrieve relevant information—also improves as children mature. Very young children find it difficult to focus their attention and to search their memory effectively when interviewed. They may simply respond to recognized words or simple phrases without considering the entire question, and they are unable to monitor their comprehension or answers to questions (Lamb et al., 2015). As children grow older, both natural development and knowledge gained from school improve their skills.

Remembering an experience does not ensure that a child will be able to describe it for others. Forensic interviews are challenging for children, as they involve very different conversational patterns and an unfamiliar demand for detail (Lamb and Brown, 2006). Young children may use words before they completely understand their meaning and may continue to confuse even simple concepts and terms such as “tomorrow,” “a lot,” or “a long time.” As children mature, they acquire the ability to use words in a more culturally normative way, although terminology for sexual encounters, internal thoughts and feelings, and particularly forensic and legal matters may be beyond their grasp (Walker, 2013). Forensic interviewers and

those who evaluate the statements that children make in a legal context would do well to appreciate the many extraordinary demands made on child witnesses.

Although concerns about younger children’s verbal and cognitive abilities are well recognized, the challenges of effectively interviewing adolescents are often overlooked. Because adolescents look much like adults, forensic interviewers and multidisciplinary team members may fail to appreciate that adolescents vary greatly in their verbal and cognitive abilities and thus fail to build rapport, provide interview instructions, or ensure the comprehension of questions (Walker, 2013). Ever conscious of wanting to appear competent, adolescents may be reluctant to ask for assistance.

Forensic interviewers and investigators must guard against unreasonably high expectations for teenage witnesses and should not adopt a less supportive approach or use convoluted language, which will complicate matters.

Culture and Development

A child’s family, social network, socioeconomic environment, and culture influence his or her development, linguistic style, perception of experiences, and ability to focus attention (Alaggia, 2010). Cultural differences may present communication challenges and can lead to misunderstandings within the forensic interview. Fontes (2008) highlights the importance of having clear-cut guidelines and strategies for taking culture into account when assessing whether child abuse or neglect has occurred. Forensic interviewers and investigators must consider the influence of culture on perception of experiences, memory formation, language, linguistic style, comfort with talking to strangers in a formal setting, and values about family loyalty and privacy when questioning children and evaluating their statements (Fontes, 2005, 2008; Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006).

Disabilities

Children with disabilities are potentially at greater risk for abuse and neglect than children without disabilities (Hershkowitz, Lamb, and Horowitz, 2007; Kendall-Tackett et al., 2005). Forensic interviewers are unlikely

“Cultural differences may present communication challenges and can lead to misunderstandings within the forensic interview.”

to have specialized training or experience in the broad field of disabilities or regarding developmental or medical concerns; thus, collaboration is often necessary to successfully interview these children. Interviewers should use local resources—including disability specialists or other professionals who work with children and their primary caregivers—to gain insight into the functioning of specific children and any needs they may have for special accommodations (Davies and Faller, 2007). The interviewer may have to adapt each stage of the interview, balancing these adaptations with the demand for forensic integrity (Baladerian, 1997; Hershkowitz, Lamb, and Horowitz, 2007). More than one interview session may be necessary to gain the child’s trust, adapt to the child’s communication style and limitations, and allow adequate time to gather information (Faller, Cordisco Steele, and Nelson-Gardell, 2010).

Trauma

Children who have been victims of maltreatment or were witnesses to violent crime often react uniquely to their experiences. Forensic interviewers must be cognizant of factors that mitigate or enhance the impact, as trauma symptoms may interfere with a child’s ability or willingness to report information about violent incidents (Ziegler, 2002). The memories of children who have suffered extreme forms of trauma may be impaired or distorted (Feiring and Tasca, 2005); these children may not recall their experiences in a linear fashion but, instead, as “flashbulb memories” or snapshots of their victimization (Berliner et al., 2003). In addition, their memories of traumatic experiences may be limited, with a particular emphasis on central rather than peripheral details (Fivush, Peterson, and Schwarzmueller, 2002). Interviewers and those involved in investigating child abuse may need to modify their expectations of what a traumatized child is able to report. They should not attempt to force a disclosure or continue an interview when a child becomes overly distressed, which may revictimize the child. Children who are severely traumatized may benefit from additional support and multiple, nonduplicative interview sessions (Faller, Cordisco Steele, and Nelson-Gardell, 2010; La Rooy et al., 2010).

Disclosure

Understanding the disclosure process is critical for both the investigative process and child protection outcomes. Research to date on children’s disclosure of sexual abuse—based mainly on retrospective surveys of adults and reviews of past child abuse investigations—indicates that no single pattern of disclosure is predominant (Lyon and Ahern, 2010). Disclosure happens along a continuum ranging from denial to nondisclosure to reluctant disclosure to incomplete disclosure to a full accounting of an abusive incident (Olafson and Lederman, 2006). Some children also disclose less directly, over a period of time, through a variety of behaviors and actions, including discussions and indirect nonverbal cues (Alaggia, 2004).

The interaction of individual characteristics, interviewer behavior, family relationships, community influences, and cultural and societal attitudes determines whether, when, and how children disclose abuse (Alaggia, 2010; Bottoms, Quas, and Davis, 2007; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lyon and Ahern, 2010). Factors that help to explain a child’s reluctance are age, relationship with the alleged offender, lack of parental support, gender, fear of consequences for disclosing, and fear of not being believed (Malloy, Brubacher, and Lamb, 2011; McElvaney, 2013). A review of contemporary literature reveals that when disclosure does occur, significant delays are common. In a recent analysis of child sexual abuse disclosure patterns, Alaggia (2010) found that as many as 60 to 80 percent of children and adolescents do not disclose until adulthood. If outside corroborative evidence exists (e.g., physical evidence, offender confessions, recordings, witness statements), there is still a high rate of nondisclosure (Lyon, 2007; Sjoberg and Lindblad, 2002). Furthermore, children who disclose often do not recount their experiences fully and may, over time, provide additional information (McElvaney, 2013).

Current literature on children’s disclosure of sexual abuse has implications for practice. According to Malloy, Brubacher, and Lamb (2013), precipitating events or people frequently motivate children to disclose abuse. Some children require a triggering event, such as a school

safety presentation, to allow them to discuss abuse without being the one to broach the subject (McElvaney, 2013). Other children may need to be questioned specifically about the possibility of abuse. Child abuse professionals should understand the many intersecting dynamics that help a child disclose maltreatment and should be open to the possibility that disclosure is not an all-or-nothing event.

Considerations Regarding the Interview

Almost universal agreement exists regarding the need to interview children about allegations of abuse. Once this is accepted, there are a number of important considerations, such as timing, documentation, setting, interviewer, questions to be asked, and whether to use interview aids/media.

Timing

Conduct the forensic interview as soon after the initial disclosure of abuse, or after witnessing violence, as the child's mental status will permit and as soon as a multidisciplinary team response can be coordinated (APSAC, 2012; Saywitz and Camparo, 2009). As time passes, the opportunity to collect potential corroborative evidence may diminish, children's fortitude to disclose may wane, and opportunities for contamination, whether intentional or accidental, increase (Johnson, 2009). However, children who are overly fatigued, hungry, frightened, suffering from shock, or still processing their traumatic experiences may not be effective reporters in a forensic interview (APSAC, 2012; Home Office, 2007; Myers, 2005).

Documentation

Electronic recordings are the most complete and accurate way to document forensic interviews (Cauchi and Powell, 2009; Lamb et al., 2000), capturing the exchange between the child and the interviewer and the exact wording of questions (Faller, 2007; Warren and Woodall, 1999). Video recordings, used in 90 percent of Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) nationally (MRCAC, 2014), allow the trier of fact in legal proceedings to witness all forms of the child's communication. Recordings make the interview process transparent, documenting that the interviewer and the multidisciplinary team avoided inappropriate interactions with the child (Faller, 2007). Recorded forensic interviews also allow interviewers and others to review their work and facilitate skill development and integrity of practice (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, and Mitchell, 2002; Price and Roberts, 2011; Stewart, Katz, and La Rooy, 2011).

Neutral and Objective Setting

The National Children's Alliance (NCA), as a part of its accreditation process, requires CACs to provide child-focused settings that are "comfortable, private, and both physically and psychologically safe for diverse populations of children and their non-offending family members" (NCA, 2011:36). However, there is a dearth of literature on what constitutes a child-friendly environment (NCA, 2013).

Interview rooms come in all shapes and sizes, are often painted in warm colors, may incorporate child-sized furniture, and should only use artwork of a non-fantasy nature. The room should be equipped for audio- and video-recording, and case investigators and other CAC staff should be able to observe the forensic interview (Myers, 2005; NCA, 2013; Pence and Wilson, 1994). Although it is generally recommended that there be minimal distractions in the interview room (APSAC, 2012; Saywitz, Camparo, and Romanoff, 2010), opinions differ about the allowance of simple media, such as paper and markers. More recently published literature suggests that younger children may benefit from having access to paper and markers during the forensic interview (Poole and Dickinson, 2014). Materials that encourage play or fantasy are uniformly discouraged, as is any interpretation by the interviewer of the child's use of media or other products.

Role of the Interviewer

Forensic interviewers should encourage the most accurate, complete, and candid information from a child and, to this end, the child should be the most communicative during the forensic interview (Teoh and Lamb, 2013). Interviewers must balance forensic concerns with decisions about how much information to introduce (APSAC, 2012; Orbach and Pipe, 2011). In addition, they should be attentive to the possibility that their preconceived ideas may bias the information gathered—particularly if the interview is conducted in an unduly leading or suggestive manner—and should avoid such practices (Ceci and Bruck, 1995; Faller, 2007).

Question Type

Maximizing the amount of information obtained through children's free recall memory is universally accepted among forensic interview models as a best practice. Forensic interviewers should use open-ended and cued questions skillfully and appropriately to support children's ability and willingness to describe remembered experiences in their own words (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, and Horowitz, 2007; Myers, 2005; Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011). Ask more focused questions later in the interview, depending on the developmental abilities of the child, the child's degree of

candor or reluctance, the immediacy of child protection issues, and the existence of reliable information previously gathered (e.g., suspect confession, photographs) (Imhoff and Baker-Ward, 1999; Lamb et al., 2003; Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006). This approach reduces the risk of the interviewer contaminating the child's account.

A common language for labeling the format of questions does not exist; however, similarities in currently used labels do exist (Anderson, 2013; APSAC, 2012; Lyon, 2010). Agreement also exists that questions should not be judged in isolation. The labels for memory prompts may be classified into two main categories—recall and recognition—and are based on the type of memory accessed.

Recall prompts are open-ended, inviting the child to tell everything he or she remembers in his or her own words; such prompts have been shown to increase accuracy (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, and Abbott, 2007; Lamb et al., 2008). Open-ended questions encourage children to elaborate and to include salient details without significant input from the interviewer, who should use them throughout the interview. Recall prompts may include directives or questions, such as “Tell me everything that happened,” “And then what happened?” and “Tell me more about (specific person/action/place that the child previously mentioned).” Although the accounts retrieved through the use of recall prompts can be quite detailed and accurate, they may not be complete. Interviewers may ask specific, focused questions to obtain additional details about topics the child has already mentioned, using a “who, what, where, when, and how” format. Although these detailed questions focus the child on certain aspects of his or her report that are missing, the child may or may not recall such information. These questions may promote a narrative response or may elicit brief answers (Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Hershkowitz et al., 2012). They do not introduce information or pose options to the child: “You said you were in the house. What room were you in?” followed by “Tell me about that.”

Once open-ended questions are exhausted, it may be necessary to progressively focus the query. Children may omit details because they do not know the significance of the information sought or because they are reluctant to divulge certain information. In contrast to recall prompts, recognition prompts provide the child with context or offer interviewer-created options. Recognition prompts may elicit greater detail once the child has exhausted his or her capability for narrative or when a child cannot comprehend a more open-ended question. The risk of using recognition prompts is that they may elicit responses that are less accurate or potentially erroneous if the child

feels compelled to reach beyond his or her stored memory. It is essential to use these questions judiciously, as over-use can significantly affect the integrity and fact-finding function of the interview (Faller, 2007; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, and Abbott, 2007; Myers, 2005; Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006). Suggestive questions are those that “to one degree or another, [suggest] that the questioner is looking for a particular answer” (Myers, Saywitz, and Goodman, 1996) and should be avoided.

Interview Aids/Media

The goal of a forensic interview is to have the child verbally describe his or her experience. A question remains, however, as to whether limiting children to verbal responses allows all children to fully recount their experiences, or whether media (e.g., paper, markers, anatomically detailed drawings or dolls) may be used during the interview to aid in descriptions (Brown et al., 2007; Katz and Hamama, 2013; Macleod, Gross, and Hayne, 2013; Patterson and Hayne, 2011; Poole and Dickinson, 2011; Russell, 2008). The use of media varies greatly by model and professional training. Decisions are most often made at the local level, and interviewer comfort and multidisciplinary team preferences may influence them. Ongoing research is necessary to shed further light on the influence of various types of media on children's verbal descriptions of remembered events.

The Forensic Interview

Forensic interview models guide the interviewer through the various stages of a legally sound interview; they vary from highly structured/scripted to semi-structured (interviewers cover predetermined topics) to flexible (interviewers have greater latitude). All models include the following phases:

- The initial **rapport-building phase** typically comprises introductions with an age- and context-appropriate explanation of documentation methods, a review of interview instructions, a discussion of the importance of telling the truth, and practice providing narratives and episodic memory training.
- The **substantive phase** most often includes a narrative description of events, detail-seeking strategies, clarification, and testing of alternative hypotheses, when appropriate.
- The **closure phase** gives more attention to the socioemotional needs of a child, transitioning to nonsubstantive topics, allowing for questions, and discussing safety or educational messages.



Divergent research, state statutes, community standards, and identified child/case populations contribute to the variations among models. Lack of adherence to a particular model does not, in and of itself, deem an interview forensically unsound. Increasingly, forensic interviewers receive training in multiple models and use a blend of models individualized to the needs of the child and the case (MRCAC, 2014).

Rapport-Building Phase

All interview models acknowledge that building rapport is important for both the child and the interviewer. During this phase, the child can begin to trust the interviewer and become oriented to the interview process. The interviewer can begin to understand the child's linguistic patterns, gauge the child's willingness to participate, and start to respond appropriately to the child's developmental, emotional, and cultural needs. A narrative approach to building rapport sets a pattern of interaction that should be maintained throughout the interview (Hershkowitz et al., 2015; Collins, Lincoln, and Frank, 2002; Hershkowitz, 2011).

Interview Instructions

Giving interview instructions during the rapport-building phase sets expectations that the child should provide accurate and complete information and also mitigates suggestibility. The child's age may influence the number of instructions and, perhaps, the type of instructions that may be most helpful. Interviewers may want to include some of the following instructions:

- "I was not there and don't know what happened. When I ask you questions, I don't know the answer to those questions."
- "It's okay to say 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand that question.'"

- "Only talk about things that really happened." (This emphasizes the importance of the conversation.)

For younger children, interviewers may want to have them "practice" following each guideline to demonstrate their understanding (APSAC, 2012; Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011). When children demonstrate these skills spontaneously, interviewers should reinforce them.

"Truth Versus Lies" Discussion

Recent research indicates that children may be less likely to make false statements if they have promised to tell the truth before the substantive phase of the interview (Lyon and Evans, 2014; Lyon and Dorado, 2008; Talwar et al., 2002). State statutes and community practices may vary about whether to include a "truth versus lies" discussion in forensic interviews. Some states require such a discussion or mandate that children take a developmentally appropriate oath before the substantive phase of the interview. In other states, interviewers have more autonomy regarding the techniques they use to encourage truth telling—to assess whether the child will be a competent witness in court and to increase the likelihood that the recorded interview will be admitted into evidence (Russell, 2006).

Narrative Practice/Episodic Memory Training

A substantial body of research indicates that encouraging children to give detailed responses early in the interview (i.e., during the rapport-building phase) enhances their informative responses to open-ended prompts in the substantive portion of the interview. When interviewers encourage these narrative descriptions early on, children typically will begin to provide more details without interviewers having to resort to more direct or leading prompts (Brubacher, Roberts, and Powell, 2011; Lamb et al., 2008; Poole and Lamb, 1998).

To help a child practice providing narratives, the interviewer may select a topic that was raised during a response to an earlier question, such as "Tell me some things about yourself," "What do you like to do for fun?" or "What did you do this morning?"; ask a question about a favorite activity; or ask for a description of the child's morning. The interviewer should then instruct the child to describe that topic from "beginning to end and not to leave anything out." The interviewer should continue to use cued, open-ended questions that incorporate the child's own words or phrases to prompt the child to greater elaboration. The interviewer may cue the child to tell more about an object, person, location, details of the activity, or a particular segment of time. This allows the child to provide a forensically detailed description of a nonabuse event and enables the interviewer to begin to

understand the child's linguistic ability and style (APSAC, 2012; Saywitz and Camparo 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011; Walker, 2013).

Substantive Phase

The interviewer should be as open-ended and nonsuggestive as possible when introducing the topic of suspected abuse, using a prompt such as "What are you here to talk to me about today?" If the child acknowledges the target topic, the interviewer should follow up with another open invitation, such as "Tell me everything and don't leave anything out" (APSAC, 2012; Lamb et al., 2008; Orbach and Pipe, 2011; Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011) and proceed to the narrative and detail-gathering phase of the interview.

However, if a child is anxious or embarrassed, has been threatened or cautioned not to talk, or has not made a prior outcry of abuse, the interviewer may need a more focused approach (Pipe et al., 2007). There is a distinction between real and apparent reluctance. Real reluctance refers to children who are cautious and significantly unwilling to respond to questions, whereas apparent reluctance refers to children who are introspective before responding to questions. Interviewers should therefore allow for silence or hesitation without moving to more focused prompts too quickly. In many cases, gently reassuring the child that it is important for the interviewer to understand everything that happened can effectively combat a child's reluctance.

Interviewers should plan for this transitional period deliberately, taking into account the child's characteristics, information included in the initial report, and any case concerns (Smith and Milne, 2011). Variations exist among interviewing models as to the most effective and defensible way to help a reluctant child transition to the substantive portion of the interview. Broadly speaking, options range from (1) the use of escalating and focused prompts gleaned from information in the allegation report (APSAC, 2012; Lamb et al., 2008; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011) to (2) the use of an incremental approach exploring various topics, such as family members, caregiving routines, body safety, and so forth (APSAC, 2012; Faller, 2007) to (3) the use of human figure drawings along with a discussion of body safety and appropriate and inappropriate contact (Anderson et al., 2010).

Forensic interviewers who have been trained in multiple models may use a variety of options, depending on child and case characteristics. Use focused or direct prompts only if good reason exists to believe the child has been abused and the risk of continued abuse is greater than the risk of proceeding with an interview if no abuse has occurred (Lamb et al., 2008; Orbach and Pipe, 2011).

Narrative and Detail Gathering

All forensic interview models direct the interviewer to ask the child to provide a narrative account of his or her experience to gain a clear and accurate description of alleged events in the child's own words. Do not interrupt this narrative, as it is the primary purpose of the forensic interview. Open-ended invitations ("Tell me more" or "What happened next?") and cued narrative requests ("Tell me more about [fill in with child's word]") elicit longer, more detailed, and less self-contradictory information from children and adolescents (Lamb et al., 2008; Orbach and Pipe, 2011; Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006). Because of their relatively underdeveloped memory retrieval processes, very young or less cognitively and linguistically skilled children may require greater scaffolding and more narrowly focused open-ended questions to elicit information regarding remembered events (Faller, 2007; Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2003; Orbach and Pipe, 2011). Cued and open-ended prompts, attentive listening, silence, and facilitators, such as reflection and paraphrasing, may help (Evans and Roberts, 2009). Additionally, "wh" questions are the least leading way to ask about important but missing details and can either be open-ended ("What happened?") or more direct ("What was the man's name?") (Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Orbach and Pipe, 2011). Interviewers should delay the use of recognition prompts and questions that pose options for as long as possible (APSAC, 2012; Lamb et al., 2008; Saywitz and Camparo, 2009; Saywitz, Lyon, and Goodman, 2011).

Because many children experience multiple incidents of abuse, interviewers should ask them whether an event happened "one time or more than one time." If a child has been abused more than once, the interviewer should explore details regarding specific occurrences in a developmentally appropriate way (Walker, 2013), using the child's own wording to best cue the child to each incident (Brubacher, Roberts, and Powell, 2011; Brubacher et al., 2013; Brubacher and La Rooy, 2014; Schneider et al., 2011). Using prompts such as "first time," "last time," and other appropriate labels may lead to additional locations, acts, witnesses, or potential evidence.

No one recalls every detail about even well-remembered experiences. Questions related to core elements of the abuse can maximize the quantity and quality of information a child provides. Research suggests that children and adults may recall personally experienced events better than they recall peripheral details or events they witnessed (Perona, Bottoms, and Sorenson, 2006; Peterson, 2012).

Once the child's narrative account of an alleged incident(s) has been fully explored, the interviewer can then follow with focused questions, asking for sensory details, clarification, and other missing elements. If a child provides only brief responses, the interviewer should follow up by asking for additional information or explanation using focused questions that incorporate terms the child previously provided. Although particular elements may have forensic significance (e.g., temporal dating, number of events, sexual intent, penetration), the child may not have accurately perceived or stored the information in long-term memory (Friedman and Lyon, 2005; Hershkowitz et al., 2012; Orbach and Lamb, 2007; Lamb et al., 2015). Forensic interviewers should proceed with caution when encouraging children through the use of recognition prompts to provide such information.

Introducing externally derived information (e.g., information gathered outside the interview or that the child has not divulged) may be appropriate in some interviews. There is broad consensus, however, that interviewers should use such information with caution and only after attempting other questioning methods. It is important to understand the suggestibility of such information within the context of the overall interview, the other questions asked, the child's presentation and development, and the strength of any external evidence obtained. Before or during the interview, multidisciplinary teams should discuss how, if, and when to introduce externally derived information or evidence. The manner and extent to which this information is presented varies across jurisdictions and models.

Alternative Hypotheses

Contextually appropriate questions that explore other viable hypotheses for a child's behaviors or statements are essential to the overall integrity of the interview. Allow the child to explain apparently contradictory information, particularly as it concerns forensically relevant details (e.g., the suspect's identity or specific acts committed). Additionally, the interviewer may need to explore the circumstances surrounding the targeted event to distinguish abuse from caregiving activities, particularly with a young child or one with limited abilities.

Questions about the child's source of information or prior conversations or instructions may be helpful if there are concerns about possible coaching or contamination.

There is no one set of questions used routinely in every interview, as child characteristics, contextual settings, allegations, and case specifics vary greatly.

Consultation With the Multidisciplinary Team

Forensic interviews are best conducted within a multidisciplinary team context, as coordinating an investigation has been shown to increase the efficiency of the investigation while minimizing system-induced trauma in the child (Cronch, Viljoen, and Hansen, 2006; Jones et al., 2005). Before the interview, multidisciplinary team members should discuss possible barriers, case-specific concerns, and interviewing strategies, such as how best to introduce externally derived information, should that be necessary. Regardless of whether the forensic interview is conducted at a CAC or other child-friendly facility, the interviewer should communicate with the team members observing the interview to determine whether to raise additional questions or whether there are any ambiguities or apparent contradictions to resolve (Home Office, 2007; Jones et al., 2005). The interviewer often has to balance the team's request for further questions with the need to maintain legal defensibility and with the child's ability to provide the information requested.

Closure Phase

The closure phase helps provide a respectful end to a conversation that may have been emotionally challenging for the child. The interviewer may use various strategies during this phase (Anderson et al., 2010; APSAC, 2012; Home Office, 2007; Poole and Lamb, 1998):

- Ask the child if there is something else the interviewer needs to know.
- Ask the child if there is something he or she wants to tell or ask the interviewer.
- Thank the child for his or her effort rather than for specific content.

"Because many children experience multiple incidents of abuse, interviewers should ask them whether an event happened 'one time or more than one time.'"

- Address the topic of safety plans and educational materials and provide a contact number for additional help.

Other Considerations

Multiple evidence-supported forensic interview models are used throughout the United States, and all of these require the interviewer to adapt the model to the needs of each child based on unique situational variables. Some of the more commonly faced situational variables are highlighted below.

Multiple, Nonduplicative Interviews

One comprehensive forensic interview is sufficient for many children, particularly if the child made a previous disclosure, possesses adequate language skills, and has the support of a family member or other close adult (APSAC, 2002; Faller, 2007; London et al., 2007; NCA, 2011; Olafson and Lederman, 2006). The literature clearly demonstrates the dangers of multiple interviewers repeatedly questioning a child or conducting duplicative interviews (Ceci and Bruck, 1995; Fivush, Peterson, and Schwarzmuller, 2002; Malloy and Quas, 2009; Poole and Lamb, 1998; Poole and Lindsay, 2002). However, some children require more time and familiarity to become comfortable and to develop trust in both the process and the interviewer. Recent research indicates that multiple interview sessions may allow reluctant, young, or traumatized children the opportunity to more clearly and completely share information (Leander, 2010; Pipe et al., 2007). Multiple, nonduplicative interviews are most effective when the interviewer uses best practices in forensic interviewing; adapts the interview structure to the developmental, cultural, and emotional needs of the child; and avoids suggestive and coercive approaches (Faller, Cordisco Steele, and Nelson-Gardell, 2010; La Rooy et al., 2010; La Rooy, Lamb, and Pipe, 2009).

Supervision and Peer Review

Although agreement exists that knowledge of forensic interviewing significantly increases through training,

this newly acquired knowledge does not always translate into significant changes in interviewer practices (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, and Esplin, 2002; Lamb et al., 2008; Price and Roberts, 2011; Stewart, Katz, and La Rooy, 2011). Supervision, peer reviews, and other forms of feedback should help forensic interviewers integrate the skills they learned during initial training and also improve their practice over time.

Supervision facilitates one-on-one interaction between a more experienced forensic interviewer and a professional new to the job and may or may not include assessment of the interviewer's performance (Price and Roberts, 2011; Stewart, Katz, and La Rooy, 2011). Larger CACs may employ multiple forensic interviewers who can provide individual support to newly trained interviewers. Often, CACs operating within a regional service area undertake similar efforts.

Peer review is a facilitated discussion with other interviewers or team members and is intended to both maintain and increase desirable practices in forensic interviewing (Stewart, Katz, and La Rooy, 2011). It is an opportunity for forensic interviewers to receive emotional and professional support and for other professionals to critique their work. The peer review should be a formalized process in a neutral environment with established group norms and a shared understanding of goals, processes, and purpose. Power dynamics, a lack of cohesion, and differing expectations can easily derail peer review efforts, leading to a failure to achieve real improvements in practice. Training in the use of tools for providing more effective feedback (e.g., guidelines for giving and receiving feedback), checklists to assist peer reviewers in defining practice aspects for review, and strong leadership can assist practitioners in establishing a meaningful and productive process.



Vicarious Trauma and Self-Care

Professionals exposed to the reports of abuse and victimization of children often suffer from vicarious traumatization, an affliction commonly called “the cost of caring” that has symptoms similar to those of posttraumatic stress disorder (Figley, 1995; Perron and Hiltz, 2006; Lipsky and Burk, 2009). Studies suggest that forensic interviewers, law enforcement officers, child protection workers, victim advocates, therapists, medical personnel, attorneys, and judges can all suffer from repeatedly hearing reports of child victimization (Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Perron and Hiltz, 2006; Russell, 2010).

Vicarious trauma can be mitigated at multiple levels. Supervisors and organizations should be particularly attentive to the mental health of their staff and should be aware of factors that can exacerbate the development of vicarious trauma, including gender, past personal trauma, work dissatisfaction, large caseloads, long hours, and a lack of personal and professional support systems (Meyers and Cornille, 2002). Individuals should recognize the benefits of the work they undertake in their professional lives and celebrate their successes, knowing they have made a difference in a child’s life.

Summary

The CAC movement was born out of the concept that the traditional fragmented and duplicative child abuse investigative process was not in the best interests of children. The multidisciplinary team approach has proven to be more child-friendly and better able to meet the needs of children and their families (Bonarch, Mabry, and Potts-Henry, 2010; Miller and Rubin, 2009). This revolutionary approach should continue to guide the nation’s response to child abuse investigations. To increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for all children, it is imperative to continue ongoing discussions among professionals in both direct service delivery and program planning.

Although there have been significant efforts over the past several decades to improve the nation’s response to child maltreatment, these efforts have often emanated from a single program or region without leading to a national debate on a particular topic, such as the development of forensic interviewing with children. This bulletin serves as the first collaborative effort, by professionals from many nationally recognized forensic interview training programs, to summarize the current knowledge and application of best practices in the field.

INTERVIEWER TIPS

Overall Considerations

- Conduct the interview as soon as possible after initial disclosure.
- Record the interview electronically.
- Hold the interview in a safe, child-friendly environment.
- Use open-ended questions throughout the interview, delaying the use of more focused questions for as long as possible.
- Consider the child’s age, developmental ability, and culture.

Building Rapport With the Child

- Engage the child in brief conversation about his or her interests or activities.
- Provide an opportunity for the child to describe a recent nonabuse-related experience in detail.
- Describe the interview ground rules.
- Discuss the importance of telling the truth.

Conducting the Interview

- Transition to the topic of the suspected abuse carefully, taking into account the characteristics of the child and the case.
- Ask the child to describe his or her experience in detail, and do not interrupt the child during this initial narrative account.
- Once the initial account is fully explored, begin to ask more focused questions if needed to gather additional details, get clarification, or fill in missing information.
- Mirror the child’s wording when asking followup questions.
- Exercise caution at this stage. Use focused queries judiciously and avoid suggestive questions that could compel the child to respond inaccurately.
- Explore other viable hypotheses for the child’s behaviors or statements.
- Consult with those observing the interview to determine whether to raise additional questions or whether to resolve any ambiguities or contradictions.

Ending the Interview

- Ask the child if there is anything else he or she would like to share or to ask.
- Discuss safety plans and provide educational materials.
- Thank the child for participating.

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This bulletin was prepared under grant numbers 2009-CI-FX-K010, 2010-CI-FX-K005, and 2011-CI-FX-K003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), U.S. Department of Justice.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.