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PRACTICE

DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FORENSIC INTERVIEWING

—by Karen J. Saywitz

An interview can be the first step to recovery for a victim of abuse. Unfortunately, however, the interview sometimes becomes an intrusive experience in which powerful adults try to pry words from frightened children. Reliable and effective interviewing of suspected victims of child abuse requires knowledge of both child development and the forensic context. Equally important, to enhance trust and lessen anxiety an interviewer must convey empathy.

Children are not a homogeneous group. Children of different ages vary in language and memory ability, cognitive and social skills, and emotional maturity. Moreover, individual children may be delayed or advanced for their age in one or more of these areas. Consequently, the interviewer must mold the interview to the child's stage of development. Because young children reason idiosyncratically and create their own explanations for their experiences, interviewers cannot assume that children understand an experience, a question, or even a word in the same way an adult would. When adults ask questions in language too complex for young children to comprehend regarding concepts that are too abstract for them to understand, both the child and the interviewer are likely to be frustrated and perplexed. The use of developmentally sensitive techniques is essential to obtaining reliable information from young children.

Empathy, based on understanding the situation from the child's point of view, is equally essential. Children are accustomed to familiar nurturing adults, such as parents or teachers. You can assume that an interview with a stranger in an unfamiliar setting will be an anxiety-provoking situation for the average child. Children might be ambivalent, or even frightened, about talking to you. Perhaps they have been threatened not to tell. Children are unlikely to know why they are being questioned about painful and embarrassing experiences and, used to familiar adults who often ask questions to which the adults already know the answers, children may be geared to supply only minimal responses. They do not automatically understand the unique demands of the forensic context. They have little understanding of the abstract justice sys-

tem and cannot use the "big picture" to put their feelings in perspective on their own. Empathic comments will lessen the child's anxiety and help establish a minimum level of trust. One of the best ways to show empathy is to acknowledge explicitly the child's feelings using simple comments such as, "I wonder if it is hard to talk to a stranger about something that is hard to talk about."

A great deal more can be done, however, to ensure that an interview elicits reliable information with a minimum of discomfort to the child.

Building Rapport and Observing Developmental Level

Setting the Stage. Young children's thinking is dominated by the "here and now" and by their immediate environment. They reason on the basis of what they see. Children spend a great deal of mental energy adapting to the environment in which the questions are asked. Thus, the interviewer needs to reserve a quiet, private place, and give children time to familiarize themselves with the room in a nondemanding playful atmosphere. In this way the child will be free to give full attention to the questions being asked.

Creating the Context. Knowing what to anticipate reduces anxiety. Let children know where their parents will be waiting, and provide a brief sketch of how you will spend the time together. Tell children why you are asking all these questions, and what will happen to the information they provide. Failing to inform them in age-appropriate language of the limits on confidentiality can have disastrous effects on this and on subsequent interviews if children feel betrayed later. It's important to explore what children have been told by others about the interview to alleviate unrealistic fears and expectations.

Evaluating Children's Speech and Language. As you're engaged in these preliminaries, listen carefully to the number of words in children's sentences and syllables in their words. This helps you match your language to the child's language. In general, the younger the child, the shorter the sentence and the fewer syllables per word.

In addition, you need to adapt your vocabulary to fit the child's. To young children, a case is something you carry papers in, a hearing is something you do

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is important to tell, for example, so that the sexual abuse will stop or so the offender will get some help.

Finally, many children do not tell about their sexual abuse despite efforts of evaluators to facilitate their disclosure. In cases where information from the child is sparse or absent, it is important for the evaluator to point out that an inconclusive evaluation or unsubstantiated report is not synonymous with a false allegation.

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preparing a final revision based on your suggestions. Lucy will submit the proposed guidelines to APSAC's Board of Directors, who will consider official endorsement by the Society. If you are concerned about this area of practice, make your approval or suggestions known to the Guidelines Committee, Task Force and Board by following the procedure described in the introduction to the proposed guidelines.

I hope each of you will find this issue of *The Advisor* thought provoking and useful. If you have suggestions for future articles or other information that APSAC's members may find helpful and interesting, please share them with us.

A CONTINUUM OF TYPES OF QUESTIONS USED IN INTERVIEWING CHILDREN ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED AND CONFIDENCE IN RESPONSES

-by Kathleen Coulborn Faller

	Question Type	Example	Child Response	
Open-Ended ↓ Closed-ended	A. General	How are you?	Sad, 'cause my dad poked me in the pee-pee.	MORE CONFIDENCE ↓ LESS CONFIDENCE
	B. Focused	How do you get along with your dad?	OK, except when he pokes me in the pee-pee.	
		Did anything happen to your pee-pee?	My daddy poked me there	
		What did he poke you with?	He poked me with his ding-dong.	
	C. Multiple Choice	Did he poke you with his finger, his ding-dong, or something else?	He used his ding-dong.	
		Did this happen in the daytime or nighttime?	In the day and night.	
	D. Yes-No Questions	Did he tell you not to tell?	No, he didn't say anything like that.	
		Did you have your clothes off?	No, just my panties.	
	E. Leading Questions	He took your clothes didn't he?	Yes.	
		Didn't he make you suck his penis?	Yes.	

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with your ears, charges are something you do with a credit card. Before using a word, ask a child to define it. Do not ask, "Do you know what the word court means?" Children are likely to say yes, thinking that a court is a place to play basketball. Therefore, ask children to tell what the word means in their own words.

Talking to Children

Age-Inappropriate Language

Long, complex question - When you were with your uncle in the bedroom of the blue house your mom took you to, what did he do to you?

Passive voice - Were you touched by him?

Confusing pronouns - What did *she* do with *them*?

Double negatives - Didn't mom tell you not to go there?

Multi-syllabic words - identify

Complex verbs - It might have been ...

Hypothetical - If you want a break, then let me know.

Testing the Child's Skill Level

Before asking questions, test certain skills by devising tasks that measure specific capabilities. For example, before asking children how many times something happened find out if they can count. Do not check this ability by asking a child to count from one to ten. Rote recall of numbers is like repeating memorized words to a song: it

Developmentally Sensitive Language

Several short questions - Where did your mom take you that day? Who was there? What room were you in? What happened there?

Active voice - Did he touch you?

Clear use of names - What did Mary do with Bill and Jane?

Single negatives - Did mom tell you not to go there?

Short words - point to

Simple verbs - Was it ...

Direct - Are you tired? Do you want a break?

es not mean that the child understands number concepts. Instead, try some activity that requires counting: Ask the child to hand you four pennies from a row of ten.

Obviously, if a child cannot count objects, he or she will be unable to count events in time. But counting events is still more difficult than counting pennies: Pennies are discrete units, but determining where one event begins and another ends can be difficult. If a sex act happened twice in one night, is that counted as one time or two? The adult must specify the exact physical activity to be counted: "How many times did he put his finger in your ear?"

In a forensic interview, eliciting the time and place of an event as well as a description of the participants and actions is often crucial. Some other tasks for measuring relevant skills are as follows:

Locations/Positions. Before asking about specific locations, such as "Were you beside or in front of the car?" "Were you on top of or beneath him?" check whether the child understands prepositions: correct usage and understanding develops gradually. For example, ask the child to put the red block beside (or beneath) the blue block.

Telling Time. Test a child's ability to tell time on a digital as well as an analog clock. Find out if they understand the days of the week, months of the year, seasons, hours, minutes, and so forth.

Body Parts. Find out what words children use to refer to their own and others' body parts, including genitals. Point to the parts on drawings or dolls.

Measurement. Find out whether children can accurately estimate weight in pounds, height in feet and inches, and whether they can label ethnic groups accurately. Use yourself as an example or use magazine pictures ("How tall am I?").

Eliciting Information

When a child does not possess the skills to answer a particular kind of question, use alternative methods of questioning. For example, a child under seven or eight may not be able to tell time, but can provide the name of the television show he was watching when the event began. The interviewer can reconstruct the time and date from a television guide. The key is to ask about something meaningful to the child. When young children cannot state someone's age in years, ask whether the person was old enough to be a grandparent, a mommy, or a teenager. To avoid misinterpreting responses, ask for children's reasoning processes as well

Preschoolers often think the tallest person is the oldest person because they tend to focus on one aspect of information at a time. They focus on height to indicate age and fail to process information about hair color or wrinkles as indications of age as well. Ask "What makes you think he was old?" "Did he have any hair?" "What color was his hair?" These examples highlight the need for creativity and knowledge of child development to elicit accurate information from children.

The extent to which leading questions influence children's reports has been widely discussed. While there are age differences in suggestibility, there are also limits on what can be suggested to a child. Space prohibits a review of this literature. However, experts tend to agree about a few general principles:

- * Begin by seeking the most general, spontaneous rendition in response to open-ended inquiry, such as "Tell me what happened?"

- * Follow the child's lead, helping the child to continue a narrative by repeating what he/she just said: "So he took you to the blue house." Prompt with "What happened next?"

- * Move to open-ended questions about general categories of information: "What can you tell me about the way the person looked? Is there anything about the weather that day you can remember?"

- * When children suspected of being in danger fail to respond to these general probes, direct and sometimes leading questions are used at the discretion of the interviewer. However, responses to specific yes/no or multiple choice questions are difficult to interpret. Follow up by asking children to elaborate: "Tell me more." Otherwise, one cannot be certain children understand and respond to a question as it is intended.

Beginning with general open-ended questions and moving towards more specific ones creates a hierarchy of confidence in children's answers.

Closure

If children have become upset, this is a time to help them regain their composure. Enhance their self esteem by complimenting them on doing a good job at something that was hard for them to do. Be sure to praise the children for their *effort*—working hard during the interview—and for the *content* of what they say.

Finally, be sure to dispel any misperceptions that may have arisen. Give children a turn to ask any questions they may have. This is a time to empathize with realistic fears, correct unrealistic expectations, and offer strategies for

copings with anticipated anxiety-provoking situations. The interviewer should set the stage for future interactions. Tell children what will happen next. In an age-appropriate fashion, educate them about the various steps of the legal, health and mental health systems.

Developmental sensitivity and empathy will facilitate eliciting more accurate information with less stress for children.

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