

# PRACTICE

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS FOR CHILDREN ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

—by Kathleen Coulborn Faller

In the last five years, doubt about accusations of sexual abuse has resurged. One of the arguments skeptics have put forth is that evaluators induce false positives (accounts or affirmations of sexual abuse when none has occurred) by the way they question children (Wakefield and Underwager, 1988). That is, evaluators hope to find sexual abuse, and children, wishing to gratify the evaluators, provide socially desirable responses, which support an allegation of sexual abuse in cases where victimization has not occurred.

Although existing research suggests that children are seldom led into making false accusations by inappropriate questioning techniques (Clarke-Stewart, as cited in DeAngelis, 1989; Goodman, 1988; Goodman, Hirschman & Rudy, 1987; Goodman & Reed, 1986), nevertheless the prudent professional should use questions that facilitate the child's disclosure, rather than questions that suggest particular responses (i.e., leading questions). In the discussion that follows, types of questions will be defined and guidelines for questioning children will be suggested. The goal of this approach is both to lessen the vulnerability of evaluations to challenges because the questioning is leading, and to decrease the risk of false positives. These suggestions are based upon the author's clinical findings and experience (see Faller, 1988; Faller, forthcoming b).

Although the focus of this discussion is on questioning, in many cases, especially those involving young children, the evaluator is not relying solely on the child's verbal responses in the interview. Questioning is done in conjunction with the use of anatomically explicit dolls or other media.

### Types of Questions

Five types of questions will be discussed: (1) general questions, (2) focused questions, (3) multiple choice questions, (4) questions requiring a yes or no answer, and (5) leading questions. These questions are listed in ascending order from least leading to most leading. They are also in descending order, from those more likely to those least likely to elicit responses from children in which we can have confidence (see chart, p. 5).

I. General questions. A general question is one that inquires in a non-specific manner about the individual's

state of mind or circumstances. Examples might be a query about how the child has been feeling lately or why the child is coming to see the interviewer. Such questions are very appropriate with an adult, for example a rape victim, and might well elicit a description of the problem for which the client is seeking help. General questions are much less likely to elicit desired information from children. The typical response of a child to the question, "Why are you here?" is "I don't know" or "I forgot". As a rule, children will need more specific questions than adults to elicit descriptions of what is troubling them.

2. Focused questions. Focused questions are directed toward possible contexts of sexual abuse, but are open-ended. Several types of focused questions can be used with children who have been sexually abused. Some target the possible offender, others body parts, and still others the circumstances of the sexual abuse.

*Person-focused questions.* Person-focused questions are directed toward significant people in the child's life, including the alleged offender. The evaluator asks these questions about the important people in the child's life, usually beginning with persons who have positive relationships with the child and delaying discussion of the possible offender until close to the end of this line of questioning. If there is more than one possible offender, or if one of the involved parties is likely to suggest that the perpetrator is someone else (e.g., an older brother rather than the father), the evaluator should ask about all relevant persons. The child is asked questions such as the following:

"How do you get along with your mom/dad?"

"What sorts of things do you do with your mom/dad that you like?"

"Is there anything she/he does that you don't like?"

If so, "What don't you like?"

"Is there anything your mom/dad does to your body that you don't like?"

As the reader can see, the initial questions are neutral and later ones more germane to possible abuse. If the evaluator elicits material indicative of sexual abuse, further questions will explore the allegation through focused questions as well as other types of questions described below.

*Questions focusing on the body parts.* Another type of focused question relates to the child's experience with or knowledge about body parts. Such questions flow most naturally from the child's identification and naming of body parts, using anatomically explicit dolls or pictures. The following are examples of focused questions that might elicit relevant information:

*Questions Related to the Penis*  
(assuming the offender is a male)

"Who has one of those?"

If the child responds, "My brother," ask if anyone else has one.

"What is it for?"

If the child answers that it's for going pee, ask if it does anything else.

"Did you ever see one?"

"What do daddies (men) do with it?"

"Does it ever do things you don't like?"

If so, "What?"

"Did you ever touch one?"

If so, "Whose?"

*Questions Related to the Vagina*  
(assuming the victim is a female)

"Who has one of these?"

"What do you do with yours?"

"Do you know how yours got hurt?"

"Has anyone ever touched yours?"

"Has anyone ever done anything to yours?"

"Has anyone ever tried to touch yours?"

"Has anyone ever wanted to put something in yours?"

If so, "What?"

Questions about body parts should of course be varied according to the sex of the alleged perpetrator and victim. However, it is a good idea to ask the child questions about both male and female private parts. Often the contrast between the child's responses related to the alleged offender's genitalia and a non-offending parent are enlightening. In addition, a substantial percentage of children are sexually abused by more than one person (Faller, forthcoming a) and sometimes by adults of both sexes (Faller, 1987). Thus, it is prudent to ask about all private parts.

*Questions focusing on the circumstances of the sexual abuse.* Focused questions about the circumstances of the sexual abuse can relate to the environmental circumstances, how the offender characterizes the abuse, or how the offender induces the child not to tell.

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Possible questions include:

"What do you do when you stay up late at night?"

"Do you ever play games with your dad?"

If so, "What kind of games?"

"Do you have any secrets in your family?"

If so, "What secrets?"

The evaluator will usually have some idea of the circumstances of the alleged sexual abuse which will guide the kind of focused questions to be asked.

Often the possible circumstances of the sexual abuse must be asked about in several different ways before relevant information is elicited. A large percentage of children will be reluctant to reveal the negative things that happen, for example, "at grandpa's" or "at night," and will say "I don't know," "I don't remember," or will relate neutral or positive events. Children may need to become convinced that the interviewer really does want to know, or that the advantages of telling outweigh the disadvantages.

**3. Multiple choice questions.** Multiple choice questions should be considered if the child does not respond to focused questions. Multiple choice questions are more likely to be asked about the context of the victimization rather than the sexual behavior. In addition, when asking multiple choice questions, the interviewer tries to anticipate all the possible choices and pose them for the child, to avoid putting the child in the position of having to choose between two or more wrong answers. Thus, if the child responds that she has touched a penis, but does not answer when asked whose, the evaluator should ask whether it was her dad's, her uncle's, or someone else's, not merely whether it was the father's or the uncle's. The following are some examples of multiple choice questions:

"Did it happen before you went to bed or after you went to bed, or both?" If the child does not respond to the question, "What were you wearing?", the interviewer might ask if the child was wearing her day clothes or night clothes. If the child says "I don't know" when asked how many times the abuse happened, the evaluator could ask if it happened one time, two times, or lots of times.

It is preferable to elicit responses to focused questions than to use multiple choice questions. However, some children have a great deal of difficulty describing their sexual abuse and need

more directed questions. A good indicator that the child is describing a genuine experience is when the child puts the response into her own words rather than using one of the response choices. An example would be a child who, when asked if she was wearing her day clothes or night clothes, replies that she had on her pink nightie with the blue bow.

**4. Questions requiring a yes or no answer.** Somewhat less preferable are questions that require the child to answer yes or no. Such questions should be used when other, more open-ended questions do not elicit responses. Some critics have argued that yes-no questions suggest affirmative answers. However, this need not be the case. The evaluator can just as easily ask questions that expect a negative response as ones where the reply is anticipated to be positive.

Nevertheless, if yes-no questions are used, the evaluator should be alert to a pattern of answers that is either all positive or all negative. The former may signal social desirability responses, and the latter may indicate the child does not want to answer or is being oppositional. At times it is a good strategy to interject a question that should elicit a reply opposite to the child's pattern of responses: for example, ask a question whose response is "Yes" ("Did you come here with your mom today?") when the child is providing only "no" answers. The child's answer to the question then provides a context for discussing why the child is persistently giving negative responses.

Sometimes a child contradicts earlier statements, usually by denying earlier assertions of sexual abuse. It is appropriate to raise this issue with the child. For example, the evaluator may say, "Is that what you told your mother?" when, for example, the child denies that grandfather did anything. Many children will respond by saying no, and then the evaluator asks what the child told her/his mother. Following such a reply, the evaluator asks which statement is true.

Examples of yes-no questions are as follows:

"Was your mother there?" An evaluator might ask this question when

"Where was your mother?" did not elicit sufficient information.

"Did your father do something to your pee-pee?" If the child answers affirmatively, the interviewer can revert to a more open-ended question "What did he do?"

"Did he touch your sister's private, too?"

"Did he tell you not to tell?"

**5. Leading questions.** Highly leading questions are usually not appropriate when an evaluator is trying to find out what happened from a child. Much more than yes-no questions, leading questions indicate the desired answer. The following are examples of leading questions:

"He put his finger inside your pee-pee, didn't he?"

"She told you to say it was your brother, not your father, who did it. Isn't that right?"

"Didn't he want you to suck his dick?"

"Haven't you lied to your parents before?"

#### *A Strategy for Questioning Children*

Although some children will readily describe their sexual victimization, such children are the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, the evaluator expects to have to ask numerous questions and sometimes closed-ended ones. Nevertheless, the evaluator always strives to use open-ended questions resorting to closed-ended ones only when open-ended ones do not elicit information, and returning to open ended questions once a particular issue has been resolved. Moreover, in forming conclusions based upon interview data, the greater the proportion of closed ended questions, the less confidence the evaluator may place on the information elicited from the child. Nevertheless evaluators need to appreciate that children may provide very accurate account in response to leading questions, and that in some cases, especially with young children, directive, and at times, leading questions are necessary.

When should the evaluator desist from questioning a child in situations where no confirming evidence is forthcoming? This varies depending upon what other evidence suggests sexual abuse for example medical evidence, a prior statement, an eyewitness, or the child's affect when denying abuse.

If the evaluator has good cause to believe something has happened, but the child is inhibited from revealing it, the evaluator may stop asking about sexual abuse and focus on why the child can not disclose. A useful introductory question is, "Is this stuff hard to talk about?" and, if the response is affirmative, the evaluator asks why. The evaluator then tries to assuage the child's fears, if it is honest to do so. A second strategy is to try to communicate to the child why

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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**CORWIN** (Continued from page 1)

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.	

**SAYWITZ** (Continued from page 2)

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?