

PRACTICE

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH AVOIDANT CHILDREN

—by Deborah Davies & Donna Montegna

Conducting forensic interviews with sexually abused children can be both rewarding and challenging. Often, despite the best efforts of the interviewer to reassure and comfort the child, a history is difficult to obtain. Children employ a variety of defenses to block the interviewer's questions. These include distracting and interrupting the interviewer with irrelevant questions or comments, acknowledging that they have a problem with someone but "forgetting" the details, or stating that they don't know what happened. Some children become hyperactive, aggressive, fearful or dissociative. Others may completely deny a prior history of molestation.

Many factors may contribute to children's reluctance to disclose their molestation. These include the closeness of the child's relationship to the perpetrator, the period of time over which the molestation occurred, the amount of secrecy surrounding the molestation, and the degree of violence or threat used to coerce the child's compliance. Children often have many fears regarding the consequences of their disclosure, fears that must be addressed before an interview can be successful.

The most important point to remember is that resistance reveals great anxiety. Confronting children regarding their physical condition, their prior statements about molestation, or their behavior in the interview will only intensify their anxiety and cause them to shut down. To avoid being further emotionally traumatized, avoidant children must be handled in a gentle, sensitive, and caring manner.

The following are some strategies that may be helpful in working with avoidant or resistant children.

1. First, and repeatedly, take time to reassure children that they are not in trouble, that they have done nothing wrong, and that nothing they feel or say will make you embarrassed, upset, or critical of them. This seems obvious to the interviewer but an anxious and

fearful child requires frequent reassurance.

2. Help the child retain a sense of control. One way to do this is to enable the child to gain emotional distance from the disclosure by using third party communication techniques such as puppets, play telephones, stuffed animals, or dolls. You may want to identify a doll as the alleged perpetrator and have the child tell the doll directly what happened that the child didn't like. Or you can use a puppet to question a young child, providing some relief from the pressure of one-on-one questioning by the interviewer.

Another way to help children retain a sense of control is by providing choices. Children may want to draw pictures rather than talk. Although you need to let them know that they'll need to do both, you can give the child the option of which to do first, and when.

3. Recognize that children may only be able to give small amounts of information at a time, and allow periods of non-directed play between statements about molestation. This provides children with the opportunity to manage their anxiety, and lets them check out and monitor the interviewer's response to the disclosure. Respecting the child's pace may seem time-consuming and tedious, but can result in a more effective interview.

4. Sometimes children are able to provide peripheral details about the molestation before divulging specifics. For instance, the child may be able to state with whom they had a problem, where they were and how old they were when the problem occurred, etc. Perhaps the child witnessed the molestation of another child. If so, questioning the child about what happened to the other victim may be helpful. Often children are able to describe the experience of another and then proceed in disclosing their own victimization. Questioning about less threatening subjects like peripheral details and others' victimization helps the child

gradually work into talking about his or her own molestation.

5. Sometimes, interviewers attempt to deal with avoidant children by repeating questions. Do not ask the same question over and over. This may seem to the children like badgering, and result in their becoming more entrenched in denial and avoidance, while giving rote answers designed simply to end the questioning. If you must repeat a question, change your vocabulary or the way you phrase the question.

6. If children are behaving hyperactively, attempt to structure their activity. Ask them to show you how high they can jump. If children are being aggressive, direct their aggression toward an inanimate object, such as a pillow or large stuffed animal. Children have very few opportunities to express their anger in a socially acceptable manner. Providing them with a structured and controlled outlet for this emotion can be therapeutically valuable, and useful in learning the causes of their behavior.

When none of these strategies work, simply terminating the interview may be the best option. Never act disappointed or frustrated: children should not be made, even inadvertently, to feel as though they have failed in some way by not talking about molestation. Their task has been much more difficult than yours. Ask if they have any questions for you, and thank them for participating in the interview.

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