

# PRACTICE Developmental Considerations in Forensic Interviews with Adolescents

—by Wendy Susan  
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and Michael Hertica

## Introduction

In the past eight to ten years, many articles and books have been written regarding the special developmental considerations for interviews with children who are suspected victims of child sexual abuse (Saywitz and Damon, 1988; Freeman and Estrada-Mullaney, 1987; Faller, 1988; Goodman and Reed, 1986). At the same time, little information has become available regarding the special considerations required for effective interviewing of adolescents who are suspected victims of sexual abuse. A successful forensic interviewer of adolescents must not only know and use good interview techniques, but must have an understanding of adolescent development and how it may affect the interview process. The information in this article is intended to improve investigative interviews where the information obtained may be used in the criminal justice system. It is critical to remember that the focus of attention in any case proceeding into the court system will likely be on the interview and the interviewer.

## Normal adolescent development: An overview

According to Jean Piaget, the developmental psychologist who described the concept of cognitive stages of development, the capacity for "formal operational thought" begins in adolescence and characterizes adult cognition. Formal operational thinking involves the ability to reason hypothetically, to take into account a wide range of alternatives, and to reason "contrary to fact." Developmental psychologists have come to believe this capability exists in only 30%-40% of adolescents and adults in America (Gardner, 1982). Thus, many adolescents (and many adults) who appear to be mature may not yet be cognitively equipped to fully participate as effective adults in society (Keniston, 1971). Uncertainty, lack of education and experience, confusion about identity, and the emotional turmoil that accompanies rapid growth further limit the adolescent's ability to appear as a competent witness in an investigative interview.

Adolescents may appear physically mature and have some cognitive ability to understand how the world works, but psychologically still be dominated by egocentric thinking.

Egocentric individuals have difficulty accepting the perspectives of others and tend to take more responsibility for events than is realistic. Excessive self blame or internal attribution of responsibility may result in the adolescent's accepting responsibility for acts that are beyond his or her control, including incidents of molestation or abuse. The adolescent's sense of responsibility or egocentric view of life differs from childhood egocentrism in a very specific way. While the child thinks "everything happened because of me," the adolescent believes that,

"While everything did not happen because of me, I should have been able to control or stop it" (Celano, 1992).

All of these developmental issues can have a dramatic impact on the investigative interview of an adolescent. It is important to remember that the adolescent's interview requires the same skill and understanding on the part of the interviewer as the child's interview. It is essential to a successful interview that the interviewer be able to understand the adolescent's perspective and appeal to his or her needs and concerns (Barker, 1990).

## Physical development

As with younger children, adolescent physical development is rapid and wide ranging. Development is uneven across the population, with some youngsters maturing early in terms of height, weight, and secondary sexual characteristics, and others still appearing very young and immature even until age sixteen.

Early physical maturity can present a serious social handicap for girls, while boys appear primarily to reap social benefits from being ahead of the growth norm (Steinberg and Hill, 1978). Early maturation, however, can put both boys and girls at great risk, making them appear more erotic and more sexual than they really are. Because adolescent physical growth is erratic, not gradual, the teenager seldom has the opportunity to adjust to new levels of physical maturity before demands to "live up to your appearance" surface. Early maturation can cause adolescents to be brought into sexual situations which they cannot emotionally handle.

Girls who mature early may find themselves outgrowing boys their own age and may become the subject of unwanted attention from older and adult males. Boys who mature early are prized socially and athletically, but may also be the target of unwanted or confusing sexual attention from adults. Adolescents who are abused after developing secondary sex characteristics may feel, guiltily, that their appearance triggered the abuse. Offenders may manipulate the mature-looking victim by playing on this sense of guilt and by suggesting that the child's physical development is a sign that he or she is ready in every sense for sex (Celano, 1992).

The adult appearance of the early maturing adolescent poses a challenge for the interviewer, who must maintain his or her focus on the emotional and cognitive levels of maturity in the subject of the interview, which are often at great disparity with his or her looks.

## Intellectual development

As mentioned above, Jean Piaget theorized that adolescents have the capacity to conduct formal operational thought, just as adults do. That is, he suggested that adolescents are able to fully mentally conceptualize, do long-range thinking, and consider all options. Formal operational thinking includes the

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ability to talk about things using language where words represent objects and actions. Formal thinkers can understand similes, allegories, metaphors, and irony; they can think about their own thinking (metacognition) and about other people's thinking; hypothesize about other people's motives and perspectives; and conceptualize and construct theories apart from concrete reality (Gardner, 1982). In reality, however, many adolescents have not reached this level of thinking, and some never will. For much of the American population, concrete thinking is the dominant perspective. Concrete thinking, according to Piaget, involves black and white perspectives, concentration on short range fixes, immediacy, and restricted perspectives.

David Elkind, a gestalt and transpersonal psychologist who has worked extensively with adolescents, describes some of the perspectives of adolescents which reflect their psychological egocentrism and concrete thinking. Elkind describes how adolescent psychological egocentrism results in the adolescent projecting his or her private

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thoughts onto others and interpreting these thoughts as public information, creating what Elkind calls an "imaginary audience" which thinks, fears, and judges the adolescent in the same way the adolescent judges him- or herself. Adolescents, according to Elkind, are particularly sensitive to a great number of issues because they truly believe that they are under constant scrutiny and judgment (Elkind, 1979). The individual who is fully cognitively mature, with formal thinking processes intact, can challenge his irrational fears about what others think. But most adolescents cannot comprehend that their projected beliefs are not really what others are thinking.

For adolescent victims, any sense of self-blame (internal attributions) is particularly painful because the victims believe that others may know about the abuse simply by looking at them (Celano, 1992).

Elkind also talks of adolescents' "personal fables," in which they project themselves, their parents, and their friends onto an ideal standard that results in an unrealistic belief in their own invulnerability and uniqueness (Elkind, 1979). This limitation in evaluating reality can result in enormous risk taking. Adolescents will take on situations clearly beyond their abilities, such as sexual situations, which they fully believe they are capable of handling but in which, in fact, they are unable to control crucial variables. The authors refer to this "personal fable" as adolescents' "As If Thinking," or "Magical Thinking," in which adolescents make decisions and act as if what they wish and believe are reality.

The predominance of concrete thinking, combined with the power of the imaginary audience and

the personal fable, make reasoning and confrontation ineffective ways to communicate with adolescents. Empathic, emotional appeals that reflect the interviewer's understanding of the unique perspectives of the adolescent are more likely to be productive.

In professional interviews about victimization, the adolescent is very often an "unwilling subject." The unwilling subject displays the following characteristics:

- Fear of not being believed.
- Embarrassment and humiliation.
- Feeling unduly responsible and accountable.
- Wanting to protect the abuser or the family.
- Believing that he or she alone can cope with the existing situation.
- Fear of what his or her own pleasure, passivity, enjoyment or response might mean in the context of disclosure.
- Fear of reprisal.
- Fear of exposure to others.

In other words, the unwilling subject has a powerful stake in *not* disclosing about events of victimization.

### Language

While adolescents technically have sophisticated language—that is, they use all parts of speech—their "in" language predominates and has much more meaning for them than formal communication. Many adolescents have limited vocabularies, and the interviewer's language must be congruent with the adolescent's level of understanding. Adolescents' concern about the "imaginary audience's" perspective may lead them to be reluctant to ask for clarification or to acknowledge when they do not understand what is being discussed.

Adolescents, particularly those with emotional problems, chaotic lifestyles, trauma histories, or learning disabilities may have particular difficulties with language and cognition. These difficulties can include:

1. Difficulty in sequencing events and main ideas.
2. Fragmented understanding of questions.
3. Fragmented responses which do not adequately convey their message.
4. Poor listening skills.
5. Abrasive conversational speech.

When language and communication problems exist, the interview is much more complicated. It is more difficult with an adolescent than with a child to sort out whether the problem is one of language, cognitive development, or emotional barriers. However, the effective interviewer must be able to identify the source of the communication problem and utilize appropriate strategies to overcome it. This would include an assessment of language ability during the rapport-building session.

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### Social development

Adolescents' primary developmental task is establishing an independent sense of identity and finding their place among their peers (Erikson, 1968). Therefore, adolescents are very concerned with peer group approval and may appear to have little or no concern about the approval of adults. They are striving for emotional emancipation from their family and hence may be very reactive to any interactions with adults that smack of parental discretion or authority.

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Victimization dramatically undermines adolescents' nascent sense of identity and independence. They are typically very reluctant to disclose this loss of control to anyone. Forensic interviewers often are identified with parents and other authority figures, and may find adolescents very evasive and hesitant to disclose.

### Emotional development

Adolescents tend to be self-centered, volatile, shame-filled, guilty, easily humiliated, awkward, and unrealistic in their self-assessments. Adolescents are more confident than competent, and often refuse to admit that they do not know what they do not know.

### Sexual development

Sexual abuse interferes with the normal developmental unfolding of natural sexual feelings, desires, and identity. Because adolescents clearly recognize they have their own sexual thoughts and feelings, they readily take responsibility for anything that may happen to them sexually. They may not be able to differentiate, because of emotional immaturity and cognitive limitations, between purposeful sexual activity and sexual activity in which they have been coerced, seduced or manipulated.

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Sexual abuse victims also are at risk for developing serious body image problems, thinking of themselves as tarnished or believing that anyone who looks at them can see their sexual victimization. Their shame and humiliation at being victimized accentuates the normal complement of discomfort and embarrassment that accompanies having a body which is changing faster than they can accommodate to it. This condition leads to serious limitations in adolescents ability to sort out sexual abuse from chosen sexual interaction (Celano, 1992).

### Reasons for disclosure

If adolescents are unwilling or reluctant disclosers of abuse, what will motivate them to discuss

details of sexual abuse? Typical reasons for disclosure by an adolescent include:

1. The family is being disrupted as a result of other stresses.
2. The offender has left the home.
3. The adolescent develops the insight that the abuse is not okay or that there are more serious implications than he or she had realized earlier.
4. The adolescent is directly asked about abuse and given assurances of a safe environment.
5. The adolescent finds a safe relationship; i.e., a love relationship or a therapeutic alliance.
6. The offender or another significant other dies.
7. The adolescent becomes aware that other children or siblings are at risk.
8. The abuse becomes intolerable.

Many adolescents disclose abuse when they have become angry enough at the offender to overcome their humiliation and their reluctance to disclose. Anger is a "red flag" for some interviewers, suggesting a motivation for false allegations. From the authors' perspective and experience, false allegations of sexual abuse from adolescents are rare. While anger may play a role in false allegations, anger is one of the most common motivators for true disclosures of abuse among adolescents (Sorensen and Snow, 1991). When false allegations of abuse are suspected, investigators should be aware that such allegations most frequently signal other serious difficulties in the family life of the adolescent.

### Setting up the interview

Adolescents, more than children, may have a gender preference regarding the interviewer. They may also want a support person with them during the interview. Asking about both these issues demonstrates your concern.

The interview itself involves much the same format as an interview with a suspected child victim. The interview involves three phases: (1) Rapport building, which includes a developmental assessment; (2) Information gathering, which includes asking open-ended questions that cue the adolescent to what you need to know, eliciting significant and telling details of the abuse, and exploring the adolescent's perspective on who is accountable; (3) and finally, Closure, in which fears, concerns and a summary of the interview are reviewed.

### Credibility guidelines

Corroborating disclosures of sexual abuse by suspected adolescent victims include the following areas for exploration (not necessarily during the interview process):

1. Have there been previous allegations and if so, how were the disclosures made? Statistically, children who are victimized by sexual and physical abuse are at greater risk for future victimization. Conversely, if an adolescent has been victimized in the

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- past and experienced secondary gain during or after the disclosure (e.g., attention, material rewards, relief from responsibility, excessive power in the family), there may be a greater risk for a false disclosure.
2. What is the sexual history? How did the adolescent learn about sex? Is there a history of sexual activity? This is necessary history for evidentiary reasons. (Interviewers should be careful to explain the reasons that this information is necessary, so that the process of inquiry not unnecessarily traumatize the adolescent).

3. Is there a history of chronic running away, truancy, or substance abuse on their own or within the family? Is there self-mutilation or other behavior injurious to the adolescent?
4. Is there a history of acting out physically or sexually? Any history of firesetting?
5. Have there been recent changes in the family constellation that may account for disclosure? What has been the history of family relationships?

Parts or all of this information may not be relevant to the case being investigated. These are areas, however, that the interviewer should consider as they may become issues in the criminal justice process.

### Cautions for the interviewer

Interviewing the adolescent victim can present a major challenge to the professional interviewer. This individual looks, and in many ways acts, like an adult who is capable of a spontaneous disclosure of victimization. Special developmental issues do exist, however, and must be considered if success in the interview process is to be achieved.

Throughout this article, the authors have provided practical considerations in the various areas discussed. Additionally, interviewers may benefit from the following tips:

1. Remember, the independence-identity issues of adolescents are very powerful. Control is a very important issue for them. Allowing the suspected victim to feel in control of the pace and structure of the interview can be of great benefit.
2. While realizing that the interview has a serious purpose, it may be beneficial to try to lighten up the atmosphere using appropriate humor to make the adolescent feel more at ease.
3. Recognize that the fear that disclosure may mean things will get worse is real and valid.

4. Recognize that adolescents do not, and do not want to, see themselves as powerless. Rather than emphasizing "It's not your fault" as you might do with a child, allow them to accept some accountability and help them find a way to forgive themselves. Also, try to help them plan a way to protect themselves from future decisions which might lead to victimization.

5. Recognize that the adolescent's consensual sexual history confuses the issue for them; they have great difficulty differentiating their own sexual feelings and desires from what has been imposed upon them.

6. Remember that even though adolescents may be capable of formal operational thinking and a sociocentric perspective on world events, when it comes to their own victimization they may be interpreting things from a much younger level of emotional and psychological maturity. They require the same compassionate considerations in the interview process as do young children if they are to participate in a meaningful way.

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