

***Finding Words/Half a Nation:*
The Forensic Interview Training
Program of CornerHouse and APRI's
National Center for Prosecution of
Child Abuse**

**Lori S. Holmes, MA, LISW
and Victor I. Vieth, JD**

When asked why it was so important to send a man to the moon, President Kennedy replied, "Because the moon is there." When asked why we developed *Finding Words* and are now replicating this course around the country as part of *Half a Nation by 2010*, we reply, "Because abused children are there." Boys and girls, young and younger, are struggling to survive in every community in this country and, because these children are out there, we must be here, on the front lines of child protection. *Finding Words/Half a Nation by 2010* may be the single largest initiative on behalf of abused children in the history of our republic.

As part of the *APSAC ADVISOR's* new series on child forensic interview training programs, the editor has sent a set of questions to major trainers. These questions and our answers follow.

1. Training model: Do you have a training model of what constitutes a competent or "good enough" child forensic interview? What are its components and its characteristics?

Although there is no such thing as a perfect interview, a competent interview takes place when a child is interviewed in a developmentally and linguistically appropriate manner in a child-friendly environment by someone who is adequately trained. The 5-day *Finding Words/Half a Nation* curriculum is designed to produce competent forensic interviewers who can defend their interviews in court. The program is rooted in several core beliefs.

First, we believe forensic interview training is most effective when teams rather than individuals receive instruction. Accordingly, we require teams of police officers, child protection workers, and prosecutors to attend trainings together. We believe the prosecutor is an essential member of the team. If a child reveals abuse, the civil child protection and criminal investigations may be for naught unless the interview can be defended in court. Prosecutors trained with their teams in child forensic interviewing will acquire optimal skills and knowledge to question interviewers on the stand, to educate judges, and to cross-examine defense expert witnesses. Moreover, when children are called to the witness stand, prosecutors need to ask developmentally and linguistically appropriate questions.

Second, we believe forensic interviewers should be taught by practicing forensic interviewers, utilizing an interview protocol that takes into account pertinent research and is defensible in court.

Although there is no such thing as a perfect interview, a competent interview takes place when a child is interviewed in a developmentally and linguistically appropriate manner in a child-friendly environment by someone who is adequately trained.

Although there are several acceptable protocols, it is not feasible to teach them all in a one-week course. *Finding Words* uses CornerHouse's RATAAC protocol, and it is taught by CornerHouse forensic interviewers. Those on the front line of daily child interviewing want to leave a course with an interview format they can put to use the following Monday morning. RATAAC makes this possible. RATAAC is simple yet complex. It is simple in that it is a mnemonic device with each letter standing for a different stage of the protocol: Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch Inquiry, Abuse Scenario, and Closure. A student who can remember "RATAAC" can remember the entire protocol. The protocol is complex, however, in that each component takes into account a child's age, developmental functioning, and other variables. RATAAC cannot be taught by simply reading an article or attending a workshop; the protocol must be taught in a course that is intense and hands-on.

Third, we believe students must master a variety of content areas that pertain directly to competent child forensic interviewing. These include the following: dynamics of and victim responses to child sexual abuse; child development and age-appropriate questioning guidelines; the process and potential blocks to disclosure; effective use of and withstanding legal challenges to anatomical dolls, diagrams and drawings; the search for corroborative evidence; hearsay; memory and suggestibility; preparing the child and forensic interviewer for testifying; and diversity issues.

Fourth, we believe that students must read the pertinent research themselves. All *Finding Words* students must study several hundred pages of homework assignments. The purpose behind the homework is to empower students to testify in court that they have not only attended lectures about pertinent research but they have also read much of this research themselves.

Fifth, students must demonstrate their skills and be critiqued by their peers and by professional interviewers. As part of *Finding Words/Half a Nation*,

every participant must interview a child about a nonabuse event, such as a trip to the zoo. Each participant also conducts one videotaped interview with a professional actor who portrays a child sexual abuse victim. Both of these exercises take place in a small group format with a maximum of 10 student multidisciplinary team members and one professional forensic interviewer. The students receive both written and oral critiques from their peers and the professional forensic interviewer. The purpose behind the peer critiques is to get each community comfortable with ongoing peer review. We teach students that no ego should stand in the way of protecting a child and that we have a moral responsibility to be vigilant in improving one another's skills. Participants keep their videotapes and written interview critiques for further review at home.

Sixth, students must demonstrate their ability to defend basic interviewing concepts in court. They are required to complete an essay examination, which although stressful, is less stressful than testifying in court. Essay examinations prepare students better for court testimony than do multiple choice tests. In court, forensic interviewers are never asked multiple choice questions that contain

the correct answer as one of four choices. Like the questions asked in court, essay questions test recall memory rather than recognition memory.

2. Leading questions: Most models include the instruction to avoid leading questions. What is your operational definition of a leading question?

A leading question is in the eye of the beholder, and defense attorneys too often categorize every question that is not open-ended as "leading." In the *Finding Words* definitions of question types, we consider as leading only "mis-leading" questions. These include tag questions, "Your mom touched your butt, didn't she?"; statement of fact questions, "I know someone hurt you. Who was it?"; and assumptive questions, "Where were you touched?" when the child has not mentioned being touched. None of the other question types suggest a single answer to the child. Students are taught never to ask a misleading question in a forensic interview.

3. History: How did *Finding Words* and *Half a Nation* come about?

CornerHouse, an interagency child abuse evaluation and training center located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, opened in 1989 utilizing the RATAAC protocol to interview alleged victims of sexual abuse. Professionals around Minnesota began asking if CornerHouse could teach them how to do this type of interview. In 1990, CornerHouse began teaching the 5-day, child sexual abuse forensic interview training course. In an 8-year period, CornerHouse trained teams of prosecutors, investigators, and child protection workers in 82 of Minnesota's 87 counties. CornerHouse found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the demand for the training, even with 9 courses a year training 10 people at a time.

In 1991, Cottonwood County, a rural county in southwestern Minnesota, overhauled its child protection system and implemented a series of reforms. As part of this process, all interviewers were required to attend CornerHouse training. Because of these efforts, the county charged and convicted twice as many sex offenders in a 4-year period as had occurred in the previous 12 years. Victor Vieth was serving as an assistant county attorney in Cottonwood at this time, and he believed strongly that the training he and his colleagues received at CornerHouse was instrumental in the county's dramatic success (Vieth, 1998).

In 1997, Mr. Vieth was hired as a senior attorney with the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse (NCPCA) in Alexandria, Virginia. NCPCA is part of the American Prosecutors Research Institute, the nonprofit affiliate of the National District Attorneys' Association. In response to many calls from frontline child protection workers, police officers, and prosecutors for forensic interview training, APRI proposed to present the CornerHouse model of training on the national stage in a new format titled *Finding Words*.

Finding Words was first presented in Savannah, Georgia, in 1998. APRI received over 400 applications from teams around the country seeking admittance to the course. The *Finding Words* title, the real child interview exercise, and four of the lecture topics are all

that set the CornerHouse and *Finding Words* trainings apart. The *Finding Words* course is described in this paper.

Because the demand for *Finding Words* was so great, APRI and CornerHouse decided to limit its training at the national level and instead to assist states in establishing their own 5-day courses to be locally run and taught. We set as our goal establishing 25 state programs by 2010. The project has been completed in South Carolina, New Jersey, Indiana, and Mississippi. In 2003, the project will be completed in Georgia and Missouri and in 2004, in West Virginia and Maryland. As of this writing, over 40 states have contacted APRI for applications to be admitted into the program. For further information about *Half a Nation by 2010*, readers should contact Grant Bauer by e-mail at grant.bauer@ndaa-apri.org or call (703) 549-4253.

4. Personnel: Whom do you train? Teams? Individuals? Rationale?

Several aspects distinguish the *Finding Words* training from other forensic interview trainings. First, professionals cannot simply sign up to attend the course but must submit applications. Second, professionals are more likely to be accepted into the course if they apply as a team made up of a prosecutor, law enforcement investigator, child protection worker, and CAC forensic interviewer. Teams that attend the training together are better able to work and support each other when they return to their jurisdictions. Prosecutors knowledgeable about child development are better able to understand why interviewers framed questions as they did, and interviewers trained in reliability factors know better what to say in an interview to increase the chances that their interview will be admitted into court. Investigators learn how to construct interviews for corroborative purposes so that the child's statement never has to stand alone. A child sexual abuse case can be successfully put together only with a team approach.

The RATAAC protocol can be used to interview children not only about sexual abuse but also about other forms of maltreatment and the witnessing of violent crime. Because the protocol is semistructured, there is no set of scripted questions to ask in an interview.

5. Focus: Is the questioning focused on child sexual abuse only? Do your guidelines routinely include questions about physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, and felony animal abuse? Rationale?

The RATAAC protocol can be used to interview children not only about sexual abuse but also about other forms of maltreatment and the witnessing of violent crime. Because the protocol is semistructured, there is no set of scripted questions to ask in an interview. If multidisciplinary team members want questions addressed during the interview regarding neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, or felony animal abuse, the interviewer will ask the questions. If the child provides a lead toward any of these issues, the interviewer will follow the child's lead and explore such topics. For example, if the child says, "He does that only when he's drinking," the interviewer would respond with, "Tell me about his drinking." If child protective services want domestic violence issues explored, the interviewer can ask a question like, "Tell me what happens when someone in your house gets mad."

cont'd on page 6

6. Focus: Do you see your interview protocol or guidelines as prosecution-focused or protection-focused? Do you see conflicts between these goals? In cases of conflict, does protection trump prosecution, or the reverse?

We believe the only effective way to protect children is as a team. Accordingly, forensic interviewing must be both prosecution- and protection-focused. Indeed, prosecution is often a prerequisite to protection. Although most mothers will eventually support their abused children, this is not always done immediately. In some cases, a prosecution is necessary to bring the issue to a head and force the family to deal with the abuse. Even when a mother immediately supports the child, she may have feelings of guilt or shame that the team must address so the mother can support the child appropriately.

We see no conflicts between the goals of prosecution and protection. In individual cases, there may be differences of opinion about whether to proceed civilly, criminally, or both, and the team as a whole will have to decide. This is another reason why we train teams, in the hope that the various players will gain a better understanding of each other's roles and learn to work together for the betterment of children.

7. Structure: Do you teach structured protocol, semistructured protocol, or flexible guidelines? Rationale?

RATAC is a semistructured process for which one or more stages can be modified or eliminated, thus allowing for the developmental level and unique characteristics of each child as well as the particulars of each case. RATAC is the acronym for the first letter of each stage of the interview process: Rapport,

Anatomy Identification, Touch Inquiry, Abuse Scenario, and Closure. The process as a whole is successful because of the various techniques utilized within each stage. Protocol stages and techniques are based on research in areas such as child sexual abuse, child development, and suggestibility.

8. Content: How do you build rapport? How do you initiate the questions designed to move to the topic of concern or the abuse allegation?

Rapport is established as part of the interview process rather than before the interview begins. Rapport, the first stage of RATAC, is intended to establish the child's comfort, communication, and competence. To establish comfort, the interviewer obtains "equal positioning" with the child by, for example, sitting on the same-size chairs, or on a couch instead of chairs at opposite ends of a table. Interviewers are also encouraged to reduce their appearance of authority. For police this means interviewing in plain clothes without a gun or badge. Interviewers are taught to maintain a friendly, objective stance and to avoid an interrogation mode.

Interviewers learn to pay attention to all three ways a child communicates—language, behavior, and emotion. All three forms of communication may provide key information and reveal potential blocks to disclosure. Children's behaviors and emotions may be inconsistent with their language, as when a child may insist that nothing

has happened while crying and pulling her hood up over her head.

The interviewer is also taught to conduct a mental assessment of the child's developmental abilities during rapport building. It is the interviewer's responsibility to establish the child's competence, not the child's responsibility to prove it.

Rapport usually begins when the interviewer draws a picture of the child's face, followed by drawing family circles. (The face picture technique is generally skipped with children older than age 10; between ages 8 and 10, children are offered a choice about having the face picture drawn.) A large pad of flip chart paper sits between the interviewer and the child and becomes the means and focus of communication. The interviewer is generally the one who completes the drawings, but on occasion, the interviewer may offer the child a marker to assist in the drawings. While the interviewer is drawing the face picture, she is asking the child various questions to assess the child's level of development, vocabulary, and narrative ability. By drawing the child's face picture, the interviewer communicates to children from the start that they are important. When making family circles, the interviewer invites children to tell about whom they live with, who is in their families, or both. As children tell about their families, the interviewer draws small circles on the flip

chart paper and, under each circle, records family members' names and relationships and the ages of any children. If the interviewer determines that further rapport building is necessary, she may also query the child about school, hobbies, or friends.

Anatomy identification follows, to establish the young child's ability to differentiate gender and to find out the child's names for body parts. Two anatomical diagrams, of the same ethnicity and developmental stage as the child being interviewed, are shown to most children through age 9. The young child

is asked to indicate which diagram is the girl and which is the boy and is then asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?" The interviewer then tapes the diagram that is the same gender as the child on the flip chart, while stating that the diagrams are used to find out the child's words for various body parts. The interviewer begins by circling body parts at random and asks the child, "What do you call this?" The interviewer neutrally repeats back what the child has said, allowing the child the opportunity to correct the interviewer. The interviewer then writes on the diagram whatever word(s) the child uses.

Next, the interviewer transitions into touch inquiry for the purpose of assessing the child's ability to understand and communicate about touch. Unless a spontaneous statement is made during rapport building or anatomy identification, this is the stage of the interview in which questions explore the abuse allegation. The interviewer begins by discussing touches that would generally be considered positive. The interviewer may say, "When kids come to talk to me, I talk to them about different kinds of touches. I'm wondering if you ever get touches that you like?" The interviewer follows this up by saying, "Tell me about the touches you like." The interviewer will clarify, if necessary, from whom the child gets the touches and where on the child's body he or she gets those touches. The interviewer then asks the child, "Are there places on your body where it's not

We believe the only effective way to protect children is as a team. Accordingly, forensic interviewing must be both prosecution- and protection-focused. Indeed, prosecution is often a prerequisite to protection.

okay for other people to touch?" The diagrams that were utilized during anatomy identification can also be used here to allow the child to point to the places where it's not okay for people to touch. The interviewer can follow up by asking the child, "Has someone ever touched you in one of those places?" If a child responds affirmatively, the interviewer is taught to say, "Tell me all about that." Alternative ways to inquire include asking about touches the child doesn't like, places the child doesn't want to be touched, and places no one is supposed to touch.

To focus the child on the abuse allegation, the interviewer can also try questions such as the following: "Did you have to go to the doctor because something happened to you?" "Did you tell your mom that something happened to you?" "Did something happen to you that you didn't like?" Even though these are yes-no questions, they are followed by "Tell me all about that," so that the child may access free recall rather than recognition memory. We teach students never to presume anything and to respect the process of disclosure. So even if the intake says the child went to the doctor, the interviewer would *not* say, "I understand that you went to the doctor; tell me about that." Instead, the interviewer asks the child a question.

9. Content: Does your protocol vary according to the developmental level of the child being interviewed? Rationale?

Because RATAc is a semistructured process, one or more of the stages can be modified or eliminated, allowing for the developmental considerations of each child. It is virtually impossible to ask the same question of a 3-year-old that you can of a 13-year-old. Every stage of the process needs to be geared to the developmental needs of *that* child. For example, although it is extremely beneficial to draw a face picture to develop rapport with a 4-year-old, it would be generally detrimental for building rapport with a 12-year-old. The sample questions in this article represent those we teach for use with 6- to 8-year-olds.

10. Content: What do you teach about the use of interview aids? Rationale?

Finding Words teaches the use of drawings, anatomical diagrams, and anatomical dolls. Adults in forensic settings frequently use props or other aids when explaining their experiences. In a traffic case, for example, an accident reconstructionist may use models or toy cars to demonstrate events. If adults can use such aids, why would we deny the same opportunity to children, who may have less communicative ability and greater need? Because some children need demonstration aids to explain their experiences fully, failure to use them condemns many children to fall through the cracks of our child protection system.

Drawings

Freehand drawings on a large pad of flip chart paper are utilized as a technique throughout the RATAc protocol. There are at least nine ways in which the drawings can be helpful during the interview. First, drawings help establish rapport. Second and third, they can clarify communication with the child while inviting correction

from the child. If the interviewer incorrectly spells the child's name, for example, the child can see this and let the interviewer know he or she made a mistake. This lends credibility to the child in the sense that it demonstrates the child is willing to correct the interviewer when he or she gets something wrong. Fourth, drawings help prod the child's memory. Fifth, drawings can increase the recall of details. When the child says that he or she was touched in the bedroom, the interviewer can say, "Tell me all about your bedroom." The interviewer can then begin to draw the room as she asks clarifying questions like, "What's in your bedroom?" Sixth, when an investigator goes out to corroborate the child's statement, the drawings then demonstrate the child's credibility and competence. Seventh, the drawings provide evidentiary information. These drawings become part of the record and can be introduced as exhibits during trial. Eighth, the drawings help take away some of the intensity from the interview process. Both the child and the interviewer have something upon which they can focus besides each other. And lastly, if the child starts to become distracted or uninterested, the interviewer can use the drawings to reengage the child. This can be as simple as the interviewer saying, "Look at this picture a minute..."

Diagrams

The *Finding Words* anatomical diagrams that are utilized are outline drawings of nude boys and girls at various stages of development. The diagrams look like real people in that they include facial and age-appropriate body features. The diagrams are of both males and females of various ethnicities. As with any interview aid, interviewers should be able to articulate the purpose for using anatomical diagrams (Holmes & Finnegan, 2002). There are at least four purposes for using the diagrams. First, a number of authorities recognize the value of the diagrams in assisting the child to identify body parts (American Professional

Because RATAc is a semistructured process, one or more of the stages can be modified or eliminated, allowing for the developmental considerations of each child. It is virtually impossible to ask the same question of a 3-year-old that you can of a 13-year-old.

Society on the Abuse of Children, 2002; CornerHouse, 2002; MacFarlane, Waterman, et al., 1986; Sorenson, Bottoms, & Perona, 1997), thereby lessening the chance the interviewer will unwittingly suggest the name of a body part and the child will adopt that name. Second, the diagrams may assist the interviewer in determining a preschool or developmentally delayed child's understanding of, and ability to distinguish between, male and female gender (CornerHouse, 2002). Third, interviewers can ask children to indicate on the diagrams where sexual touching occurred (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2002). Research findings indicate that anatomical diagrams are effective in obtaining body touch information from children (Steward & Steward, 1996). Fourth, anatomical diagrams are useful for clarification purposes (Bourg et al., 1999). For example, if a child uses different words to name a certain body part, the interviewer can ask the child to indicate the location of that body part on the diagram.

Anatomical Dolls

The *Finding Words* program utilizes anatomical dolls in accordance with the APSAC guidelines (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1995). The most appropriate functional use that is taught during the forensic interview is as a demonstration aid (Holmes, 2000). In this sense, the dolls are appropriate for the following purposes: to clarify information; allow children to

cont'd on page 8

demonstrate what they cannot or will not say; allow children to distance from their own body; and allow for the opportunity for consistency.

11. Content: What do you teach about questioning reticent (nondisclosing) children?

There are two sections of the course designated specifically to this issue. First, students are taught about the process of disclosure. They are taught to identify the types of disclosure and the various stages of disclosure. Characteristics of tentative disclosure are discussed in detail, and the students are taught to recognize tentative language cues, such as “might have, could have, probably, sometimes, usually,” and so forth.

Second, another session of the course teaches students to recognize potential blocks and problems in the interview and offers interview tips to deal with them. Both of these sections are designed to teach students to respect the process of disclosure while strategizing how to remove specific blocks to disclosure. When a child is not capable or willing to disclose, or when there is no disclosure to make, students are taught to modify RATAAC and move to closure.

12. Content: How are diversity issues integrated into your guidelines or protocol?

Diversity is the exclusive subject of one of the workshops and is otherwise addressed throughout the training. Students are also required to read several articles containing suggestions for better responding to the needs of their diverse communities. We teach students concrete steps for developing cultural sensitivity before, during, and after the forensic interview (Vieth, 2002).

13. Content: What do you teach about interviewing with corroborative evidence in mind, so that the child's interview need not stand alone?

We believe and teach that no child should go to court alone. We argue that every child's statements can be corroborated in some way. We encourage students to think outside the box, to tear apart their videotaped statements from alleged child victims paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, and confirm everything that can be corroborated. We have a specific workshop on this issue, and students receive further instruction in their homework assignments (Vieth, 1999).

14. Outcomes: Have you measured training or protocol outcomes, and if so, how? What have you found?

We have received a grant from the Children's Bureau to measure the effect of *Finding Words/Half a Nation* in those states in which the program has been implemented. We intend to measure such things as the impact of the program on substantiation and conviction rates. If we can document that the program is resulting in better quality cases, we will be able to establish the overall quality of the program in terms of its ability to protect children. This, we believe, is what it is all about.

In the words of Jackie Robinson, “A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives” (Dravecky & Yorkey, 2001). As *Half a Nation* takes its place in the annals of history, may it be said that we empowered tens of thousands of frontline child protection professionals to influence positively the lives of millions of children.

References

- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. (1995). *Practice guidelines: Use of anatomical dolls in child sexual abuse assessments*. Chicago: Author.
- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. (2002). *Practice guidelines: Investigative interviewing in cases of alleged child abuse*. Chicago: Author.
- Bourg, W., Broderick, R., Flagor, R., Kelly, D. M., Ervin, D. L., & Butler, J. (1999). *A child interviewer's guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- CornerHouse. (2002). *Child sexual abuse forensic interview training manual*. CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation Center. Minneapolis: Author.
- Dravecky, D., & Yorkey, M. (2001). *Play Ball*. J. Countryman.
- Holmes, L. S. (2000). Using anatomical dolls in child sexual abuse interviews. *Update*, 13(8).
- Holmes, L. S., & Finnegan, M. J. (2002). The use of anatomical diagrams in child sexual abuse interviews. *Update*, 15(5).
- MacFarlane, K., & Waterman, J., et al. (Eds.). (1986). *Sexual abuse of young children: Evaluation and treatment*. New York: Guilford.
- Sorenson, E., Bottoms, B. L., & Perona, A. (1997). *Handbook on intake and forensic interviewing in the children's advocacy center setting*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Steward, M. S., & Steward, D. S. (1996). Interviewing young children about body touch and handling. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 61(248).
- Vieth, V. I. (1998). In my neighbor's house: A proposal to address child abuse in rural America.

We believe and teach that no child should go to court alone. We argue that every child's statements can be corroborated in some way.

Hamline Law Review, 143(22).

Vieth, V. I. (1999). When the child stands alone: The search for corroborating evidence. *Update*, 12(6).

Vieth, V. I. (2002). Cultural sensitivity in the forensic interview process. *Update*, 15(1).

