

# What Is My Next Question?

## Using Question Frameworks to Improve Children's Narrative Accounts of Abuse

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Do I have to answer? I mean . . . it was only that one time. We were playing outside, and Mommy had to go to the store. He always does stuff when she goes to the store. I think she knows something because she keeps taking my baby brother with her. Daddy said to come inside, but Brandon had to stay outside. Daddy said, "Come here," and he . . . he started doing that. I went to my room, and then Mommy came home.

What is the next question in this forensic interview of an 8-year-old girl?

The field of child forensic interviewing draws upon accepted practices in the areas of question formation (Faller, 2007), knowledge of children's language development (Walker, 1999), and the development of interview protocols such as the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and CornerHouse's Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch Inquiry, Abuse, and Closure (RATAC) protocols (Brown &

Lamb, 2009). Building upon these foundations, how can the interviewer's question framework maximize children's ability to report their experience? This article offers practical strategies to improve the clarity, accuracy, and level of detail children provide by emphasizing the need to structure interview question frameworks in response to children's narrative accounts of abuse.

Although some differences exist among researchers, Faller (2007) noted that the field generally recommends open-ended questions over close-ended questions because of their likely greater accuracy and acceptance in court. Child interviewers are often directed to utilize invitational phrases such as "Tell me about [an event]" to obtain detailed narrative accounts in the child's own words. Interview protocols such as NICHD also advise a "narrative training phase" to teach children to provide descriptive details about an event (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008, p. 88). If children disclose abuse, ideally they will generalize the practice narrative lesson and provide initial narrative accounts of their abuse experience in response to "Tell me everything about that." As seen in the previous example, however, children's initial narratives are rarely, if ever, a complete history of their experience. Further questioning is required to clarify the events described in the initial narrative, along with other potential events and concerns.

Interview protocols offer some guidance on the framework and types of questions to ask after the child provides the initial narrative account. For example, NICHD recommends techniques such as referencing events, people, or actions using the child's words ("contextual cueing"), and asking the child about blocks of time based on the child's account of the event ("time segmentation"). Interviewers can clarify aspects of the child's narrative account by posing, "You said something about X; tell me everything about X." (Lamb et al., 2008). However, interviewers



may *target different aspects of the child's narrative account* depending on their individual style, level of training, and agency role. Without an overarching framework to structure and organize questions, the risk of confusing the child and interviewer increases, and the quality and inter-reliability among interviewers may decline.

## The Initial Narrative Account

The example of the 8-year-old girl's statement contains several characteristics typically found in children's initial narrative accounts. The child provides multiple details about the alleged event but skips information regarding what sexual acts may have occurred, referring only to her father "doing that." The child provides what appears to be a relatively linear timeline of the event from beginning to end as instructed by the interviewer, but there are gaps in the timeline, such as whether Brandon stayed outside and exactly what happened in the house.

Note that the child provides significant levels of detail through the use of a single, open-ended invitational request, which supports the use of these questioning techniques within interview protocols. From the simple "Tell me about that" instruction the interviewer learns that (1) this may have occurred one time, although the child strongly alludes to possible other incidents, (2) it likely occurred at the child's home, (3) her mother went to the store, (4) her brother Brandon was home but likely not present during the alleged abuse, (5) there appeared to be purposeful isolation of the girl from her brother, (6) her father told her to "come here," (7) her father did something, and (8) she went to her room after this alleged incident. The efficacy of eliciting narrative details through open-ended questioning is self-evident, particularly *when considering how many directed, focused questions would be required to obtain this same level of information*. It is also possible that the interviewer would not glean this information using directed focused questions. For example, the interviewer may not have known to ask about her brother's whereabouts or her father's possible attempts to isolate the child from her brother.

While children can provide significant levels of information from these techniques, children and adolescents should not be expected to provide a clear, complete, and detailed account of an event when presented with a single "Tell me about that" request. Other fields of practice do not expect this level of reporting ability from children. For example, pediatricians do not expect children to offer a cogent, organized, and complete history of symptoms using the single phrase "Tell me about your health." Walker (1999, p. 19) advised that children's narrative accounts might appear "incomplete and disorganized" until sometime in the teenage years. Given this premise, the interviewer's task is not only to obtain accurate information but also to organize the flow of information with a question framework, providing that the questions are not leading or overly suggestive.

A well-organized question framework maximizes the child's ability to accurately describe his or her experience, and the interviewer and interview observers ideally obtain a clear understanding of the child's experience. The child's overall outcome improves when one's service and treatment plans are based on the clearest, most accurate information from the child. Conversely, a poorly structured, disorganized interview framework risks confusing the child and yielding inaccurate information by repeatedly switching subjects and time references. The child may be perceived as less credible by professionals and the court system, even though the interviewer, not the child, may be responsible for the lack of clarity.

## Event Versus Scripted Memory

The field of child forensic interviewing recognizes the importance of determining the frequency of abuse to guide interview questions. Failure to match the question framework to the child's description of a single episode versus a combination of multiple episodes typically leads to interviewer errors and the perception that the child is not credible. Therefore, interviewers must be intentional in formulating questions based on whether they are seeking to access event memory or scripted memory. *Event or episodic* memory involves recall of a single, distinct event. This type of memory recall is critical for child abuse assessments, as professionals most often seek specific details of a particular event rather than a generalized account of abuse (Klemfuss & Ceci, 2009). In contrast, *scripted* memory involves an averaging of events over time. Scripted memory typically does not contain the same level of detail regarding specific events, but the generic script may be recalled better and may be more resistant to suggestive questioning than event memory (Olafson, 2007). As a frame of reference, an adult may recall idiosyncratic details of an anniversary dinner at his favorite restaurant (event/episodic memory). The same adult would have difficulty recounting details of every specific visit to the same restaurant over time and would resort to describing what usually occurred at the restaurant, such as what food he usually ordered or where he would usually sit (scripted memory).

## Single-Event Interview Strategy

For single event interviews, the interviewer accesses episodic memory by asking the child to tell about the specific event from the beginning to end. The child responds with an initial narrative account of the event. As seen in the opening example, children often incorporate both the narrative practice experience and the instruction to describe the event from beginning to end, and their account roughly follows a linear timeline of the event. At that point, a simple and effective strategy is to address the child's initial narrative statements from the start of the narrative account, working through the narrative from beginning to end. Because the interviewer asks the child to report completely about an event from the beginning to the end, it follows logically to organize interview questions in this same manner.



Based on the example, the interviewer should first ask the child to describe more about her statement that they were “playing outside.” Following invitational questioning techniques and “contextual cueing” (Lamb et al., 2008, p. 94), the interviewer may pose, “Let’s start at the beginning to make sure I get everything right. You said that you were playing outside. Tell me everything about playing outside.” When the child satisfactorily describes playing outside, the interviewer may inquire about her mother going to the store, and subsequently ask the child to tell more about her father telling her to “come inside” while Brandon stayed outside. The interviewer can then address the critical issue by asking, “You said your father said, ‘Come here.’ Tell me everything that happened when your father said, ‘Come here.’” The child may provide details about the alleged abuse or may still demonstrate avoidance about what occurred. If the child does not respond to this invitational question, the interviewer may pose a focused question, such as “He told you to come where?” Once the child responds, good practice dictates that the interviewer should pair this focused question with an open-ended invitational request, such as “Tell me about what happened then” (Lamb et al., 2008).

Note that the interviewer avoids the temptation to immediately ask about her father “doing that” in response to the child’s initial narrative account. Whether the child was sexually abused is obviously a critical issue. However, transitioning directly to questions about her father “doing that” is problematic in this example, and in most cases, for three reasons. First, the interview will likely fail to clarify contextual details surrounding the abuse event and will often miss critical information. Second, the interviewer risks losing track of which details the child has or has not provided, and must switch time references repeatedly to obtain a complete picture of what happened from beginning to end. Last, the interviewer also risks increasing the child’s avoidance by quickly initiating questions most likely to produce reluctance and anxiety.

Using a practical, linear question framework to explore a single event from the beginning to the end of the child’s initial narrative has several benefits. First, utilizing questions formulated from the child’s own language minimizes potential interviewer errors and assumptions while simultaneously increasing the child’s capacity to provide relevant details (Lamb et al., 2008). Second, the interviewer is less likely to become disorganized, since the children themselves provide the road map for organizing questions. Third, the interviewer clearly conveys that the interviewer is listening carefully to the child’s statements, creating the prospect of effective reciprocal communication throughout the interview. Fourth, questions designed to clarify the beginning of the episode often give children the running start they need to subsequently describe traumatic events. Finally, children often provide information the interviewer would not have obtained otherwise through focused questioning. The end result is more likely to be a clear, detailed account of the alleged event in the child’s own words.

### Multiple-Event Interview Strategy

Multiple-event interviews tend to be complex, given the need to clarify several events over the course of time. For abuse that occurred more than one time, accepted practice recommends attempting to access event or episodic memory by asking the child to isolate one specific event, such as the first, last, or worst time abuse occurred (Lamb et al., 2008; Olafson, 2007). If the child recalls a specific incident, the interviewer structures questions about this specific single event using the single event strategy previously outlined. After the child describes the single event in sufficient detail, the interviewer may opt either to ask about another recalled specific incident (event memory) or shift questioning to what “would” occur over time (scripted memory).

Multiple-event interviews differ depending on case circumstances such as the frequency and duration of abuse. In the authors’ experience, however, until around age 8, children should generally not be expected to provide event memory details on more than one to two episodes within a single interview. The authors also find that the younger the child and the more numerous the

abusive events, the more likely the interviewer may need to switch to scripted memory questions to clarify what “would” happen during additional events after the child provides a single episode description. Once the interviewer chooses to switch to a scripted memory framework, the evaluator’s questions should match the child’s scripted memory responses and be phrased as what “would” or “usually” happen, such as “Would your father ever touch you with other parts of his body?” after the child disclosed one episode of touching.

Some children cannot recall a specific event when abuse occurred more than one time. For example, young children tend to have more difficulty than older children in isolating and reporting details of specific episodes within multiple events (Poole & Lamb, 1998). If the child cannot isolate a specific episode such as the first, last, or worst time, the interviewer has case-specific options. The interviewer may ask the child to “Tell me what happened,” recognizing that the child’s account will likely contain both episodic and script memory details. After the child provides their account, the interviewer may ask whether the alleged abuse happened in a different way or a different place to obtain a more complete history. Alternatively, the interviewer could exclusively utilize scripted memory questions and ask what “would” occur. This strategy attempts to strictly access scripted memory to avoid confusion between single and multiple events. However, the interviewer of young children should be cautious before assuming the child understands and can use scripted recall at will when asked what “would” occur. Furthermore, the interviewer should document any difficulty discriminating between episodic and scripted memory, and note that the child’s account may contain both episodic and scripted details.

Note that scripted memory questions are often focused or yes-no questions, in which any positive response should be paired with an invitational question to “Tell me more about that” (Lamb et al., 2008). By matching scripted memory questions to the child’s scripted recall, the interviewer can glean critical information such as different locations, types of touching, and other idiosyncratic details without confusing the child and risking inaccurate reporting. After exhausting questioning about the alleged offender, the interviewer should ask whether the child was sexually abused by any other individual, and follow up any positive response either within the interview or through additional interviews.



### Shifts Between Episodic and Scripted Memory

Even when children start to report a single incident using episodic memory, they may shift between episodic and scripted memory responses. This phenomenon occurred in the sample narrative statement. The child initially stated that abuse occurred one time, but she alluded to the possibility of more than one incident by stating, “He *always* does stuff when she goes to the store.” She then reverted back to episodic memory and described the one incident when her father called her inside. Interviewers must recognize children’s subtle language changes, marking their switch from event to scripted memory (or vice versa) and formulate questions accordingly. Key words such as *always*, *would*, or *usually* and the use of the present tense indicate a child’s shift to scripted memory. When these switches occur, the interviewer should gently redirect the child back to episodic memory to describe the single recalled event. After the child fully describes this single event in detail, the interviewer should revisit whether events occurred more than once through statements such as “You said before that he always does stuff when your mother goes to the store. Tell me everything about that.”

In increasingly complicated interviews, the child may initially report no clear recall of a specific event, forcing the interviewer to match the child’s scripted memory to a scripted-memory-question framework. As the child reports what would occur, the discussion may spark memories of a specific event. Depending on factors such as the age of the child and the salience of the event, the interviewer can opt to pose episodic memory questions if the child is able to detail this single event. The key point is that the interviewer must identify these shifts wherever they occur and respond accordingly by matching the question framework to the child’s episodic or scripted memory recall.

## Pitfalls

Even in relatively straightforward single-event cases, child interviews are replete with choice points when the child's statements challenge the interviewer's questioning framework. Children may spontaneously offer information about concerns such as domestic violence, substance abuse, or even abuse by other individuals. These choice points create decision trees within the child interview. The method through which the interviewer navigates these decision trees defines variations between interviewers, as individual interviewers may follow different paths within the interview.

Consistent with the narrative in our example, the child may next describe sexual touching by her father and then spontaneously state that her uncle did the "same thing." The interviewer's dilemma is whether to abandon the original line of questioning about her father and ask about the uncle, or to flag this issue and delay asking about the uncle until later in the interview. Interviewers must use their clinical knowledge and experience to inform their decision based on the individual child, but in the authors' experience, the best strategy is generally to avoid repeatedly switching subjects. The interviewer will most likely improve accuracy by exhausting questions about a particular subject on the decision tree before moving to the next. Once the subject is completely explored, the interviewer can move to the next subject.

If the child in the example spontaneously discloses abuse by her uncle as well, the best approach would likely be to advise the child that the interviewer wants to understand better what happened with her father and will ask about her uncle later in the interview (or during an additional interview). The interviewer can cue the child and direct the conversation by simply stating, "If I ask about too many things at once, I get very confused. I'll ask about your uncle a little later, but let's finish talking about your father."

## Conclusion

Our experiences support the use of narrative interview techniques to obtain vastly improved quality and quantity of information from children. The use of such techniques can be further enhanced when interviewers structure their question framework to maximize the child's capacity to verbalize a clear, linear, detailed description of his or her experiences. By using simple strategies to address single-event and multiple-event interviews, interviewers can avoid pitfalls, such as shifts between subjects and between episodic and scripted memory. Ideally, the end results are more accurate and detailed information from children; a forensically defensible interview that maintains the integrity of interview protocols; and improved medical, mental health, child protection, and legal outcomes for children as well as their families.

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