

Comparing the NICHD and RATAAC Child Forensic Interview Approaches—Do the Differences Matter?

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“It’s simple, but not easy. Ask more open-ended questions and fewer closed-ended questions.” This is how Tom Lyon (professor of Law and Psychology at the University of Southern California and an expert on child interviewing) describes the task of conducting a child forensic interview that maximizes reliability while minimizing suggestibility. For the child being interviewed, it’s easy to guess when asked a focused question that can be answered with just one or two words, which increases the likelihood of being wrong. For the interviewer, the challenge is to increase the use of open-ended prompts to successfully elicit more accurate narrative responses from children.

Throughout the world, professionals from a variety of backgrounds (including social work, law enforcement, and others) are now specially trained in child-sensitive “forensic” interviewing. These training programs are likely to mirror one of two popular approaches—a structured “narrative” interview that emphasizes eliciting verbal narratives in response to open-ended invitations (similar to or based on the **NICHD protocol**), or an interview that incorporates early use of media, such as anatomical drawings, along with specific questions regarding “touch” (similar to or following the **RATAAC protocol**). For interviewers trying to enhance their skills and utilize best practices, it is important to recognize both the similarities and differences in these two approaches.

Background

By definition, forensic interviews are investigative in nature and aimed at gathering reliable information that can serve as evidence in civil and criminal courts to help protect children and/or hold offenders accountable. Concerns about inappropriately suggestive interview techniques in high-profile child abuse cases around the globe during the 1980s and 1990s resulted in greater emphasis on open-ended interview techniques most likely to elicit free recall narratives and accurate information. At the same time, it was

recommended that the use of more focused, closed-ended “recognition” prompts be minimized, especially with children under age 6, since research clearly demonstrated the risk they pose of producing unreliable answers.

RATAAC Protocol

Developed by Minnesota’s “CornerHouse” Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) in 1989, the RATAAC protocol includes five elements:

- *Rapport*
- *Anatomy Identification*
- *Touch Inquiry*
- *Abuse Scenario*
- *Closure*

The RATAAC protocol promotes the use of media, including easel pads and drawing of a “face picture” and “family circles” by the interviewer during the rapport stage. This is followed by asking young children to provide names for body parts using anatomically detailed drawings, and discussing touches as the primary method for introducing the topic of suspected abuse with children under age 10. RATAAC instructors encourage interviewers to consider the appropriateness of using anatomical dolls as demonstration aids following a child’s verbal disclosure of sexual abuse. In the one published study involving the use of the RATAAC protocol in 500 real-life interviews for suspected child sexual abuse taking place in 2003 and 2004, interviewers at the CornerHouse CAC introduced anatomical dolls in 49% of their interviews. The RATAAC protocol reflects several practices common in the United States at the time it was developed, such as anatomy identification (sometimes also called “body parts inventory”) and the use of anatomical dolls. The RATAAC protocol has been taught in 17 states, as well as in Japan.

NICHD Protocol

The NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol was developed by a group of researchers (led by Michael Lamb) at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to encourage the use of open-ended prompts to elicit verbal

narrative responses and thus translate widely supported research-based recommendations into operational guidelines. It was first published in 2000. Since then, the NICHD protocol has been utilized in several countries and has inspired adaptations in a number of jurisdictions that integrate and endorse its key components.

Among the approaches based on, or more similar to, the NICHD protocol are (partial list): Tom Lyon's (2005) "Ten Step Investigative Interview," "Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Guidance on Interviewing Victims and Witnesses, and Using Special Measures" from the United Kingdom (2011), Michigan's Forensic Interviewing Protocol, Washington State's Child Interview Guide, Ohio's Childhood Trust Flexible Interview Guidelines (Erna Olafson and Julie Kenniston), the National Children's Advocacy Center's (NCAC) Flexible Interview Model (Linda Cordisco-Steele and colleagues), and North Carolina's RADAR Adaptation of NICHD Protocol (Mark Everson and Chris Ragsdale).

The NICHD protocol is supported by extensive field research involving over 40,000 real-life interviews in the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Canada, and it is described in numerous articles published in many peer-reviewed scientific journals. Phases of the NICHD protocol include the following: *Introductory phase*: explaining the purpose and ground rules; eliciting a promise to tell the truth

- *Rapport-building phase*
- *Training in episodic memory* and narrative event practice
- *Transition to substantive issues*: using open-ended, nonsuggestive verbal prompts
- *Free recall phase*: investigating the incidents using a variety of open-ended prompts
- *Closure*

Approaches based on the NICHD protocol tend to discourage the use of props such as dolls and drawings (or recommend their use only late in the interview if necessary for clarification) due to concerns that they may unnecessarily raise the risk of eliciting inaccurate information.

Similarities

Creators of both the RATA and NICHD protocols were motivated by the desire to improve interview practice and be sensitive to the needs of children. Consequently, there is agreement about a number of guiding principles and interview characteristics, some of which are described next.

Flexibility – Although the RATA protocol is described as "semi-structured" and the NICHD as "structured," both approaches allow interviewers to modify their approach to adapt to the indi-

vidual child and circumstances. For example, if a child immediately starts to disclose abuse at the beginning of the interview process before all initial stages have taken place, both approaches would agree that the interviewer should follow the child's lead rather than postpone discussion of the abuse experience(s).

Interview as only part of the investigation – No matter what protocol is utilized, there is agreement that a forensic interview is only one part of a complete investigation.

Necessity of peer review and ongoing training to reinforce and maintain interviewer skills –

Consistent with the results of research conducted by the developers of the NICHD protocol, proponents of both RATA and NICHD agree that interview training alone is insufficient to maintain and improve interviewer performance. Ongoing training to reinforce skills along with regular support and feedback (including review of interviews with peers) are necessary.

Setting – There is widespread agreement that the interview setting should be private, free from distractions, child-friendly, and neutral. Whenever possible, the interviewer should be the only person present during the interview with the child.

Documentation – Everyone concurs that video recording is the best and most accurate way to document interviews and should be utilized whenever possible. In addition, there is apparent agreement that the child should be informed when the interview is being recorded.

Timing – No matter the preferred protocol, interviewers agree that it is preferable to interview a child as soon as possible after the alleged event(s), while considering the child's mental and physical state and ability to provide information (such as whether it is naptime or the child is otherwise tired or distracted).

Interviewer demeanor – Both approaches endorse an interviewer demeanor that is supportive, warm, and friendly while maintaining objectivity. Interviewers should be open-minded and unbiased and should de-emphasize authority.

Importance of building rapport – Both approaches teach that it is critical for interviewers to engage the child, establish a relationship, and make him or her comfortable before initiating questions about substantive allegations.

Developmental appropriateness – Being developmentally appropriate during an interview is crucial. Both approaches stress that interviewers must pay careful attention to the child's understanding and use of language, and adjust to his or her developmental level. This includes making sure the child understands the interviewer (and vice-versa) and keeping sentences short and simple.

Importance of adapting to the individual child – Consistent with other interview approaches, the NICHD and RATA protocols are in agreement that interviewers should recognize and respect the uniqueness of each child. In addition to adapting to the child’s cognitive developmental level, interviewers should consider the child’s physical age, cultural background and experiences, mindset, level of support,

physical or other disabilities if any, and other unique characteristics if any and adapt accordingly.

Differences

Table 1 indicates some of the differences between the NICHD and RATA protocols. Discussion of three of the key differences follows.

Table 1. Comparison of Interview Approaches*

Components/ Techniques	NICHD-Based Approaches (emphasizing verbal narratives)	RATA-Based Approaches (CornerHouse/Finding Words/ChildFirst)
Introductory Instructions (or “ground rules”)	Routine—interviewer explains expectations (such as <i>“Correct me if I make a mistake”</i>) and acceptable responses (such as <i>“I don’t know”</i>) early in the interview, and includes practice examples with young children	Instructions not included at beginning but reinforced throughout the interview “when opportunity presents itself”
Promise to tell truth; with or without Assessment of Truth/Lie Testimonial Competency	Child is usually asked to promise to tell truth in developmentally appropriate language; Truth/Lie competency of young children <i>may</i> be assessed using examples	Not included —Truth/Lie discussions at beginning of interview are discouraged by RATA instructors
Narrative Event Practice (or “training in episodic memory”)	Important interview stage used to build rapport and to assess child’s use and understanding of language—open-ended invitations are used to elicit neutral or positive event narratives	Not specifically designated as a separate stage or component of the interview
Use of Drawings	Drawings (usually gender-neutral) are used sparingly and generally only after a disclosure when attempts to elicit verbal narratives during substantive questioning have been insufficient	Use of drawings in various ways is encouraged, starting with “face pictures,” “family circles,” and anatomically detailed drawings at beginning of interview (see descriptions that follow)
Face Picture	Not included	When younger than age 8, and child’s choice if 8–10 years—interviewer uses easel pad to draw picture of child’s face and ask questions; part of rapport stage along with family circles
Family Circles	Not included	When younger than age 11 (and older if interviewer chooses), questions about and draws circles to represent who child lives with and help structure child’s report

Table 1. Comparison of Interview Approaches* *continued*

Components/ Techniques	NICHD-Based Approaches (emphasizing verbal narratives)	RATAC-Based Approaches (CornerHouse/Finding Words/ChildFirst)
Anatomy Identification	Not included	Anatomically detailed drawings used to see if children younger than 6 years can differentiate gender, and w/children younger than 10 years to name body parts
Touch Inquiry (to introduce topic of concern)	Not included	Yes/No questions (and follow-up) about positive and negative touch for children younger than 10 years
Nonsuggestive Transition (to introduce topic of concern)	Starts with “ <i>Tell me why you’re here today</i> ” for all children and, as needed, uses question progression that becomes gradually more direct (see, for example, Lyon’s “Ten Step Interview”)	“ <i>What do you know about coming here today?</i> ” can be used w/children ages 10 and over, but not usually w/younger children
Substantive Questioning (called “Abuse Scenario” in RATAC protocol)	Emphasis on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting narratives (such as “<i>Tell me about ...</i>,” “<i>Tell me more</i>,” and “<i>What happened next?</i>”) • Nonsuggestive open-ended inquiries for all ages (and minimizing use of forced choice questions) • Gradual progression as needed to more direct questions • “Pairing” open-ended follow-up requests for more info following direct questions or short answers • More focused open-ended techniques such as cued recall and time segmentation to elicit details 	“Process of Inquiry” model favors fewer free recall/indirect questions and more direct questions (including Yes/No and multiple choice) w/younger children and those w/more emotional trauma; considers more indirect questions (free and focused recall) most appropriate w/older children and those who are less emotionally traumatized; misleading questions should not be asked
Use of Anatomical Dolls	Generally not used	Interviewers are encouraged to use dolls under appropriate circumstances

*This comparison is a brief and partial list of the author’s general impressions of some of the components and techniques and areas of emphasis that may *differ* in these two approaches. Individual practice or specific approaches can vary and often blend different aspects of both approaches.

There are a number of similarities in these approaches not reflected in this chart.

The most significant differences between the NICHD and RATA protocols involve children under the age of 10. Consideration of the differences should take into account that young children, especially preschoolers, are the age group most susceptible to suggestion.

Interview Instructions

Interview instructions or “ground rules” have research support and are specifically included as part of the introductory phase of an NICHD-based forensic interview in order to orient the child to interview expectations, discourage guessing, and increase resistance to suggestion. Recommended instructions incorporated in many approaches based on the NICHD protocol include the following:

1. “Don’t guess”

The child is given permission to say “*I don’t know*” and is told not to guess, accompanied by a practice example (for young children) such as “*What’s my dog’s name?*” Assuming the child says “*I don’t know*,” the interviewer reinforces the answer and asks that the child not guess when answering other questions. Adaptations such as Tom Lyon’s (2005) “Ten Step Investigative Interview” recommend also using an example where the child *does* know the answer, such as “*Do you have a dog?*” and pointing out that the child *should* answer when he or she knows the answer.

2. “Don’t understand”

The child is given permission to say he or she doesn’t know what the interviewer means when a question is not understood, accompanied by a practice example (for young children) such as “*What’s your gender?*” Assuming the child says he or she doesn’t know what that means, the interviewer acknowledges that’s a hard word and says, “*What I mean is, ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’*”

3. “Correct interviewer mistakes”

The child is encouraged to correct interviewer mistakes, accompanied by a practice example (for young children) such as “*What would you say if I said you were 30 years old?*” Assuming the child corrects the interviewer with his or her actual age, the interviewer thanks the child and asks the child to correct any other mistakes by the interviewer.

4. Interviewer lack of knowledge

The child is clearly told that, because the interviewer wasn’t there, he or she doesn’t know what happened and can’t help answer interview questions.

5. Promise to tell the truth

The interviewer asks for a commitment from the child to tell the truth. This can be done by asking the child “*Do you promise that you will tell me the truth today?*” Tom Lyon’s (2005) “Ten Step Investigative Interview” adds the question “*Will you tell me any lies?*” Additional discussion regarding the child’s understanding of the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie is optional.

Tom Lyon points out (and demonstrates in interviews he has conducted) that an interviewer should be able to cover the above-listed instructions at the outset of the interview in 2 minutes or less. After providing instructions at the beginning, an interviewer should continue to offer reinforcement of these ground rules throughout the interview whenever appropriate.

Proponents of the RATA protocol recommend incorporating interview instructions into the body of the interview as the opportunity presents itself (for example, when the child corrects the interviewer or answers “*I don’t know*” on his or her own) rather than reviewing instructions at the beginning of the interview. They argue that “extensive pre-interview instructions” are not necessarily effective and that immediate and positive reinforcement when the situation arises is more helpful. The drawback with omitting instructions at the beginning and waiting until the opportunity presents itself is that reticent or very deferential children, who most need practice and encouragement to apply these instructions, are the least likely to provide the opportunity for reinforcement on their own during the interview.

Narrative Event Practice

Although RATA trainers encourage interviewers to invite children to provide a narrative statement about life experiences during the rapport stage, neutral narrative event practice or “training in episodic memory” is given much greater emphasis as a separate and important interview phase in the NICHD protocol. It recommends that interviewers identify a recent innocuous event experienced by the child and then use a series of open-ended questions and prompts to encourage the child to provide detailed narrative responses and elaboration about that event from episodic and recall memory. Having children “practice” responding to open-ended prompts about neutral experienced events has been shown to increase the amount of information produced from recall memory during the substantive phase of the interview, regardless of their ages. Based on the extensive body of research regarding the use of the NICHD protocol in the field, it is clear that even preschoolers are capable of providing informative narrative responses (albeit shorter than those provided by older children) to open-ended prompts. This is especially important given the greater suggestibility of preschool age children. But since open-ended invitations and narrative free recall responses are a departure from the usual way adults communicate with young children, it takes practice and training of both the child and interviewer with narrative event practice to maximize the child’s ability to provide narratives.

In contrast, RATA’s “Process of Inquiry” teaches interviewers that narrative responses are less likely and that direct and focused questions are more appropriate with young children. Because there is not yet any published research examining the question types and responses elicited by RATA interviewers in real-life interviews, it is not clear how the RATA protocol compares with

the NICHD protocol with regard to the use of direct and focused questions in interviews with young children.

Transition to Topic of Concern

For young children (under age 10), the RATAC protocol utilizes “touch inquiry” as the primary means of introducing the topic of suspected sexual abuse. Children are asked to identify touches they like and touches they don’t like or consider confusing, followed by questions about where on the body they are touched and by whom. The question “*What do you know about coming here today?*” can be used with children 10 and over but has generally been considered developmentally inappropriate with younger children under the RATAC protocol.

The NICHD protocol adopts a much different approach, taking advantage of the fact that in most cases of suspected abuse, the child has made a previous disclosure that is the basis for conducting the forensic interview. The topic of suspected abuse is introduced for all ages by posing an extremely open-ended invitation, for example “*Now that I know you better, tell me why you came to see me today,*” or “*Tell me why I came to talk to you today.*” If the child doesn’t immediately respond with information about the topic of concern, the interviewer can use other open-ended nonsuggestive prompts, for example “*It’s really important for me to know why you came to see me today,*” “*I understand something may have happened to you—tell me what happened,*” “*What did _____ tell you about coming to talk to me today?*” “*Why do you think _____ brought you here to talk to me today?*”

In research involving real-life interviews, interviewers utilizing the NICHD protocol have had impressive success with these prompts—over 80% of initial disclosures of sexual abuse by preschoolers were made in response to such free-recall prompts. If these are not productive, the NICHD protocol gives the interviewer the option to use a series of general prompts, or prompts based on background information, that are as nonsuggestive as possible but become gradually more focused, for example “*I heard you talked to _____ about something that happened—tell me what happened,*” “*I see you have [a bruise, a broken arm, etc.]—tell me what happened,*” “*I heard you saw [the doctor, a policeman, etc.] last week—tell me how come/what you talked about,*” “*Is [your mom, another person] worried about something that happened to you? Tell me what she’s worried about,*” “*I understand someone might have bothered you—tell me what happened,*” “*I understand someone may have done something that wasn’t right—tell me what happened,*” “*I understand something may have happened at [location]—tell me what happened.*”

Conclusion

A great deal of time and attention has been devoted to improving interviews with children regarding suspected abuse over the last 30 years. We now know that using open-ended prompts to elicit free recall narrative responses is critical in order to maximize reli-

able information from children. This is especially true with young children who are more likely to respond with inaccurate information to direct and focused recognition prompts. Tom Lyon’s admonition that interviewers should “*ask more open-ended questions and fewer closed-ended questions*” is indeed a simple concept, but it can be very challenging to implement on a consistent basis. Interviewers should be as knowledgeable as possible about available options, should regularly seek review of their work, and should strive to incorporate evidence-based best practice techniques in their interviews so that children’s voices are heard. As research continues and our experience grows, we will continue to learn more about how to do a better job of protecting children and holding offenders accountable.

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