

Gathering Information From Children About Child Neglect

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In assessing for child trauma caused by maltreatment, a central source of information is the child. Information may derive from the child's verbal and behavioral communications, the child's functioning, and the child's physical condition. The focus of these guidelines is on eliciting verbal communication from the child about child neglect. Child neglect is manifest in a variety of forms: failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, or medical care; abandonment and expulsion; lack of adequate supervision or control; and educational neglect (Depanfilis, 2006). Although this article focuses on gathering information about child neglect, in fact, the evaluator may ask about neglect in a larger context of inquiry into child maltreatment and endangerment. Moreover, the child's words will rarely be the only source of information used to determine neglect.

For professionals assessing for child maltreatment, interest in the child as the source of information originated in efforts to gather data about sexual abuse when the evaluator has little to rely upon other than the child's verbalizations or behaviors. Querying about sexual abuse has taught evaluators important lessons. Evaluators should avoid leading and suggestive questions when at all possible and not use coercive techniques. Not only may such practices result in actual inaccuracies or fabrications but these practices also can result in legal and ethical challenges to the evaluator's work.

Accordingly, the guidelines in this article provide strategies for questioning that advise maximizing the use of open-ended questions/probes and minimizing the use of closed-ended questions/probes. The strategies are based upon a history of interview best practice (e.g., Bourg et al., 1999; Carnes, Wilson, Nelson-Gardell, & Orgassa, 2001; Faller, 1993, 2003, 2007) but are heavily influenced by the more recent research on questioning strategies found in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol (e.g., Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007). The NICHD protocol was initially employed with cases of sexual abuse and then applied to physical abuse. (e.g., Lamb et al., 2007). This article demonstrates how these research-based strategies can be applied to concerns about child neglect (Faller, 1999), but it also offers additional advice based upon practice and experience in gathering information about neglect.

First, the guidelines contextualize neglect-related questions and probes by a brief discussion of the structure of a child interview. Second, within the discussion of a child interview, the guidelines describe a continuum of questions, from more open-ended to more closed-ended, and how the continuum relates to inquiry about child neglect. Third, the guidelines provide strategies for asking about important people in the child's life. These questions may elicit information about child neglect. Fourth, the guidelines suggest questions in two domains that are directly focused on child neglect: the child's care and control and the child's environment. Finally, the guidelines propose questions about parental behaviors that may result in neglect.

Child Interview Structure and a Continuum of Questions

The role of the evaluator, the structure of services, logistical considerations, safety issues, and the specifics of the allegation or concerns all affect the process and content of the child interview. In addition, the evaluator must judiciously juggle competing priorities: the need to know about child neglect and other trauma, the goal of not re-traumatizing the child, the admonition to avoid leading the child, and the issue of child safety.

With these goals in mind, evaluators will find the framework employed in interviews regarding sexual abuse useful when asking about neglect. That is, an interview generally has a beginning, a middle, and an end (Faller, 2007). This three-phase model is simpler than many other models (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Lamb et al., 2007; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Yuille, 2002) and provides the flexibility needed to gather data about possible neglect.

Beginning Phase

The beginning involves contextualizing the interview for the child, describing the evaluator's role, setting some ground rules or expectations, and building rapport with the child (Faller, 2007). What the evaluator conveys to the child about his or her role will vary depending upon that role and the child developmental level.

Useful ground rules include the following: (1) telling the child that the evaluator will be asking questions and advising the child

that if he or she knows the answer, to answer the question, but to say, “I don’t know,” if the child does not know the answer; that is, “don’t guess,” (2) telling the child if he or she doesn’t understand the question to say so, and the evaluator will ask it in a better way, and (3) finding a strategy for determining the child’s ability to tell real from fiction and obtaining the child’s agreement to tell the truth (e.g., Lyon, Carrick, & Quas, 2013; Lyon, Saywitz, Kaplan, & Dorado, 2001). It may be useful to practice the ground rules, for example the “don’t guess” rule (Lamb et al., 2007). Nevertheless, fewer ground rules are preferred because the child may not remember multiple ones.

Although rapport building is essential in the beginning phase of the interview to engender trust, rapport maintenance is an ongoing task in child interviews involving sensitive topics. As the evaluator asks about difficult material, rapport may wane, thereby necessitating additional rapport-building endeavors (Faller, 2007).

In the beginning phase of the interview, the evaluator assesses the child’s overall functioning and development, usually by asking the child to provide a narrative about positive or neutral events. This process determines the child’s capacity to provide a narrative and imparts to the child expectations about the interview discourse (Lyon, 2001). That is, the narrative opportunity teaches the child that the evaluator will invite the child to provide information and then ask follow-up questions to gather additional details.



Middle or Maltreatment-Neglect Phase

The middle of the interview is the neglect assessment phase. Questions/probes/statements used to transition from the beginning phase to the neglect-related portion may differ from best practice in sexual or physical abuse interviews. When sexual or physical abuse is suspected, there may be a recent, salient abusive event about which the evaluator is inquiring (e.g., I understand something may have happened to you; tell me about it.) (Lamb et al., 2007). In contrast, in neglect situations, there often have been chronic caretaker omissions in multiple domains. Sometimes these have resulted in a consequence that is salient to the child, such as becoming homeless or being removed from the home. In such cases, the evaluator can ask an open-ended question/probe about this salient consequence (e.g., Tell me the reason you aren’t living with your mom.). In other cases, however, the evaluator is endeavoring to gather information about possible neglect *before* a decision is made about child safety. In these instances, some transitional or scaffolding statements are needed to alert the child to a change of topic and to introduce the topic of concern (e.g., Lamb et al., 2007).

Since, as a rule, the evaluator will be concerned about caretaker neglect, a good transition strategy may be to ask the child about people who are important to the child (e.g., Now that I’ve gotten to know you a little, I want to ask you about the people who are important to you.). These *people questions* will be described in greater detail. Other possibilities are open-ended queries about the child’s care or the child’s environment, also to be discussed. Evaluators may need to explore multiple domains in neglect situations and therefore will engage in several transitions during the interview.

The content of the middle phase of the interview will vary depending upon the type of neglect the evaluator is attempting to understand. Types of questions and their order of preference will vary depending upon the child, the type(s) of neglect, and the within-interview context of the questions. Nevertheless, it is useful to apply the guidelines for preferred questions/probes related to sexual abuse to the assessment of neglect, that is, privileging open-ended questions/probes and attempting to exhaust the child’s free recall before resorting to the more closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions that elicit information should be followed by more open-ended probes (see Table 1).

Invitational questions that invite a narrative are the most preferred (e.g., Tell me everything you remember about being left alone.). Some children lack the developmental skills to respond to invitations and need “*wh*” questions (e.g., who, what, when, where, and how). “Wh” questions can be general (e.g., How did you get food?) or specific (e.g., What meals did you miss?) (Lyon 2001). General “wh” questions are preferred both because they are more likely to elicit a narrative and because they are less likely to evoke a guess (Lyon, 2001).

Table 1. Question/Probe Continuum From Open-Ended to Closed-Ended

TYPE OF QUESTION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Invitational question/probe	A question/probe that invites a narrative	Tell me everything about your family getting evicted.
“Wh” question	Who, what, when, where, and how	Where did you stay after your family got evicted?
Follow-up questions, probes, cues	Cues that invite the child to provide more detail	Say more about what it was like sleeping in the car.
Direct question	A question that invites a yes/no answer	Did you get evicted because your mom didn’t pay the rent?
Multiple-choice question	A question that provides the child a range of responses from which to choose	Did your mom spend the rent money on something else or didn’t have rent money or some other reason?

Both invitational and “wh” questions should lead to *follow-up questions/probes*, such as “say more about that,” “and then what happened?” or “anything else you remember?” Other appropriate follow-up cues that encourage additional information include “okay,” “umhum,” or repeating the child’s last information with an invitation to add more.

It may be necessary to ask a *direct question* (yes/no) (e.g., Did you ever have to sleep in the car?). When asking a direct question, the evaluator should ask it in the most open-ended manner that is feasible, and an affirmative response should be followed by an invitational probe (e.g., Tell me all about sleeping in the car.). Nevertheless, there are contexts in which yes/no questions are more open than “wh” questions. For example, “Was anyone else in the car?” may be less leading than “Who else was in the car?” if there was no one else there.

Direct questions may be the preferred method of querying about parental endangerment behaviors (e.g., Does anyone in your family use drugs?). A positive response from the child should lead to an invitational probe (e.g., Tell me all about the drugs your mom uses.)

Multiple-choice questions may be appropriate to query about contextual details when the child has made a disclosure about neglect and when invitational probes and “wh” questions do not elicit specifics about the context of neglect (e.g., Did you sleep in the car one night or more than one night?) Multiple-choice questions violate the principle of gathering information from the child, rather than the evaluator supplying information. They may,

nevertheless, be preferable to not knowing contextual details. When employing multiple-choice questions, evaluators should take care to avoid giving the child a forced choice between incorrect responses (Bourg et al., 1999). Adding another option is recommended (e.g., Were you left alone at your house, his house, or somewhere else?) but may create a cumbersome question.

End or Closure Phase

The end is interview closure. During closure, the evaluator may recap the child’s disclosures, using the child’s words. Evaluators may also inquire whether the child has had other neglectful, harmful, or endangering experiences or whether other persons have neglected, harmed, or endangered the child. Affirmative responses to these probes return the evaluator to the middle phase of the interview. During closure, evaluators may thank the child for participating in the interview (Lamb et al., 2007) and give the child a general idea about next steps or the interview outcome (Faller, 2003, 2007).

Substantive Areas for Questions Related to Neglect

Evaluators are advised to plan which domains to ask questions about and to have several strategies for approaching these topics, should the first (or second) leave child safety unresolved. Questions about each neglect-related topic discussed next attempt to provide approaches for exploring topics in an open-ended manner. The questions/probes are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. Evaluators need to tailor their inquiry to the case circumstances and the child’s developmental level.

People Questions

People questions may provide a transition from rapport-building to the neglect-related part of the interview without inquiring directly about neglectful experiences.

a. Transitional statement:

Now I'm going to ask you about the people who are important to you.

b. Invitational probe:

Tell me the people who are important to you.

c. "Wh" questions:

Who are the people who are important to you?

Because the invitational probe and the "wh" question may not be easily understood by some children, the evaluator may need to clarify by using one or more of the following statements:

These might be people who take care of you.

These might be people in your family.

These might be people you are close to.

These might be people you really care about.

Once the evaluator obtains some names, he or she asks about each person in as open-ended a way as possible. If the evaluator thinks that one of these people has neglected or traumatized the child, a good strategy is to save queries about that person until after inquiring about positive people in the child's life. The evaluator will be asking about all of the people the child names. "Your mom" in the suggested questions and probes is merely illustrative.

d. Invitational probes about the people:

Tell me all about (your mom).

Tell me what (your mom) is like.

e. Follow-up probes:

Tell me more about what (your mom) is like.

Anything else you can think of about (your mom)?

f. "Wh" questions:

"Wh" questions about the people are often necessary because invitational questions are too different from ordinary discourse or do not trigger recall, or both. Case characteristics and concerns should be helpful in formulating appropriate "wh" questions. Here are some potentially useful ones:

What do you like about (your mom)?

What don't you like about (your mom)?

It may be more appropriate, however, to ask a yes/no question, such as; *"Is there anything you don't like about (your mom)?"* and then to follow this up if the child provides an

affirmative response. Similarly, questions such as *"Are there any things (your mom) does to you that you don't like?"* probably should precede a "wh" question about *"What things?"*

What sorts of things do you do with (your mom)?

How do you know when (your mom) is pleased with you?

What does (your mom) do when you misbehave?

g. Follow-up probes:

If the child provides a response to a "wh" question, the evaluator should use follow-up probes before asking specific "wh" questions or yes/no questions. Examples are as follows:

Say more about what you like about her.

Anything else you can think of?

Care and Control Questions

Another approach to learning about child neglect is to ask about how the child is cared for. Some of these questions probe for lack of adequate care and supervision and others for failure to provide food and control.



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a. Transitional statement:

Now I'm going to ask you (more) about who takes care of you.

b. Invitational questions:

Tell me who takes care of you. Children will usually mention just one person—my mom. The evaluator can then state, *Tell me all about how your mom takes care of you.* Children may respond that “she’s nice,” or “she loves me.” The evaluator can then probe, *Tell me about the last time she was nice or showed that she loves you.*

c. Follow-up probes:

Tell me more about that time.

And then what happened?

d. “Wh” questions:

These may be employed if invitational probes do not produce information or produce insufficient information. They can be followed by additional “wh” questions, invitational probes, or follow-up probes and questions, or both.

Who takes care of you?

– *How do they do it?*

What things do you like about how they take care of you?

– *Say more about the things you like.*

What things don't you like?

– *Tell me all about the things you don't like.*

When (your mom) isn't there, who takes care of you?

Who helps you get dressed?

Who sees you get to school?

Who takes care of you when you're sick?

Tell me about the last time you were sick.

Who puts you to bed?

– *What time?*

Who cooks?

– *What meals do you eat?*

– *What do you eat?*

e. Yes/no questions:

These are probably preferred when the evaluator is trying to determine whether there are times when there is no food.

A positive response can be followed by more open-ended probes:

Are there any times when there's no food?

– *What do you do then?*

– *Tell me about the last time there was no food.*

A yes/no question is probably a preferred question when the evaluator is trying to determine if there is lack of adequate supervision.

– *Are there times you baby-sit for/take care of yourself?*

A yes/no question is probably preferred to determine whether there is another person available when the child is alone.

Is there someone you can call?

More probes about lack of adequate supervision include the following.

How long are you alone?

Can you tell me about the last time you took care of yourself?

Are there any younger kids you look out for when you babysit yourself?

Tell me about the younger kids.

Parental control is both an abuse and neglect issue. Excessive parental control may signal abusive behavior whereas lax or no parental control may signal neglect. Since the focus of these guidelines is neglect, that is the focus of the questions. Questions related to rules and chores may shed light on neglect.

f. Transitional statement:

Now I want to ask you about the rules at your house.

g. Invitational probes:

Tell me what rules you have at your house. This query is likely to be too abstract. The evaluator might follow up with rules about having friends over, curfew, homework, or hitting.

h. “Wh” questions:

The evaluator may need to ask “wh” questions to determine the rules.

What time to you have to be home (at night, after school)?

What are the rules about doing homework?

Similarly, questions that may elicit a pattern of neglect are probes about chores.

i. Invitational probes:

Tell me what chores you have to do.

The evaluator will need to ask what happens when rules are not followed or chores are not done to determine if there is a pattern of neglect.

Environment Questions

Environment questions may be useful in learning about child neglect or the child's living situation. Responses can supplement an assessment of home.

- a. Transitional statement:
Now I want to talk about the place you live.
- b. Invitational probes:
Tell me all about the place you live.
Tell me all about who lives with you.
Tell me what your house is like.
- c. "Wh" questions:
Who lives at your house?
Where do you sleep? Who else sleeps there?
Where do others sleep?
How many rooms? Tell me about the rooms.
Who cleans at your house?
Where do the pets go to the bathroom?
Who does the laundry?
- d. Direct questions:
Do you have a regular place to sleep? Tell me about that place.
- e. Multiple-choice questions:
Does your dog poop in the house, outside, or both?



Parental Behaviors That Might Endanger the Child or Result in Neglect

The child welfare literature documents that parental behaviors or traits that are not specifically acts of omission (neglect) may result in child neglect or other child endangerment (US DHHS, 2009). Examples are substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems, developmental disabilities, and criminal activity. These are important areas of inquiry when there are concerns about neglect and usually require a combination of direct, invitational, and "wh" questions. Questions related to substance abuse and domestic violence are illustrative and will be covered.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is the parental problem most highly correlated with child neglect because it compromises a parent's ability to provide adequate care and supervision (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2009; DePanfilis, 2006). Additionally, spending family resources on substances may compromise the caretaker's ability to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Caretakers may use a range of drugs and alcohol, may manufacture drugs such as methamphetamine, or may sell drugs, all of which can result in child neglect.

- a. Transitional statement:
Now I want to ask you what you know about people using drugs and alcohol.
- b. Invitational and follow-up probes related to alcohol:
Does anyone at your house ever drink alcohol, such as beer, whiskey, or wine? If the child says "yes," the evaluator should ask who and then ask about each person the child names.
Tell me about (your dad's) drinking.
Anything else about (your dad's) drinking?
And then what happens?
- c. "Wh" and direct questions related to alcohol:
What does (your dad) drink?
How many times a week does (your dad) drink? A multiple-choice question might elicit more accurate information.
 - *Does (your dad) drink often or every once in a while?**How does (your dad) act when he drinks? Direct questions may be needed.*
 - *Does (your dad) ever fall down?*
 - *Tell me about the time he fell down.*
 - *Can (your dad) take care of you OK when he's drinking?*
 - *Does he ever just fall asleep?*
 - *And then what happens?*
 - *Does he ever get mad when drinking?*

– Does he ever hurt anyone when he drinks?

– Say more about that.

Does (your mom) ever go to the bar?

– How often?

Does (your mom) ever drive a car when she's been drinking?

– Did (your mom) ever have an accident?

Did (your mom) ever have to go to the hospital or to a counselor for drinking?

– Tell me what you know about her going to the hospital.

d. Direct, invitational, and “wh” questions related to drug use:

Are there any drugs at your house?

– Tell me about the drugs. This might be too vague a question, necessitating – “wh” and direct questions.

– Which ones?

– Who uses them?

– What happens when they use them?

– Do you know how they get them?

– Where does the money for drugs come from?

– Did (your mom) ever get sick from drugs?

– Then what happened?

– Did (your mom) ever have to go to the hospital?

How old you were when (your mom) started using drugs?

Do you know how many times a day/week (your mom) has to have the drug?

Family Violence

Research demonstrates a high correlation between domestic violence and child abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). However, domestic violence may also result in child neglect (Antle et al., 2007). A battered woman may be so preoccupied with her safety and the impact of domestic violence on herself that she neglects her children.

a. Transitional statement:

Now I'm going to ask you about disagreements in your family.

b. A yes/no questions may be the most appropriate initial query:

Do your mom and dad have disagreements?

If the child responds “yes,” the evaluator may use an invitational probe.

Tell me all about the disagreements.

Tell me about the last disagreement they had.



c. A yes/no questions may be the most appropriate way of asking about actual fights in the family:

Do your parents ever have fights?

If the child provides an affirmative response, the evaluator may then follow with an invitational probe.

Tell me all about the fights.

d. “Wh” questions may be employed to gather details:

What do they fight about?

How do they fight?

e. Multiple-choice questions may be needed to gather details:

Do they just yell or do they ever hit or what?

Does this happen a lot or has it happened just a few times?

f. Similarly, direct questions followed by more open-ended probes may be appropriate:

Does anyone ever get hurt?

– *Tell me all about the last time.*

Does anyone ever have to go to the doctor/hospital?

Do any kids ever get hurt when they are fighting?

– *Tell me about getting hurt.*

Does anyone in your family have a gun or knife? If the child says “yes,” ask,

– *Who?*

What can you tell me about (gun or knife)?



Conclusion

Interviewing children with a possible history of neglect is a challenging task because neglect tends to be manifested as a pattern of non-startling omissions, which require more focused and less open-ended probes than sexual abuse. In addition, evaluators often have to inquire into multiple domains to understand whether there is a pattern of neglect. Nevertheless, questioning strategies that were developed in research on sexual abuse can be applied to questioning about neglect. They need to be supplemented with practice knowledge.

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