

# The Evolution of The Childhood Trust Child Forensic Interview Training

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*Key words: key words: forensic interview, touch survey, Childhood Trust*

The Childhood Trust's Child Forensic Interview Training Institute, known by many in the field as "Childhood Trust," has evolved as new practices and research emerge. By equal measure, it has stayed true to its core components and commitment to offering an excellent skill-building opportunity to forensic interviewers. In June 2013, the course officially moved from The Childhood Trust Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and the title of the course was changed to Child Forensic Interview Training. Julie Kenniston continues to manage the five-day course, which, although no longer under the auspices of The Childhood Trust, carries on the legacy of David Corwin, MD; Erna Olafson, PsyD, PhD; and Barbara Boat, PhD. Practitioners have offered the course, which is approved by the National Children's Alliance, in Ohio, Kentucky, and New Hampshire with registrants from a variety of locations across the United States.

The origin of the program can be found in the *APSAC Advisor* (Olafson & Kenniston, 2004). The Child Forensic Interview Training is the inspiration for the Wisconsin Forensic Interview Guidelines (2018) and will be the basis for the state of Kentucky forensic interview training. The Child Forensic Interview Training teaches a flexible, narrative-inviting approach for all types of maltreatment, witnessing violence, and other crimes and traumatic experiences. The course relies on research-based and practice-informed techniques and is consistent with the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children

(APSAC) *Practice Guidelines on Forensic Interviewing in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse* (2012) and "Child forensic interviewing: Best practices" (Newlin et al., 2015). The training offers a basic script from which participants create their own interviews. The script is an adaptation of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) interview model (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008) and a modification of "Ten step investigative interview" by Thomas Lyon, JD, PhD (2005).

The Child Forensic Interview Training focuses extensively on blending art and science to engage children in a conversational and defensible way. Skill-building primarily focuses on how each interviewer can maximize accurate information *from* a child while minimizing negative impact *on* the child during the interview. The approach is child-focused and trauma-informed. To support these goals, the course teaches the Cognitive Interview (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992) and the Hourglass Approach to participants to enhance the child's memory and narration. There is a heavy focus on gathering details and corroboration. Media (e.g., drawings, timelines, and other communication aids) is incorporated, only as needed after narrative-inviting attempts, to maximize information from children having difficulty communicating with words alone and to help clarify what children are expressing. The course teaches interviewers to pair media with continued narrative-inviting prompts to give context to the incorporated media. The course also teaches interviewers to "read the room" and pay attention to the child's needs, affect, and presentation and to "check in" with the child throughout the interview to minimize any

potential negative impact that the interview might create, addressing those issues if they arise. Peer and faculty review are essential in the learning process with a focus of both improving skills and assessing an interview for defensibility in court.

## Types of Maltreatment

The Child Forensic Interview Training has, since its inception, always incorporated content for interviewing about all types of maltreatment. Over the years, the course has provided several tools to participants that allowed for nonsuggestive questions about an array of topics, including but not limited to sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence, animal violence, neglect, and psychological maltreatment. The course now provides this information in supplemental training resources to increase the toolbox for interviewers, but interviewers are no longer practicing the use of these tools during the course. One such example is the Touch Survey, which was modified from *Assessing Allegations of Sexual Abuse in Preschool Children: Understanding Small Voices* (Hewitt, 1999). The updated approach to the Touch Survey addresses criticisms in the literature (Gilstrap & Ceci, 2001) and emphasizes an open-ended, balanced inquiry. The course offers a script example so that participants understand the intended flow of the updates, and a section was added that includes witnessing different types of touch. Since generating multiple hypotheses to account for alleged or known details has always been a cornerstone of this course, the updated Touch Survey allows for assessing and addressing a variety of experiences.

Throughout the course, participants are encouraged to remain open-minded and take steps to mitigate any possible assumptions or interviewer bias during the interview. The course endorses an informed interviewer approach but has trained interviewers working in jurisdictions that utilize blind interviews as well. An informed interviewer has conversations with the multidisciplinary team (MDT) and might review records prior to the interview to gather information that assists in generating hypotheses and formulating question strategies. A blind interviewer has very limited information prior to the interview, sometimes only the child's name and age. Regardless of the approach utilized in a jurisdiction, the interviewer

should minimize suggestibility in question type and communication style. To reinforce the concept of generating multiple hypotheses (which includes consideration of polyvictimization), the scenarios for practice interviews include a variety of maltreatment allegations and some of the scenarios include concerns associated with nonabuse situations.

## Screening in Forensic Interviews

The Child Forensic Interview Training differentiates screening in four ways: screening to assess for multiple types of trauma, screening for role-based content, screening for topic-related content, and screening "at risk" youth (also known as "precautionary" or "exploratory" interviews). In any given case, the needs of the MDT dictate the screening content explored in a forensic interview.

### Screening for Multiple Types of Trauma

As stated earlier, the Child Forensic Interview Training has always included tools to assess for multiple types of trauma and encourages participants to maintain an open mind and use a multiple-hypotheses-testing approach while assessing the complex experiences of children. Although some jurisdictions would prefer that interviewers focus on the allegation only, the Child Forensic Interview Training pushes interviewers to go beyond the allegation to get the totality of the circumstances for the child. Interviewers are taught to inquire extensively about the circumstances and dynamics of a child's situation rather than solely discussing the alleged abusive act and its details. This includes, but is not limited to, the following dynamics between the child and the alleged offender: relationship, communication, non-abusive activities, manipulation, access, and control. An interviewer can do this in a variety of ways and should discuss this ahead of time with the prosecutor on the MDT. Sometimes screening for multiple types of trauma identifies multiple perpetrators in one interview, and this could be problematic for some jurisdictions.

In jurisdictions where the forensic interview and safety assessment of the child are separate interviews, the child protective services (CPS) worker sometimes does

the assessment of other types of trauma and/or other perpetrators either during the initial contact prior to the forensic interview or subsequent to the completion of the forensic interview. If the child discloses another incident that prompts an MDT response during the CPS assessment, the child can be scheduled for an additional forensic interview regarding the new allegation. The narrative-inviting interview strategies taught in the Child Forensic Interview Training benefit forensic interviewers, law enforcement officers, and CPS workers because they are taught to provide children the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences. Practitioners combine the data children provide with other investigative and assessment data to guide decisions about cases. The key for MDTs is to minimize duplicative interviews of children. If the forensic interview does not screen multiple types of trauma, CPS workers completing these assessments should refrain from conducting a duplicate forensic interview while gathering this information. CPS workers can engage the child through narrative-inviting questions, being careful not to repeat the same process that the forensic interviewer used, thereby minimizing interview fatigue or monotony for the child. The same goes for follow-up interviews that are sometimes necessary with children as investigations evolve.

### Screening for Role-Based Content

The Child Forensic Interview Training addresses how to include screening questions during forensic interviews when the MDT decides that specific content is necessary based on the needs of a team member. The course teaches participants to screen in an open-ended way and to refrain from a list of yes/no questions at the end of the interview. A major factor that contributes to whether or not interviewers use screening questions is how the forensic interview fits into the overall investigation and assessment of the child. To minimize duplicative interviews, the course teaches interviewers to discuss with the MDT both who is making follow-up contact with the child and whether those screening topics will be covered at another time. If the team decides that certain areas should be covered in the forensic interview, the course teaches interviewers to use a narrative-inviting and balanced approach. For example, if safety assessment information regarding parental mental health or substance abuse are

dynamics that the MDT requests to be assessed in the forensic interview, the course encourages interviewers to ask about those issues in a nonassumptive, open-ended way. Instead of asking a list of closed-ended questions (Do you know what drugs are? Are there drugs in your house? Do your parents use drugs? Does your mom take medicine?), the course teaches interviewers to ask narrative-inviting prompts (Tell me what you know about drugs. How do you know when someone is using drugs? Tell me about something that worries you.) and to pair closed-ended questions with narrative follow-ups when closed-ended questions are needed (Have you seen drugs in your house? Tell me all about that.). The preferred method of gathering information is in narrative format. However, when needed, interviewers can focus the child with closed-ended questions and then immediately follow with narrative prompts to provide context to the child's response to the closed-ended question. This is especially true when the interviewer asks a yes/no question and the child replies with a "no" response.

#### "No" Response Follow-Up Example

**Interviewer:** Have you seen drugs in your house?

**Child:** No.

**Interviewer:** Tell me all about not seeing drugs in your house.

**Child:** My mom hides them in the top cupboard from the little kids so they can't reach them and she only uses them in the bathroom.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about your mom using the drugs in the bathroom.

**Child:** I can smell it when she smokes the drugs. And she always comes out of the bathroom acting funny and smiling.

**Interviewer:** Tell me how you know that mom smokes the drugs.

**Child:** I saw her do it in the living room when the babies were little. I smelled it. It smells the same in the bathroom after she comes out.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about your mom acting funny and smiling.

**Child:** My mom is always sad and she cries a lot. But when she smokes the drugs, she says she is happy and she laughs a lot.

Child maltreatment investigations include many interactions that involve a child. Although MDTs

try to minimize the number of times a child is interviewed, each team member has a role that requires information gathering. Medical providers inquire about medical history. CPS workers assess safety and well-being. Law enforcement officers establish whether a crime has been committed and investigate those crimes. Prosecutors prepare children for court. A forensic interview is one part of a larger ongoing investigation with multiple moving parts. Cases evolve over time. A single interview with a child near the beginning of a child maltreatment investigation will likely not gather all the information that every partner on the MDT needs. The Child Forensic Interview Training encourages MDTs to thoughtfully discuss the role of the forensic interview in the larger investigation.

Forensic interviews focus on both protection and prosecution. However, the role of the forensic interviewer as part of the MDT functioning might influence the depth and breadth of content covered. Some jurisdictions rely on trained CPS workers and law enforcement officers to conduct forensic interviews. Some others use medical providers, advocates, or prosecutors for the forensic interview. An increasing number of jurisdictions use dedicated forensic interviewers who do not have a dual role in the investigation. It stands to reason that the interviewer's professional role, experience, and training might influence the depth and breadth of information gathered in a forensic interview. For example, CPS workers who are trained to conduct forensic interviews might gather more information regarding safety, while medical social workers might gather more information to guide the follow-up medical exam. Whether or not an interviewer has dual roles, an MDT relies on that interviewer to complete a comprehensive forensic interview, gathering the details needed for the MDT. Communication with the MDT during the interview, whether with technology or by taking a break, is one way to ensure that the interviewer gathers the needed information for each team member. In addition, MDTs decide whether or not the forensic interview replaces other interactions that could occur with the child in order to minimize interviews. For example, some teams use the forensic interview as a means of gathering the necessary information required by the CPS worker to conduct

an initial safety assessment. In this situation, a forensic interviewer might include questions to screen for types of maltreatment that are not the focus of the investigation (physical abuse or domestic violence, for example, when the allegation is concerning sexual abuse) and also screen for dynamics that go beyond the allegation and assess for child safety and well-being (meeting basic needs, supervision, attachment and bonding, drug/alcohol use, physical and mental health, discipline, etc.). Some MDTs rely on the forensic interviewer to gather information that guides the medical exam, thus having the interviewer ask the child questions about pain, bleeding, menstruation, or concerns about their body. Frequently, the forensic interviewer is asking questions required by law enforcement to help establish probable cause for a search warrant and subsequent arrest warrant. Although any forensic interviewer on a team could be asked to gather information specific to one partner's needs in the investigation, the depth of these inquiries is likely linked to interviewer role, training, and experience. The Child Forensic Interview Training does not teach one approach, but instead offers guidance on how to ask those questions when the MDT decides that an interview should include those topics.

### **Screening for Topic-Related Content**

A forensic interview is an opportunity for a child to talk about things that have happened in the child's life. In order to assess whether or not those things require safety plans or prosecution, interviewers need to fully explore what the child shares. To do so, interviewers should be asking narrative-inviting questions that provide context and a deeper understanding of the child's experiences. Some dynamics are easily understood when a child offers detailed explanations. But even then, there might be a need to screen for topic-related content. For example, inquiring about secrets, the use of technology, money, gifts, or indicators of exploitation can provide insight into the power dynamic or grooming and manipulation used by the alleged offender in a sexual abuse investigation. If the child does not offer that information in the interview, screening questions are a way to gather that data. Other examples of topic-related screening would be to inquire about weapons, threats, stalking, strangulation/asphyxiation, property damage, or



animal cruelty in domestic violence or sex trafficking cases. By assessing for patterns of coercive control, the interviewer provides information to the MDT partners who are making case decisions around safety and prosecution.

The Child Forensic Interview Training uses the Hourglass Approach throughout the interview, but particularly for screening questions. The course teaches interviewers to engage in topics with narrative invitations whenever possible. When closed-ended questions are occasionally needed, the course teaches interviewers to pair those closed-ended questions with narrative prompts to get context for the closed-ended response.

The Hourglass Approach starts with narrative invites that prompt a child to give rich detail. The visual of the hourglass represents the amount of information the child gives in response to questions. The large part of the hourglass represents narrative prompts that yield many words from the child. The narrow part of the hourglass represents questions that yield minimal information, often one or two words in response to a multiple choice; yes/no; or who, what, where, when, how many/how long question. Interviewers should be in the large part of the hourglass for the majority of the interview, only moving to the narrow part when a closed-ended question is needed. The interviewer should then move directly to the large part of the hourglass again (just like the sand in the hourglass). This approach minimizes the potential of screening questions becoming a list of closed-ended or yes/no questions in an interview, as demonstrated in the “No” Response Follow-Up Example provided above. The goal is to use as many narrative prompts as possible throughout the interview (i.e., to stay in the large part of the hourglass) and to revert to narrative prompts as soon as possible after the interviewer uses closed-ended questions.

### Hourglass Approach Example

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about what Caleb said to you.

**Child:** Caleb was really mean and he told me not to tell. He said it really mad with his mean face like this [child grits her teeth and squints her eyes]. And he said, “You better not tell or I’m gonna hurt

you!”

**Interviewer:** How did people find out about what Caleb did?

**Child:** They just found out.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever tell someone?

**Child:** No.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about you not telling.

**Child:** I never told someone. I only texted my friend Anna that Caleb did that stuff to me and she told my teacher.

The course teaches interviewers to invite narratives even after children respond “no” to a yes/no question. This allows interviewers a chance to understand the answer instead of assuming the “no” response (in this example) means that the child never disclosed. This is one of the many benefits of the Hourglass Approach.

### Screening “At Risk” Youth

Sometimes, an MDT uses a forensic interview to screen for potential maltreatment when there is no specific allegation but there is a concern or high level of risk to the child. This might be the case for children with sexualized behaviors, siblings of children who have made a disclosure, children in the care of offenders who collect sexually explicit pictures/videos of youth, or vulnerable high-risk youth. Many interview models are built on the concept of transitioning to a topic of concern. Consequently, the problem with these screening interviews is that there is not a specific topic of concern, there is merely an overall concern that something might have happened. These interviews can feel like fishing expeditions, so they require good planning and much discussion with the MDT.

Forensic interviews have a purpose. Bringing a child in to “just see” if something happened, or repeatedly interviewing a child because they haven’t disclosed, would be a fishing expedition and would not meet the purpose of a forensic interview. There is no widely accepted approach for conducting screening interviews for “at risk” youth. The Child Forensic Interview Training briefly addresses this topic and offers suggestions as well as cautions for this interview type. The interview technique is to create balanced inquiries to assess for potential topics of concern and to use the Hourglass Approach. The Touch Survey,

as written in the updated version, is a good option for younger children. The key is to create narrative-inviting prompts to assess for concerns while also assessing and addressing any potential barriers to disclosure. Because interviewers will do some “at risk” interviews with children who are not being abused and others with children who are being abused but are not in the disclosure process, knowing when to quit is essential. Children should not be badgered in the interview but instead provided an opportunity to talk about their life experiences. Children might not have anything to share or might not be ready to talk on the day/time of the interview. The course teaches interviewers to complete the process as much as possible and finish with a respectful closing that leaves the door open to additional conversations or interviews if needed. The MDT is the guiding force for how far to go in these screening interviews. In addition, providing information to the child about what to do if the child has something to share in the future is an important step. This might include a psychoeducational component in the interview. The Child Forensic Interview Training teaches to close these interviews with an option to talk with the child again if something arises.

## Special Populations

The Child Forensic Interview Training has always been one component of a menu of training options. The updates in the last several years have been crucial in streamlining the course and keeping it basic so that practitioners are taught and practice primary forensic interview skills during the basic five-day course. Additional training and advanced courses complement the five-day basic course. The basic course covers the topic of preschoolers to the extent that it presents the linguistic work of Anne Graffam Walker, PhD (Walker & Kenniston, 2013) in addition to content regarding development, memory and suggestibility, and question strategies. Training faculty have offered additional courses for interviewers seeking more information about interviewing preschool children. There is also focus on adolescents and the impact of their development, communication style, and exposure to a variety of influences.

The Child Forensic Interview Training does not specifically address the needs of individuals with

developmental disabilities. However, there are many options for advanced training that will assist interviewers in improving those skills. An excellent complement to the basic five-day course is FIND—Forensic Interviewing for Individuals with Disabilities created by Modell Consulting Group.

The topic of child sex trafficking is complex and requires an advanced level of training. The Child Forensic Interview Training provides information and practice interviews for interviewing teens but suggests that interviewers hone their basic skills before adding the specialized approaches for child sex trafficking victims. The Child Forensic Interview Training utilizes faculty that are a part of the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC)’s Child Sex Trafficking Forensic Interview Training (CST FIT). This course originated with an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) grant awarded to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 2011. The course has evolved to the updated Sex Trafficking and Exploitation Forensic Interview Guidelines taught in the CST FIT course that NCJTC offers. See [ncjtc.fvtc.edu](http://ncjtc.fvtc.edu) for details.

An important supplement to the CST FIT course is Presenting Evidence in Child Forensic Interviews, a skill-building, advanced forensic interviewer course that covers the practice of presenting a variety of evidence in all types of child abuse and exploitation cases. This includes evidence that is intangible (verbal information or reports that are externally verifiable) as well as tangible (physical). The course teaches participants interview strategies that are child-focused and trauma-sensitive as well as being legally defensible. Participants discuss strategies for presenting and managing graphic evidence as well. Because this topic often comes up in the basic Child Forensic Interview Training, there is brief mention of it in the five-day course, but the course gives participants information about attending these advanced courses for additional skill-building.

## Use of Media

The Child Forensic Interview Training has always offered the use of drawings as a communication option for children. The primary approach in training is that interviewers would use drawings, only as needed, to

complement narrative-inviting questions. Interviewers use drawings to *enhance* prior details, as in the case of children drawing an event, a person/thing, or floorplan after narrating about it. In this situation, the course encourages participants to consistently invite narrative and never make assumptions about a child's drawing. The course discusses comfort drawing as an option for the child or the child and interviewer. The course shares pros and cons of comfort drawing from both the practice and research perspectives. It also discusses body maps as an option in cases where other verbal prompts have not focused the child and the allegation requires, at a minimum, a screening of the child's experience of touch. Interviewers also use body maps as a clarification tool *after disclosure* if the child's words do not clearly indicate necessary information.

In the past, the Child Forensic Interview Training offered content and practice time for using anatomical dolls. Currently, the five-day program very briefly discusses anatomical dolls, which the course views similarly to body maps. If needed, anatomical dolls would be incorporated only after disclosure as a demonstration aid, and the interviewer would continue to use narrative-inviting prompts as the child demonstrates with the anatomical dolls. The course instructs interviewers to put the dolls away once the demonstration is completed and continue with narratives. Anatomical dolls are referenced as a last resort when a narrative approach is not enough to understand what the child is trying to communicate.

As stated previously, the course offers the Touch Survey as supplemental material. The Touch Survey, a systematic screening procedure for child abuse, is a highly engaging approach that includes drawing and inquiries about different types of touch children experience and witness (Hewitt, 1999). However, interviewers can also use the Touch Survey without drawings by incorporating the series of questions conversationally in the forensic interview. This approach can be helpful for interviewers who conduct "at risk" interviews when there is no prior disclosure or there is concern that does not rise to the level of an allegation. To date, there is no universally accepted approach for screening interviews, particularly with young children and siblings of allegedly abused children. This modified Touch Survey provides a

neutral, narrative-inviting, balanced option.

### Using Evidence

The Child Forensic Interview Training supports presenting evidence to the child in forensic interviews when the interviewer and the MDT have assessed the case facts and the child's needs and deem the presentation of evidence necessary. Practitioners present evidence in a child-focused and trauma-informed way. Because presenting evidence is an advanced skill, the basic five-day forensic interview course does not attempt to incorporate this content but instead provides information regarding advanced training on the topic (see above training opportunities in Special Populations).

### Multiple Interviews and Extended Assessments

The Child Forensic Interview Training does not offer guidelines regarding extended assessments in the basic course. However, the basic course discusses concepts regarding number of interviews and minimizing duplicative interviews as stated previously.

### Unique Practices

The Child Forensic Interview Training focuses on adult learners' needs throughout the five days. Participants practice components during the week as they create their own interviews from a basic script, which culminates in having each participant conduct a full interview with a peer acting as the child. This interaction is purposeful in that each participant experiences the role of interviewer and interviewee. In over 22 years of offering this approach, the most consistent feedback is that participants learn what it is like to be asked questions in a forensic way. For some participants, this experience is sometimes more powerful than asking the questions.

A large part of the Child Forensic Interview Training is balancing the science and art of interviewing. The course encourages participants to be conversational and to pay attention to their style of engagement while also minimizing suggestibility. In addition, the continual focus on generating and testing hypotheses has been advantageous for learners. A clear understanding of why and how to generate hypotheses

assists participants in formulating responses when defending their interviews. Training staff who plan and offer The Child Forensic Interview Training see the five-day course as the foundation on which to build additional skills, and so they attempt to keep the five-day course at a basic level. As the course continues to evolve and update interview practice based on new research, the practitioners offering the course have streamlined it. The course's creators have pulled out additional content to be offered separately in order to give enough time in the basic course to fully cover and practice skills. The Child Forensic Interview Training addresses the fact that MDTs have differing needs and interviewers come from a variety of work backgrounds that can influence how they interview.

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