Interviewing Preschool Children

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Key words: child sexual abuse, physical abuse, forensic interview, preschoolers, developmental issues, young witnesses, forensic questioning, interview adaptations

Conducting forensic interviews of child witnesses is an important and complex task, no matter the ages of the children (Lamb, Brown, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2018; Poole, 2016; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2018). The responsibility of helping frightened or confused children to feel as comfortable as possible speaking with a stranger about difficult experiences and doing so in a forensically sensitive and legally defensible manner is challenging. It requires the pairing of interpersonal skills, warmth, and developmental sensitivity with critical thinking, neutrality, and the mastery of a unique conversational pattern. Other adults in children's lives do not talk or form questions like forensic interviewers do, making forensic conversations unfamiliar and potentially stressful for children. Forensic interviewers request much detail and seek clarification and specificity (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Fortunately, science has provided forensic interviewers with tools (e.g., interview instructions, narrative practice, consistent use of cued-open recall questions) to help prepare child witnesses for this unfamiliar task, although every forensic interviewer knows these evidence-based practices are more effective with some children than with others (Lamb et al., 2018; Poole, 2016). Challenges arise when interviewing children of a different culture, or who have cognitive or linguistic challenges, are extremely traumatized, or reluctant to be forthcoming for a variety of social and interpersonal reasons (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2019; Fontes, 2008; Fontes & Faller, 2007; Walker, 2013). However, forensic interviewers face unique challenges when questioning preschool children, for a variety of cognitive and socioemotional reasons.

Challenges Arising from the Preschool Developmental Stage

While it is widely accepted that individual children develop at different rates, age and development will generally limit 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in their ability to comprehend and perform complex tasks of communication. Their perception and interpretation of events is based on limited and personal knowledge of the world, as well as the guidance and conversational influence of the family and community (Rogoff, 1990). Language is limited, concrete, and personal, perhaps understood by close family members, but challenging for an unfamiliar interviewer. A 4-year-old child's interpretation and memory of an event will be different than if this same child experienced the exact same event at 9 years old.

While there is variation among child advocacy centers, most forensic interviewers will attempt to interview children as young as 3 years of age and at times even 2-year-olds, especially when there is serious injury to children or when interviewers know that the child was present at the time of a homicide or traumatic injury to another person.

These are daunting interviews. Young children can certainly be at risk for maltreatment by caregivers, other familiar adults, or older children and may be considered a safe target because of language limitations and their trust in the benevolence of those to whom they are attached. Because of limited understanding of sexuality and cultural boundaries, preschoolers may not identify inappropriate sexual or physical acts as such and so may not tell or ask for help (Faller & Hewitt, 2007; Hewitt, 1999). Caregivers may be highly alarmed by concerning

behaviors or statements that preschool children make. In trying to make sense of or interpret the observed behaviors, these adults may resort to their own version of questioning preschoolers. Adults may question, reassure, and give information or words to preschoolers that reflect adult interpretations of the children's experiences. Very young children may adopt caregivers' descriptions without having the maturity to distinguish between the adults' words and their personal experiences (Korkman, Juusola, & Santillan, 2014; Lamb et al., 2018; Lindsay, Johnson, & Kwon, 1991).

While older children, and even adults, can be suggestible to misinformation under certain conditions, there is a greater risk for preschoolers (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Melinder, Endestad, & Magnussen, 2006), stemming from deficits in developmental skills. Source monitoring, theory of mind, cognitive control, executive functioning, and metacognition are among the developmental tasks that preschool children and their adult caregivers are working toward, but children generally accomplish these tasks during the latency years.

Source monitoring, or the ability to identify how one knows something, is not fully developed in preschoolers (Poole & Lindsay, 2001). Indeed, preschool children often respond to a question about how they know certain information with "I just *knowed* it," articulating their understanding of knowledge as something one has rather than something one acquires. Because of an inability to identify the source of information, preschool children may believe they heard, saw, or experienced something about which they were told.

Theory of mind is a developmental accomplishment that allows children to comprehend that no two individuals will have the exact same experience or understanding of an event depending on each party's location, viewpoint, emotional response, or perception of the event (Flavell, 1985, 1986; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). Consequently, preschool children do not appreciate the need for description and clarification, assuming others know what they know.

Cognitive control, also known as executive process,

is a set of brain processes that enables children to exercise control over thought, attention, and behavior. This ability to exercise cognitive control, allowing children to carefully listen to the question, monitor their understanding of the question, and only provide an answer that is responsive and true, is not well developed in most preschool children (Poole, Dickinson, Brubacher, Liberty, & Kaake, 2014; Siegel, 2012).

Metacognition is the ability to not only think but also to reflect on and monitor one's thought process. Metacognition encompasses a range of memory strategies that allow children to monitor understanding, "think about their thinking," and respond appropriately to the question (Brubacher, Poole, & Dickinson, 2015; Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Markman, 1981).

Several researchers have noted that source monitoring, theory of mind, and cognitive inhibition/executive functioning interact to influence children's susceptibility to intentional or accidental influence from adult conversational partners (Bright-Paul, Jarrod, & Wright, 2008; Melinder et al., 2006). These concerns should not lead investigators or prosecutors to mistrust preschool children's ability to provide accurate information about a meaningful event that they experienced or observed. However, it does caution forensic interviewers to be especially attentive to minimizing the introduction of information through their questions or statements and to be observant for indications in young children's responses that could indicate influence may have occurred prior to the interview.

Clear communication between forensic interviewers and child witnesses is essential and highly dependent on the receptive and expressive language skills of both parties. Language development is remarkably active during the preschool years with children going from a vocabulary of zero words at birth to approximately 10,000 words by first grade (Haskill & Corts, 2010). Preschool children's day-to-day environment, interactions with others, and conversational partners influence the number and types of words preschoolers use as well as their understanding of the purpose and pragmatics of communication. Preschool children's

vocabulary is unique and idiosyncratic, often allowing immediate family members who participated in the cocreation of shared language to understand the children's needs and desires (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Reese & Fivush, 1993). Preschool children who family members describe as "very verbal" may not appear so in the forensic interview setting as they have had little experience in communicating with strangers.

Forensic interviewers and young children must overcome the challenge of establishing a common language for even routine events. Preschool children tend to be literal and concrete in the labeling of people, objects, and activities (Walker, 2013). Collecting some specific information from caregivers can prepare interviewers to be better conversational partners, especially about everyday matters. Such information might include the children's name for all family members in their households, the basic routine of their day, names for anatomy, and favorite interests and activities. The use of an unfamiliar word may cause preschool children to misunderstand or fail to respond to a question. For example, young children who attend daycare or an educational setting may only recognize the familiar label "4-K" as opposed to "preschool" or "Miss Nancy" rather than "teacher."

Preschool children typically report less information about a remembered event than older children, although accuracy for recalled elements may be similar to older children (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Lamb et al., 2018). Autobiographical memory retrieval strategies are poorly developed in preschool children, even for bright and verbal preschoolers who demonstrate recall competency with rote memory tasks. Forensic interviewers and investigators should not dismiss preschool children's ability to provide information, which can be used in conjunction with other investigative information to make informed decisions about both protection and criminal matters. Gagnon and Cyr (2017) state, "children as young as three years old are able to produce short but informative responses when questioned appropriately about the CSA incident" (p. 110).

Forensic interviews are characterized by an unfamiliar pattern for conversations between adults and children. Adults are the naïve participants; children are the

knowledgeable participants, as they had the experience being discussed; and adults must ask a series of questions to obtain information from children as witnesses (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Questions that elicit preschooler's free memory recall (cued invitations and open or concrete "wh" questions) correlate with higher percentages of accurate responses (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Orbach, Katz, & Horowitz, 2012; Lamb et al., 2003). Open "wh" questions ask for a more narrative response from children (e.g., "What happened?"), and preschoolers understand concrete "wh" questions (who, what, and where) more easily than abstract "wh" questions such as when, how, and why (Malloy, Orbach, Lamb, & Walker, 2017). Cued invitational questions will be most effective when more narrowly focused (e.g., "What do you do in school?") as opposed to a more general narrative request (e.g., "Tell me everything about school."). Preschoolers benefit from greater scaffolding (e.g., "I heard you go to kindergarten. What is your teacher's name? What do you do in school?") with the earlier statements or question serving as a directive to "think about school."

Option-posing questions (multiple-choice and yes/no) present the greatest risk for eliciting misinformation from preschool witnesses (Fritzley & Lee, 2003; London, Hall, & Lytle, 2017; Mehrani & Peterson, 2015; Okanda, Kanda, Ishiguro, & Itakura, 2013; Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999). Forensic interviewers face decisions with preschool witnesses about when to end interviews, as even good disclosures from preschool children often feel incomplete. The risk of continuing to question preschoolers by resorting to option-posing questions is that these questions may elicit incorrect information (Fritzley, Lindsay, & Lee, 2013; Mehrani & Peterson, 2015; Peterson et al., 1999; Poole et al., 2014).

As every parent and preschool teacher knows, preschool children can have short attention spans, particularly for tasks that are not engaging for them (Gladwell, 2000). Adults who routinely interact with preschool children have developed supportive behaviors, such as limiting expectations, changing up activities, giving breaks for rest and play, and using scaffolding language (repetition of children's words, elaboration, and expanding their understanding). Many of these strategies for managing the short

attention spans of preschool children in other settings are not appropriate for forensic interviews.

Adaptations for Conducting Forensic Interviews of Preschool Children

Based on 20 years of research, there is considerable consensus about effective child forensic interview strategies (Poole, 2016; Saywitz et al., 2018). However, questioning preschool witnesses requires adaptations of every phase of a forensic interview without abandoning the basic principles.

Experts direct forensic interviewers to provide comfortable interview settings (National Children's Alliance, 2017) and to establish rapport with child witnesses (Eisen et al., 2019; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz, & Malloy, 2015; Poole, 2016). Establishing comfortable environments for preschoolers and adequate preparation for interviews can help to set the stage. A room that is pleasant and inviting with child-size furniture, but not over-stimulating or introducing fantasy or an invitation to play, creates the right space (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014). Preschool children reluctant to separate from caregivers or anxious about engaging with a stranger in an unfamiliar place may benefit from "something to do" as the interviewer establishes initial rapport (Rogoff, 1990). The availability of a single can of Play-Doh® with a couple of plastic cutters, or an easel with large paper and washable markers, or even a simple wooden puzzle for 2-year-old or young 3-year-old children can allow interviewers to engage with children around concrete, shared activities. For anxious preschoolers or children who have difficulty separating from a caregiver, it may be helpful to use a two-session approach, giving space for a relaxed pace and growing familiarity. This may allow the interviewer to establish comfort in the first meeting and address the topic of concern in a second session.

Experts also advise interviewers to adopt a relaxed and engaged demeanor, use simple sentence construction (fewer and concrete words), and allow greater time for preschoolers to respond. Conversation should initially be about concrete things and activities in the room, as this is a more familiar interactional pattern for preschoolers with adults, and then move to simple questions that ask children to access memory about familiar topics. Earlier preparation can aid forensic interviewers in being better conversational partners (i.e., they know the answers to many of the questions asked during rapport) as well as deciphering preschool language that may be difficult to understand. Time with preschoolers in the presubstantive phase of interviews is more productive when spent listening to children, as opposed to interviewers talking at children or testing them. Listening to children informs the forensic interviewer about children's types of words, sentence construction, use of concepts, number of conversational exchanges before interest is lost, and signals for lack of understanding or interest in a topic. Interviewers may omit instructions, which mostly address children's use of developmental skills that preschoolers lack or are unable to implement (Lamb et al., 2018). Interviewers can adapt narrative practice by relinquishing the request for sequencing of a single episode of an event, but still provide preschool children an opportunity to describe something they know about or have experienced. It is helpful to ask about a known family event (e.g., a birthday party, day in the park, trip to the zoo, or routines at school) when possible; interviewers should solicit this information from caregivers ahead of time. Finally, preschool children can be asked to name the people who live with them, which should happen immediately prior to the transition to the substantive phase of the interview. For the rare preschoolers in active disclosure who understand the intended purpose of the interview, the naming of family members may allow them to spontaneously begin talking about the topic of concern. It is difficult to predict the amount of time needed for individual preschool children to "warm up" to the conversation. Forensic interviewers should allow adequate time for establishing rapport and gaining a sense of children's conversational abilities without tiring them before any attempts to transition to the substantive portion of the interview.

Forensic interview protocols universally instruct interviewers to transition to the allegation portion of the forensic interview through an open prompt such as "What are you here to talk to me about today?" (Lamb et al., 2018; Poole, 2016; Saywitz et al., 2018).

This prompt is seldom effective with preschoolers who often do not come to forensic interviews with the conscious intention of reporting about previous conversations or concerning incidents. Forensic interviewers often must cue preschoolers to the topic of concern without being overly suggestive or informative. This is challenging for many reasons. Earlier conversations between preschool children and parents or adults may have been coconstructed; consequently, interviewers are not sure which words or statements came from the children (Ceci, Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994; Korkman et al., 2014). Even when there are spontaneous outcries from preschoolers, developmental immaturity can make it difficult for preschool children to know that they should deliver this information to a forensic interviewer. Hopefully, preinterview planning will provide some guidance for the forensic interviewer. During preinterview planning, forensic interviewers in conjunction with law enforcement (LE) and child protective service (CPS) investigators should review information from the original maltreatment report, information gleaned from caregivers, and information about follow-up actions to the children's initial statements (e.g., doctor's exam, visit to home by LE and/or CPS, etc.). Interviewers can select topics for the purpose of focusing children on areas of interest to explore. Forensic interviewers can engage children in conversations about people (Mommy, Daddy, Big John, etc.), environments (Mommy's/Daddy's house, school, etc.), context (babysitting, bedtime, etc.), activities (wrestling, bathing, swimming, etc.), follow-up reactions or actions (doctor/police came to the house), or words reportedly used by children previously ("tickling game," "messing with me," "humping," etc.). Topics selected should be limited to only those thought to potentially have some meaning for the preschool interviewee, and questions should stay within the recall-based realm (cued open-questions and "wh" questions, both of which are scaffolded) as much as possible.

Gathering details about incidents of possible abuse and obtaining clarification is an additional challenge in preschool interviews. Children of this age will recall and focus on elements of the experiences that drew their attention and that they understand in their own unique ways. Preschool children will not organize the description of an event in the same way adults or older children might, and they often omit some elements considered essential in informative narratives (e.g., location, participants, sequence, emotions). It can be difficult for interviewers to understand exactly what preschool children are describing because of their unique language and limited recall. Forensic interviewers should exercise caution when attempting to clarify or expand on preschoolers' information through use of option-posing questions (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Lamb et al., 2018; London et al., 2017; Mehrani & Peterson, 2015). Preschool children may choose to demonstrate or point on their bodies and not be able to follow up with verbal descriptions or clarifications. The introduction of media, such as human figure drawings or dolls, can stray away from recall-memory questions and prompts and can run the risk of introducing information or suggesting answers to young children. Indeed, preschool disclosures are typically incomplete, and outcomes are highly dependent on thorough investigations conducted by LE and CPS investigators. Closure is typically simple as preschool children are either happy to return to the waiting room to be reunited with caregivers and a greater number of toys and activities or negotiate for more time in the forensic interview room to continue engaging activities such as playing with Play-Doh® or drawing on the easel.

Preschool children can be informative witnesses when allowed to stay within their developmental abilities. In all cases, investigative teams would do well to respect that even well-done forensic interviews are only one part of investigations. This is especially true for cases involving preschool children.

About the Author

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