

HOW PRE-INTERVIEW PLANNING HELPS WITH DECISION-MAKING IN THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW



Pre-interview planning with multidisciplinary team members is critical in providing information which the interviewer may use in making informed and strategic decisions throughout the forensic interview. This planning should involve investigative partners such as child protective services and law enforcement. In addition, depending on jurisdiction, advocates, caregiver, and others may also be invited to share information. The planning should address the topic of the alleged offense, relevant information regarding the child, and information regarding the suspected offender.

Having child-specific knowledge prior to the forensic interview can help ensure that the interview is a cognitively, emotionally supportive interaction, which enables and motivates the child to convey experiences to the best of their abilities. Child-specific information can include birthdate; grade level in school and whether the child is on task with peers of the same age; physical and/or developmental challenges and the impact of these challenges; any needs for special accommodations; mental health diagnoses, medications; and what the child has been told about the interview.

Factors Preventing or Delaying Disclosure

Three factors may delay or prevent children from disclosing abuse: intrapersonal, relational, and sociocultural. Intrapersonal factors include the internalization of blame, feelings of shame and responsibility, self-protection mechanisms, and insufficient understanding of sexuality, including confusion about the abusive situation, and no means of disclosure.

Relational factors can include violence or dysfunction within the family, awareness of repercussions for themselves and others, and a fragile support network. Power dynamics include possible

manipulation/grooming and multiple facets of the relationship with the alleged offender (which may explain delayed disclosure). Discussing this relationship during pre-interview planning, and then exploring the relationship between the child and the alleged offender during the forensic interview process will benefit investigators and others in understanding reasons for a possible delayed or tentative disclosure. In addition to exploring manipulation of the child, it's also important to examine possible manipulation and grooming of the child's family and the community.

There may be certain questions that need to be asked if a child has been manipulated, such as:

- "Tell me your thoughts when you first met [...]."
- "Did your feelings change?"
- "How do you feel about him/her now?"
- "What did your friends/parents say about [...].?"
- "Talk to me about things starting with [...]."
- "Did you ever think about telling?"

Sociocultural factors include social stigma, lack of knowledge of human sexuality, taboos regarding sexuality, lack of access to services, as well as historic invisibility of sexual abuse within the culture.

Reactions of Disclosure Recipient

Understanding how the disclosure came about, the context of the disclosure, what inhibits or promotes disclosure, and how the disclosure recipient responded is important to discuss in the pre-interview planning meeting. If the child considers the reactions of the disclosure recipient or caretaker negatively, they may be reluctant to report during the forensic interview. This means the interviewer may have to spend additional time developing and maintaining rapport both in pre-substantive phase and throughout the interview.

Understanding the disclosure process and the level of support of key people in the child's life can assist the interviewer and team in understanding the need to move slower within the interview and the necessity of providing adequate social support. If the child feels supported, they may be more willing to engage in the interview process.

Discuss Possible Reluctance Before the Interview

Discussing possible reluctance before the interview can assist with alternative methods of transitioning if needed. If the child does not respond to the first transition question, “What did you come here to talk about today?” then, based on information discussed in pre-interview planning, the interviewer may make the decision to ask one or two other gentle probing questions such as “Are you worried about something?” or “Are there some problems happening?”—all the time keeping the questions fairly open so if the child responds negatively, there is still room to continue the interview.

If we know the child has reported maltreatment to an adult, then during the pre-interview planning meeting it could be decided that the interviewer will bring up the conversation, again keeping the prompt as open as possible: “I understand you talked with [adult’s name/position] at school yesterday.” Provide the information as a declaration, not as a yes/no question, and then wait for the child’s response. Dependent on the response and the prior decisions made by the team, the interviewer may ask for more information, such as “Say some more about that conversation with [adult’s name].” The reason for introducing information is acknowledging the conversation took place without bringing up the content of the discussion. The goal is for the child to take the information and expand on what was said.

Critical to the success of the interview is interviewing children in their primary language. Even children who are fluent in English may be more comfortable speaking their first language when discussing sensitive and potentially traumatic issues related to maltreatment or witnessing. Children who choose to have the interview conducted in a second language may have difficulty as memories are language dependent and the child may recall the event in the primary language and, in the moment, have to translate into English. In cases where English is not the primary language, it may be advantageous to have an interpreter on site if needed.

Another consideration is how the child identifies and what name they prefer and pronouns they use. Discussing the child’s name and pronouns before the interview can assist the interviewer in providing a child-friendly, socially supportive, and respectful interaction.

Another consideration is possible evidence and the use of such evidence or information during the interview. During the pre-interview discussion, it is important to articulate a purpose for the usage of outside information/materials and to discuss possible impacts on the child and the interview. It is not acceptable to use information/evidence to confront the child regarding previous statements or following a recantation.

The information obtained during pre-interview planning should not be a “checklist” but, instead, should be considered in how the information can assist the interviewer during the interaction with the child.

What Does This Mean for the Interview?

- Child-specific knowledge is necessary to create a developmentally appropriate interview.
- The topic of the investigation and investigative objections should be reviewed.
- Alternative hypotheses should be discussed to combat bias.
- Explore information regarding the disclosure and what occurred after the disclosure.
- Information or evidence should be reviewed and decisions regarding use should be made before the interview.

References

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