

WHAT IS SAFETY?



The National Children's Alliance, the children's advocacy centers' (CACs') membership organization, states, "A CAC requires a separate, child/youth-focused setting that provides a safe, comfortable, and neutral place where forensic interviews and other CAC services can be appropriately provided for children and families."

While CACs provide a physically safe environment, it can be difficult to provide psychological safety as children may not be physically or emotionally safe when they leave a CAC. Disclosure of sexual abuse or maltreatment can be an extremely stressful, traumatic experience. Children worry about being placed in foster care, are concerned that a parent could be arrested, afraid they will have to change schools, or anxious if other family members will believe them.

Due to these and other concerns, a common statement voiced by children during a forensic interview is, "I'm scared." In a desire to make the situation more comfortable while providing forensically appropriate social support, interviewers frequently respond with some of the following statements: "This is a safe place," "You don't have to be scared here," or, "You can say anything here."

Children may have no baseline for safety. Stating a CAC is a safe place does not help children. In essence, these seemingly supportive statements are attempts to negate children's feelings and ignore their interpretations of interviews and/or disclosure experiences. These statements also do not overcome children's past traumas and experiences. Interviews can be traumatic. Children may not be open to the forensic interviewer.

A more appropriate response is one that acknowledges children's statements and then seeks to elicit further information while heightening the multidisciplinary team's understanding of children's experiences.

- "You said that you're scared. Help me understand feeling scared."
- "You're scared. Talk to me about being scared."
- "How do you feel about talking to me today?"

Children may respond they are shy, they may be crying, or chewing their fingernails. Ask children if there is something that helps them when they are feeling scared. Try to find where they are coming from. It is a hollow statement to say to children they are not in trouble with you. Children hear what they want to hear. They could be thinking they will be in trouble with their parents. Ask for more understanding. Gather more information of their experiences.

Another consideration, dependent on case variables and jurisdictional preference, is to consider ending interviews and having children return another day. If interviewers attempt to talk children out of their feelings, we are depriving ourselves of the opportunity to gain both additional information and better

understanding of the totality of children’s experiences. By acknowledging the stated emotion, “I’m scared,” interviewers are accepting and honoring where children are in that moment.

References

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