

IMPORTANCE OF UTILIZING “WHAT THINK” AND “HOW FEEL” QUESTIONS



Children will typically exhibit little emotion when disclosing abuse, both in forensic interviews and during courtroom testimony. An unfortunate by-product of this lack of emotional expression is the tendency for professionals involved in the investigations and prosecutions of child maltreatment cases, as well as jurors, to view the children as less credible. One method of countering these negative assumptions regarding credibility is to ask children subjective questions. In other words, ask children about their emotional reactions/feelings (i.e., “How did you feel when the babysitter made you play the sex game?”); their thoughts (i.e., “What are your thoughts about being here today?”); and any physical sensations experienced during the reported event (i.e., “How did your body feel when the babysitter put her finger in your butt?”).

Understanding the Reasons for Delayed Disclosure

In addition to addressing credibility concerns, the expression of thoughts and feelings can assist children in explaining the varied reasons for delayed reporting. Delayed reporting is an additional reason individuals may not believe children’s allegations of maltreatment. There are often multiple, overlapping external and internal factors keeping children from reporting maltreatment. Asking a child about their thoughts and feelings regarding disclosure can assist in understanding the child’s internal dialogue and struggles, while supplying investigators, prosecutors, and jurors with an understanding of the delayed disclosure (i.e., “Did you ever think about telling?” or “What kept you from telling?”).

One of the key components of a forensic interview is to provide a welcoming and comfortable space where children can share their experiences. Asking children how they feel about being in the interview room or talking with the interviewer is one method of engaging and building social support. The beauty of questions, such as “How do you feel about talking to me?” or “What are your thoughts about being here?”, is that they can also help address potential reluctance.

Children Rarely Spontaneously Mention Subjective Content

An interesting phenomenon is that, even when the interviewer has frequently utilized questions/prompts asking for a child's narrative, only about 5% of children spontaneously mention subjective content. One possible reason for a lack of subjective content is age. Younger children may simply lack the ability to reflect on their feelings or may be incapable of describing their thoughts and feelings due to less developed cognitive and language abilities.

Research has also demonstrated that many children, when describing negative events, use fewer "emotion" words than when describing a neutral or positive event. To overcome these challenges and assist children in providing subjective content, interviewers may need to ask specific questions, such as "What were you thinking when your sister was messing with you?" or "How did your body feel after you were raped?". The interviewer should always use the child's terminology.

If a child responds with a single word such as mad, sad, upset, hurt, etc., the next prompt or question from the interviewer should be a request for more information (i.e., "Talk to me more about being sad.").

A 2022 study examining the use of direct questions in eliciting emotional expression in a forensic interview found that when children reported emotions in their narratives, they underwent a more intensive memory retrieval processing of their experiences. Children who did report negative emotions retrieved a higher number of central and peripheral details regarding the maltreatment.

What Does This Mean for the Interviewer?

1. If children "tune" into their feelings regarding a reported event, they may access more detailed information regarding the experience.
2. Began using "what did you think" or "how did you feel" questions in the presubstantive phase of the interview to prepare children for usage during the allegation portion of the interview (i.e., "How did you feel when you hit the home run?").
3. "How did your body feel?" is a way to prompt children about any physical sensations they may have felt during the event.

4. If children provide a response to a subjective content question, follow with a prompt for more information (i.e., “How did you feel when you caught the football?” “Good.” “Say some more about feeling good.”).
5. Utilize “how feel” and “what think” questions during the substantive phase of the interview, as the child may be able to provide more forensically relevant details.

References

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