

INTERVIEWING PRESCHOOLERS

While preschoolers can report accurate and reliable details regarding an experience, they do not spontaneously give detailed and complete accounts of their experiences. They can be especially challenged by stress, memory searches, questions difficult to comprehend, plus the complex and unfamiliar characteristics of forensic interviews.

Children as young as 3 years of age can produce short but informative responses when questioned appropriately and the number of details provided increase along with their developmental abilities. A key component to conducting forensic interviews with preschool children is the types of questions asked.

Appropriate Question Types

A narrative invitation is the most open-ended of all question types and does not guide the reporting of an event. An example would be when a child has reported some information, then asking, "Tell me more ...". Narrative invitations yield significantly more details than all other types of questions which is in line with the consensus in the literature. However, narrative invitations can be too broad for preschoolers and may elicit a nonresponse or an answer incongruent with the question. If this occurs, then interviewers should use cued invitations.



A cued invitation (depth prompt) repeats back what the child said and then asks for more information. An example would be, "You said Bobby touched your whoo-ha. Tell me more about Bobby touching your whoo-ha." Cued invitations yield significantly more details and descriptions from preschoolers.

Formulating questions that contain a clue previously mentioned helps preschoolers better identify the information interviewers are requesting and thus preschoolers provide more productive answers. If the child said, "I was in Mama's room when Bobby touched my whoo-ha," there are now clues available to formulate the next question. The next best question would be a cued invitation, "You said Bobby touched your whoo-ha in Mama's room. Tell me about Bobby touching your whoo-ha."

Wh-questions, also known as directives, focus on specific information needed to understand an event, such as who, what, where, when, and how. Wh-questions can be considered opened or closed. Closed wh-questions aim to provide short answers on a specific topic. An example is, "Where were you at home when Bobby touched your whoo-ha?"

An open-ended wh-question allows the child to elaborate freely, by using the word "how". An example is "How did Bobby touch you?". Preschool children can generally answer who and what, which is the basis of a child maltreatment allegation. Some preschoolers may also be able to answer where an incident took place. However, because preschoolers are very literal and concrete, the wh-questions "when" and "how" will generally be beyond their cognitive abilities. These questions rarely provide the sought-after information.

Clothing Placement

Another challenge with preschoolers is our need to understand clothing placement during an abusive incident. In some jurisdictions, interviewers assess a child's performance on spatial terms such as on/off, outside/inside, or over/under using a Kleenex box and marker (box test). Literature by Stolzenberg et al., (2017) showed that a child's performance on the box task poorly predicted his/her ability to explain spatial relationships regarding clothing.



According to Stolzenberg et al. a "where" question is superior in eliciting intermediate descriptions of clothing more than any other type of question. So instead of asking on/off, under/over (which for preschoolers implies separation), or inside/outside, using the "where" question is more likely to elicit a description that enables the interviewer to accurately envision clothing placement.

References

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