

SUBJECTIVE CONTENT IN THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW

Subjective content refers to a child's feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations experienced during an event. Most children when recounting abuse rarely exhibit emotion, either in the forensic interview or during questioning in a courtroom setting.

The forensic interviewer understands a child's reaction to ongoing maltreatment can present in various ways and a lack of emotional response is very common. Unfortunately, many people, even professionals such as law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges, tend to view a child's disclosure as less credible when little emotion is displayed in the recounting of the abuse. Jurors expect emotional behavior, such as crying, fear, or embarrassment, to be displayed by a child. When a child presents as stoic or matter of fact, jurors judge a child as less credible.



According to Stolzenberg, Williams, McWilliams, Liang, and Lyon (2019), an important component of a convincing narrative is the inclusion of subject content, the forensic interviewer may need to ask specific questions eliciting a child's thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations.

Think of subjective content as a paint-by-number picture. As each color is added to the designated section, eventually the observer will have a complete picture of the object depicted. If, say, the painter does not like yellow and left yellow out of the picture, the item depicted in the picture might not be recognizable or could be incomplete. This is the same reason the interviewer should ask about subjective content. A child rarely spontaneously supplies this information, so it is up to the interviewer to question and gather subjective information. Doing so allows investigators and others to better understand the totality of a child's experiences.

Questions to Ask

According to the authors in the study cited above, interviewers should ask "how feel" and "what think" questions. Here are some examples:



- "You said the babysitter touched your private. How did you feel when the babysitter touched your private?"
- "What were you thinking when the babysitter touched your private?"
- "How did your body feel when the babysitter touched your private?"

The "how did you feel" question can elicit both emotional and physical sensations. If a child responds with a physical sensation, such as "It hurt," gather more elaboration regarding the "hurting" and then ask, "What did you think when the babysitter touched your private?" to assist in understanding a child's emotional response. "How did your body feel?" questions can aid in gathering physical sensations.

Another avenue to explore in the forensic interview is asking a child, “Did you ever think about telling?” Dependent on a child’s response, the interviewer might explore what kept a child from telling and what has happened that they could now disclose. These questions may help a child to acknowledge fear, shame, embarrassment, or myriad other reasons for delaying disclosure.

If a child responds to subjective content questions with a one-word response, such as “sad,” then follow with a narrative-encouraging question, “Tell me more about feeling sad when the babysitter touched your private.”

Research demonstrates that some professionals, as well as jurors, may judge a child’s credibility on emotional responses in the recounting of maltreatment. Understanding this challenge should assist interviewers in crafting questions to elicit the entirety of a child’s experiences.

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