

FUNNELING THE TRANSITION TO THE SUBSTANTIVE PHASE OF THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW



Researchers are beginning to take a “micro-level” approach to elements of the forensic interview and are examining small nuances in the various questions and prompts utilized by interviewers. One focus area has been the utility and productivity of prompts used to transition from the pre-substantive phase to the substantive phase of the interview.

Narrowing the Transition Funnel

Best practice in forensic interviewing promotes utilizing a funneled approach during the transition phase, beginning with an initial narrative-encouraging transition prompt. If the child does not report maltreatment, then interviewers may ask a few more non-suggestive questions. If these questions do not result in a report of maltreatment or witnessing, some interviewers may choose to ask increasingly more directed prompts until disclosure, or the interviewer and multidisciplinary team can choose to halt the interview due to child safety or other factors specific to the case. Interviewers must balance the need for uncontaminated and non-suggestible testimony with child safety concerns.

High-Quality versus Low-Quality Prompts

Recent research has examined the effects of different wording or phrasing utilized during initial transition prompts, as well as the informativeness of the children’s responses to these prompts. Studies demonstrate, as the interviewer moves from the pre-substantive to the substantive phase of the interview, the potential usefulness and benefits of first asking children, “What did you come here to talk about today?” (high-quality prompt). High-quality prompts are associated with a higher rate of disclosure and more allegation-relevant information. “Why did you come here to talk today?” or “How come you came here today” are both low-quality prompts and do not prompt the child to talk about their experiences.

“Why” questions reduced the probability of obtaining an immediate informative response by 60%. When children did provide an uninformative response, interviewers frequently resorted to increasingly low-quality questions/prompts or suggestive prompts and provided less socially supportive statements. These low-quality questions/prompts also elicited less productive information from child witnesses, and it took more time to move the child to disclosure. The “why” question also did not prompt children to talk directly about their experiences.

Another low-quality transition prompt begins with a “Do you know...” and, according to one study, decreased the probability of obtaining immediate informative responses by 91% compared to the recommended prompt, “What did you come here to talk about today?”



What does this mean for the forensic interview?

1. Interviewers should utilize a funneled approach to transition from the pre-substantive to the substantive phase of the interview.
2. The initial transition prompt should be “What did you come here to talk about today?”
3. If the child does not disclose to the initial prompt, consider narrowing the focus, using one or two of the following prompts:
 - “What did your parent/caretaker say about coming here today?”
 - “Are you worried about something?”
 - “Has something been bothering you?”
 - “Has something happened?”

Notice that the more focused requests are yes/no questions but do not explicitly ask about individuals or actions. If the child gives an affirmative response, then follow immediately with a narrative request for further information.

4. Depending on jurisdictional preferences, consider introducing verifiable facts/information not provided by the child (i.e., “You went to the hospital” or “You talked with a counselor at school”). Keep the introduced information open and non-suggestive. Do not pair an action with an alleged offender.
5. If the child does not respond to the narrower focusing prompts or the introduction of information, consider terminating the interview.

References

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