

ASKING ABOUT ACTIONS VERSUS DEFINITIONS



Forensic interviewers must understand the challenges children encounter when asked to recount memories of an experience. This understanding can “inform interviewer decisions about when to elicit certain types of information and how to support retrieval of that information” (Danby, 2024, p. 3). Information that can be consciously recalled and verbally communicated, known as *declarative memory*, is divided into two components: *semantic memory* and *episodic memory*.

Semantic memory is generic or general knowledge (i.e., a child sees a piece of fruit and identifies the fruit as an apple), while episodic memory is knowledge of personally experienced events. Both types of memories have different developmental trajectories. Semantic memories usually develop at an earlier age and are retained longer than episodic memories.

Episodic memories include what happened during an abusive incident, while semantic memories may include the name of the offender, his or her relationship with the child, the layout of a home, or descriptions of well-known objects.

Topic-Hopping

Interviewers frequently shift between asking for semantic and episodic information. This back-and-forth shifting is known as *topic-hopping*, which requires more effort on the part of the child and can increase the likelihood of errors as a child becomes mentally exhausted. Another way to envision topic-hopping is through the following analogy: A car is driving along a highway (recalling episodic information), and a truck pulls alongside the car and then forces the car off the road (semantic information), causing a disruption in memory recall.

Some interviewers and investigative team members believe a term or euphemism used to describe a sexual act must be clarified immediately. Topic-hopping is often observed when a child uses a term or euphemism and the interviewer, instead of continuing with questions that encourage the child to provide additional narrative, asks for a definition that pulls from semantic memory (i.e., a child says she was molested and the interviewer asks, “What does *molested* mean to you?”).

Definitions Do Not Equal Lived Experiences

If the child provides a definition, it may still be unclear if that definition accurately describes the child’s experience. Interrupting a narrative to ask for a definition (semantic memory) should be avoided. Instead, facilitated notetaking (taking notes of mentioned details) allows for later follow-up once the narrative has been exhausted. “Child interviewing protocols generally recommend prioritizing episodic information by asking for complete recalls of an incident before asking for semantic details” (Danby 2024, p. 3).

Using Directives

If, after exhausting a child’s narrative using invitations, it is still unclear what the child experienced, the interviewer may choose to supplement the information provided with specific *wh*-questions. These specific *wh*-questions, also known as *directives*, can increase productivity without increasing the potential for errors. Directives can be used to ask about a child’s subjective reactions (i.e., “How did you feel when the babysitter made you touch her private?”), perceptions, identification of the alleged offender, prior disclosures, temporal information, as well as actions.

Directive questions inquiring about both the alleged offender’s actions and the child’s actions, should provide more information than asking the child for a definition of a term or euphemism for a sexual act (i.e., “What did his body or hands do when he molested you?” or “What did your hands do when your uncle made you touch his private?”). “Moreover, asking questions about the hands may reduce the need to use the word ‘touch,’ which can be problematic for younger children whose understanding of ‘touch’ may exclude more specific terms, such as *tickle* or *rub*” (Friend, Nogalska, & Lyon, 2024, p. 9).

What Does This Mean for the Interview?

- Avoid topic-hopping and do not interrupt a child's narrative to ask for a definition.
- If jurisdictionally allowed, use facilitative notetaking to document areas that need further information after exhausting the narrative of an event.
- Use invitations to exhaust a child's narrative regarding an event.
- Selectively use directives (wh-questions) regarding actions when a child uses a term or euphemism for a sexual act (after exhausting the narrative).

References

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