

HELPING CHILDREN PROVIDE EXPERIENTIAL DETAILS



During forensic interviews, children typically provide two types of information from their declarative memory systems: semantic and episodic. Navigating between these two sub-systems is often a highly challenging task, particularly when the child has experienced multiple events and investigators need specific episodic details for charging purposes. Enhanced support is needed for these interviews (Danby, 2024). A forensic interviewer who understands the difference between declarative memory sub-systems can craft semantically and episodically focused questions—and by applying critical thinking skills to supportively shift between the two—will greatly benefit both the child and investigative team.

Essential Steps for Gathering Semantic and Episodic Details

First, use a transition prompt that directs the child to talk about their experiences. Both experimental and field research have confirmed that using “what” questions, such as “What did you come to talk about?” or “What do you know about coming here?” has multiple “downstream” benefits (Garcia et al., 2022).

Second, listen carefully to the child’s response. If the child predominantly uses linguistic markers associated with script memory—such as present perfect verb tenses (e.g., *doing bad things*, *messing with me*) and modifiers like *always* or *sometimes*—this likely indicates a semantic memory retrieval of multiple events.

Research has demonstrated the benefits of directing children to elaborate on their script responses before shifting the focus to specific episodes. An initial script focus has been found to enhance overall informativeness and may also prompt the recall of details linked to episodic events (Brubacher et al., 2012; Connolly & Gordon, 2014).

Semantic Details: Expand the Script Questioning Strategies

During the forensic interview, consider using the following strategies to help elicit more meaningful details:

1. Use action-focused script prompts
2. Ask about the maltreatment starting
3. Ask about locations
4. Use broad memory prompts
5. Use cued emotional inquiries

Consider the following script memory response:

“When I had been visiting my cousins for a while, their new mom started doing mean things to me. She always pulls my ears and sometimes she rubs sandpaper on my feet. She does things that really scare me, too.”

1. **Use action-focused script prompts:** “Say some more about your cousins’ new mom **pulling** your ears,” or “Tell me all about your cousin’s new mom **rubbing** sandpaper on your feet.” To effectively pose these types of questions, be mindful to:
 - incorporate the child’s language,
 - use specific verbs (action words) that the child has just articulated, and
 - pose questions/prompts in the present perfect tense.
2. **Ask about the maltreatment starting:** “Talk about when the mean things started.”
3. **Ask about locations:** “Tell me all the places you are when your cousins’ new mom does mean things to you.”
4. **Use broad memory prompts:** “Think about all the things that happen when your cousins’ new mom does mean things to you. Remember as much as you can, then talk about what you are remembering.”
5. **Use cued emotional inquiries:** “Say some more about your cousins’ new mom doing things that scare you.”

Choosing the Most Effective Questioning Strategy

Asking about when the maltreatment started or posing a broad memory prompt is likely to be a good cognitive match for high narrative children who demonstrate well-organized memory recall strategies

during their narrative practice. Less narrative children, whose narrative practice reveals struggles with memory recall, may benefit from the increased structure and specific focus of action-focused prompts.

Emotional networks play a significant role in memory retrieval processes (Karni-Visel et al., 2022). If the child has named a specific emotion, following up with a cued emotional inquiry can be very effective. If the child has not made any statements about their emotional reactions to events, interviewers can inquire directly, for example, “How do you feel when you visit your cousins?” These types of questions may be combined with other strategies.

Location identification questions can be effective for both high and less narrative children and can be combined with other strategies. These readily understood questions may yield more precise, concrete information that can be linked to episodic events.

Episodic Details: Exhaust the Narrative Questioning Strategies

1. Know your jurisdictional requirements for particularization:
 - Number of incidents
 - Specificity of timeframe
2. Reflect on responses to script prompts/questions. Were there episodic cues, “one time” references, unique labels, varied locations? Incorporate the child’s specific language for these elements into your episodically focused questions/prompts.
3. Which semantically focused questioning approach(es) were productive for this child? For example, did the child clearly identify varied locations? Consider questions such as: “You said the mean things happened in the basement, the tool shed, and the blue bathroom. Tell me everything that happened one time in the tool shed.” “Talk about what your cousins’ new mom did with the sandpaper one time in the basement.” If the child responds informatively to a broad, semantically focused memory prompt, repeat this strategy. For example, “You said your cousins’ new mom would use the sandpaper when she was really mad. Think about one time she used the sandpaper. Remember as much as you can and then describe everything that happened, from beginning to end.”
4. Clearly articulate the shift to episodic focus. If you observe high narrative abilities during the earlier narrative practice, refer the child to this. “For my next question, I am going to ask you to talk the same way you did when you told me about the time you went to Six Flags with your dad.” For less narrative children, “You have been talking to me about what happens when you go to your cousins’ house, now I am going to ask you a different kind of question.”

5. Phrase questions/prompts in the past tense. Exhaust the narrative and obtain the full event sequence.
6. Focus on one episode at a time.
7. Monitor for infiltration of script markers.

References

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