

# CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE



Narrative practice, or, as it is often referred to in research literature, *episodic memory training*, is a crucial step during the presubstantive phase of a forensic interview. Conducting an effective narrative practice provides both cognitive and emotional support to the child while preparing them for memory retrieval tasks during the substantive phase. Since retrieving and describing memories are cognitive skills that gradually develop during childhood (Lamb et al., 2011), many children come to a forensic interview with limited experience in these types of endeavors.

## Cognitive Support Benefits

- Exposure to broad, recall questions
- Practice recalling specific memories
- Practice sequencing an event memory
- Practice describing specific details

## Emotional Support Benefits

- Conveys interest in child's experiences
- Extends rapport-building
- Allows for emotional inquiries
- Establishes that the child will do most of the talking

Narrative practice also provides the forensic interviewer with an opportunity to observe the child's memory retrieval processes and how coherently they narrate recalled experiences. This information allows the interviewer to proceed, knowing what cognitive and social support strategies are likely to be most effective. Skipping or overlooking narrative practice can reduce the likelihood that the child will provide complete or accurate information later in the interview.

## Essential Components of Effective Narrative Practice

### 1. Unique event, unrelated to the investigation

Asking the child to talk about a single, personally experienced event, or one experience of multiple occurrences places an appropriate demand on their memory and offers valuable opportunities to elicit the types of details typically sought during the substantive phase of the

forensic interview: event actions, interactions, location, context, involved persons, and subjective reactions.

For most children, there will be multiple potential narrative practice topics to choose from. During rapport-building, the child may mention an activity such as playing on a sports team or name a person they enjoy spending time with. If these opportunities do not present themselves, interviewers can ask the child to “think about a time you got to do something fun” or ask them to recall “everything that happened on your last birthday.” For younger children, a parent or caregiver can identify an activity the child recently engaged in.

Asking the child to recall the day’s activities, from waking up to coming to their forensic interview appointment, has several drawbacks. Their memory of this time period will only be a few hours old and therefore will not require a robust recall demand. Children often respond to this prompt by talking about rote routines, which is not as stimulating as a unique event (Cyr, 2022). Finally, this narrative practice topic will always be related to the investigation because it ends with the forensic interview.

## **2. Clear instructions**

It may be helpful to provide a brief explanation to the child at the beginning of the interview, such as “The way I ask questions is different, so I’d like to practice/demonstrate.” Follow up by outlining the narrative practice steps: “I am going to ask you to think about one time you did something fun [such as attending a baseball game]. Remember as much as you can, and then tell me about everything that happened, from beginning to end.”

## **3. Close observation**

Did the child pause before speaking and appear to be engaged in active memory recollection? Did they consistently speak in the past tense? Were they able to provide a sequential and coherent narrative (VanMeter et al., 2023) containing core event details? Conversely, was the child’s event narrative incoherent but sparse with details? Did they exhibit difficulty focusing on a specific period, as evidenced by infiltrating script language?

## **4. Episodically and action-focused questions/prompts**

Children who are highly narrative and sufficiently motivated will need minimal assistance from

the interviewer; they can provide a sequential, detailed event narrative with just attentive listening and minimal facilitation. Less narrative and unevenly motivated children can also provide substantial information, but they require more input from the interviewer. Scaffolding questions, such as “What happened next?” and “Say some more about hitting the home run” can be immensely helpful. Posing action-focused follow-up questions that use the child’s own language and ensuring all questions are phrased in the past tense can help the child expand and complete their narrative.

## References

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