

EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS IN A FORENSIC INTERVIEW TO THE TOPIC OF CONCERN

Questions used to transition a child from the pre-substantive (beginning) phase of an interview to the substantive phase have the potential to either move the interview forward or derail the discussion. The pre-substantive phases generally include rapport development, interview instructions, narrative practice, and family. The substantive phase explores any allegations of abuse the child may report.

What Versus Why Transition Prompts

Recent research examined the effectiveness of two different transition prompts: “Why did you come here to talk to me today?” versus “What did you come here to talk to me about today?” The questions may feel similar; however, the *what* prompt provided more informative responses, especially nouns related to an activity or person (e.g., the camping trip/my uncle) or verbs (e.g., the touching).



The *why* prompt elicited more uninformative responses, leaving the interviewer struggling with how to introduce the topic of concern without being overly suggestive. A potential reason the *why* prompt resulted in a higher level of noninformative responses may be because a child has greater difficulty mastering an understanding of the abstract concepts needed to respond appropriately. The *what* prompt is concrete and easier for a child to understand.

Due to the sensitive nature of maltreatment discussions, the *why* prompt may also be viewed by the child as more critical and accusatory in nature.

Other Transition Prompts

If the child does not respond to the *what* prompt, the interviewer can ask other questions designed to assist the child in moving toward the topic of concern, such as:



- What did your (mom, dad, caretaker, etc.) say about coming here today?
- Are you worried about something?
- Have there been some problems?
- Is someone worried about you?
- Has someone been bothering you?
- Has something happened?

If the interviewer uses any of the more focused prompts and receives an affirmative response, he/she should then immediately follow with an open-ended request (e.g. “Tell me about your uncle bothering you.”) eliciting a narrative response and explore any allegations fully.

References

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