

# **Continuous Skill Building for Child Forensic Interviewers**

*A Research-to-Practice Summary*

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## **Championing and Strengthening the Global Response to Child Abuse**

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# **Continuous Skill Building for Child Forensic Interviewers**

## **A Research-to-Practice Summary**

### **I. Background Information**

When there is an allegation of child abuse or when a child is present during a violent or criminal act against another person, it is necessary to conduct a forensic interview of that child as a potential witness. Much depends on this conversation, as young witnesses are often the only person, other than the accused, who knows the details of what happened. Dr. Irit Hershkowitz described the forensic interview as the gateway to the investigation. Indeed, information gained from the child informs the investigation and becomes an important factor in decisions made about protection and possible legal action (Hershkowitz, Melkman, & Zur, 2018).

As the information gathered from the witness needs to be reliable, accurate, and as complete as possible, there is a burden placed on the professional conducting the forensic interview. “Expert professional groups agree that children should be interviewed as soon as possible after the alleged offenses by interviewers who themselves introduce as little information as possible, while encouraging children to provide as much information as possible in the form of narratives using open-ended prompts” (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Esplin, 2002, p. 114).

Many cases of alleged child abuse are investigated using a Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) and a Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) approach, typically regarded as the gold standard for a coordinated response to child abuse investigations. A variety of professionals may serve in the role of forensic interviewer for the investigative team. For example, Law Enforcement (LE) and Child Protection Services (CPS) investigators may conduct the forensic interview of a child whose case they are investigating. Alternatively, a widely used model is employment of the services of a Child Forensic Interview Specialist (CFIS). The CFIS professional, whose background may vary, is neither an investigator nor an advocate for the child or case; but rather serves as a person with specialized training and skill in questioning children. Currently,

there are few academic programs which include training on forensic interviewing or investigation of child abuse. However, to be an effective forensic interviewer, an individual must have knowledge and skills about current research on questioning children to achieve the most reliable information; and familiarity with child development, basics of memory formation, cultural influences, and state and federal laws about child abuse. An effective way to initiate the development of a forensic interviewer is through an intensive, research-based training consisting of recommended reading, didactic instruction, observation of demonstrations of interview stages and strategies, and opportunities to apply new learning through structured activities and role-plays. Depending on training logistics and resources, the initial training may occur in a one-week block of time or be spread across several separate meetings of fewer days. A lesser used training delivery model involves distance learning opportunities where the individual learner works at their own pace.

## **II. Summary of Research on Training Forensic Interviewers**

Almost twenty years ago two studies documented the ineffectiveness of intensive training alone in changing interviewer behaviors (Aldridge & Cameron, 1999; Warren et al., 1999). The studies demonstrated that while participants' knowledge increased because of the training, there was little change in behaviors regarding questioning styles employed by the interviewer or the amount of information gained from child witnesses. Following these early studies, Michael Lamb and colleagues conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of four training conditions, two of which included targeted feedback on transcribed interviews from participants following training (Lamb et al., 2002). The findings from this study demonstrated the benefit of the adherence to a structured interview protocol and attendance of intensive day-long workshops every month, which included feedback on implementation of best practice questioning approaches. Additionally, accurate and targeted feedback on interview transcripts for both the individual's and fellow interviewer's performance was helpful in improving adherence to the structured protocol and an increase in the use of narrative seeking prompts/questions.

In 2002, Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, and Mitchell reviewed 37 recorded and transcribed forensic interviews immediately following a period of intensive supervision which provided specific feedback to the interviewers, and then compared those interviews to transcripts of forensic interviews from the same group of interviewers six-months after feedback ceased to be provided. The researchers found a decline in interviewer performance and a return to the use of riskier, option-posing prompts.

In Sweden, Cederborg and colleagues provided police officers with supervision, including verbal and written feedback on simulated, as well as actual, forensic interviews while the officers simultaneously attended a course in forensic interviewing. Participants were trained in the identification of different types of questions preparing them to evaluate their own work and to provide effective feedback to other interviewers (Cederborg, Alm, Lima da Silva Nises, & Lamb, 2013).

Martine Powell aptly stated that “the design and delivery of interviewer training is a highly complex task” (2008, p. 199). Powell and colleagues developed an intensive training program based on six key elements, including incorporation of principles that underpin effective interviewing, adoption of an interview protocol that encourages narrative description from children, clear instruction, effective practice opportunities, expert feedback, and regular ongoing evaluation of interviewer performance (Powell, 2008). Powell recommended a model of ongoing practice with feedback which is interspersed over time, targets specific goals, and is tailored to the individual learner’s ability level. She made a persuasive argument for the importance of feedback that is accurate, specific, and supportive. Powell, Fisher and Hughes-Scholes (2008) compared the benefit of feedback on performance provided at the end of a standardized mock interview versus intermittent feedback during the mock interview, and found the intermittent, intra-interview feedback to be most instructive in shaping practice. Powell, Guadagno, and Benson (2016) explored the effectiveness of computer-based learning activities in shaping interviewer trainees’ use of open-ended questions and found this to be an effective approach in moving trainees closer to desired, rather than habitual, behaviors in questioning children. The inclusion of expert feedback, the use of an on-line platform for training new forensic interviewers, and the recommendation that

this process be delivered over several months further expanded earlier thinking about methods for developing skills in forensic interviewers.

In 2011, Price and Roberts demonstrated the effectiveness of an extensive training and feedback program for law enforcement and social work investigators in Canada. Participants submitted a pre-training recorded interview for transcription and coding, before participating in a two-day training consisting of an introduction to child development and the structural components of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol. Following the training, participants submitted interviews weekly for transcription, coding, and written feedback. A refresher training was conducted two months after the initial course and participants continued to receive weekly feedback for six months. The researchers documented significant changes in the interviewers' use of open prompts and a lessening of option-posing questions.

In Scotland, police officers and social workers attended a training based on a national curriculum to prepare them to work as forensic interviewers. The training advocated for a phased approach like the Memorandum of Good Practice in England and Wales (1992), mirroring the focus on increasing narrative responses from child witnesses put forth by the NICHD protocol. Goetzold (2015) looked at participants' satisfaction with the training and perception of their performance, and reviewed recorded practice interviews conducted by the participants to analyze their actual performance. The findings were not encouraging. Goetzold found that while "participants were overwhelmingly positive about the course" and acknowledged the importance of obtaining a free narrative from the child, they persisted in the use of closed questions throughout the interview. Additionally, many participants were dismissive of the benefit of a narrative practice portion in the interview, arguing a need for a flexible and child-centered approach.

Stolzenberg and Lyon (2015) advocated for a training and feedback approach that combined self-evaluation and intensive peer review sessions to improve the interviewer's ability to adhere to best practice standards. During the study, trainee interviewers attended weekly, 2-hour seminars. Additionally, trainees were required to conduct short interviews weekly for 10 weeks, with unknown

children (between 5 and 10 years of age), transcribe each interview verbatim, and provide comments and self-review. Concurrently, each week every interviewer trainee was assigned to review the work of a classmate's interview, code questions, and provide suggestions for improvement.

Several studies addressed the potential stress faced by professionals conducting forensic interviews of children during an investigation. Furthering the work of Perron and Hilz (2006), who found that forensic interviewers were at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue, Bonach and Heckert (2012) examined the effects of secondary traumatic stress experienced by forensic interviewers working within a CAC setting. Using a website link survey format, and a national directory provided by the National Children's Alliance (NCA), the researchers reached out to CAC forensic interviewers and invited their participation. Demographic information and measures of satisfaction with organizational support, organizational buffers, and job support were collected. The goal was to evaluate sources of support that might ameliorate the impact of stressors potentially contributing to secondary traumatic stress. Support from colleagues and supervisors was found to have an impact on the well-being of child forensic interviewers. Furthermore, the researchers found that such support may promote retention, which could provide the dual benefit of a longer tenure for interviewers to develop skills, and reduce costs associated with hiring and training new forensic interviewers. Other external characteristics of the interviewer, such as age and the presence of other life stressors also contributed to outcomes.

Duron and Cheung (2016) further explored the potential impact of engaging with children's difficult stories through forensic interviewing. During the process of creating training tapes of a forensic interview of a disclosing and a non-disclosing child, actors were required to repeat the interviews multiple times, playing both the role of the child victim and the interviewer and working from actual transcripts of children's disclosures. When participants were later invited to provide feedback on their experience, the actors reported their role as the child to be "emotionally taxing" as well as stressful, frustrating, and embarrassing. The role as the interviewer was reported to be "unexpectedly complex" as the respondents described the task of interviewing as being "hard

to find the balance between being empathetic and ensuring that I was asking the question correctly” (p. 355).

### **III. Training and Feedback for Forensic Interviewers**

What does current research reveal about preparing professionals for the important task of questioning young witnesses? Research has focused more on early training and feedback, with an emphasis on changing long-standing habits about how adults, in general, question children. Training and feedback typically support adherence to an effective protocol and development of the habit of using primarily recall-based questions to maximize the amount and accuracy of information obtained from young witnesses, with a minimal use of more specific recognition-based questions.

Top findings from the review of available science include:

- (1) Training alone or training with access to short-term or sporadic feedback is inadequate, given the complexity of the task and the difficulty of reversing long-standing habits.
- (2) There is a need for a more expanded period of ongoing oversight, focused on the need for sensitive and targeted feedback.
- (3) Shorter follow-up trainings after an initial intensive training can increase learning.
- (4) “Practice is clearly maximized when practice is combined with expert feedback” (Powell, 2008, p. 197).
- (5) Feedback that closely follows the completion of a practice or an actual interview is most effective in shaping future practice.
- (6) Interviewers benefit from observing feedback to others, as well as receiving feedback on their own work.
- (7) While the need for consistent reflection and feedback is greatest as a new interviewer develops his/her skill set, ongoing opportunities for review and feedback are important to maintain effective interviewing skills.

Challenges exist for CAC communities when designing and implementing effective strategies for training and supporting skillful forensic interviewers. Resources and consistency or adequacy of staffing can impact a CAC’s ability

to fund initial training of a new forensic interviewer, much less to provide ongoing training and effective, consistent feedback. When forensic interviewers are not employed by the CAC, but rather are employees of law enforcement or child protection agencies, there may be little influence over turnover and assignment of duties, possibly creating a need for never-ending training for new forensic interviewers. Job responsibilities and high caseloads can also discourage individual interviewers and agencies from prioritizing supervision and on-going training.

An additional challenge, which currently lacks the advantage of research to guide practice, is the long-term development of forensic interview specialists. While feedback on protocol adherence and the implementation of effective questioning strategies is essential in early skill development and will never fade from need for attention, the process for developing nuanced skills for interviewers when engaging reluctant children or children involved in more complex cases has received little attention. More experienced forensic interviewers, especially those for whom forensic interviewing is their profession, deserve to benefit from opportunities to continue developing their expertise, knowledge, and a broad-based skill set.

The literature on skill development of forensic interviewers emphasizes the ongoing need for accurate, timely, and effective feedback, as well as training opportunities, including refresher trainings and training that furthers skill development and knowledge. While peer review has gained popularity and status as the mechanism for providing oversight and feedback (NCA, 2017); it is not the only method, nor is peer review strongly represented in current literature on developing interviewer competence.

## **IV. Options for Providing Feedback and Support to Forensic Interviewers**

### **A. Supervision**

“Defining supervision is challenging, largely because the content and structure of supervision varies with professional grouping...” (Roth & Pilling, 2007, p. 4). Operationally, supervision can be described as a relationship between a senior



member of a profession and a junior member, which extends over time and is focused on both development of the junior professional's skills and a commitment to providing a high quality of services to clients. To be effective, supervision should be planned, purposeful, goal-oriented, and intentional. There is an evaluative component to the supervisory relationship, as well as the provision of support, encouragement, and direction of the learning process. Essential components are goal setting, providing feedback, and intentional adjustments as the interviewer's skills develop and progress. Literature on supervision mostly comes from the medical and clinical fields but can be applied to developing evidence-based, flexible skills in forensic interviewers. Drawing from literature discussing skill development in clinicians, Roth and Pilling (2007) state, "In seeking evidence regarding the value of supervision, it is worth starting by noting that supervision is an implicit - and often under-recognized - component of the treatment packages used to research the efficacy of psychological therapies" (p. 5).

Supervision is especially beneficial to new forensic interviewers as they attempt to integrate new knowledge and unfamiliar behaviors introduced in training and develop effective interviewing habits and practices. Martine Powell (2008) emphasized the benefit of expert feedback, which is timely, objective, specific, and supportive. The individual relationship allows the supervisor to tailor feedback to the strengths, weaknesses, learning style, and confidence level of the new interviewer. Reflective supervision (Franklin, 2011) assists in the socialization process of functioning as a member of an investigative team and a multidisciplinary team. The supervision model allows for consideration of the interviewer's proficiency and the opportunity to match supervision to the skill level of each interviewer. The supervision approach may not be an option for all CACs, as it requires an experienced and competent forensic interviewer with a commitment to developing the skills of less experienced interviewers. Additionally, optimal supervision is provided by a professional who continues to practice as a forensic interviewer and who has an ability to continue to develop her/his knowledge through reading of research articles or understanding of evolving issues in the field.

## **B. Mentoring**

A mentor or coach may be a more experienced forensic interviewer who can provide feedback and support to a new practitioner, but may not have the depth of knowledge or experience to provide supervision. Feedback can be enhanced with the use of structured tools focusing on implementation of the interview structure or coding of the types of questions used by the interviewer. Opportunities to receive timely feedback following an interview of a child can enhance the new interviewer's insight into their skill set and facilitate improvement of practice. Aside from helping the new interviewer, an additional benefit of the mentoring approach can be reinforcement and increased awareness of "best practices" for the mentor/coach. A possible downside may be the transmission of opinion as opposed to evidence-based recommendations.

## **C. Consultation**

A model employed by some CACs when there is no in-house ability to provide supervision is the formation of a contractual relationship with a forensic interviewer with advanced skills to provide education (such as article review, topic focused discussions, etc.), feedback, and support. While lacking the immediate availability of an on-site supervisor in the case of challenging interviews or situations, the consultation model can broaden the discussion and feedback of the in-house forensic interviewers. The consultation can happen in conjunction with internal peer review or mentoring, and may serve to develop the skills of all involved. At times the consultation agreement may include opportunities for the consultant to review recorded forensic interviews and to provide feedback on specific skills and case/child-based adaptations.

A consultant may provide many of the same types of support as those provided by a supervisor without the responsibility of direct guidance or shared responsibility for the younger professional's job performance. This model may incur additional cost for the CAC which could be prohibitive. Scheduling and regular availability can also be a challenge.

#### **D. Peer Review**

Peer review is the review and critique of one's work provided in a supportive manner in a neutral setting by colleagues engaged in the same profession. Benefits can include opportunities for skill improvement and reinforcement of good practice, reduction of a sense of isolation, opportunity for support and encouragement, and the sharing of knowledge. Peer review may happen within a smaller in-house setting or in a larger regional, state, or national venue. Peer review is often recommended as a cost-efficient method for providing feedback on interview practice, but there is no research supporting the effectiveness of peer review in the creation of behavioral changes, increased knowledge and skills, and provision of emotional support and guidance with difficult cases. Variables such as the skill of peer review participants, frequency of review, timeliness and quality of feedback, and lack of ability to address individual goals and needs impact the effectiveness of the peer review process. Effective feedback depends on accuracy, specificity, objectivity, and timing. Poor feedback may negatively impact performance; mediocre feedback, such as "It was great" or "the child was difficult," has no benefit; while accurate and specific feedback can be beneficial. Without good facilitation, a peer review session may be dominated by strong and opinionated voices, especially when mixed groups include participants with more power either because of professional role or number of years of experience.

#### **E. Self-Review**

Forensic interviewers can benefit from opportunities to review their own work and reflect on their practice strengths and areas for development. This exercise can bring greater self-awareness and goal setting for improvement of practice for highly motivated forensic interviewers. The use of tools can assist the forensic interviewer in reflecting upon and evaluating their implementation of the specific steps of the forensic interview protocol. Alternatively, interviewers may review a recording or transcript of their forensic interview noting the questions used. After coding all questions and statements, interviewers may engage in further self-review by counting the numbers of recall and recognition-based questions, by making note of the sequencing of

those questions, and brainstorming for possible better options. Self-review can be combined with other methods of feedback.

## **V. Training and Support Needs of Forensic Interviewers**

### **A. Needs of New Forensic Interviewers**

Much of the energy around supervision and peer review naturally focuses on supporting the skill development and competence of newly trained forensic interviewers. Additionally, much of the science addresses strategies for helping interviewers internalize and routinely adhere to the interview protocol, as well changing behaviors regarding the types of questions used by interviewers. As Cederborg et al. (2013) stated, “Improved interview behavior can be reinforced when interviewers are systematically and extensively trained to follow a flexible interview protocol and are given continuing supervision and feedback on simulated, as well as actual, forensic interviews” (p. 244-245). The research on the impressive results from the implementation of the NICHD structured forensic interview protocol provides a roadmap for on-going training and a structured intensive feedback process. The approach used in the NICHD research included having all interviews digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded by “experts” who then provided timely feedback on each interview. As productive as this approach might be, it is unrealistic for busy CACs. However, the principle of early, consistent, and specific feedback should be considered and adapted when CACs are developing a plan for building skills with new interviewers.

Professionals new to the task of forensic interviewing have difficulty self-monitoring, as much of their cognitive energy is focused on striving to implement a new set of conversational demands and recommendations. While the consumers (LE, CPS, prosecutors) are likely to have strong opinions about the type of information they desire from child witnesses and can certainly assist forensic interviewers in understanding evidentiary requirements, they often do not have a depth of knowledge and experience in conducting forensic interviews. Feedback can vary regarding accuracy and helpfulness. Inaccurate feedback or feedback that contradicts principles of

high-quality interviewing may mislead or confuse the new interviewer, ultimately diminishing the quality of their performance. Interviewers at this stage benefit from objective, specific, and accurate feedback. Interviewers also benefit from structured opportunities to practice components of the forensic interview process that present the greatest challenges for the individual interviewer. It is important for the new interviewer to become confident and skillful with the basics of interviewing, as this will free up the interviewer's attention and allow him or her to then to consider the challenges presented by complex children and cases.

Additionally, newly trained forensic interviewers often lack confidence, feel unsure of their skills, and are unable to evaluate their own performance. Wanting to do a good job, many newer forensic interviewers are very aware of their limitations, but unsure as to how to improve their practice. Support and the knowledge that someone consistently "has your back" while developing a new skill-set enhances growth, confidence, and job satisfaction.

## **B. Needs of Experienced Forensic Interviewers**

As forensic interviewers grow in their skills and become more fluent and flexible with implementing their protocol and good questioning approaches, they are ready to tackle the greater challenges and nuances of interviewing a variety of children, bringing an endless array of complexities. As important as the current science is for guiding an interviewer's practice with children in active disclosure with adequate cognitive and linguistic skills who have made an outcry to a supportive family member, forensic interviewers routinely encounter children who do not meet this description. Forensic interviewers may be interviewing children who are young, from a different cultural background, extremely reluctant or even terrified, or with severe psychopathology or a disability. Additionally, new issues in maltreatment such as interviews of children where there is a need for the introduction of electronic evidence, concerns about child exploitation or trafficking, or complex histories of victimization and maltreatment are part of the practice of forensic interviewing. Each of these issues in interviewing is informed by little to no evidential basis to guide the practice of forensic interviewers.

Saywitz, Goodman, and Lyon (2017) in their chapter on forensic interviewing from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment*, recommend a “toolbox” of evidence-based strategies stating, “We highlight the need for interviewers to have a toolbox of techniques at the ready from which they can select the most appropriate tools for a particular child, context, or jurisdiction – techniques that they can justify based on the best available science” (p. 310). Many dedicated forensic interviewers are cross-trained in numerous interview protocols and may be committed to staying informed about new research and participating in critical thinking and brainstorming to best adjust “best practice” recommendations to the real-life challenges regularly encountered. As forensic interviewers progress in knowledge, understanding of the research, and flexibility in crafting skillful adaptations, they benefit from opportunities to have supervision and peer review experiences supporting their growth. While these experienced interviewers may play a mentoring or supervisory role themselves with less experienced interviewers or members of the MDT, they have a need for opportunities to maintain and expand their own skills and practice.

## **VI. Building the Skills of Forensic Interview Supervisors**

Available literature on providing feedback to forensic interviewers focuses on two areas: (1) increasing awareness and skill in using recall-based prompts/questions and limiting the use of recognition-based questions, and (2) adherence to a protocol that implements best practice. No degree, additional training, certification or licensure is recommended to become a supervisor or trainer of forensic interviewers. Indeed, very little direction is offered beyond completion of a recognized training in forensic interviewing and participation in a review and feedback process. While none of the research on forensic interviewing offers a pathway for becoming a skillful teacher or supervisor, essential elements could include (1) a depth of knowledge, (2) comfort and flexibility with interviewing practice, and (3) the integration of knowledge and practice. Additional knowledge areas might include increased understanding of the impact of development, culture, and trauma on children’s ability to make sense of abusive experiences and their descriptive language. It is necessary to stay abreast of ongoing research about forensic interviewing in

this highly dynamic field. A supervisor of forensic interviewers should be able to describe, explain, and defend their work, as well as practice in a high-quality way.

Familiarity with adult learning theories, the basics of reflective supervision, and increased skill in providing effective feedback will greatly enhance an interviewer's comfort and effectiveness when mentoring or supervising other forensic interviewers who may have a wide range of skills and comfort levels with the forensic interviewing process. Opportunities to teach, write, and testify can be helpful; but are not necessary. A commitment to continually engaging in reading the literature and upgrading one's skills when necessary is important. Flexibility, humility, and commitment to the professional growth of other forensic interviewers is essential.

## **VII. Future Directions**

The forensic interviewing field has made great strides in developing and implementing effective initial training programs for professionals new to forensic interviewing. There is wide recognition that an initial training program is insufficient for changing long-standing adult attitudes and behaviors when questioning children. The field must evolve to support mechanisms for providing effective feedback, ongoing training, and support which assist forensic interviewers in integrating new skills. Additionally, as interviewers become more comfortable and proficient in implementing an evidence-based protocol and questioning strategies, they benefit from training and supervision opportunities to develop critical thinking strategies, leading to more nuanced approaches for meeting the needs of children with developmental challenges, unfamiliar cultures, or a high degree of trauma. Also, without current science that provides direction, interviewers are faced with implementing effective approaches for cases with specific issues that challenge our traditional skills for best eliciting information from child witnesses; such as the presence of evidence without a child outcry, concerns of exploitation or trafficking, and the request to interview immigrant and undocumented children. Additional research and recommendations are needed regarding these complex issues.

Supervisors of forensic interviewers are challenged to move beyond a simplistic recommendation for peer review and to develop a broader consideration of methods for providing continued growth and skill development in interviewers, which can be facilitated by integrating a broad array of mechanisms for providing feedback and support, as well as establishing criteria for effective peer review.

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