

Foundation for the National Children's Advocacy Center Child Forensic Interview Structure

The National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC) is a leader in the field of child forensic interviewing, and provides training, consultation, and technical assistance related to NCAC's *Child Forensic Interview Structure (CFIS)*, to governments, agencies, and frontline workers worldwide. Although NCAC's *CFIS* has not been subjected to extensive research, it is grounded in the most recent literature and research on best practice in interview structure and questioning formats. The NCAC *CFIS* also recognizes that child-specific needs, cultural and community issues, and local practice must be accommodated when a forensic interviewer implements a specific interview structure. Much of the available child forensic interviewing research centers on the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) scripted forensic interview (FI) protocol. This paper explains the similarities and differences between the NCAC and NICHD protocols and why they exist.

The NICHD scripted FI protocol is the only forensic interview protocol in the world that has been subjected to rigorous scientific review. Numerous factors made this research possible, including National Institute of Health funding, a group of dedicated developmental scientists, the implementation of a scripted protocol which ensured uniformity, access to large numbers of recorded forensic interviews, and an intensive oversight and feedback mechanism. The initial research was conducted in Israel and in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA and included interviews of children who came to the attention of the system as the result of "out-crying" to an adult reporter or investigator. Most of the interviews were conducted with children between the ages of 4 and 12 years of age. A few more recent studies have included 3-year old children, and the top age extended up to 15 years in one study.

The outcome of the NICHD research and project resulted in a paradigm shift for standards of conducting interviews of child witnesses. The principle findings were that children provided more information and greater detail in response to recall-based open questions. Forensic interviewers could be trained to increase the amount of open questions in their interviews of children with the use of a scripted protocol and intensive feedback. The forensic interview script also included the introduction and practice of interview instructions/ground rules, an opportunity to practice providing a detailed description of a recent enjoyable or neutral event experienced by the child, and an open transition to the topic of the concern such as "What are you here to talk about today."

All of the aforementioned elements are included in the NCAC CFIS, apart from the recommendation for the use of a script. NCAC is concerned that adherence to the NICHD script gives the conversation a stilted quality, often interfering with interviewer engagement and listening to the child.

For children who did not initiate a discussion of the allegation in response to the open invitation, the NICHD script recommends a series of increasingly focused questions or prompts. While the prompts are scripted, interviewers are allowed discretion about when and where to limit the use of certain prompts. NICHD recommended prompts include:

- “I heard that something may have happened to you. Tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end.”
- “I heard that you talked to [name of person] at [location}. Please tell me what you talked about.”
- “Has anything happened to you at [location]?”
- “Has anybody been bothering you?”
- “Did someone do something to you that you don’t think was right?”

The use of the scripted prompts presented a challenge not only for our own practice at NCAC, but also for many of the national and international professional groups with whom we train and consult. In response to community need, most Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) in the U.S. also interview children who have never made an outcry to an adult or professional. In these cases, concerns may have arisen due to troubling or unclear statements made by the child, non-normative sexualized behavior between children, the discovery of evidence such as photographic images or text or phone messages, a witness who observed abuse, or trafficking of minors. In addition, children who have been removed from homes with serious domestic violence (which may or may not have resulted in a death) or children removed from homes during a drug or child pornography investigation may also be interviewed at CACs as possible victims or witnesses. Consequently, the scripted questions/prompts included in the validated NICHD FI protocol may be contradictory to the line of questioning that is appropriate for any unique child, circumstance, or investigation. This very real and important issue has prevented NCAC from recommending only the use of the NICHD FI Structure in the manner that the research recommends.

Instead the NCAC CFIS recommends a preliminary meeting which includes the forensic interviewer, law enforcement and child protection investigators, and possibly other essential professionals to review information available concerning the allegations and to construct a series of increasingly focused prompts which are tailored to each case. Post transition, the NCAC CFIS approach recommends the continued use of focused open prompts to gather the majority of the information from the child in their own words with very limited use of carefully selected direct questions which can be followed by a request to “tell me more about.....”

The Forensic Interviewing Field

There is recognition by scientists and practitioners that the field of forensic interviewing is dynamic, never reaching an absolute conclusion about best practices. Research will continue to be conducted and new issues will arise in child protection and the impact of social issues on children and families will be explored. Awareness is increasing about the need to make cultural

and linguistic adaptations to recommended interview practices, as well as the need for science to consider the impact of culture and language on children’s memory. At this time, NICHD researchers are finalizing research on a “Revised Protocol” based on lessons learned about the need to pay greater attention to the emotional needs of child witnesses (Hershkowitz, Lamb & Katz, 2014). The *Revised NICHD Protocol* includes enhanced rapport building and supportive statements, which seems to have a positive impact on children’s motivation to participate in the forensic interview, and is highly consistent with the NCAC *CFIS*.

An upcoming chapter in the 2018 revision of the *APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* by Karen Saywitz, Thomas Lyon, and Gail Goodman recommends a toolbox of evidence-based strategies, and acknowledges that the forensic interviewing field is always in an evolutionary process to improve practice. As research continues to inform and challenge what we think we know, forensic interviewers will develop more nuanced adaptations of recommended forensic practices. “Best practices” is not a position or place that will ever be absolutely achieved. “Best practices” is supplemented by “promising practices” which may necessitate removal, addition, or adaptations to elements of the interview structure. Greater dialogue and collaboration between scientists interested in the topic of children as eyewitnesses and practitioners who are facing the day-to-day challenges in interviewing complicated children with complicated lives can work together to move us forward. We have much to understand about the impact of culture and language on children’s memory and statements, as well as the impact of chronic trauma, mental health concerns, and current political environments on child witnesses, families, and the professionals who are committed to protecting and assisting them.