Rapport in Child Forensic Interviews

A Research-to-Practice Summary

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Rapport in Child Forensic Interviews

"The function of rapport in this institutional setting of interviewing child witnesses is primarily about enabling a child to feel comfortable enough to disclose potentially embarrassing or distressing and accurate information to an interviewer in sufficient detail to help determine whether a prosecutable crime has occurred" (Fogarty, Augustinos, & Kettler, 2013).

This paper is an attempt to expand upon the current recommendations for building rapport with children during a forensic interview with the goal of assisting a child in being the best witness that he/she is capable of being. Specific guidance and strategies, drawn from both the empirical literature on forensic interviewing and broader literature on interviewing children in a variety of settings, are included.

Forensic Conversations are Challenging

When there is an allegation of abuse of a child or when a child is thought to have witnessed violence against another person, the child must be interviewed as a potential victim or witness. Intended to elicit case specific information that is uniquely the child's, a forensic interview should be conducted in a developmentally sensitive and legally sound manner, utilizing research and practice-informed techniques (APSAC, 2012; NCAC, 2012; Saywitz & Camparo, 2010; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011).

The forensic interview of a child is difficult for both parties. The child is asked to talk in detail about potentially confusing or distressing topics with a stranger. This is a particularly daunting task for young children who have limited, idiosyncratic vocabulary and difficulty engaging in complex memory searches (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Fivush & Haden, 2003). Additionally, the attempt by the child to recall and give words to distressing experiences often

gives rise to uncomfortable internal responses and upsetting memories. The forensic demand for detail, explanation, and clarification can be stressful for any child witness (Reisberg & Heuer, 2007; Rothschild, 2000; Van Der Kolk, 1996).

The forensic interviewer faces his/her own set of challenges as he/she is charged with the responsibility of engaging and maintaining the child's attention and motivation and adapting the forensic conversation to the child's cognitive and linguistic abilities, while attempting to elicit a specific and complete explanation of past events (APSAC, 2012; Faller, 2007; Saywitz & Camparo, 2010).

The Importance of Establishing Rapport

Establishing rapport has long been recognized as an essential component of any assessment activity with a child (Greenspan, 2003; Kadushin & Kadushin, 1993). While often treated as "common sense and intuitive," rapport remains difficult to pin down (Fogarty, Augustinos, & Kettler, 2013). We know rapport when we experience it personally or when we observe it, but are challenged to articulate helpful instructions for building rapport, especially with a limited amount of time. Grahe and Bernieri (1999) describe rapport as a "combination of qualities that emerge from an interaction" and leave us feeling "invigorated." They also use terms such as "engrossing, friendly, harmonious, involving, and worthwhile" to describe interactions high in rapport.

A recent study with eyewitnesses examined the effects of including a rapport-building phase in the interview and found that participants in the rapport cohort were willing to spend a longer amount of time with the interviewer and attempted to more thoroughly search their memories (Collins & Lincoln, 2002).

This paper will address some of the hallmarks of rapport, as well as goals and issues within the forensic setting. It will conclude with suggestions and benchmarks.

Strategies for Building and Maintaining Rapport

The late Stanley Greenspan stated, "Engagement, or a sense of relatedness, requires that both parties feel connected to each other" (Greenspan, 2003). In other words, it is not just what you say, but how you say it and if you mean it. Communication is multi-faceted. While appropriate questioning is by far the most researched skill in forensic interviewing, a host of additional behaviors and strategies will assist the interviewer in engaging and maintaining the child's cooperation while diminishing the stress resulting from the forensic interview.

An inviting, calm, and child-friendly environment provides the backdrop for helping a child to feel comfortable. Creating a connection with the child and lessening his/her anxiety is the focus of the initial portion of an interview, but continues throughout the conversation. Setting a relaxed pace without any sense of urgency or pressure is essential (Greenspan, 2003; Kadushin & Kadushin, 1993).

While some recommendations for building and maintaining rapport in the forensic interview are similar to those which apply to interviewing children in a variety of settings, others are remarkably different. We will initially address the shared components.

Non-Verbal Behaviors

We cannot evaluate the essence of any verbal exchange merely by reading a transcript of the conversation. According to Mehrabian (1972), 58 percent of communication is non-verbal with another 34 percent being tone of voice and only eight percent being verbal (Mehrabian, 1972). Attention and interest are communicated through our posture, proximity, and facial expression. Non-verbal behaviors that assist in building rapport include forward orientation with an open posture, trunk lean, mutual gaze, smiling, eye contact, and nodding. Such behaviors, however, must be adjusted to the culture and unique temperament of each child (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990; Grahe & Bernieri, 1999).

Feelings, thoughts, reactions, and concerns can be communicated non-verbally, as well as verbally, by the child. The interviewer should closely observe the non-verbal behaviors of the child as well as maintain awareness of his/her own non-verbal messages. A forensic interviewer should guard against assuming that he/she can intuit the emotions of an individual child such as fear, embarrassment, shame, or the child's feelings about the alleged offender or other family members.

A comfortable environment contributes to rapport. While not over-stimulating, the room should reflect a space that is comfortable and inviting to a child. Child appropriate furniture, pleasant and muted colors with little visual distraction are recommended. Availability of simple media, such as paper and markers, may contribute to a less formal atmosphere, diminish anxiety, and allow alternative modalities of expression (Cordisco Steele, 2011; Faller, 2007; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010).

Verbal Attending Behaviors

The purpose of asking skillful and non-leading questions is to provide a child with the opportunity to describe his/her experiences in his/her own words; but questions alone are not enough. To obtain the full benefit of good questioning, the interviewer must also be a good/active listener and a careful observer (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). Verbal attending behaviors, when used in tandem with good questioning strategies, can optimize a child's ability to describe his/her experiences. Lamb and Brown (2006) describe children as "conversational apprentices" stating, "Children depend on their adult conversational partners, both for an understanding of the task and for retrieving and reporting detailed information about their experiences." Verbal following, encouragers, reflection/paraphrasing, summarizing, and silence are verbal attending behaviors that actively communicate support and interest, as well as provide scaffolding for the child's conversation.

Verbal following is simply responding to a child's sharing of information with acknowledgment of their statements (i.e. encouragers and reflection) and follow-up questions, as opposed to ignoring those statements and responding instead with a disconnected question. Narrative prompts and open–ended "wh" questions can encourage the child to elaborate further on statements already made. Children who have not yet internalized the components of narrative description of an event (participants, location, actions, statements, and thoughts and feelings) may be able to provide more detail when offered helpful prompts.

Encouragers are a particular kind of verbal response that communicate no information to the child and may not even include words, but do provide a response. Encouragers include sounds like "hmm," "uhm" (rather like verbal head nods), as well as phrases such as "I see." These are essentially vocal responses that communicate to the child that the forensic interviewer is

listening without interrupting or adding to the child's narrative. Strong responses such as gasps or "how awful" or "oh my" are to be avoided.

Reflection and paraphrasing (also known as active listening) are the most useful and flexible of the verbal attending skills. Reflection is simply parroting back to a child his/her exact words. Paraphrasing, as opposed to mirroring the child's exact words, captures the "gist" or essential elements of the child's statements (Evans & Roberts, 2009). Both reflection and paraphrasing communicate that the interviewer is truly listening and the reflection alone may encourage further elaboration, the sharing of additional information, or clarification of comments. Reflection/paraphrasing can feel like acceptance or acknowledgement from the child's point of view, thereby providing support and potentially increasing rapport. When the interviewer has included the request to "tell me if I get something wrong" as one of the interview instructions, reflection/paraphrasing provides an opportunity for the child to correct the interviewer. For a child with weaker narrative skills or who provides shorter responses, the combination of reflection of the child's statement paired with the follow-up question serves to organize the conversation without introducing information. Whereas therapists typically focus on the affective or experiential components of the child's statements (feelings over content), the forensic interviewer focuses on details, facts, and descriptions provided by the child (content over feelings).

Summarizing is an extended form of paraphrasing which ties together a number of the child's statements. Summarizing is a useful technique when responding to a child's long and detailed narratives and may help to ensure that the interviewer has encoded the important information. Summarizing may also be used with a child who gives information in a less organized manner, perhaps like a series of "snapshots." The interviewer may use this technique to tie the child's statements into a more coherent narrative or as a lead-in to additional questions.

Silence is also an essential component of a forensic interviewer's communication skills. A relaxed atmosphere that incorporates moments of silence throughout the process allows a child time to gather his/her thoughts, to search his/her memory for relevant information, to formulate a response to a difficult question, or to work through ambivalence about putting experiences into words. When pauses are a part of the forensic interview from the beginning, silence is less likely to create discomfort in the child or the interviewer.

Scaffolding

In everyday usage, the term scaffold refers to a "supporting framework" (Webster, 1997) which provides structure and assistance during the erection of a building under construction. Applying this concept to the scaffolding that occurs in an interview, acknowledges that a child's ability to provide a narrative description of personally experienced events is a skill that is "under construction." Young children face the greatest challenge in being able to fully describe life events, particularly when speaking with an adult that was not present for the event (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Vgotsky, 1978). A child may have lived through and may recall an experience; but still lack the necessary language, story models, and appreciation of his/her role as a witness (Walker, 1994). The challenge for the interviewer is in providing structure, offering support and encouragement, and requesting further details and clarification without suggesting content or meaning of the event to the child. The metaphor of a "scaffold" is useful in understanding a group of adult behaviors that can assist a child in maximizing his/her ability to provide information about events which he/she has experienced or witnessed. Developmentally appropriate questions in combination with attending and facilitation techniques are effective means of providing scaffolding for the forensic conversation.

Rapport Strategies Specific to Forensic Interviewing

A relaxed and friendly introduction of the interviewer's role and the environment, as well as an age appropriate explanation of the process, set a comfortable tone for building rapport in the interview. The forensic interviewer should introduce him/herself as "a person who talks to kids, likes to find out a lot about them, asks lots of questions, and listens to the answers" or a similar age appropriate statement. The forensic interviewer should explain the recording process and notify the child of any observers. Demonstration of good attending skills, patience, interest, and a non-judgmental manner aids in creating and maintaining rapport. Although children often do not actually verbalize concerns or questions, any questions that do arise should be answered as honestly and simply as possible.

The forensic interviewer maintains rapport by reacting to each new topic as it arises with curiosity and interest by asking follow-up questions and encouraging description and clarification. As the forensic conversation is conducted for the purpose of gathering information from the child in as much detail as the child is able to provide, the forensic interviewer should address all topics, easy or challenging, in the same manner. This can be accomplished by encouraging full description and explanation from the child with the goal of establishing the child as the "expert" about all aspects of her life. The interviewer intentionally wants to counter the normal rules of adult-child conversation, where the adult is typically viewed as all-knowing, by providing an opportunity for practice of detailed description of everyday events and setting a pattern of interaction for the entire conversation (Cordisco Steele, 2011; Lamb, 2011; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011). Encouragement, interest, and support should not be evaluative, nor topic specific. A friendly, open, unbiased, and information seeking approach is necessary to maintain rapport throughout the interview. Forensic interviewers cannot "fill in the spaces" for the child.

Use of Questions

Research on forensic interviewing emphasizes the many benefits of using open-ended questions/narrative prompts when questioning a child. Commitment to seeking information from a child through the use of open-ended questions serves to increase the total amount of information provided by the child. Perhaps more importantly, the information elicited through the use of narrative-inviting questions is likely to be more accurate. So, the interviewer hopefully gains greater quality and quantity of information through the use of these questions that tap the child's free recall memory (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Saywitz & Camparo, 2010; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011).

Less discussed is the possible impact the use of open questions might have on rapport between the interviewer and the child. When provided an opportunity to describe experiences (abuse or otherwise) in his/her own words, a child might be expected to feel more comfortable and have a greater sense of control and efficacy. However, if pressed through the use of repeated prompts to "tell me more" and "tell me everything and don't leave anything out" a child with poor narrative ability might experience greater stress, pressure, or a sense of inadequacy. With such children, perhaps increased direction through the use of more narrowly focused open questions or open "wh" questions might assist the child. More focused "wh" questions may assist the child in understanding some questions; also allowing her/him to tell the interviewer when he/she doesn't know the answer to a question. Greater understanding of the request might allow the child to maintain a greater sense of comfort and control, thus maintaining rapport with the interviewer

While acknowledged as sometimes necessary, direct questions, particularly option-posing questions, should be delayed as long as possible, used with care, and followed by the request to "tell me more." Concerns arise about influence on the child's responses when the interviewer frequently uses option-

posing questions which may increase suggestibility. A child is most suggestible about the elements of a remembered experience when he/she either does not recall or is unsure of the information being sought. While interviewers may wish to come to the aid of a reluctant child through the use of such questions; he/she may also be communicating a demand for information the child does not possess, thus diminishing rapport.

Interview Instructions

An age appropriate explanation of the rules that govern a forensic interview helps the child to understand the similarities and differences of the forensic interview from other adult-child conversations. For many children, knowing the "ground rules" of the forensic interview helps them to feel more comfortable. While the same basic guidelines are used with all age groups, adaptation to the age and culture of the child will make the introduction of interview instructions more useful and more conducive to increasing rapport. For example, a younger child may benefit from an opportunity to "practice" the application of each instruction, while an adolescent may find the explanation alone to be more respectful of his/her age and abilities. Phrasing might need to be altered with children from certain cultures to be more in line with social expectations.

Narrative Practice (Episodic Memory Training)

A substantial body of research demonstrates that emphasizing a narrative practice approach in the early stage of the interview increases children's informative responses to open-ended prompts in the substantive portion of the interview. Children, additionally, provide more details without interviewers having to resort to more direct or leading prompts (Hershkowitz, 2009; Lamb et

al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Interviewers who routinely engage in narrative practice of a non- abuse event are more likely to use the same linguistic approach and similar prompts when asking a child to elaborate on substantive topics (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz, & Malloy, 2013).

A distinct narrative practice opportunity is an important component of rapport building in a forensic interview. Narrative practice is accomplished by having the child describe a recent everyday event in detail. Invitations such as "Start at the beginning and tell me everything and don't leave anything out" communicate the wish for complete description. Some children are easily able to provide a detailed description of their morning or a recent experience. Additionally, the use of focused narrative prompts following a child's more limited statement helps less descriptive children to understand the level of detail and elaboration sought by the interviewer. In addition to expressing interest in the child and building rapport, the interviewer is able to establish a "base line" for the child's narrative ability and linguistic style and to observe the child's response to particular types of questions. Having a sense of the child's linguistic style allows the forensic interviewer to make necessary adaptations to elicit this child's "best" narrative descriptions. Additionally, the child comes to further understand the request being made of him/her. Maintaining a similar style of interaction and questioning throughout the interview assists in maintaining rapport with the child.

Addressing the Topic of Concern

Current forensic interview protocols agree that a child should be afforded the opportunity to talk about the allegation topic in a narrative manner and using his/her own words. This is encouraged by the use of an open prompt such as "What are you here to talk to me about today?" Any narrative from the child in response to this question should not be interrupted. When the child is allowed

to initiate the substantive portion of the conversation in his/her own way and to provide details at his/her own pace, rapport is maintained.

When asked to recall and describe a remembered event, a child naturally begins with information that is most salient to him/her or information he/she thinks is likely to be of interest to the adult listener. Requesting that the child "start at the beginning and tell me everything about ....." can lead to a narrative description of an event that is easier to understand and follow for the unfamiliar listener. However, forensic interviewers must listen attentively to each child and adapt follow-up questions to the needs of the child. Slight changes in wording may accomplish the goal of keeping questions open without placing undue stress on the child.

Clarification

As previously mentioned, a forensic interviewer cannot "fill in" gaps in a child's description of an abusive event. From the beginning of the forensic conversation the interviewer should remind the child and demonstrate through his/her behavior that the child knows more about all events under discussion than the interviewer. Adopting this approach early in the interview and building rapport with the child assists in preparing the child for questions about clarification and elaboration when more difficult topics arise.

Repetition of the request to "start at the beginning" reinforces for the child that this is a beneficial way to recall and relate one's experiences. Not all children will be able to accommodate this request due to developmental stage or cognitive or linguistic challenges, and the interviewer may have to make adjustments. The goal is to establish a pattern of requesting information that sets a rhythm for how remembered events will be discussed and encourages the child to be detailed and descriptive. This may also help to eliminate some of the more focused follow-up questions that often are used to ask the child to fill in missing details.

Closure

The child's participation in the forensic interview should be acknowledged in a kind and respectful way. Conversation can return to more everyday topics. The forensic interviewer's demeanor should remain friendly, interested, and neutral throughout the interview. Connection (rapport) with the child is paramount throughout the interview.

Summary

The importance of establishing rapport in the early stages of the forensic interview of a child is universally acknowledged Establishing rapport with child witnesses has been shown to increase motivation, encourage relaying of more information, and reduce suggestibility (Almerigogna, Ost, Bull, & Akehurst, 2007; Hershkowitz, 2009). However, less attention has been given in the forensic interviewing literature to the processes through which a forensic interviewer can build and maintain rapport with a child during an unfamiliar and potentially difficult conversation. In this paper specific guidance was provided, which included strategies from the literature on forensic interviewing and the broader literature on interviewing children. The goal is to assist each child in being the best witness that he/she is capable of being at the time of the interview. This brief discussion may serve to encourage further exploration as to how interviewers might attend not only to the cognitive issues and concerns; but also the emotional and social needs of children who serve as witnesses. Balancing the needs of investigative agencies and the courts with respect for the child's wish to "tell the story of what happened to me" is a daunting and important task.

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