Forensic Interview Room Set-up

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Multidisciplinary teams and children's advocacy centers throughout the country have been working diligently for the past twenty years to establish "child-friendly" settings in which to interview children and developmentally disabled adults about witnessing and experiencing abuse and violence.[2] But what does this mean? What does a "child friendly" setting look like? This article examines the potential components of a child friendly setting, and considers the underlying principles for each element.

To consider the appropriate elements for the setting of an interview room, this article will address three components: Before the interview, during the interview, and after the interview.

1. Before the Interview – In preparing for the interview, multidisciplinary teams should consider what the surroundings look like to the children and families that will be served. When children come for their interviews, they should perceive an environment that is "child-friendly" and respectful of them and their needs.[3] Child-sized seating, a play area, decorations designed for children, and friendly staff all contribute to a welcoming atmosphere. Children should have access to materials and toys that reflect the needs and interests of the diverse populations served in the setting. The facility should be accessible for people with disabilities, in addition to being physically safe and "child proof" for children of all ages. Alleged offenders should be denied access to the facility where children are interviewed.[4] Children and families should be observed and supervised by staff, volunteers or team members at all times. Consider the possibility of having one entrance and waiting area for the children and families, and a separate entrance for staff, visitors, and deliveries in order to protect the confidentiality of the children and families receiving forensic interview services.

    a. Materials – Toys, games, books, and coloring pages should represent the cultures and ethnicities of the children and families we serve.[5] Allegations of sexual abuse and violence are stigmatizing enough; interview settings can help reduce this isolation by acknowledging and depicting the magnitude of people affected by violence. Similarly, resources, forms, and brochures should be available in multiple languages to facilitate communication.

    b. Physical Setting – Child-sized furniture, mixed in with furniture for adults, is a welcome change for children in an authoritarian world. Furniture and paraphernalia arranged for children to play and relax help engage them in the interview process from the moment they enter the building.

       Strive to create a waiting room environment that is calm and serene. Over-stimulating games and activities, including video games, television, and/or movies can result in excessive attachment of the child to those activities. This may cause difficulty transitioning the child to the interview itself. Avoid providing toys and activities in the waiting room that employ techniques similar to those that may be utilized in the interview

process, including dolls for play or staff engaging the child in face drawings or conversations about the child's family.

Finally, consider the waiting room interactions when interviewing siblings or other children related to one case. Attempts to minimize cross-contamination within the case are imperative. It may be more appropriate to bring children in on different days, or seat them in separate waiting areas, when the case involves multiple victims.[6] If this is not possible, increase staff interaction with children in order to minimize opportunities for cross-contamination.

c. Facility – Consider the physical setting and location of the interview facility. Does your multidisciplinary team conduct your interviews in a freestanding building, separate from a doctor's office, school, police station or courthouse? Cultural or religious beliefs may impact the experiences of children and families, and subsequently affect their comfort level in various locations. While for some children and families a doctor is someone who helps people stay healthy, other children and families may be frightened of the clinical setting of a doctor's office or hospital where they may have received a shot, undergone a painful procedure, or visited sick or dying family members.

   Similarly, while some people regard police officers as men and women who help people stay safe, others may consider police stations as locations where people go when they are in trouble.[7] Further, for people who may be newly integrated into American culture from a country where conflict and warfare are the norm, police stations may be one step removed from the execution of a family member or loved one.

   School settings are not the ideal location for interviewing children about abuse or violence. There is often difficulty in securing a private location in a school, resulting in the utilization of the principal's office for the interview. However, children often consider the principal's office as the place to go when they are in trouble. Children may have additional concerns about the confidentiality of the information they disclose in a school setting.

d. Staff – The waiting or lobby area of the interview setting should be staffed in order to adequately provide supervision and information to the clients served. Consider having staff members available to review and explain authorization and release forms to the child's parents or caregivers. A staff or team member, such as an advocate, family liaison, or support worker, may be available for the parent to share resources and referral information. This eliminates duplication of services, and provides necessary support and information to parents who may be reeling from the distressing report that their child may have been directly or indirectly victimized.

   Prior to the interview, it may be helpful for the interviewer to briefly meet with the non-offending parents or caregivers in a private room, separate from the child being interviewed. Regardless of whether your team's interviewers conduct a "blind" interview – not knowing anything about the allegations of abuse or violence prior to the interview –

or whether the interviewer has some minimal information regarding the reports, caregivers may benefit from knowing what they can expect from the interview process.

2. During the Interview – Interview rooms should be comfortably furnished, and equipped with technology that allows for memorializing the interview, as determined by the needs of the multidisciplinary investigative team members of the community.[8]

   a. Physical Setting – The furniture in the interview room should be comfortable and accessible for children. Large, welcoming couches or chairs arranged in a manner that allows for direct and relaxed communication is ideal. Hard benches or steps may enable a distractible child to lose focus on the topic more quickly. An interrogation-style arrangement with the interviewer sitting across the table from the child may be intimidating, and the bulk of the table may impede the ability to effectively communicate with the child. In an interview, children communicate in three ways: through their language, their behaviors, and their emotions.[9] It is imperative that interviewers pay attention to all three of these forms of communication in order to fully understand what a child may be saying in the interview. For example, a child may be verbally reporting that he didn't experience abuse, but may be compulsively manipulating an object or tearing apart a Kleenex, which may belie his statements. If the interviewer is not able to see these actions, she may not have a full understanding of what the child may be communicating, and may miss exploring important issues or topics with the child in the interview.

   It is also tempting to make a setting so child-friendly that it is no longer appropriate for the forensic setting. In order for the interviewer to effectively build rapport with the child and to make the child feel comfortable in the interview room, the interviewer herself must be comfortable. For example, while beanbag chairs may be appealing for children, the noise of the child's – and the interviewer's – movements on the beanbag chair may impede the ability of the interviewer or the multidisciplinary team members to hear and understand the child's statements.

   In addition, if interviews are video recorded, bear in mind that the recording must be appropriate for court, as needed. It is essential that judges and juries are also able to hear and understand what is said during the interview. Noises from the movements on the beanbag chair may be enhanced onto the video recording, and make it difficult to listen to. Further, in order to maintain interviewer professionalism and decorum in the interview, and credibility in court, it is not recommended that judges and juries see adult interviewers struggling to get out of a beanbag chair at the conclusion of the interview.

   Finally, minimal distractions in the interview room allow the child to maintain focus on the interview process. Interview tools utilized during the course of the interview, such as anatomical diagrams or dolls, should be chosen by the interviewer, with some input from the child, to represent the age, gender and ethnicity of the child and the alleged offender.[10,11] This reduces issues of suggestibility and confusion for the child during the interview and potential subsequent court hearings. Store interview tools out of site until determined necessary by the interviewer. Reserve pictures or wall murals that may

encourage play or invite fantasy for rooms where children are not being interviewed about factual events.

b. Videotape equipment – Ideally, the multidisciplinary team members will observe the interview from another room, either via closed circuit television or from beyond a two-way mirror.[12] State-of-the-art technology allowing for memorializing the interview using VHS or DVD recorders might include video cameras with picture in picture technology and time and date stamp video recording features. The picture in picture equipment allows for one camera to focus on the big picture of the interview room activities, capturing the interviewer, the child, any interview aids utilized, and an interpreter, when appropriate. The second camera can focus on the child being interviewed, recording the child's movements and activities around the interview room. Emotions or behaviors displayed by a child may contribute to the child's report, and can be captured close-up. Time and date stamping allow for accurate representation of the timing of the interview, and may allay any concerns that the record was edited.

c. People in the room – Generally, only the child and the interviewer need to be in the interview room. Incorporating other people in the interview room is not recommended, unless it is critical to the effective communication with a child. In order to establish a comfortable setting for a child, it is important to remove intimidating elements, and minimize multiple authority figures in the room.

   As professionals, we should strive to reduce any factors of coercion we may convey to the child. Encourage law enforcement professionals to interview children in plain clothes, removing their gun belts and badges. Reducing intimidation and interviewing children in a friendly, encouraging manner enhances children's abilities to resist possible suggestion from adults, and allows for more accurate and complete reports of abuse or violence. [13,14,15]

   Team members should incorporate an effective means of communicating with each other towards the end of the interview to ensure all areas of inquiry are being explored. This ideally would be achieved without leaving the child alone in the interview room, and may include the use of a telephone connected between the interview room and the team observation room, or may include the use of a "bug in the ear" system. The bug in the ear system includes a cordless hearing device in the ear of the interviewer, with information or questions being fed to the interviewer through a microphone from the team observation room.

3. After the Interview – In order to provide the most supportive and accommodating services to children and families, we must attend to their needs after the interview as resolutely as we do before and during the interview.

   a. Staff – Allow time for children to play and decompress after discussing the difficult subjects of abuse and victimization. A brief period to expend energy with toys or games, or simply sitting quietly in a comfortable, peaceful setting may help the child transition for the remainder of her day. Having staff or team members available to provide this

transition, or to simply supervise the child during this time, goes a long way toward normalizing the child's experience at the interview site.

b. Service Recommendations – Following the interview, allow time for the multidisciplinary team members, including the forensic interviewer, to evaluate each child interviewed to determine if he or she requires subsequent referrals. Therapy, a medical evaluation, or other services may help ameliorate the effects of abuse or violence the child may have experienced. Communicate recommendations to this effect to the parents or caregivers of the child in a private room, out of the presence of the child. A resource list with several options may be provided to the parents or caregivers, and if available, a team member may facilitate contact with appropriate providers.

c. Gifts – Individually packaged snacks may be routinely provided to children immediately following their interview, but should consist of healthy choices such as juice boxes, crackers and cheese, or fruit. Inappropriate introduction of this practice, or supplying the children with candy bars, soda, and sugar-laden "treats" may be regarded as incentives, and may challenge the credibility and impartiality of the interview.

   Providing the child with substantive toys, teddy bears, or clothing as part of the interview process is also generally not recommended. While toys and playthings might be comforting for a child following a distressing event, presenting these items to children immediately following a forensic or investigative interview may be perceived as an inducement or reward for a child's report of abuse. Children who are in need of clothing, other personal effects, or basic needs may be provided these items on a different visit to the facility, separating the interview from the experience of receiving these items.

Conclusion

During the course of forensic interviews with children, we are asking very vulnerable and inexperienced individuals to report very personal and intimate information to veritable strangers. It is in our best interest – not to mention that of the children – to do so in a way that considers how this experience may impact them. It is the very least we can do as professionals to provide a setting that enables the child to be as stress-free and as comfortable as possible during this process.

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