

NICHD-ROCSA

**An adaptation of the
NICHD interviewing
protocol for
investigating
internet-related
child sexual abuse**

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An adaptation of the NICHD interviewing protocol for investigating internet-related child sexual abuse

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PROMISE ELPIS project promotes multidisciplinary and interagency models for child victims and witnesses of sexual violence, with a specific focus on specialised interventions and excellence in practice in cases where there is a presumed online element of the sexual violence.



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Introduction

THIS ADAPATION OF THE NICHD PROTOCOL IS DEVELOPED FOR USE BY TRAINED CHILD INTERVIEWERS, FAMILIAR WITH THE REVISED NICHD PROTOCOL. IT IS PARTICULARLY DEVELOPED FOR CASES FOR WHICH THERE IS A PHYSICAL EVIDENCE OF A STRONG SUSPICION OF THE EXISTENCE OF SUCH EVIDENCE.

THAT EVIDENCE could typically consist of:

- sexual pictures, videos or any other material clearly identifying the child
- online conversations, where the child has demonstrably¹ been a participant.

The original NICHD protocol was developed for suspected cases of offline child abuse, which often entail little or no corroborating evidence. Cases of online CSA, however often entail strong technical evidence, wherefore there is a particular need to guide investigative interviewers in how to introduce the allegation and refer to possibly existing evidence. While it is still important to conduct the interview in a non-suggestive manner and build it around questions prompting for free recall, it may be necessary and ethical to be transparent with existing evidence early on in the interview in order to not blindside the child.

¹ demonstrably = the conversation or pictures have been saved on the child's own device or a device the child uses, or the nickname or account is known to be used by the child. This may be the case, for instance, when the child themselves acknowledges using the account or username, or the information has been provided by the service provider based on registration- or log-in information, or when it is by other means clear.

The aim of this modified interviewing protocol is this to suggest ways in which to address existing evidence of online abuse in as child-sensitive and non-suggestive a way as possible, and to give examples of information / evidence that may be relevant to ask for the legal assessments of online abuse cases. Interviewers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the revised NICHHD protocol, in particular ways to support and encourage child interviewees. Literature on this is recommended at the end of this document, including relevant studies related to online abuse and its consequences for child victims.

In cases where the suspicion is not based on strong evidence for the particular child being victimised, using the regular NICHHD-R is recommended. However, the questions proposed in this adapted protocol may be used as reference on how to ask about issues that tend to be relevant to online cases. Before the interview, interviewers are encouraged to inform themselves about the social media platforms, applications or games that are related to the suspicion under investigation as well as how they operate.

Alternative hypotheses

Consider alternative explanations for the available evidence before the interview, as well as how to obtain information regarding these. In internet-based abuse cases, a central question may be who has actually been using an account or username related to the case at hand.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



ATTENTION! Adapt the selected questions according to the suspicion at hand and the developmental level of the child.

Recommended interview structure

Part 1. INTRODUCTION

My name is _____, I am a [profession] and my job is to talk to children about things that have happened to them. As you can see, we have a video camera here. It will record us talking so I can remember everything you tell me.

Check if the child is okay with all this and whether they have any questions.

Part 2. RAPPORT BUILDING

The purpose is to get the child to relax and settle into the situation as well as possible.

Make sure that the child feels as comfortable as possible:

How are you feeling about being here to talk with me today? Do you have any concerns? Is there anything that I can do to help you feel more comfortable?

First, I would like to get to know you better. Tell me about things you like to do.

If the child does not answer, gives a short answer, or gets stuck, continue building rapport, asking the child open-ended questions about other things, for example:

Tell me about things you like to do in your spare time?

Continue with the rapport building until the child seems to be at ease and provides detailed narrative responses. You can ask the child about their school, hobbies or other things that they like to do after school. Remember to give the child enough time to answer before asking new questions. You should also ask the child further invitations about things they have already mentioned, making sure the questions are open-ended. For example:

Tell me about [something the child has mentioned].

Use various introductory questions to ask about different topics; one of those invitations should focus on internal contents: thoughts, feelings, sensations, or emotions. When the child mentions

something, follow up on that with an open-ended prompt:

Tell me more about the time in the car / You mentioned playing X, tell me about X. These are cued follow up questions aimed to encourage the child to expand on topics they have mentioned.

If the child seems nervous or hesitant to talk, you may address the issue by asking questions, such as:

Tell me about your feelings right now.

Support the child by thanking them:

Thank you for sharing this with me.

PART 3. GROUND RULES (RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES)

Explaining and practising ground rules (rights and responsibilities)

In accordance with the legislation at hand; explain who can/will see the interview and or/ the recording of it afterwards. You may want to stress that it will not be publicly available / available online or given out to other people than those concerned.

My co-workers will also be following this conversation from the room next door through that camera. They are there to help me, and they will remind me if I forget to ask you about something important. We will take a break at some point, and then I will ask them if there is anything else that I should ask you about.

Adjust the questions according to the child's developmental level.

There are certain ground rules related to this discussion, which I would like to tell you about next.

3.1 Understanding

- *It is important that we understand each other as well as possible. If I ask you a question that you don't understand, please tell me that you don't understand.*
- *If I don't understand what you say, I'll ask you to explain.*
- *And if I accidentally say something that is not true, you must tell me about it. Is that okay?*

According to the child's age, practice these rules with some examples.

The younger the child, the more they might need concrete examples to understand the concepts of the interview well.

For example:

If I said that you are a ten-year old boy (when the child is not), what should you answer?

If the child does not get it right the first time, pose another practice question, for instance:

“You are wearing a grey jacket, what should you answer?” or similar.

Correct a wrong answer or reinforce the child if they give the right answer.

3.2 I don't know / I don't remember

If I ask you a question and you don't know the answer, just tell me: "I don't know." So, if I ask you, [e.g. what did I have for breakfast today], what would you say?

If the child says: *"I don't know"*, say:

Exactly. You don't know. If the child offers a guess, ask: Do you know what I had for breakfast today?

And continue:

No, you don't know me and [e.g., you weren't with me when I had my breakfast this morning], so you don't know. When you don't know the answer, please don't guess, just say that you don't know.

Pose another practice question if the child does not get it right the first time, for instance *“What colour is my car / what is the name of my cat”* or similar.

3.3 The right to decline

Part of my job is to talk to children and young people about things that have happened to them. I meet with lots of children and young people so that they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them. It is very important that you tell me the truth today about things that have happened to you.

Here you might ask the child to promise to tell the truth or ask:

Can we agree that you will only tell the truth here when talking to me today?

Legal rights or obligations relevant for the national context may be addressed in a similar way; making sure the child understands the situation as well as possible (if this has not already been done prior to the interview). Such obligations or rights may be, for example, the right not to incriminate a family member or the criminal liability for children over the age of 15 years. These need to be planned ahead of the interview, taking into account national legal requirements and the child's age, development and possible vulnerabilities.

The most important rule is that you must tell the truth. So if there is something you do not want to talk about, just tell me you don't want to talk about it. Is this okay with you?

4. PRACTISE INTERVIEW

and building further rapport (training in episodic memory)

Prior to the interview, please identify a recent, positive and meaningful event in which the child actively participated. The purpose is to ask the child to narrate something that has occurred and follow up on what the child has narrated similarly as with the suspected offence.

4.1 Main invitation

Before we talk about why you're here today, we're going to practise a bit. I would like for you to tell me as much as you can recall about an event or something that you have experienced. I understand that a few [days, weeks] ago there was [a holiday, birthday party, other event]? Tell me everything that happened [during the event], from the beginning to the end, as best as you can.

In case an event wasn't identified previously, ask:

Has there recently been any special event that you could tell me about? / Have you done something out of the ordinary in your free time recently?

If the child doesn't identify a suitable event, say:

So, tell me everything that happened [today, yesterday], from the time you woke up until you [got here / went to bed].

4.2 Follow-up invitations

Support the child by thanking them:

Thank you, [child' name], you've told me a lot of interesting things!

Please repeat briefly, what the child has said and pair this with open-ended follow-up questions:

And then what happened?

Use this question as often as needed throughout this section until you have been given a full account of the event. Remember to support the child's account through active listening, nodding, showing interest, and thanking the child.

Remember to reinforce the child by providing supportive comments throughout, for instance:

Thank you [child] for telling me that. What you say is very clear and helps me understand what happened.

Provide support in a way that feels natural to you and adapted to the development and context of the child.

4.3 Cued invitations

You should also aim to use some other questions probing for more detail. (About time, events, thoughts, emotions).

You told me about X, please tell me more about that.

You can also use time segmenting invitations, probing for information from different parts of the event just described by the child. For example:

You told me that you played inside before going to the market. Tell me everything that happened at home from the time you woke up until you left to go to the market".

Adjust to the child's developmental level, for example, asking simply "Tell me about the playing / going to the market" if the child has difficulties understanding the longer instruction.

For example:

Please tell me everything that happened from the moment [an activity the child mentioned] to the moment [a subsequent activity].

Also ask the child about his/her thoughts and feelings.

Earlier, you spoke about [thought, feeling]. Tell me more about that.

What did you think about that?

How did it make you feel?

If the child doesn't mention what they thought or felt, you can ask:

What did you think about that? How did it make you feel?

4.4 Discussing the topic of online activities

If the child has not brought up any online activities (gaming, using Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Discord, Reddit, watching Youtube, streaming on Twitch, etc.) previously, you may also inquire about these, as openly as possible. This may be a good way to find out the child's general knowledge of online issues as well as how they describe them.

Examples of online-related questions:

- *Tell me about things you like to do online?*

If the child doesn't understand the concept of "being online", you can ask:

- *What do you like to do on your phone? [/other devices]*
- *What device do you use when you are online / play online / gaming with your friends / chatting with your friends?*

Continue with cued invitations to ask the child for free narratives about issues they have already mentioned:

- *You told me you play [Brawl stars]. Tell me about that!*
- *You told me you like [TikTok]. Tell me more about that!*
- *You told me you like to use [Snapchat]. I'm new to the app myself, so I don't know that much about it. Could you please tell me more about it?*

You may also probe for more detail about different aspects of the online activities as well as the child's experiences, thoughts and emotions related to these.

- *You told me you play [FIFA22]. Tell me more about that game?*
- *You told me about this online game [Fortnite] – tell me more. You said it has different characters. Tell me about the characters.*

- *You told me you like to spend time on [TikTok]. Tell me about that. (If the child doesn't give a descriptive response, you may ask: What do you usually do there?)*
- *You told me you usually play around 2 hours on a weeknight. Please tell me everything you can about that.*
- *Tell me about using snapchat.*
- *Tell me about the place you are in physically when [you play games/ use snapchat]? (According to what the child has told about online activities. At home, at school, outside, in your room, at a friend's house, etc.)*
- *Tell me about other people who are present when you are gaming/ playing games? (Physically in the same room / in the kitchen, in another room)*
- *You mentioned that your character has a nickname, tell me more about the nicknames?*
- *You said you knew these things about these characters. Tell me how you know these things?*
- *You said that you know these things because you've talked to them. Tell me more about talking with them?*
- *Tell me about what happens when you are online? (Pose follow up questions about how, where, whom / messages / chatting / on the phone / via video / webcam?)*

IMPORTANT:

When a child tells you about events occurring in a digital space or a social media platform, always clarify the child's account, character, nickname, username or account name.

Remember to clarify how the child understands the terms and concepts you are talking about, for example "service", "nickname", "user". For example: "Do you know what a username is? Can you tell me?" "Can you tell me about usernames you use?" or "You mentioned he DM'ed you, can you tell me what you mean by that?"

Remember to do this for all important terms used by the child, also when you think you understand their meaning. For example, the exact meaning of sexual terms may be of crucial importance in a possible trial.



5. THE SUBSTANTIVE PHASE

(The alleged offence)

The interview proceeds to the suspected offence on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the individual characteristics (and hypotheses) of the incident, e.g. by referring to something the child has said, a doctor's appointment, someone's expressed worry about a child's internet contact or pictures or chat logs sent to the police or discovered by the child's guardians. Below are some example questions illustrating how you may address the issue. However, you must always plan them as appropriate. It is also a good idea to consider the most direct questions you can ask during the interview in advance to make sure you avoid crossing the line during the interview, i.e., to know when to stop and return to discussing other topics, take a break or end the interview.



IMPORTANT:

In online-related cases it is important to emphasize that the discussion / interview is not about the child doing anything wrong. This should be repeated whenever necessary throughout the interview.

Only bring up facts you have strong evidence of. You can be straightforward when telling the child about it, but do not pressure the child to tell. The child should be given an opportunity to tell – but never be forced or pressured to do so.

Particular sensitivity may be required with LGBTQ children. In some cases, the child hasn't "come out" to their parents before the investigation of the suspected abuse. If you are unfamiliar with the subject, familiarize yourself with questions related to LGBTQ youth.

5.1. Transition to discussing the suspected offence

Now (that we know each other a little better), I want to talk about why [you are, I am] here today.

Always plan how you'll proceed to the suspected offence on a case-by-case basis! As soon as the child begins to talk about the suspicion / offence, move to section 5.2.

- *Do you know why you have come to see me today?*
- *What did [name of person escorting the child to the interview/ mother/father...] tell you when you came here?*

Where online issues have been discussed during the interview, you can make a transition to the topic of the allegation for example like this:

We have discussed some things you like to do online. Are there other things that you have experienced online that you would like to tell me about?

If the child doesn't seem to know why they are being interviewed or does not bring the subject up, there are two different scenarios of how to proceed according to the strength of the evidence already in the case.

It can be that the police have

5.1. A) strong evidence; photos, videos or other indisputable solid evidence such as messages, chat logs etc. that this child has been a victim of a crime or

5.1. B) suspicion / weaker evidence that this child has come up in the investigation as a possible victim and the police needs to know what the child knows about the perpetrator and whether anything criminal has happened to her.

Below are examples of possible ways to proceed with the interview in either scenario. Keep in mind that the child may not know why they are being interviewed. In this case, a gradual and careful provision of cues should follow so that the child is not forced to tell, and questions are as non-leading as possible. It is also possible that the child knows / thinks they know why the investigation is taking place and is reluctant to disclose due to feelings of responsibility, shame, fears of others' reactions or because they are in love with the perpetrator (or the person the perpetrator pretends to be) etc. In this case, the focus should be on continuous rapport building and support to reduce anxiety, to regulate emotions, to cope with internal conflicts and so.

5.1. TRANSITION A:

For suspicions with solid/strong evidence; photos, videos or other indisputable solid evidence such as messages, chat logs etc. that this child has been a victim of a crime

The following example questions are created for situations where there is strong evidence that the child has been a victim of online sexual abuse. This has to be judged on a case-by-case basis, depending on the available evidence. For example, pictures or video material of the child or proof of sexual conversations with the child have been delivered or reported to the police by the child's guardians, the internet service providers or other authorities.

- *The police are investigating a case where a user in [Snapchat, edit to fit the case] has contacted children and [asked them to send pictures / sent them pictures/ contacted children, edit to fit the case]. I want to ask you some questions about this. Tell me anything you know about this.*
- *This username is [nickname / username Mr. Hoot, edit to fit the case]. Tell me what you know about this [username]?*

If appropriate (i.e., the child seems very reluctant or there is reason to believe they feel guilty themselves):

Sometimes children may experience confusing and unpleasant things online. Some children might think that they have done something wrong, but I just want you to know that this is not something you need to worry about now / we are not here because you have done something bad / forbidden.



IMPORTANT:

If there is solid proof in the investigation, such as identifiable photos or chat logs / messages that are known to be written with the child's user account, but the child does not reveal related information, the interviewer should refer to the evidence quite early in this part of the interview, while still leaving as much space as possible for the child to tell about what happened in their own words. Again, it is important to emphasize that the child has not done anything wrong.

Examples:

- *The police have investigated devices (computer / phone) used by [Mr. Hoot, use the username of the perpetrator, as the child does not necessarily know their real name or identity or that the perpetrator is an adult] and found messages sent by their and pictures sent to them by children. Please tell me anything you know about this / Can you tell me anything about this / Mr Hoot?*
- *The police have found messages that Mr Hoot has sent to [Flowergirl13, use the child's username]. Can you tell me something more about this?*

If the child doesn't answer:

- *What can you tell me about the username Flowergirl13?*
- *The police have found some photographs / videos of you where you do not have any clothes on. Can you tell me about these?*
- *(How have these photos ended up with Mr. Hoot?)*
- *Where applicable: Again, please remember that we are not here because you would have done something wrong. The police are investigating what this adult person(s) has/have done.*

The child is reluctant to talk

If the child contradicts available evidence, remind the child that they have a right to not talk about it. Be supportive and encouraging.

If there is something you don't want to tell me about, just say so. You have the right to not tell me about it. Just tell me you don't want to talk about it and I will respect that.

If the evidence recovered by the police clearly shows that the suspect has told the child not to tell anyone, this can be referred to as well;

I have seen messages sent to you by Mr. Hoot where he has told you not to talk about this with anyone, but you should know / I want you to know that you have the right to tell me anything you want / no one has the right to forbid you from telling about these things ...

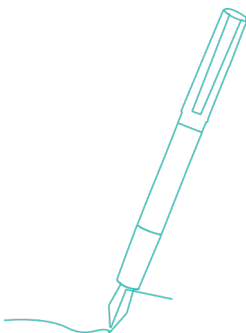
If there is strong evidence that Mr. Hoot has asked the child to send naked pictures (etc.) or sent naked pictures of his own, you can refer to that;

The conversations we have seen seem to show that Mr. Hoot has [asked you to send him pictures] – tell me about that.

In some cases, it is possible to reveal the identity of the perpetrator to the child at this stage. However, consider carefully how to present this, as the child might be unaware that the perpetrator is an adult.

The police have found out that Mr. Hoot is actually a 50-year old man/ woman/person, who has been in contact with several children. It is therefore important that we get all the information about him/her/them that we can. If you could tell us everything you know and remember about him/her, it would help the police very much to investigate the case better. Anything you know about him, any pieces of information you remember would be helpful to us.

YOUR NOTES

This image shows a full page of primary-ruled notebook paper. It features ten horizontal rows, each defined by two parallel blue dashed lines. Vertical red solid lines divide the page into three main sections: a narrow left margin, a wide central writing area, and a narrow right margin. The entire page is white and contains no text or other markings.

5.1. TRANSITION B:

Suspicion with weaker evidence.

The child has come up in the investigation as a possible victim and the police need to know what the child knows about the perpetrator and whether anything criminal has happened to her.

- *The police are investigating a case where a certain user in [Snapchat, edit to fit the case] has contacted children and [asked them to send pictures / sent them pictures/ contacted children, edit to fit the case] and I want to ask you some questions about this. Tell me if there is anything you know about this?*
- *The moderators / administrators of [Snapchat, edit to fit the case] have informed the police about this username, who we believe has been contacting children. Do you recognize this username? Tell me everything you know / remember.*

If the child doesn't seem to talk about the topic of the interview, here are some further examples:

- *You told me that you use [service, platform, game – edit according to the case at hand]. Tell me about that / what you do there?*
- *What is your username / account name / nickname on there?*
- *Have you ever used other usernames?*
- *Have you ever used the username [Flowergirl13]?*
- *Tell me, on what sites / games / platforms have you used this username?*
- *Have you ever interacted with the username [Mr. Hoot]? ... “Tell me about that”.*

If the child denies, refrain from asking any more direct questions regarding this. Consider discussing neutral topics or taking a break or proceed towards closing the interview.

Closure:

In cases where the child has not disclosed anything: thank them for coming and say that it is understandable that the situation may feel difficult for them. Make sure to give the child contact details if they later feel there are things they would like to tell. Again, it is important to stress that the police don't think that the child has done anything wrong / bad (choose wording according to the child's age and the culture/context/language use at hand – and only for cases where there is no suspicion the child would have engaged in any criminal act themselves).

Further reading and resources:

Lamb, M.E., Brown, D.A., Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y. & Esplin, P.W. (2018).

Tell me what happened: Questioning children about abuse, 2nd edition. Wiley.

Joleby, M., Lunde, C., Landström, S. & Jonsson, L.S. (2020).

All of me is completely different: Experiences and consequences among victims of technology-assisted child sexual abuse. *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.606218

Korkman, J. & Joleby, M. (2025, forthcoming)

Disclosures and forensic interviews in the context of online child sexual abuse. In: *Child Sexual Abuse: Disclosure, Delay and Denial*, 2nd Edition, Eds (Pipe, M-E., Lamb, M.E. & Hershkowitz, I. (forthcoming). Taylor and Francis



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Implementing the Barnahus Quality Standards throughout Europe

PROMISE is supporting Europe to adopt the Barnahus model as a standard practice for providing child victims and witnesses of violence rapid access to justice and care. We undertake this work to fulfil the PROMISE vision: a Europe where all children enjoy their right to be protected from violence.

A Barnahus provides multi-disciplinary and interagency collaboration to ensure that child victims and witnesses of violence benefit from a child-friendly, professional and effective response in a safe environment which prevents (re)traumatisation. With the formal support from national authorities, PROMISE provides opportunities to translate national commitment into action and engage internationally in the process. In addition, regular networking and strategic communications continually activate our growing network of professionals and stakeholders who are committed to introducing and expanding Barnahus services nationally.

The first PROMISE project (2015–2017) set European standards and engaged a broad network of professionals. The second PROMISE project (2017–2019) promoted national level progress towards meeting the standards and formalised the PROMISE Barnahus Network. The third project (2020–2022) expanded these activities to include University training, case management tools, with a view to establishing a European Competence Centre for Barnahus and laying the groundwork for an accreditation system for Barnahus. The current project: PROMISE ELPIS (2023–2025) is managed by Charité–University Medicine, Berlin, and promotes multidisciplinary and interagency models for child victims and witnesses of sexual violence, with a specific focus on specialised interventions and excellence in practice in cases where there is a presumed online element of the sexual violence.





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