BUILDING FORENSIC INTERVIEWING SKILLS THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT

Forensic interviewing is a complex, nuanced interaction between a specially trained interviewer and a child. Within these interactions there are multiple, simultaneously occurring variables that require carefully balanced attention. These variables include an awareness of and adherence to core competencies throughout the interview. Additionally, the interviewer must evaluate and effectively utilize information gained from the pre-interview team planning while concurrently attending to state and/or federal statutes, and the needs of the multidisciplinary team members involved in the investigation. Finally, forensic interviewers also should have a broad understanding of children's memory, linguistic, communicative, and metacognitive capabilities.

Core Competencies

There are four core competencies interviewers must master to become proficient and effective: understanding question typology, adhering to a jurisdictionally agreed-upon protocol, providing social support, and applying critical thinking to inform decision-making throughout all phases of the forensic interview. Each core competency can be split into three tiers or skill levels—foundational, intermediate, and advanced.

At the foundational level (Level 1), for example, an interviewer should have *some of* the following competencies in question typology:

1. Recognizing various question types including leading or suggestive questions.
2. Understanding the *function* of different question types.
3. Avoiding the use of leading/suggestive questions.
4. Recognizing when a question is ineffective.
5. Knowing/utilizing at least 2-3 question stems for encouraging narrative.

6. Recognizing faux invitations.

7. Recognizing the difference between script/gist and episodic language in the child's statements.

8. Recognizing the differences between script/gist and episodic language cuing questions.

At the intermediate level (Level 2), interviewers should have the following competencies in question typology:

1. Effectively utilizing different question types to target specific information needs.

    a. Adjusting questioning strategies to meet the child's developmental needs.

    b. Matching question types to meet specific cognitive/emotional support and adaptative needs throughout the interview.

2. Recognizing when a question is ineffective and identifying how to effectively remediate.

3. Utilizing a variety of questioning stems to encourage narrative.

4. Avoiding faux invitations.

5. Effectively pairing narrower questions with open requests that encourage elaboration.

6. Posing script/gist questions when intended focus is script account; posing episodic questions when intended focus is single incident.

7. Using event labeling to obtain episodic-specific details.

At the advanced level (Level 3), interviewers should have developed proficiency in adjusting questioning strategies during all phases of the forensic interview.

Building Core Competencies

Forensic interview training programs generally include information on normative cognitive, social and language development of children, best practice questioning strategies, protocol structure, appropriate use of social support, utilization of information gained in pre-interview planning, plus courtroom preparation and testimony. According to Lamb (2016), effective generalization from initial training to real-world interviews is often hindered by the lack of opportunities to receive "detailed and high-quality feedback from supervisors, trainers, and colleagues" (p. 712).

Research has shown that attending an initial forensic interview training can give the forensic interviewer a false sense of expertise and competence. When, in fact, if the training is not subsequently followed by ongoing, detailed feedback and opportunities to attend additional trainings on a regular interval, the

interviewer's ability to maintain the use of open-ended, highly elaborative questions will eventually fall to pre-training levels. Neither years of experience nor the number of interviews conducted assure that an interviewer is performing best practice, legally defensible interviews. Developing and maintaining effective forensic interviewing skills requires substantive effort. Targeted skill development, well-timed instruction, and systematic guidance from experienced supervisors, mentors, and peers are key components that facilitate the ongoing development of core competencies.

Supervision, Mentoring, and Peer Review

Researchers and interviewers both in the United States and across the globe are actively discussing various methods interviewers can utilize to effectively build their skills after completing an initial forensic interviewing training. Supervisors should both promote continued training and provide multiple opportunities for interviewers to receive specific, actionable, and targeted feedback. This feedback can be provided through supervision and engagement in peer review, a practice required for CAC accreditation. In some cases, feedback can also be provided through consultation and mentoring with tenured forensic interviewers or other experts in the field. Maintaining a regular schedule of reviewing recently conducted interviews and receiving specific and written feedback can identify patterns of current interview behavior and areas for targeted skill development.

Self-Assessment

Another tool to assist in developing forensic interviewing skills is self-assessment, as it is critical that interviewers routinely, systematically and objectively, review their own work. There are numerous methods for reviewing one's own work, such as transcribing an interview then coding questions/prompts; interview mapping, which allows interviewers to identify and code questions/prompts while also evaluating their use and efficacy in different phases of the interview; reviewing adherence to the interviewer's protocol or overarching elements of the interview process; reviewing the use of emotionally supportive statements; or the use of an evaluative tool.

Interviewers should engage in self-assessment on a regular basis. Identifying one or two elements to focus on, determining specific challenges, and considering what could have been done differently can provide an

opportunity to recognize strengths, better understand unhelpful habits, and set achievable goals for change. As with supervision, mentoring, and peer review, more benefits are derived from self-assessment based on the specificity of the review. The practice of examining a short segment of one interview is not the most productive. Rather, interviewers should focus on specific elements within an interview, for example, narrative-encouraging questions or effective use of facilitators. Reviewing multiple interviews over time can help develop an awareness of effective versus ineffective habits and identify specific goals for improving practice.

What Does This Mean for the Interview?

- Competency in forensic interviewing is developed and enhanced through both practice and regular guidance. After attendance a foundational training, interviewers should regularly attend additional training and receive supervision (with a tenured forensic interviewer).
- In addition to supervision, interviewers should engage in mentoring, peer review, and regular self-assessment.
- Supervision, mentoring, peer review, and self-assessment should provide targeted and specific feedback.
- Using a variety of methods in the provision of targeted and specific feedback is encouraged and can help build core competencies over time.
- It is valuable to think of different levels of core competencies as specialized knowledge and skills within different levels. Progressing to a higher level may depend on additional knowledge, experience, maturity, self-awareness, and reflective practices.

Additional Resources

The following are resources that can be used to assess the quality of forensic interviews:

- Taking AIM: Advanced Interview Mapping for Child Forensic Interviewers, journal article authored by Mark Everson, Scott Snider, and Scott Rodriguez (2020). *APSAC Advisor*, *32*(2), 72-91.
- Forensic Interview Trace (FIT), software to evaluate the quality of forensic interviews.

- [The Griffiths Question Map: A Forensic Tool for Expert Witnesses' Assessments of Witnesses and Victims' Statements](#), technical note authored by Olivier Dodier and Vincent Denault (2018). *Journal of Forensic Sciences, 63*(1), 266-274.

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