

QUESTIONS UTILIZED IN THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN TO DETERMINE CLOTHING PLACEMENT



Determining clothing placement in sexual abuse interviews can assist investigators in understanding if a touch was accidental or intentional.

Simple or Intermediate

Clothing placement can be simple, either on or off, or clothing might be partially on or partially removed. This is known as intermediate clothing placement. According to Stolzenberg et al. (2017), children performed well when asked questions regarding simple clothing placement but experienced greater challenges with describing intermediate clothing placement.

Difficulties with describing intermediate clothing placement may be partly because of the different degrees of placement (i.e., the shirt is unbuttoned, a fly is open, versus shorts pulled down to the ankles). To determine clothing placement, interviewers frequently ask, “Were your clothes on?” or “Were your clothes on or off?”. There are multiple challenges with these seemingly simple questions.

Challenges with “Or Something Else”

“Were your clothes on?” and “Were your clothes off?” are both recognition questions that are especially problematic for preschool children because they often respond with unelaborated yes or no answers. “Were your clothes on or off?” is a forced-choice question, and younger children often choose one of the two options even if neither option is correct.

For many years, interviewers have added “or something else” to a forced-choice question such as, “Were your clothes on, off, or something else?”. The belief has been that the risks of using forced-choice questions are lessened when the “or something else” is added. Adding “or something else” option has been practice-informed as there is little research on the benefits of utilizing the “or something else” option with asking a forced-choice question.

London, Hall, and Lytle (2017) showed that when “on” or “off” was not correct regarding clothing placement, the “something else” option could increase the accuracy of a child’s response. However, the challenge is that using the “something else” option also increased error rates. Even if a child responded with “something else,” the interviewer would still need to follow this response with a request for more information such as, “Talk to me about your clothes being off.”

Lyon and Henderson (2021) reported concerns that “children choose ‘on’ or ‘off’ regardless of the ‘something else’ option because their tendency to guess would lead them to choose the option that seemed closest to the right answer” (p. 35).

Exhaust the Narrative

Before narrowing the scope of questions regarding clothing placement, interviewers should exhaust the narrative using breadth or sequencing questions (i.e., “What happened next?”) and depth questions (i.e., “Tell me more about [detail mentioned by the child]”) questions.

After exhausting the narrative, if clothing placement is still uncertain, asking a child, “Where were your clothes?” could be employed. Recent research indicates that children are more likely to describe intermediate clothing placement when asked “where” questions than when asked recognition (yes/no) or forced-choice questions. However, dependent on development, recall capabilities, or language abilities, some children may still respond to a “where” question with a single word response “on” or by pointing to their bodies.

Lyon and Henderson (2021) reported that some children could be confused by the “Where were your clothes?” question and postulate that “What happened to your clothes?” is a question that requires future study.

What Does This Mean for you During the Forensic Interview?

If, after exhausting a child’s narrative, clothing placement is still uncertain, ask, “Where were your clothes?” or “What happened to your clothes?” rather than using yes/no or forced-choice questions. According to Wylie et al. (2021), “While yes/no, forced-choice, and open-choice questions often lead young children to erroneously describe intermediate clothing placement as “on” or “off,” questions asking where clothes were placed are more likely to elicit descriptions that adequately convey the fact that clothes were neither completely on nor completely off. At the same time, even where questions are less than perfect, children need encouragement to elaborate on brief responses about clothing placement” (p. 8).

References

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