

# CHOOSING A TOPIC FOR AN EFFECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE



After repeated incidences of maltreatment, details and memories may become tangled and interwoven making it challenging for children to differentiate and provide specific details of separate incidents. In an appropriately conducted narrative practice, children, who practice recalling a past event in response to narrative-encouraging questions or prompts, are more responsive and better able to delineate among episodes of maltreatment.

## What is the Purpose of Narrative Practice (Episodic Memory Training)?

Also known as “episodic memory practice” or “episodic narrative practice,” the purpose of this step in the forensic interview process is to allow children an opportunity to practice providing narratives about an autobiographical event or a specific episode of a repeated event (either positive or neutral). This step of the interview differs from rapport-building in that an interviewer is asking the child to describe a singular incident rather than a general recounting of an activity the child enjoys. An effective narrative practice “promotes awareness of the level of detail required for interviewers to understand the children’s experiences (Lamb et al., 2018, p. 92).

## The Need to Ask about a Singular Event

In a forensic interview, children are asked to provide details of specific events (episodic memory) rather than recounting of what generally happens (script memory). In narrative practice, if a child recounts playing softball, he or she may report “When we go to the field, we warm up, we play the game, we have snacks, and then we go home.” This is an example of scripting, recounting what normally occurs when the child plays softball. Asking the child to recount a particular day or specific game (episodic memory) out of the many games he or she has played allows the child to think about the differences between a memorable day versus other non-memorable days or one event out of a series of repeated events. This teaches the child the level of

details needed of a particular event, and is especially useful if, in the substantive phase, the child reports maltreatment.

## Potential Problem Topics

Interviewers sometimes ask a child to recount events that occurred the morning of the forensic interview. A child's morning activities (and yours!) may be routine. A child often responds with "You get up, wash your face, brush your teeth, get dressed, catch the bus, go to school." When events are routine and predictable, children frequently recount what usually happens, not what happened. Recounting routine memory of what normally happens is called script memory.

Scripting does not teach the child the need to delineate specific details regarding a specific event which is what is required in the substantive phase of the forensic interview.

Another subject frequently used in narrative practice is asking the child to recount his or her last birthday. The belief is that a child's birthday is memorable, and the child can easily or with some prompting be able to recount details of the last birthday. While a child may be able to recall the details of his or her last birthday, the interviewer is operating under the assumption the child's birthday was at best a positive event or at least a neutral event that the child is willing to discuss.

Typically, interviewers ask the child "Tell me about yourself" or, if that's too broad, "Talk to me about something fun you get to do". If the interviewer assumes the most recent birthday is an acceptable topic, rapport could be inadvertently damaged. Too often I have heard children say "My birthday was bad. We didn't do anything. I didn't get any presents. We don't celebrate birthdays in my family." I can only imagine how these children must have felt when the interviewer brought up a topic that was unsettling or unhappy.

## What Should Interviewers Ask About Instead?

Think back to the topics mentioned by the child during rapport development and ask the child to recount a singular episode. Ask the child to think about that one day/event and then recount the event starting at the beginning (i.e., trip to Disney World, one time she or he won a softball game, a recent field trip, shopping for a Valentine's dress, winning a swimming competition, etc.). Utilize narrative-encouraging prompts, breadth, and depth questions to gather as much information as possible. This will assist the child in understanding and providing the details about maltreatment should a disclosure follow your transition.



## What Does this Mean for the Forensic Interview?

- Choose one specific topic discussed in the rapport-building phase of the interview. If this proves difficult, ask if the child has engaged in a pleasant or different activity (i.e., “Have you done something fun or different lately?”).
- Exhaust the child’s narrative using both breadth (i.e., “What happened next?”) and depth prompts (i.e., “You said you caught the fly ball. Talk to me more about catching the fly ball.”).
- Utilize narrative-encouraging questions to gather information regarding what occurred, who was involved, the location of the activity, and when the activity took place (if developmentally appropriate).
- If you have to ask specific wh- questions (who, what, where, when, how) pair with a prompt for additional narrative.
- Avoid asking about an everyday, routine activity (i.e., morning routine, getting ready for school, etc.)
- Avoid asking child about a birthday/holiday unless introduced by the child and the birthday/holiday is either a positive or neutral event.

## References

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