

MAXIMIZING THE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION GATHERED DURING A FORENSIC INTERVIEW

A wide variety of factors can influence a child's ability to provide evidentiary information regarding allegations of maltreatment or witnessing. A deciding factor in the amount of information gathered may be a well-conducted interview. According to Michael Lamb (2015), an international expert on forensic interview, "Findings concerning individual differences in children's responses underscore the need for forensic interviewers to adhere to best practice guidelines" (p. 484).



Interviewing Protocols Follow Best Practice Guidelines

Interviewing protocols, based on research and international consensus, are utilized in children's advocacy centers throughout the United States. While there are differences among the protocols, most follow best practice guidelines and contain similar stages (rapport-development, interview instructions, narrative practice [episodic memory training], and a funneled transition to the substantive phase).

Interviewing protocols promote broad use of narrative questions as these questions elicit longer, more accurate, and more detailed responses from the child. Best practice guidelines also promote strategic use of direct (wh-questions) and specific questions. Different question types have different functions and should be varied throughout the interview to both direct the flow of conversation and provide opportunities for the child to share information he/she deems relevant. Here is a review of the different types of questions needed to interview a child and how they can be utilized to protect the child.

Narrative-Encouraging Questions Elicit More Information

The majority of questions asked during an interview, especially if it is to be child-led, should ideally be narrative-encouraging questions. Narrative invitations ask the child to freely talk about a topic previously

mentioned by the child. Invitations encourage longer, more accurate, and more detailed responses, but do not specify what information is required. They are also more effective at eliciting temporal information and assist in reducing negative effects of interviewer bias while maximizing the child's credibility. Some examples of narrative invitations are: "Talk to me about ...," "Help me understand ...," "Share some more about ...," "Describe ...," and "Explain" These are examples of narrative invitations utilizing different questioning stems that encourage further elaboration from the child.

A common narrative invitation taught in forensic interviewing trainings is "Tell me about ..." after a child has relayed some pieces of information. Unfortunately, many interviewers repeatedly use, "Tell me about ... ," without ever varying their language. If the only narrative invitation question stem repeatedly utilized throughout the interview is "Tell me about ... ," then the interviewer can appear robotic and uninterested in the child's responses. (See Takeaway Tuesday, Season 1, Episode 2, "Beyond Tell Me More.")

Extending the Narrative

Breadth and depth prompts are sub-categories of narrative invitations. Breadth prompts ask a child to report the sequence of an event. These prompts include asking "What happened next," "Then what happened," or "Tell me the very next thing that happened." All include the words "what happened." Some researchers report interviewers frequently gather information regarding the beginning and middle portions of events but fail to gather information regarding the ending of an incident. Exhausting the breadth questions assists the interviewer in gathering more information regarding a child's experiences. The interviewer may also include repeating a child's statement (i.e., "You said the babysitter locked the bathroom door. Then what happened?"). Questions about actions are often related to increased information productivity.



Depth prompts utilize previously reported details as cues to the child to provide further elaboration. The interviewer specifies the focus on the inquiry (i.e., "You said the babysitter locked the door and then played a nasty game. Tell me about the nasty game."). A combination of breadth and depth prompts can assist in extending and expanding a child's narrative. An effective forensic interviewer incorporates the child's specific words into the construction of each narrative invitation, breadth, and depth prompt.

If you find yourself asking “What made it stop?” there is the possibility you have not exhausted the child’s narrative.

When to Ask Wh-Questions

Sometimes an interviewer seeks minutiae regarding peripheral details not germane to the offense. These questions are generally specific and do not allow the opportunity for a child to give a narrative response (i.e., “Where in the bedroom were you?” “How was your body positioned?” or “Describe the wallpaper in your bedroom.”). What might be necessary in some instances, such as location in a room if the child indicates the possibility of physical evidence, might not be required if the child indicates fondling. Additionally, these types of details are easily forgotten and can be reported inconsistently (See Takeaway Tuesday, Season 3, Episode 5, “Unknowable and Unanswerable: How Many Times Did He Touch You?”).

Children generally do not understand the level of detail required during a forensic interview. Wh-questions, also known as focused recall or cued recall questions, utilize who, what (specific), where, when, or how. One of the primary functions of wh-questions is to fill gaps in the child’s narrative. When asking a child for a specific piece of information, follow with a request for additional details using a narrative invitation. The request of additional narrative after using a wh-question is referred to as a pairing. A forensic interviewer would be unlikely to progress through an interview without the judicious use of some wh-questions.

Specific questions, such as yes or no, dictate what precise information is sought and do not encourage an elaborate response. They are, however, useful in introducing a new topic, but should be used sparingly as research indicates yes/no questions have the potential to increase suggestibility in some children. In addition, too many yes/no questions can discredit an otherwise sound interview. Yes/no questions should be thought of as screening questions to be used judiciously. Maybe the child has only shared information about abuse that happened in the bedroom. The interviewer could ask, “Has there ever been a time that something happened outside the bedroom?” This would elicit a yes/no response. If the response is yes, the interviewer would follow with a request for additional information.

One other type of specific question is a forced choice question where an interviewer provides two concrete options followed with a “something else” option (i.e., “Did it happen in the bathroom, bedroom, or

somewhere else?”). Research indicates that some children may choose either the first or second option, even if those options are incorrect. Children rarely choose the “or something else” option. Instead of asking a forced-choice question, change the question to a wh-question (i.e., change “Did it happen in the bathroom, bedroom, or somewhere else?” to “Where were you when the touching happened?”).

What Does This Mean for the Forensic Interview?

- Exhaust the child’s narrative using narrative invitations, as well as breadth and depth prompts before moving to wh- or yes/no questions.
- Pair a wh-question or a yes/no question with requests for additional information.

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