

# CHILDREN'S USE OF AMBIGUOUS TERMS ABOUT PRIVATE BODY PARTS OR SEXUAL ACTS



All interviewers have experienced moments in the forensic interview when a child is recounting an experience of maltreatment and uses an ambiguous term or euphemism when referring to a body part or sexual act. The dilemma is how and when to ask for clarification.

If a child says, "He was sex in my 'wooha,'" should the interviewer immediately follow with "What do you mean when you say 'wooha'?" Or should the interviewer ask the child if they have another name for "wooha"? Should the interviewer ask for a definition of "sex."

Think of the following analogy: You are traveling along a highway, and the road is clear ahead. Unexpectedly, a truck pulls alongside you and suddenly swerves into your lane, forcing you to take the next exit. You now must process this surprising shift in your trajectory and make adjustments in your travel. You may even experience a mild dissonance, making you unsure as to how you will get back on to the highway and resume your planned route.

This situation is similar to a forensic interview when a child is recounting a narrative description of an event, and then the interviewer interrupts the child's memory recall to ask for a semantic memory (i.e., another term or a definition). Interviewers, in a rush to clarify euphemisms or ambiguous terms, may inadvertently impede the gathering of pertinent information.

## Exhaust the Narrative

Instead, interviewers should continue asking questions, such as "What happened next?" or "Tell me the next thing that happened," to elicit as much information as possible regarding the incident, even if they are unsure exactly what body part or sexual act the child is referring to. Interviewers can also prompt additional narrative

by asking, “Say some more about [...]” or utilizing a cued invitation, such as “You said the babysitter was touching your private. Tell me about the babysitter touching your private.”

After exhausting the narrative using the child’s terms or euphemisms, then seek clarification if needed. Many times, in the process of a child’s narrative description of an event, the meaning of ambiguous terms or euphemisms becomes clear.

## Ask About Function

Research indicates that if it is unclear what part of the body the child is referring to, asking about function is more effective than asking a child for another word or definition (i.e., “Where is your ‘wooha’?” or “What does a person use a ‘wooha’ for?”). If the request for function does not produce needed clarification, the interviewer may ask younger children for location. Inquiring about location should be used sparingly, as younger children may point to a part of their body, which then must be further explored. “Show me on your body where you were touched” may be interpreted by some children as asking them to show by removing clothing or pulling clothing up or down.

Expecting a child to use anatomically correct terms if they have not been taught those terms or do not use those terms in everyday conversations may set the child up for failure.

## Refrain from Asking for a Definition

There is a similar dilemma when a child uses a euphemism for a sexual act, and clarification is required. Asking, “What do you mean by molesting?” may result in the child providing a definition without explaining what was experienced. Instead of asking for a definition, ask about actions (i.e., “You said the teacher molested you. Help me understand exactly what happened when the teacher molested you” or “Tell me the first thing the teacher did when she started molesting you in the car.” Follow with “What happened next?”). Exhausting the narrative using “what happened,” “then what happened,” or “what happened next” may provide a better understanding of the actions involved in the alleged offense. Older adolescents could be asked to provide actions directly (i.e., “You said he fingered you. What exactly did he do when he fingered you?”).

## Hold On to the Tension of Not Knowing

Researchers have indicated that interviewers often gather information regarding the beginning and middle of an event, but rarely exhaust the child's narrative to gather information on the ending of an event or incident. Exhausting the narrative, without interruption, may elicit the child's complete experience, hence providing an understanding of ambiguous terms or euphemisms.

Interviewers (and MDT members) experience tension and uncertainty when euphemisms or ambiguous terms are used for body parts or sexual acts. Tension and uncertainty are the drivers behind interrupting a child's narrative to seek clarification. Holding on to that tension until the narrative description has been exhausted, then following with requests for location or actions, may assist with gathering additional idiosyncratic and well-remembered details as a child continues to access memory recall.

## References

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