

FAUX INVITATIONS AND OTHER CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

The adage “use open-ended questions” is heard continually throughout forensic interview training and the use of such questions is considered best practice. Unfortunately, research continually proves that interviewers do not maximize the use of open-ended, narrative-encouraging questions, thereby failing to elicit a full and detailed account of a child’s experiences.



An open-ended or invitation question is one that asks for additional information regarding details previously mentioned by the child, such as “What happened next?” or “Then what happened?”.

Interviewers also regularly add the phrase “Tell me” coupled with “about”, “everything about”, or “more about” to elicit further information. In addition to the “tell me about,” words such as describe, explain, or phrases such as “give me some more information” can further encourage a narrative response

(<https://calio.org/takeaway-episodes/beyond-tell-me-more/>). Utilizing open-ended questions through both the rapport-building and substantive phases of an interview increases the amount of information produced by the child.

A wh-question such as who, how, what, where, and when limits the scope of desired information (i.e., “What did your mom say?” or “What color was the car?”), often eliciting relatively short responses from the child. Yes/no and multiple-choice questions, also known as option-posing questions, are less productive and are subject to higher error rates. Researchers, therefore, recommend maximizing the use of open-ended, narrative-encouraging questions and limiting wh- and option-posing questions.

In efforts to elicit specific information, interviewers frequently combine a “Tell me” with a wh-question (i.e., “Tell me what you were wearing”). According to Henderson, Russo, and Lyon (2019), this type of question is known as a faux invitation and does not change the wh-question into one that is open-ended.

Another frequent challenge seen in forensic interviews is known as negative recasting. Negative recasting occurs when interviewers ask an open-ended question, but before the child responds, follow immediately with a specific question (i.e., “What happened next? Did she hit you again?”).



An additional challenge that can reduce a child’s productivity in the forensic interview is the use of a static versus a non-static question. Static questions are what/how questions that ask for a description (i.e., “What color was the bedspread?”) and non-static what/how questions ask about actions, causes, or evaluations (i.e., “What did she do?”). One study demonstrated that invitations asking about actions were more productive than questions about appearances or locations.

Faux invitations and negative recasts are found more often in the substantive or allegation phase of the forensic interview, when interviewers are attempting to elicit specific information. The use of these types of questions risks reducing the amount of information a child discloses. Remember that placing a “tell me” at the beginning of a question does not automatically make the question an invitation for more information, and a wh-question narrows the scope of a question, unless one is asking “what happened.”

The consistent use of open-ended or invitation questions requires concentration and consistent practice. Also, forensic interviewers should determine if specific wh-questions can be rephrased into more open-ended questions (i.e., “What color was the car?” to “Talk to me about the car.”). When a specific wh-question is necessary, follow up the child’s response with a “Tell me more about [...]”.

Constantly thinking about and being deliberate in question choices during a forensic interview will give a child the opportunity to better share his/her experiences.

References

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Other Resources

- *Takeaway Tuesday “Beyond Tell Me More”*
 - <https://calio.org/takeaway-episodes/beyond-tell-me-more/>
- *Child Abuse Library Online (CALiO)*
 - www.calio.org
- *Question Types in Forensic Interviews – Bibliography*
 - <https://calio.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/question-types-forensic-interview.pdf%20>
- *NCAC Virtual Training Center – “Inquiring Minds Want to Know”*
 - <https://ncacvtc.org/#/curricula/435fdd5a-7806-442c-b0c4-764028614fa3>