

# CLARIFYING AMBIGUOUS TERMS FOR SEXUAL BODY PARTS IN A FORENSIC INTERVIEW

Successful investigation and/or prosecution of alleged child sexual abuse generally requires children to clearly identify the sexual body parts involved in an offense. This need for clarification can pose a challenge for forensic interviewers because children may not yet know terms for the sexual parts of their body, be reluctant to name the sexual parts of their body, or have ambiguous or unclear terms for sexual body parts.



Research clearly indicates open-ended, narrative-encouraging questions increase the accuracy of a child's response due to the encouragement of broader memory retrieval processes and allow the child to report what he or she remembers without limiting recall. However, in efforts to clarify ambiguous terms for sexual body parts, forensic interviewers often depart from best practice, pivot away from a child's narrative and begin asking more specific questions. When interviewers utilize more specific questioning strategies there is often a correspondent increase in the risk of errors or inconsistencies in children's statements.

According to Guadagno, Hughes-Scholes and Powell (2013), the authors found that attempting to clarify terms for sexual body parts was one of the reasons investigators moved away from open-ended questioning to the use of more specific questions.

## Different Themes to Clarifying Questions

Burrows, Bearman, Dion, and Powell (2017) found that common themes emerged when examining questions utilized by interviewers in attempts to clarify ambiguous terms for sexual body parts. These included requesting an alternative term (e.g., "Do you have another name for your pocketbook?"); asking about function (e.g., "What do you use your pocketbook for?"); or location of the body part (e.g., "Where is your pocketbook?").



The authors found that children's use of terms for sexual body parts fell into three categories: anatomical, clear ambiguous, or unclear terms. Anatomical terms were listed as penis, vagina, breasts, or anus. The definition of "clear ambiguous" was defined as a term a reasonable layperson would understand (e.g., "wiener" or "dick" for penis; "boobs" for breasts, or "gina" for vagina). Some examples of unclear terms are "pocketbook" or "cookie". Terms such as "private parts" or "privates" were labelled as unclear as these terms do not identify which orifice was involved.

Results indicate that children, in their initial narrative regarding the maltreatment, did not spontaneously identify sexual body parts and when they did first mention a sexual body part (generally after several specific questions), over half of the terms were unclear. With age, generally around 14, children were more likely to provide clear terms, though some teens still failed to provide clear terms.

## Asking About Function

When a term was unclear, interviewers asked questions seeking an alternative term (e.g., “Do you have another term for your wee-wee?”) and more than half of the time, children did not provide a response to this question. When interviewers asked about function of a sexual body part (e.g., “What is a wee-wee used for?”), more than 75% provided clarification. Questions regarding location (e.g., “Where is your wee-wee located?”) 85% gave appropriate responses.



There are some children, regardless of age, who will struggle to provide clear terms. They may be uncomfortable using words/terms to refer to their body or they may not have knowledge/words to describe sexual body parts. Interviewers should exhaust the narrative and seek understanding through consideration of the context and manner in which a term was used. If, at the end of the interview, it is still unclear which body part the child referenced, then seek clarification of ambiguous or unclear terms utilizing the recommendations listed below.

## Recommendations for the Forensic Interview

Many children will not use anatomical terms for sexual body parts because they may not know an anatomical term or may be reluctant to use a term with an unfamiliar adult.



1. If a child uses a term that is ambiguous or unclear, exhaust the narrative regarding the alleged event before attempting clarification.
2. When attempting clarification, first ask about function (e.g., “What is the [child’s term] used for?”). Instead of asking a child “What do you use your [child’s term] for?”, make the question less personal as some older children or teens may be offended or embarrassed.
3. In response to the question regarding location of a body part, some children may point to or touch themselves. It is a common response in preschoolers but may cause embarrassment and further reluctance with school-aged children and adolescents as they are more developmentally aware and recognize societal norms regarding their bodies.
4. Have a discussion with the appropriate team members and clarify the level of detail required for charging purposes in your jurisdiction. If a child uses a term that a “reasonable layperson” would understand, does the term then need clarification?

## References

Burrows, K. S., Bearman, M., Dion J., & Powell, M. B. (2017). Children’s use of sexual body part terms in witness interviews about sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 65, 226-235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.02.001>

Burrows, K. S., & Powell, M. B. (2014). Prosecutors' perspectives on clarifying terms for genitalia in child sexual abuse interviews. *Australian Psychologist*, 49(5), 297-304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12068>

Guadagno, B. L., Hughes-Scholes, C. H., & Powell, M. B. (2013). What themes trigger investigative interviewers to ask specific questions when interviewing children? *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 15(1), 51-60. <https://doi.org/10.1350/ijps.2013.15.1.301>

Milam, L. J., & Nugent, W. R. (2017). Children's knowledge of genital anatomy and its relationship with children's use of the word "inside" during questioning about possible sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 26(1), 23-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2016.1269863>

Sullivan, C., St. George, S., Stolzenberg, S. N., Williams, S., & Lyon, T. D. (2021). [Imprecision about body mechanics when child witnesses are questioned about sexual abuse](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260521997941). *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260521997941>