

# WHEN TO END THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW



“Forensic interviewing is an art and a science in that the interviewer is continually assessing the information received as well as the emotional well-being of the child. This assessment results in various decision points throughout the interview. Decisions start before the interviewer enters the room with the child through pre-interview preparation and planning” (Steele et al., 2025, p.19).

One decision point all forensic interviewers will encounter is when to end the interview. Conducting a forensic interview is necessary to obtain information. Although interviewers aim to gather details that support protection and law enforcement decisions, the child’s immediate and emerging needs should always come first and be addressed with timely, supportive care.

Decisions about when to conclude the interview require critical thinking and consideration of three broad areas: neurodevelopmental abilities, motivational status, and situational factors. For some children, all three of these factors may be relevant.

## Neurodevelopmental Abilities

Critical thinking should start during the pre-interview planning process. Obtaining information about the child’s communication needs, language abilities, and any neurodevelopmental diagnoses, such as ADHD, ASD, and IDD, helps interviewers consider effective engagement and questioning strategies (Hershkowitz, 2018). However, there will be times when the capacity to gather information is limited or the child’s needs are more significant than anticipated. Consider ending the interview in the following circumstances:

1. The child does not respond to simple questions, such as “What do you like to play with?”
2. The child’s speech is difficult to understand, and they do not respond to alternative communication methods, such as writing or drawing.

3. The interviewer is unable to understand a substantial portion of the child's words, and they do not demonstrate any drawing or writing abilities.
4. The child exhibits marked distractibility, and redirection attempts do not work.
5. The child appears to be severely dysregulated, to the point of raising concerns about physical safety and/or property destruction.

## **Motivational Status**

Pre-interview information gathering also allows the interviewer and investigative team to consider case-specific dynamics that evidence has shown to be predictive of reluctance. Providing social support can mitigate reluctance in some cases (Blasbalg et al., 2019), but there will always be children whose disclosure barriers will override the most thoughtful and sensitive interviewer actions. Consider ending the interview in the following circumstances:

1. The child is unresponsive to rapport-building attempts, including efforts to understand their current emotional status.
2. There is a marked change in the child's demeanor when transition is attempted, and attempts to have them verbalize their current thoughts/feelings are unsuccessful.
3. The child repeatedly asks to leave.
4. The child verbally asserts they are unwilling to talk or answer questions, and they decline alternative communication methods.
5. The child appears to be significantly dysregulated.

## **Situational Factors**

In addition to information about the child and reluctance predictors, pre-interview planning should also screen for the presence of situational factors that might impact the child's participation in the interview. Questions, such as the child's first language or if they prefer a female or male interviewer, are best answered before the interview starts. If situational factors are not screened for prior to the interview, or it becomes apparent that this is not a good day for this child, it may be best to end the interview.

Children who have experienced multiple events face unique challenges when describing both their overall history and the details of specific incidents. In these cases, interviewers should establish in advance with prosecutors how many specific incidents to focus on; this understanding can then guide decisions about when to conclude the interview.

## References

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