"WHAT HAPPENED ONE TIME…?"

Interview protocols are based on a body of literature spanning over four decades and are constantly evolving due to new and current research. These protocols reflect best practices and include understanding the impact of child development on the forensic interview, building and maintaining rapport, attending effective episodic memory training, transitioning from the pre-substantive phase of the interview to the substantive phase, managing disclosure and gathering episodic information, defining appropriate social support, as well as defining different question types and prompts, while explaining when and how best to utilize questions depending on the information sought.

Forensic interviewers are encouraged to use narrative invitations, such as "Say some more about…" because these questions are open-ended, non-specific, and are designed to elicit more information than other question types, while the information gained is considered more reliable. In addition, focused narrative invitations and open wh– questions give children the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words. These types of questions are considered child-led because the child is deciding what information to share. Other questions are narrower in scope, such as specific or closed wh– questions (i.e., "What color was the car?"), yes/no questions, or option-posing questions. Interviewers learn that words matter.

In addition to knowing the steps within a forensic interviewing protocol, the types of questions to ask, and the other best practices (as listed above), interviewers also must be familiar with jurisdictional requirements. If the interviewer believes that the child has experienced ongoing maltreatment, they may be required to explore as many different episodes as the child remembers.

Why the Word "Time" Can Create Challenges for the Interviewer

One of the questions interviewers ask to narrow the conversation to a particular instance is, "Tell me about a time… ." The challenges exist with the word "time." According to Webster's dictionary, "time" is defined as

"one of a series of reoccurring instances or repeated actions" and "a moment, hour, day, or year as indicated by a clock or calendar" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Unfortunately, when interviewers ask, "Tell me about a time…," children hear the word "time" and often misinterpret the question as a request for when the event occurred (temporal information) when instead interviewers want to know what occurred during a singular incident. This misunderstanding, when a child misconstrues the interviewer's reference to time as asking for conventional temporal information, is referred to in the research as the "pseudo-temporal problem."

Misinterpretations of Invitations

Two recent articles examined children's misinterpretation of invitations when asked, "Tell me about a time…" and found that children either responded to "Tell me about a time…" with conventional temporal information (date, year, season, etc.), expressed uncertainty ("I don't know the time"), requested clarification regarding the interviewer's intent, or responded with "I don't know."

When children responded with "I don't remember," the interviewer may have thought the child had forgotten the event, rather than the child misinterpreted the question and did not know when the event occurred. When children did express their misunderstanding, in one third of the cases, interviewers failed to clarify the ambiguity. They may have assumed the limited response was due to motivational or memory difficulties, leading them to stray from best practice and ask more focused questions. It is also important to keep in mind that more distant events, often due to delayed disclosure, ongoing maltreatment, or a long delay to trial are more likely to elicit simple "I don't know responses," which increases the difficulty of identifying pseudo-temporal responses.

"I Don't Know" Responses Increase with Age

There is no evidence to suggest that the pseudo-temporal problem decreases as children get older. In fact, the rate of "I don't know" responses increased. This could be attributed to children, as they grow older, having a better understanding or familiarity with temporal concepts such as clock time, dates, months, seasons, or years. As children become familiar with temporal information, they may feel the need to provide temporal information when asked, "Tell me about a time… ."

It is important to remember that learning about conventional time or temporal words is far different than making judgements about when the time events occurred. If a child volunteers a specific timeframe, the interviewer should follow with a request for further information such as, "Talk to me about remembering it was the summer of 6th grade."

Reducing Uncertainty and Unresponsiveness

Interviewers can reduce uncertainty and unresponsiveness to invitations when gathering information regarding specific incidents by instead using the phrase, "What happened one time… ." The need for an action-based narrative is explicit when interviewers ask, "What happened?"

A frequent question posed when children allege ongoing maltreatment is, "Tell me about a time you remember?" or "Tell me about the first or last time?" or "Tell me about a time that was different?" Changing the phrase "about a time" to "what happened" may elicit more specific information. There are some challenges when ongoing abuse occurs, as there may be multiple "firsts" (i.e., the first time the offender came into the bathroom while the child was bathing, the first time touching was over the clothes, the first time there was digital penetration, etc.).

During transition from the pre-substantive to the substantive phase of the interview, listen for cues indicating multiple events such as "He's always touching me" or "Every time my mom and mommy go on a date night, the babysitter plays the touching game." Hearing these types of cues indicates ongoing maltreatment. There is some evidence that eliciting a script account of the maltreatment "What happens when the babysitter plays the touching game?" may serve as a cue for discussing specific incidents later in the interview (i.e., "What happened when the babysitter played the touching game in the bathroom?").

Implication for Practice

Research clearly indicates that (if the child has provided episodic cues) changing the wording of the question "Tell me about a time" to "What happened one time…?" or "What happened the time in the shed?" can help avoid miscommunication and assist the child in providing an action-based narrative of an event.

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