

Asking About Manipulation in the Forensic Interview^{2, 7}



Understanding manipulation (also known as grooming) and targeting the nuances of both psychological and physical manipulation during the forensic interview helps children provide a more complete account of their experiences. In addition, exploring manipulation tactics provides investigators with a broader understanding of the effort offenders take to ensnare children, their families, and communities.

Understanding Manipulation^{1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11}

- Commonly identified stages of manipulation include:
 - victim selection
 - access establishment
 - rapport/trust development
 - systematic disinhibition and desensitization
 - Once a child has been targeted, the offender must gain access to the child. Establishing access generally begins with securing the confidence and trust of the caretakers. These manipulative behaviors help the child's caretakers feel comfortable with the offender, allowing easy and recurring access to the child. To manipulate families successfully and to avoid suspicion, offenders must find ways to legitimately have contact and engage with a child during routine, normal, everyday activities.
 - Offenders are skilled at developing rapport/trust with a child and are especially adept at recognizing and temporarily meeting his/her emotional needs. Giving material enticements, financial incentives, special privileges; or allowing victims to break rules are common tactics used by offenders. Other tactics include threatening with harm or telling a child that he/she will not be believed if the actions are reported.
- Children can experience a wide range of emotions after sexually abusive events, such as fear of retribution, feelings of complicity, embarrassment, guilt, or shame.
 - Once contact with a child is established, offenders frequently engage in systematic disinhibition and desensitizing activities, to effectively introduce sexual themes into their interactions. These activities can involve:
 - cursing
 - telling inappropriate jokes
 - showing inappropriate videos/photos
 - introducing increasingly intimate physical contact
 - Not all the above-mentioned strategies are employed in every instance of manipulation and sexual maltreatment. Every victim's experience varies because offenders adapt their strategies to fit the specific child, the child's family, and prevailing circumstances.
 - Children often describe "having an increasing sense of discomfort but at the same time uncertainty about how to put a stop to the behavior or the relationship without creating additional problems".¹ They may not trust their instincts and worry about being mistaken or overreacting. Children can experience a wide range of emotions after sexually abusive events, such as fear of retribution, feelings of complicity, embarrassment, guilt, or shame. These reactions conspire to silence children and inhibit their willingness to discuss their discomfort or disclose maltreatment.
 - A child's family members, social network, and community can also be manipulated to disbelieve the child if a disclosure of abuse is made. Sexual

offenders rely on this disbelief to cast doubts on a child's truthfulness. "Offenders groom the community so well that if a victim discloses their abuse, the community may support the offender rather than the victim, because they deem the offender to be more believable than the child".⁴

Targeting Manipulation in the Interview

When offenders are family members, close family friends, or well-respected members of the community, or when a child delays disclosure; exploring manipulation in the forensic interview allows for a better understanding of the totality of the victim's experiences. The following questions are not intended as a checklist but should be considered when interviewing a child alleging sexual abuse, especially if the abuse was ongoing.

■ Questions targeting a child's experience of victim selection:

- How did you feel about [...] the first time you met him/her?
- What did [...] say about you when he/she first met you.
- What did your family or friends say about [...] when they first met him/her?

■ Questions targeting access acquisition:

- Where would you be alone with [...]?

- Where would others (parents, caregivers, siblings, peers, etc.) be?
- Did [...] help you, or your mom/dad?
"If yes, "Tell me about ...

■ Questions targeting rapport/trust development:

- How did you feel about [...] before [...] started happening?
- What kinds of things did [...] first do with you?
- Did [...] give you or your friends things?
If yes, "Tell me about...
- Tell me about any rules [...] had.
- What would happen when you or the other kids broke the rules?
- What did [...] tell you about him/herself?
- What did [...] say about (people significant to child)?

■ Questions targeting desensitization:

- Tell me about [...] starting.
- What happened next?
- How did you feel about/what did you think about [...] after [...] started happening?

Summary

To fully understand a child's experiences and the process of manipulation, the interviewer should explore the various methods an offender employed to engage the child and gain compliance, as well as the methods utilized to maintain secrecy and prevent disclosure.

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