



Issues in Interviewing Young Children

Our Mission: The NCAC models, promotes, and delivers excellence in child abuse response and prevention through service, education, and leadership.



Topics

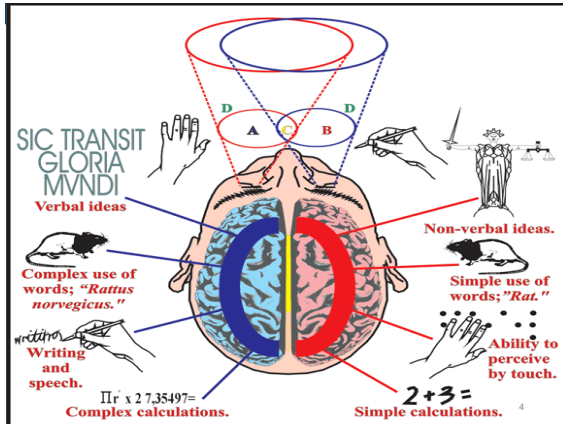
- Challenges for the youngest witnesses
- Three and four-year-old children
- Concerning behaviors and no outcry
- Cases with parents/families in conflict



Brain Development

- Brains develop bottom to top, inside to out
- Brain stem controls basic bodily functions
- Early interactions promote social / emotion, language development
- Pre-frontal cortex last to mature







Brain Hemispheres and Memory

Explicit

- Second year of life & beyond
- Sense of recollection
- Requires conscious attention

Implicit

- Present at birth
- No sense of recollection
- Behavioral, emotional, perceptual, & bodily sensations

5



Explicit Memory

Factual/Semantic

- Rote memory
- Names of objects, colors, ABC's, counting, etc.
- Shared knowledge considered important by their culture

Autobiographical

- "The story of me"
- Meaning of events to child
- Told in the words that child knows
- Life experience matters

6



Attachment

- Secure attachment
- Insecure attachment
 - Avoidant
 - Anxious/ambivalent
 - Chaotic
- Impact on the interview
- Preschoolers have limited options for other attachment relationships

7



Skills Not Yet Acquired

- Metacognition / Metamemory
 - Ability to reflect on & monitor one's cognition
 - Allows on to recognize errors in communication
 - "Think about our thinking"
- Executive functioning
 - CEO of the brain
 - Regulation of attention, emotion, memory, behavioral response, planning
 - What to pay attention to and what to ignore

8



Skills Not Yet Acquired

- Source Monitoring
 - Knowledge of source of information
 - How I know something



Skills Not Yet Acquired

- Theory of mind
 - Broad set of social skills supporting understanding of mental states of self and others
 - Understanding that you don't know/feel what I know/feel
- Moral development / deception
 - Punishment & obedience orientation
 - Semantic leakage

10



Questions

- Peterson, C., Dowden, C. & Tobin, J. (1999). Interviewing Preschoolers: Comparisons of 'Wh' and Yes/no questions. *Law & Human Behavior*.
- Lamb, M. & Sternberg, K. (2003). Age Differences in Young Children's Responses to Open-Ended Invitations in the Course of Forensic Interviews. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*.
- Hershkowitz, I., Lamb, M., Orbach, Y., Katz, C. & Horowitz, D. (2011). The Development of Communicative and Narrative Skills Among Preschoolers: Lessons From forensic Interviews About Child Abuse. *Child Development*.
- Mehrani, M.B. & Peterson, C. (2015). Recency Tendency: Responses to Forced Choice Questions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*.



Question Formats

- Narrative Invitation
- ***Focused Narrative Request***
- ***Detail Questions (Wh)***
- Multiple-choice Questions
- ***Yes/No Questions (scaffolding)***
- Leading Questions

12



Questions

Concrete

- Who
- What
- Where

Abstract

- When
- How
- Why



Lessons from Blue Clues

- If you can hold their attention, you can educate them
- 3 minute segments are optimal – 4 minutes tops
- Pace is deliberate & punctuated by long pauses
- Watch when understand; look away when confused

14



Principles

- **Everything counts!**
- Prepare ahead of time
- Interview the child who shows up
- **Allow the child to show up**
- Don't set the child up to fail
- Pay attention → let the child “teach” you



Pre-Interview Preparation

- Child’s developmental status
- Child’s home environment
- Allegations – what & to whom
- History with LE & CPS
- Other concerns in the family & environment

16



Pre-Interview Information

Stage 1

- People living in home
- Daily routines
- Interests
- Anatomical names
- Idea for narrative practice

Stage 2

- Disclosure process
- Family reactions
- Follow-up events
- Told about the interview

17



Activities and Materials May Help

- Joint drawing on easel
 - Family
 - Face
 - Trace hand
- Other shared activities
 - Play-do or puzzle
 - Prepositions
 - Name colors

18



Building Rapport

- Keep it simple
- Begin with the concrete
- Limit time on each activity
- Allow child to demonstrate skills
- Allow time to build comfort



Stage 1

Interview Instructions Narrative Practice

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May not be helpful for preschooler<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 → 4 year old• 5 & up• Keep it simple• Reinforce rule as situation occurs | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make use of pre-interview info• Shorter turn• More concrete• Sequencing not yet possible |
|---|---|



Family

- Child’s labels
- Child’s definition of family
- Be prepared to “scaffold”
- Even this task may be new



Transition Questions

- Make use of info gathered from CG & investigative team
- Plan your transitions
- Less open prompt often needed
- How far do you go?



Topics that May Transition the Child

- Talking about family members
- Talking about everyday activities
- Trip to doctor
- Visit by police or social worker
- Allegation specific prompt
- Person, place, activity
- Key words



Narrative Description

- Narrative responses shorter
- Will not exceed ability level demonstrated earlier
- Follow responses with **cued** questions for additional info
- Info may be confusing or incomplete
- Script memory, rather than episodes



Repeat Questioning

- Do not understand interviewer's intent
- Store less info – may not have anything else to tell
- Often think interviewer wants a different response



Challenges with Credibility

- Describe penetration by naming sharp object
- Introduce fantasy into disclosure
- Assumption of shared context
- Confusing statements



Children with Problematic Sexual Behaviors

Challenges with language

- Sexual abuse
- Sexual reactivity
- Problematic sexual behaviors
- Sexually intrusive behavior
- Juvenile sex offender
- Child perpetrator
- ??????



Which sexual behaviors are problematic?

- Continuum of sexual behavior in children
 - Normal expected sexual play
 - Inappropriate sexual behavior
 - Problematic sexual behavior
- Other considerations
 - Frequency
 - Developmental considerations
 - Harm



Guidelines for Determining if Sexual Behaviors are a Problem

Frequency	Developmental Considerations	Harm
High Frequency	Among Youth of Significantly Different Ages/ Developmental Abilities	Intrusive Behaviors
Excludes Normal Childhood Activities	Longer in Duration than Developmentally Expected	Use of Force, Intimidation, and/or Coercion
Unresponsive (i.e., does not decrease) to Typical Parenting Strategies	Interferes with Social Development	Elicits Fear or Anxiety in Other Children

Bornier (1995); Davies, Glasser, & Kisseloff (2002); Friedrich (1997); Johnson (2004); Larsson & Swedin (2001)



Challenges with Identification

- Identifying behaviors warranting an investigation
- Labeling one child as the aggressor and one child as victim
- Age of each child and difference in age
- Source of initial report and accuracy of the report



Considerations for IT

- Who has requested the FI?
- Age of accountability by state statute and practice
- Selecting the best location and interviewer
- Appropriate boundaries for the FI
- What is the hoped for outcome?
- Is caregiver's concern and response appropriate?



How is this FI different?

- Is there a criminal concern?
 - Establishing one child as the alleged perpetrator
 - Concern that an adult is involved in some way
- Child protection concerns
 - Safety of these children or other children
 - Concern about inadequate supervision
 - Early identification of problematic behavior



The Forensic Interview

- Stage 1
 - Engagement
 - Interview Instructions
 - Narrative Practice
 - Who lives with you?
- Stage 2
 - Possibility of barrier assessment
 - "What are you here to talk about today?"
 - Can proceed in one of two ways



The Forensic Interview – Stage 2

- Possibility of Criminal charges against child
 - CAC FI should follow LE questioning
 - Interviewer clarifies your role
 - Not here to talk about the incident they have previously spoken about to LE
 - Interviewer’s role is inquire about things that this child may have experienced
 - Role is also to inquire about the safety of this child and other children
 - Interviewer controls boundaries of the conversation



The Forensic Interview – Stage 2

- No possibility of criminal charges against either child
 - Reassurance that no children get in trouble for things they talk about.
 - Concern is to make sure that everyone is safe and doing okay.
 - “I heard that something happened at [.....] Tell me about that.”
 - Allows for more focused prompts and follow-up questions



The Forensic Interview

- Possible additional topics
 - Use of computers, l-pads, phones, and material viewed
 - Has anyone shown or taken pictures?
 - Has anyone done something that made them feel uncomfortable or that wasn’t right?
 - Anything they are worried about or afraid to talk about?
 - Limitations of body safety conversation and decisions about who should have that talk with child



Outcomes

- Information may be helpful for ACS decisions and disposition
- Referrals from CAC
- Support and education for parent by Family Advocate
- Additional decisions made by IT



Parent Against Parent Allegations

- Not “one-size-fits-all”
- Not only divorce/custody cases
- Relationship and family dynamics raise “red flags” for the report and investigation
 - Single report versus repeated reports
 - One parent/family as the reporter(s)
 - Cross reporting by parents/families
 - Anonymous reports



The Camps

“Deaf Ear” / Suspicion

- Mother ignored & dismissed
- Women & children not believed or protected
- Placed at risk of ongoing harm
- Courts favor men who have more power & resources

Parental Alienation

- False allegations are widespread
- Systematic campaign to malign & destroy credibility of spouse
- Gain custody & control of child
- Alienate affection of child



Divorce/Custody Dynamics

- Distrust/hostility between estranged parents and families
- Anxieties for the child (separation, change, uncertainty)
- Impaired parental functioning can have impact
 - Drug/alcohol abuse
 - Depression,
 - Mental illness
 - Domestic violence

40



Beware of Investigation Bias

Commonly held beliefs

- Reports of abuse made in custody/divorce are false
- Number of intentional false reports in custody/divorce cases are high
- False reports are made by an angry, vindictive parent to intentionally hurt the other parent
- Young children are easily coached to say they were sexually abused

41



Divorce in the United States

- Approximately 1 million divorces are granted per year
- 600,000 have minor children
- About 90,000 are contested
- Only about 3 out of every 1,000 involve allegations of sexual abuse

42



What To Consider...

- Who is making the allegation? Adult or Child?
- Report of abuse could be...
 - True
 - Misinterpretation of benign activity
 - Hyper-sensitivity/vigilance
 - Communication problem
 - Intentional coaching of child
 - Sexual knowledge from another source

43



Other Considerations

- Lying, fantasizing by child
- Attention seeking by child
- Exaggeration by child or adult
- Different offender
- Minimization of actual abuse
- Parent deliberating fabricating allegation with intent to seek revenge/manipulate litigation

44



Considerations

- Usually no clear forensic evidence proves / disproves allegation
- Accuser may truly believe what they are alleging
- Parent believes behavioral indicators prove abuse
- Parents have legitimate reasons for touching child
- Parents use yes/no prompts to question children and then misinterpret responses

45



False Allegation vs. Unsubstantiated

- Important to distinguish between false allegations and allegations that are unsubstantiated
- Unsubstantiated *does not* mean falsified report
- Insufficient evidence may be reason case is labeled unsubstantiated

46



Pre-Interview Planning

- Additional questions/request of investigators
 - Context of the allegation
 - History and previous reports
 - Imminent changes in visitation or custody
 - Impression of caregiver's response
- Option of requesting quick check of court cases (custody, visitation, etc.) through DA's office
- Check NCA Trak for prior interviews



Pre-Interview Planning

- Additional questions for advocate to get from parent
 - Custody or visitation issues
 - Any court orders about protection or custody
 - Dialogue between parent and child (as specifically as they can remember)
- Plan approach for interview with IT
- Go in with a plan



The Forensic Interview

- Stage 1
 - Engagement
 - Interview Instructions
 - Narrative Practice
 - Who do you live with (both homes)?
- Stage 2
 - Possibility of Barrier Assessment
 - “What are you here to talk about today?”
 - “Has something happened?” or “Is someone worried about you?”



The Forensic Interview

- Possible topics exploring larger context
 - Questions about life in each household (household members, sleeping, childcare, activities, worries or concerns)
 - Child’s conversations with parent about relevant issues
 - Conversations with each parent about the other
 - How others found out about allegation – who all informed and how
 - Worries, problems, secrets



Limitations of Information from Child

- Interview with the child is one small part of the investigation
- Keep an open mind and take the long view
- Be prepared to offer what you can to the family that is in the child’s best interest
- May encounter anger and frustration, as results are often unclear
- Keep clear about our role
