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Interviewing Suspected Victims of Child Maltreatment

Bette L. Bottoms, Alison R. Perona, Erin Sorenson, & Cynthia J. Najdowski


Many children are victims of violence in the home. Over three million cases of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect are officially reported each year, but most experts believe that far more cases of child maltreatment go undisclosed and undiscovered. Many children also suffer the trauma of witnessing acts of violence to family members, including their parents and siblings.

Cases involving child maltreatment, domestic violence, and related crimes are often complicated from an investigative perspective, because they involve testimony from child witnesses and complex emotional motivations that could promote denials or recantations. Therefore, the police, social service, and prosecutorial agencies involved in such cases use special strategies for investigation. For example, many prosecutors’ offices employ highly trained attorneys who specialize in these cases. The cases might also be prosecuted vertically, meaning that one attorney is assigned to the case from investigation through trial, fulfilling traditional investigative and prosecutorial roles and also acting as a facilitator. The vertical prosecutor coordinates efforts and strategies and ensures communication among case participants—efforts that can result in more successful prosecutions.

A child’s report can be a key piece of evidence in such investigations. This is especially true in cases of child sexual abuse because there is often little corroborating evidence. Thus, it is critically important that children’s reports in legal (i.e., forensic) contexts be accurate. In an investigation, children’s eyewitness reports are obtained during a forensic interview. This is sometimes referred to as a victim sensitive interview, a label acknowledging that the interview needs to be sensitive to and accommodating of children’s special needs.

Child forensic interviews are usually performed by professionals such as social workers, police, and prosecutors, but can also be performed by medical professionals or special child advocates. In many communities, forensic interviews are performed at a children’s advocacy center. The goals of these centers include limiting trauma for suspected abuse victims and their families, reducing the number of times children are interviewed, and ensuring that children receive non-suggestive, yet thorough, forensic interviews in a sensitive and child-friendly manner. These centers often coordinate multi-disciplinary team investigations of child abuse cases by housing representatives of all agencies involved in the investigation (police, prosecutors, child and family services, and sometimes medical professionals). Within this context, one interview that serves all partner agencies’ purposes is conducted, avoiding the need for multiple interviews.
which could further traumatize child witnesses. It also increases the probability that the forensic interview is performed by interviewers who are specifically trained in child sensitive techniques. Thus, the advocacy center model has the potential to increase the integrity of investigations involving child witnesses – an assumption researchers are currently testing.

During a forensic interview with a suspected child victim or child witness, an investigator will attempt to obtain a comprehensive report, including details about the alleged incident and offender, other possible victims or witnesses, and the location and context of the event. The best forensic interviewers use well-established, empirically validated techniques that facilitate children’s reports of actual events and minimize false reports. Good interview techniques facilitate two crucial goals: detecting actual abuse so children can be protected from further injury and ruling out abuse that did not occur so innocent individuals are not falsely accused.

Optimal Interview Techniques

Child-sensitive interview techniques have been empirically validated by researchers, often psychologists by training, who are concerned with understanding children’s capacity to give accurate reports and using that information to develop techniques to improve children’s accuracy. Specifically, in controlled experiments, researchers vary interview techniques and determine their effects on children’s accuracy, which includes both children’s ability to recall information from memory and their ability to resist false suggestions about events that never happened. Researchers also study individual child factors and situational factors that modify the effectiveness of interview techniques.

Generally, research shows that good techniques for conducting a child forensic interview include building rapport with a child before questioning, maintaining a socially supportive rather than intimidating atmosphere during the interview, remaining impartial and open-minded about what might have occurred throughout the interview rather than having fixed hypotheses about what happened, using developmentally appropriate language rather than complex sentences and advanced vocabulary, asking the most open-ended questions possible instead of narrow questions suggesting information that might be untrue, and using non-suggestive interview aids such as drawings and anatomically detailed dolls only when necessary. A discussion on some of these and other elements that compose a good forensic interview follows.

Rapport building. Establishing a positive, trusting relationship between the forensic interviewer and the child serves to set the stage for the interview, provides the interviewer with the opportunity to assess the child’s abilities and response style, and allows the child to relax. Asking a child to freely recall neutral, non-stressful events familiarizes the child with the interview format, which consists of the investigator posing open-ended questions to elicit descriptive accounts and using more directive questions only when further inquiry is required. This initial interview phase also allows the interviewer to evaluate the child’s social, cognitive, and language skills and emotional state. Research shows that during this early phase of the forensic interview and
throughout the interview to come, an interviewer’s use of warm vocal tones, supportive eye contact, frequent smiling, rapport building, and relaxed body posture helps to create a supportive environment and increases children’s resistance to suggestion.

**Question suggestiveness.** A significant concern when interviewing children is the issue of suggestiveness. Both adults and children provide more accurate reports when interviewed with open-ended questions rather than misleading questions, and when interviewed in a non-coercive rather than an intimidating context. Misleading questions are queries that introduce inaccurate information or suppositions that the child did not previously disclose. These questions are problematic because children may subsequently include the misinformation in accounts of their experiences, contaminating their reports.

Misleading questions become especially problematic when they occur in conjunction with a variety of contextual or situational factors. Children are most vulnerable to suggestion when, for example, they have been told inaccurate information prior to being interviewed; they are interviewed with questions that are not age-appropriate; they are asked misleading questions by an interviewer who is biased, who has a position of authority, or who is emotionally intimidating and nonsupportive; and when they are asked misleading questions repeatedly either within the same interview or across multiple interviews.

To avoid potential suggestibility, investigators use the least leading, most open-ended types of questions. Such questions contain little information and allow children to provide extensive, detailed accounts of their experiences. Freely recalled information is often quite accurate. Even so, using only open-ended questions without providing any cues for children risks that some details of the child’s story might be omitted. This hazard is especially relevant when children are very young or reluctant to disclose their abuse, a situation that is not uncommon. In such cases, interviewers employ more focused (but not misleading) questions to help children maintain their concentration and search their memory for details. The best interviewers balance the risks associated with using more directive or cued questions against the risks of missing a disclosure of actual abuse.

It is important to note that although even adults are sometimes suggestible, there are predictable age trends in suggestibility, with preschoolers usually being more suggestible than older children. Even so, increasing age does not always lead to increased accuracy. In fact, some studies show that older children can be more inaccurate than younger children when reporting events that might be considered embarrassing or that they have been told to keep secret. This is because older children are more likely than very young children to understand that some things, such as talking about genitalia, are embarrassing. They are also more cognitively capable of understanding and heeding an adult’s threat to secrecy.

**Interview aids.** Interview aids are sometimes valuable tools for communicating with children during a forensic interview because they help children describe the event being investigated. Some of the most common aids include freehand drawings,
anatomically detailed drawings or diagrams, and anatomically detailed dolls. These tools are most useful for clarifying already-established disclosures from older children. Research reveals that these aids can be problematic, however, for preschool-aged children because, compared to older children, they are more suggestible and their language abilities and symbolic skills are not yet developed enough to understand that drawings and dolls represent specific people. Interview aids are particularly problematic when used in conjunction with misleading questions and when presented to children who have not yet been interviewed with open-ended questioning techniques.

**Inconsistencies and questioning about repeated incidents.** During a forensic interview, or across multiple interviews (which are not recommended but sometimes unavoidable), children might make inconsistent statements. Research illustrates that some inconsistencies are normal for children, and do not necessarily indicate inaccurate reporting. Discrepancies may result from limited language or cognitive skills. Also, what seems like an inconsistency in reporting details of an event might reflect a child recounting multiple episodes of abuse. Like adults, children who experience multiple occurrences of a similar event develop memories for common, central elements of repeated events, rather than detailed memory for each individual event. That is, they develop and become dependent upon a generalized “script” for the event. Consequently, multiple experiences of stressful events can reinforce children’s memories for central aspects of the events but harm their memory for peripheral, tangential details. As a result, children might have difficulty isolating memories of a specific event from memories of other similar events. To counter the effects of this potential challenge, interviewers sometimes ask about the most recent event or use children’s own memory markers (e.g., one event happened near a holiday) to help them remember more details about particular incidents.

**Truth and lies.** It is important that children’s statements be validated to the extent possible with age-appropriate techniques. Asking children directly whether they understand the difference between truth and lies, however, is not a good technique. Research reveals that, even though children might not be able to define or express the difference between such abstract concepts, they can still be reliable witnesses. A better approach is for the interviewer to ask children about independently verifiable facts (e.g., the child’s teacher’s name) and facts that are critical to the investigation (e.g., description of the location where the alleged events took place). Other investigators can then either corroborate or refute such facts.

**Delayed disclosure and recantation.** Children sometimes delay in reporting their or loved ones’ maltreatment, or they sometimes even recant their initial reports of maltreatment. This can happen either before, during, or after a forensic interview. Delays in reports of actual abuse may be linked to shame and embarrassment, fear of not being believed, fear of police involvement, fear of reprisal from threatening perpetrators, feelings of being responsible or blameworthy for the incident, or fear of separation from caregivers. False recantations may be linked to the same factors. Of course, some recantations are true. Trained forensic investigators are aware of this possibility and conduct an impartial examination of recantations and denials. Interviewers will question a recanting child about his or her initial statements and
recantations, and gather information about circumstances of the recantation and original statements. If the interviewer discovers that a recantation was improperly encouraged by another person or was part of a deliberate effort to discourage the investigation, the interviewer will question the child about those circumstances. If, however, the child sustains the recantation and there is no evidence of improper motivation, the interviewer will accept the possibility that the recantation is true and question the child about his or her motivations for the false disclosure.

**Special Accommodations for Individual Differences Among Children**

Research reveals that children’s accuracy, suggestibility, and ability to communicate differ as a function of many factors, such as age, cultural background, and intellectual and emotional abilities/disabilities. Skilled interviewers will recognize and accommodate such factors during a forensic interview.

For example, as previously mentioned, age is a powerful predictor of children’s abilities in investigative interviews. Age is not always a perfect indicator of developmental level because children achieve developmental landmarks at somewhat varying ages and, consequently, even children a year or two apart in age can differ dramatically in terms of ability. In any case, good forensic interviewers treat young children and children at an early developmental stage with great care, interviewing them as soon as possible after a report at a time of day when they are normally awake and alert, and taking extra care to build rapport and to monitor their attention span to see if breaks are needed. Interviewers will also reassure young children that a caretaker is nearby or even allow a support person to be with children during an interview (although this person should be unable to signal the child about the accuracy of responses).

Further, compared to older children, younger children have less developed language and memory skills, as well as less capacity to understand what information might be significant in a forensic interview or to understand that the suspected abuse incident was wrong. Compared to older children, young children also give less information in response to open-ended questions, thus requiring more specific questions. Even so, suggestive and misleading questions should be avoided. Also, questions should contain simple vocabulary and be constructed cleanly (without phrases, clauses, ambiguous pronouns, etc.). Young children are particularly vulnerable to complex questions because, even though the child may not understand the question, he or she may try to answer anyway, providing inaccurate information.

There are also unique concerns when interviewing older children and adolescents. As noted previously, although older children have better memory skills and are less suggestible than younger children, they are also more aware of complex social and emotional issues. Older children, especially adolescents and teenagers, might be more reluctant than younger children to disclose embarrassing information, information that they have been told to keep secret, or information that might lead to family disruption.
There are many other individual differences among children that can affect a forensic interview. Children with disabilities are far more vulnerable to maltreatment than non-disabled children, and depending on the type of disability, they may need special accommodations. For example, a disabled child’s mental age might be less than his or her chronological age, necessitating interview techniques used with younger children to guard against suggestibility (e.g., using very direct questions and reminding the child frequently that he or she can disagree if anything said is either incorrect or misunderstood). To determine what type of accommodation is necessary, prior to an interview, the interviewer will gather information about the nature of the disability; the type and extent of impairment; how the child adapts to new environments and people; how the child manages anxiety; and if the child is taking any medication that could influence his or her behavior, ability to communicate, or memory.

Good forensic interviewers will also be aware of a child’s cultural background, which can have implications for understanding events in the child’s life, how the child and family react to the child’s victimization, and the child’s and family’s attitudes toward the investigation. Also, children who have been severely traumatized by abuse or maltreatment may need special accommodations during an interview. Much research in the field of children’s eyewitness testimony is currently focused on the effect of these and other individual differences (e.g., attention skills, temperament) on children’s memory and suggestibility. Future research will surely bring many developments relevant to understanding children’s vulnerabilities and accommodating individual difference factors in the investigative interview.

Forensic Interview Protocols and Training

Although there are variations on interview style and content, all good forensic interviews contain the basic elements outlined herein. Several specific interview protocols have been developed that prescribe a certain style of questioning. These protocols provide empirically sound and thorough instruction for performing forensic investigations. Among these are the “Step Wise Interview” developed by Yuille and colleagues, the “Cognitive Interview” designed by Fisher and Geiselman, and the “NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol” developed by Lamb, Sternberg, and other researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. These protocols generally instruct interviewers to begin an interview with rapport building, then use very open-ended questions (sometimes a specific set of scripted questions), gradually building toward more specific questioning. Highly directive questions are recommended only if open-ended questions are unsuccessful at eliciting responses, and all protocols caution against badgering children with potentially misleading, suggestive questions that could elicit false reports. Studies reveal that, compared to nonstandard interviews, these types of protocols increase the amount of accurate information obtained from children. Numerous agencies and organizations across the country offer training for child welfare professionals that embody these techniques (e.g., the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, the National Child Protection Training Center).
Conclusion

Reports obtained from children are critical evidence in many investigations. Therefore, it is extremely important that the most successful and reliable methods are implemented when interviewing children. By using techniques that encourage and facilitate children’s reports, interviewers protect children who may be experiencing abuse or maltreatment and simultaneously help prevent false allegations from threatening the rights of innocent individuals. By continuing to do research on these topics, social scientists ensure there is an adequate research base to guide interviewers and ensure justice.

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References and Further Reading


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