

Questioning Strategies for Forensic Interviews of Children  
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When children disclose sexual abuse it is common for them to undergo a forensic interview, often at a child advocacy center with a professional who has received specialized training in interviewing children. A forensic interview is a structured conversation that is designed to obtain information from the child about an event the child has experienced. When forensic interviews are properly conducted they are useful in reaching a fair disposition in criminal, family or juvenile law cases.

A series of questioning strategies have been identified and established as guidelines or protocols.\* While some differences exist among these, empirical research indicates that the most reliable information is obtained when a continuum of questions are utilized that permit the child to give an account that is minimally affected by external factors.

The question-type that should begin an interview is a free narrative; an open-ended request to describe an event the child has experienced (i.e., "Tell me everything that happened to you at the babysitter's house."). The objective of a free narrative is to have a child talk at length about the event(s) in question, with minimal input or interruption from the interviewer. Because of its open-ended nature, a free narrative gives a child complete control over a topic, thus allowing the child to describe the most personally meaningful or salient aspects of a situation or event.

Empirical research shows that children as young as three and four years old can provide accurate reports of their experiences in response to open-ended questions.

Young children, especially preschoolers, are unable to provide exhaustive accounts of their experiences and their narratives typically raise questions or include statements that may be confusing or incomplete. In such situations, additional questions are needed to clear up these issues as well as to obtain other legally-relevant details.

Interview protocols recommend using a child's spontaneous statements as the basis for further questioning and phrasing inquiries in an open-ended format that require multiple-word answers. This questioning strategy has been labeled focused narrative request and open-ended question or prompts. These questions may seek additional information about a specific allegation (i.e., "You said John hit you. Tell me everything about John hitting you."), or a more complete physical description of a detail, action or event (i.e., "You said John was wearing a shirt. What did the shirt look like?").

Regardless of the type of information sought or the reason for seeking it, the primary objective at this point of an interview is to obtain as much information as possible in the child's own words, and this is accomplished by phrasing questions in the least suggestive terms.

When further information is still required closed questions or option-posing questions may be utilized. This questioning format includes multiple-choice and yes-no questions that allow for specific, designated responses. Empirical research shows that answers to

these questions may be less accurate compared to answers to open-ended questions. Consequently, interview protocols recommend reserving them until after a complete narrative has been obtained.

Option-posing questions are recognized to be risky because children may feel obligated to provide an answer, even if they do not understand the question or know the correct answer. One way to reduce this risk for multiple-choice questions is to leave out the correct response. For example, if an event occurred in a bedroom the question could be phrased, "Where did that happen, in the bathroom, the kitchen or somewhere else?"

A similar convention is not possible for yes-no questions and this question-type should be used sparingly. Some protocols caution against asking yes-no questions about substantive issues, such as those related to specific acts or people.

Answers to both option-posing strategies should be immediately followed by requests for elaboration to ensure that the child has personal knowledge of the topic and is not simply answering out of a desire to be cooperative. When elaboration is not obtained following a response to a multiple-choice or yes-no question, vital information may be missed and, consequently, the response itself is rendered inconclusive.

Leading questions, also called suggestive questions, are the most controversial and are widely considered the most risky and least preferred questioning strategy, especially when posed in relation to central or essential details. While no single definition of leading or suggestive question has been endorsed in the professional literature, there is agreement that this questioning strategy introduces information (i.e., about a person, action or event) that the child has not previously mentioned or implies the correct or desired response (i.e., "He hit you on your butt, didn't he?").

Interview protocols recognize that leading or suggestive questions may in some limited circumstances be unavoidable. When a decision is made to use this format, the question should include the least information possible that the child has not previously volunteered. Furthermore, the child should be asked to elaborate on any information provided in response to this type of inquiry. Finally, protocols generally advise against asking questions that simply direct the child to answer in a specific way or only request affirmation or denial of specific details.

In order for a forensic interview to achieve its goal and be useful in the criminal justice system, it is necessary to follow established guidelines that are based on empirical research. Interview protocols that contain the questioning strategies discussed in this article have been established by State and professional organizations. Carefully following these or similar guidelines is an important step toward conducting scientifically valid and legally reliable forensic interviews.

\*Sources:

Forensic Interviewing Protocol. State of Michigan, Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice. Available at: [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/DHS-PUB-0779\\_211637\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/DHS-PUB-0779_211637_7.pdf)

Child Forensic Interview Structure. (January 2009) National Children's Advocacy Center, Huntsville, Alabama (Unpublished).

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