

The importance of questioning children in a developmentally-sensitive fashion

by [Dr. Dan Swerdlow-Freed](#) on July 30, 2018

Research-based forensic interview protocols direct interviewers to use question prompts that encourage children to report events in their own words and minimize questions that convey information from the interviewer or that introduces topics the child has not previously mentioned (Poole, 2016). Although different forensic interview protocols label question formats somewhat differently all involve the same questioning procedures.

- Open-ended questions (also called open-ended prompts and invitations; “Tell me everything that happened.”) require a child to search their memory for details of an event, decide which details to report, and encourage narratives that are in the child’s own words.
- Specific questions (also called focused or directive prompts) ask children to provide additional details about information the child has already provided that might not be clear or needed to be elaborated. These questions are identified by their letters, as the prompts begin with wh- or h- (i.e., “What happened...?” “Where were you...?” “How do you know...?”)
- Option-posing questions (also called closed, forced-choice, multiple-choice and yes/no questions) provide information that a child is asked to select, accept or reject (i.e., “Did he touch you on your front private, your back private or somewhere else?” “Were your clothes on or off?”)
- Suggestive or leading questions introduce information that a child has not previously mentioned, and may also suggest the desired response (i.e., “He also touched you on your butt, right?”)

Is there a standard of practice for conducting forensic interviews of children?

There is widespread agreement that forensic interviews of children should prioritize open-ended and focused questions because these elicit the most reliable information, and minimize use of option-posing, suggestive and leading questions because they elicit the least reliable information (Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Lyon, 2014). This questioning procedure is so widely agreed upon and supported by the scientific community that it is referred to as ‘best practice’ (Lamb, LaRooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011).

What is the consequence of following best practice standard?

While pre-school-age and young children have the ability to accurately describe their experiences, their success in doing so in a forensic context depends upon being questioned in a developmentally sensitive manner that prioritizes open-ended questions, limits yes/no and closed-ended questions (also referred to as option-posing, multiple-choice or forced choice), and minimizes interviewer input (State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Department of Human Services, 2017; Lamb et al, 2011).

For example, one study (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Abbott, 2007) that investigated the connection between question-type and accuracy of information concluded... "our findings show that young children are capable of reporting essential – central – forensic information in response to free-recall prompts, contrary to a widespread assumption among researchers and practitioners that option posing ('yes/no' and 'forced-choice') questions are needed to elicit sensitive and forensically crucial information from children" (p. 1127).

Forensic interviewers are trained to elicit narratives by asking children to describe in their own words what happened (Poole, 2016). These prompts allow children to report information based on their own train of thought and from their own memory, and elicit longer responses that contain more accurate information compared to focused questions, such as wh- ("Where did he touch you?"), multiple-choice ("Were your clothes on or off?"), and yes/no ("Did he touch you in the shower?") (Lamb, et al, 2007).

Open-ended prompts are considered more valuable because they elicit longer, multi-word responses that contain more details and therefore, are more informative, and this contributes to evaluating the credibility of a child's report. Because young children's initial event reports may not contain many details, interviewers are taught to help children flesh out narratives by asking additional open-ended questions such as, "What happened next?" It is also recommended practice to follow focused, multiple-choice and yes/no questions with open-ended prompts because these allow children to provide additional information in their own words (Poole and Lamb, 1998).

Despite the importance of following these best-practice guidelines to elicit the most accurate information, research shows that interviewers often fail to do so (Benson & Powell, 2015) and too quickly abandon asking open-ended questions for more focused prompts. One consequence of making this shift prematurely is that children are no longer provided the opportunity to describe an event in their own words because the interviewer takes over directing the focus of conversation (Lyon, 2014). Unfortunately, this can result in a poor quality forensic interview that has limited usefulness and may raise more questions than it answers.

For more information [about this topic](#) or to schedule a consultation appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at 248.539.7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.

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