

**STATE OF MICHIGAN**  
**GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON CHILDREN'S JUSTICE**  
**AND**  
**FAMILY INDEPENDENCE AGENCY**

**FORENSIC INTERVIEWING PROTOCOL**



STATE OF MICHIGAN  
GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON CHILDREN'S JUSTICE  
Combined Committee and  
Family Independence Agency

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice was created pursuant to federal legislation to respond to the tremendous challenges involved with the handling of child abuse — particularly child sexual abuse — cases in Michigan. In August 1993, the Task Force published A Model Child Abuse Protocol - Coordinated Investigative Team Approach. This updated Protocol encourages the use of a Forensic Interviewing Protocol when interviewing children alleged to be sexually abused.

In recent years, there has been increasing criticism directed at the type of interviews conducted by professionals involved in the investigation of child physical abuse and child sexual abuse. The criticism hinges on the use of poor interviewing techniques that could be cause for implanting memories in a child, or result in adults not listening to or learning the child's disclosure of actual abuse. In 1996, the FIA initiated the development of a Forensic Interviewing Protocol by establishing a steering committee within FIA and enlisting nine FIA county offices to participate as pilot counties in testing the protocol. Debra Poole, Ph.D., Central Michigan University, was contracted by FIA to develop a forensic interviewing protocol and a training package to be used to train staff from the pilot counties. Debra Poole also then provided training to those counties. Debra Poole's professionalism and dedication to this project enabled FIA to meet its goals in developing the protocol. Independent of the FIA project, and simultaneously to it, the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice also identified the objective of developing and implementing a Forensic Interviewing Protocol. From 1996 to 1998, FIA and the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice worked together with Debra Poole in developing and implementing a Forensic Interviewing Protocol that would improve the interviewing techniques for all professionals involved in the investigation of child physical abuse and child sexual abuse in Michigan.

This protocol should be used in conjunction with the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice "A Model Child Abuse Protocol - Coordinated Investigative Team Approach."

The application of this Forensic Interviewing Protocol will be enhanced by statewide training which will be promoted by the Family Independence Agency, the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice and the Prosecuting Attorney's Association of Michigan. The purpose of this protocol and training is to prepare local investigators to conduct competent child interviews which will reduce trauma to children, make the information gained more credible in the court process, and protect the rights of the accused.

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# Forensic Interviewing Protocol

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## Introduction

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The goal of a forensic interview is to obtain a statement from a child, in a developmentally-sensitive, unbiased and truthseeking manner, that will support accurate and fair decision-making in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Although information obtained from this interview might be useful for making treatment decisions, this interview is not part of a treatment process. Forensic interviews should not be conducted by professionals who have an on-going or a planned therapeutic relationship with the child.

*forensic interviews are hypothesis-testing rather than hypothesis-confirming*

There are two overriding features of a forensic interview (Poole & Lamb, 1998). First, forensic interviews are hypothesis-testing rather than hypothesis - confirming (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). Interviewers prepare by generating a set of alternative hypotheses about the sources and meanings of the allegations. During an interview, interviewers attempt to rule out alternative explanations for the allegations. For example, when children use terms that suggest sexual touching, interviewers assess their understanding of those terms and explore whether touching might have occurred in the context of routine caretaking or medical treatment. When children report details that seem inconsistent, interviewers try to clarify whether the events could have occurred as described, perhaps by exploring whether more than one event is being described or whether words are being used in an idiosyncratic way. Before closing an interview, interviewers should be reasonably confident that alleged perpetrators are clearly identified and that the alleged actions are not subject to multiple interpretations.

*forensic interviews should be child-centered rather than adult-centered*

Second, forensic interviews should be child-centered. Although interviewers direct the flow of conversation through a series of phases, children should determine the vocabulary and specific content of the conversation as much as possible. Forensic interviewers should avoid suggesting events that have not been mentioned by the child or projecting adult interpretations onto situations (e.g., with comments such as, “that must have been frightening”).



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## Pre-interview Preparation

There are no fixed guidelines about how much information interviewers should gather before meeting with a child. An interview is conducted “blind” when the interviewer knows only the child’s name and age. The goal of a blind interview is to reduce the possibility that the interviewer can direct the child to confirm the allegations by asking specific or leading questions. There are a variety of reasons why most experts oppose blind interviews. First, it is difficult for interviewers to develop rapport with children when they know nothing about their living situations or interests. Second, because some children will not respond to general questions about why they are being interviewed, it is difficult for interviewers to introduce the topic of abuse when they know nothing about the place or timing of the alleged abuse. Third, blind interviewing makes it more difficult for interviewers to consider alternative hypotheses about the meaning of children’s statements. Information about recent medical treatment, adults in a child’s life who have duplicate names (e.g., two grandpas), and the child’s caretaking environments and playmates can help interviewers understand what a child is describing. The National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, the American Prosecutor’s Research Institute, and the National District Attorney’s Association (1993) concluded, “Interviewing a child without knowing any of the details revealed to another is analogous to performing a medical examination without knowing the patient’s history or looking for an unfamiliar destination without a road map”.

*interviewers tailor their interview preparations to the needs of each case, collecting information that will help build rapport with the child and help test alternative hypotheses about the meaning of the child’s comments*

Pre-interview preparation will vary depending upon the nature of the allegations, the available resources, and the amount of time before an interview must be conducted. It is more important to collect background material when the child is preschool age, when the allegations are based on ambiguous information (such as sexual acting out), or when factors such as medical treatment or family hostilities might complicate the investigation. Relevant information can be obtained from a variety of sources including children’s protective services files, police reports, or by conducting collateral interviews with the reporting party and/or family members.

The following list of topics illustrates the types of information that might be useful for interviews about child sexual abuse allegations (adapted with permission from the American Psychological Association from Poole & Lamb, 1998):

- Child’s name, age, sex, and relevant developmental or cultural considerations (e.g., developmental delay, hearing or speech impairment, bilingualism)
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- Child's interests or hobbies that could be used to develop rapport
  - Family composition/custody arrangements
  - Family members' and relevant friends' or caretakers' names (especially how the child refers to significant others, with special attention to nicknames and duplicate names)
  - Caretaking environments and schedules, with the child's names for these environments
  - Relevant medical treatment or conditions (e.g., genital rashes, assistance with toileting, suppositories or recent experiences with rectal thermometers)
  - Family habits or events related to allegation issues (e.g., showering or bathing with the child, a mother who allows children in the bathroom while she changes tampons, physical play or tickling)
  - The content of recent sex education or abuse prevention programs
  - Family's names for body parts
  - Nature of the allegation and circumstances surrounding the allegation
  - Possible misunderstanding of the event
  - Possible motivations for false allegations (e.g., family or neighborhood hostilities that predate suspicions of inappropriate behavior)

## **Number of Interviewers**

Local customs and requirements often dictate how many professionals will be involved in conducting investigative interviews. There are advantages and disadvantages of both single-interviewer and team (e.g., child protection and law enforcement) approaches. On the one hand, children may find it easier to build rapport and talk about sensitive issues with a single interviewer; on the other hand, team interviewing may insure that a broader range of topics is covered and reduce the need for multiple interviews.

*one professional should be the primary interviewer, with the other taking a supportive role*

When two professionals will be present, it is best to appoint one as the primary interviewer, with the second professional taking notes or suggesting additional questions when the interview is drawing to a close. Before conducting the interview, interviewers should have sufficient preparation time to discuss the goals for the interview and the topics that need to be covered; interviewers should not discuss the case in front of the child. At the start of the interview, both interviewers should be clearly introduced to the child by name and job. Seating the second interviewer out of the line of sight of the child may make the interview seem less confrontational.

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## Support Persons

The presence of social support persons during forensic interviews is discouraged. Although it makes intuitive sense that children might be more relaxed with social support, studies have failed to find consistent or great benefits from allowing support individuals to be present during interviews (e.g., Greenstock & Pipe, 1996; Moston & Engelberg, 1992). Support persons might be helpful during early portions of the interview, but they might also inhibit children from talking about sexual details. Individuals who might be accused of influencing the child to discuss abuse, such as parents involved in custody disputes or therapists, should not be allowed to sit with the child during the interview.

When there is authorization for a support person to accompany the child (parent or teacher, for example), this individual should be seated out of the child's line of sight to avoid criticism that the child was reacting to nonverbal signals from a trusted adult. In addition, the interviewer should instruct the support person that only the child is allowed to talk unless a question is directed to the support person.

## Videotaping or Audiotaping

*read identifying information onto  
the tape and play the tape back for  
an equipment check*

Videotaping or audiotaping policies vary widely. If your county elects to videotape or audiotape, follow the suggested procedures below.

The interviewer should write out a tape label with his/her name, the child's name, the names and roles of other individuals present during the interview as participants or observers, and the location, date, and time of the interview. This information should then be read onto the tape and played back to insure that the equipment is working properly before bringing the child into the interview room. All persons present in the interview room must be clearly visible to the camera and positioned so as to be heard. Rooms should be large enough to place videotaping equipment at an acceptable distance from the child, but not so large that a single camera (or a two-camera setup) cannot monitor the entire room. Although taping reduces the need to take notes during the interview, the interviewer may bring notes into the interview (e.g., topics that need to be covered) and jot down notes during the interview to help remember which points need to be clarified. Notes can also document statements from the child that might be difficult to hear on tape. In such cases, interviewers should write down the child's exact words whenever possible.

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## The Physical Setting

The best environment for conducting forensic interviews is a center specifically equipped for this purpose. Centers often have comfortable waiting rooms with neutral toys and games, refreshments and bathroom facilities, as well as interviewing rooms with one-way mirrors and sound hookup to adjoining observation rooms. The interview room should be equipped with a table, chairs, and a cupboard for keeping supplies out of view. The goal of designing an interview room is to provide a relaxing environment that is not unnecessarily distracting to young children. Decorations such as a simple, repetitive wallpaper are cheerful but do not invite inspection by the child.

*the interview room should be friendly but uncluttered, free from distracting noises and supplies*

Interviewers who do not have access to an interviewing facility should try to arrange a physical setting that recreates some of the important features of specialized centers. First, select the most neutral location possible. For example, a speech-and-language room in a school might be a better choice than the principal's office, because children often believe they are in trouble when they are called to the main office. Similarly, children may worry about being interviewed in a police station, and thus they might benefit from an explanation about why they are being interviewed there (e.g., "You are not in trouble today, but we like to talk to children over here because the rooms are nice and bright, and we won't be disturbed.") Second, select locations that are away from traffic, noise, and disruptions; Phones, fax machines, or other potential distractions should be temporarily unplugged. Third, the interview room should be as simple and uncluttered as possible; Avoid playrooms or other locations with visible toys and books that will distract children. Young children are usually more cooperative in a smaller space that does not contain extra furniture, because they sometimes roam around and bounce on sofas, and they pay more attention when attractive items such as computers or typewriters are temporarily removed from the interview space. Interviews should not be conducted in a child's home. A child may be intimidated because his/her parents are in the home and the neglect or abuse may be taking place there. If the interview must be conducted in the home (child is preschool age, child is on school break, etc.), select a private location in the home for the interview that is away from parents or siblings and appears to be the most neutral spot.

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## Interviewer Guidelines

*be relaxed and avoid correcting the child's behavior unnecessarily or commenting on the child's reactions to the interview*

Several guidelines about interviewer behavior, demeanor and communication should be followed throughout the interview:

- Avoid wearing uniforms or having guns visible during the interview.
- Convey and maintain a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Do not express surprise, disgust, disbelief or other emotional reactions to descriptions of the abuse.
- Avoid touching the child.
- Do not use bathroom breaks or drinks as reinforcements for cooperating during the interview. Never make comments like, "Let's finish up these questions and then I'll get you a drink."
- Respect the child's personal space.
- Do not stare at the child or sit uncomfortably close.
- Do not suggest feelings or responses to the child. For example, do not say, "I know how hard this must be for you."
- Do not make promises. For example, do not say, "Everything will be o.k." Do not say, "You will never have to talk about this again."
- If the child becomes upset, or he/she is embarrassed or scared, acknowledge and address the child's feelings, but avoid extensive comments about the child's feelings. Comments such as, "I talk with children about these sorts of things all the time; it's okay to talk with me about this" can be helpful.
- Do not make comments such as "good girl" or "we're buddies, aren't we?" that might be interpreted as reinforcing the child for talking about abuse issues. Supportive comments should be clearly noncontingent; in other words, encouragements should not be based on the child talking about specific types of issues. The best time to encourage children is during initial rapport building and at the close of the interview, after the conversation has shifted to neutral topics.
- Do not use the words "pretend," "imagine," or other words that suggest fantasy or play.
- Avoid asking questions about why the child behaved in a particular way (e.g., "Why didn't you tell your mother that night?"). Young children have difficulty answering such questions and may believe that you are blaming them for the situation.
- Avoid correcting the child's behavior unnecessarily during the interview. It can be helpful to direct the child's attention with meaningful explanations (e.g., "I have a little trouble hearing, so it helps me a lot if you look at me when you are

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talking so that I can hear you”), but avoid correcting nervous or avoidant behavior that is not preventing the interview from proceeding.

- If you have difficulty understanding what the child said, ask the child to repeat the comment with phrases such as, “What did you say?” or “I couldn’t hear that, can you say that again?” instead of guessing (e.g., “Did you say \_\_\_\_?”). Young children will often go along with an adult’s interpretation of their words.
- Be tolerant of pauses in the conversation. It is appropriate to look away and give the child time to continue talking. Similarly, it is often helpful to take a few moments to formulate your next question.

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## Conducting a Phased Interview

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Most current protocols advise interviewers to proceed through a series of distinct interviewing stages, with each stage accomplishing a specific purpose. A variety of terms are used to describe this progression from introduction to closing, including *step-wise* (Yuille, Hunter, Joffe, & Zaparniuk, 1993), *funnel* (Fallon & Pucci, 1994), and *phased approaches* (Bull, 1995). There are several advantages of a phased approach to interviewing: (a) all interviewers deliver recommended introductions and instructions to children, (b) interviewers are encouraged to use less directive methods of questioning and (c) phased approaches facilitate training by breaking down the interview process into discrete steps that can be mastered separately.

A phased interview structure minimizes suggestive influences and empowers children to be informative. These goals are accomplished by three major guidelines: (a) children receive clear information about the interviewer's job and the ground rules for the interview, (b) the interviewer builds rapport in a way that encourages children to talk and (c) the interviewer elicits information using the least directive question formats. Although the series of phases is specified, the structure gives the interviewer flexibility to cover any topics that the investigative team determines are relevant, in any order that seems appropriate. This protocol describes the general structure of a phased interview but does not dictate which specific questions interviewers will ask.

*a summary of the interview phases appears in Quick Guide #1, at the end of this protocol*

The interview includes 9 phases:

1. Preparing the Interview Environment
2. The Introduction
3. Legal Competency (The Truth/Lie)
4. Establishing the Ground Rules
5. Completing Rapport Building with a Practice Interview
6. Introducing the Topic
7. The Free Narrative
8. Questioning and Clarification
9. Closure



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The order of these phases can be varied somewhat from interview to interview depending upon the preferences of the interviewers, the age of the children, and the children's initial comments. Because the truth/lie determination is included for practical reasons (e.g., competency requirements), many interviewers prefer to introduce this phase of the interview early in the conversation. Establishing the ground rules before rapport building permits the interviewer to reiterate these rules during initial, informal conversation. Because small children may not keep the ground rules in mind throughout the interview, however, some interviewers prefer to introduce truth/ lies and the ground rules after initial rapport building. Some children begin to discuss the allegations as soon as the interviewer initiates a conversation; in such cases, the interviewer should not interrupt the child until it is clear that the child has finished giving a free narrative. Interviewers can remind a child about the ground rules at any point during the interview.

## **Preparing the Interview Environment**

The interviewer should remove distracting material from the room and position the chairs and recording equipment before introducing the child to the interview room. The interviewer prepares the tape label and reads the names and titles of all individuals present for the interview, the child's name, and the location, date and time of the interview onto the recording equipment, playing it back for an equipment check. It is a good idea to be sure that the child has had a recent bathroom break and is not hungry before beginning the interview. Avoid scheduling an interview at the child's nap time.

## **The Introduction**

Sometimes children are not informed or are misinformed about where they are going and why. Children are often confused about the purpose of interviews or scared that they are in trouble. Moreover, children take time to adjust to new environments and may be temporarily distracted by the sights and sounds of the interviewing room. The purpose of the introduction phase is to acclimate the child to the interview, modeling a relaxed and patient tone that will be carried throughout the session.

*children pay more attention when they are familiar with the environment and have some understanding about what will happen*

After the child and the interviewer are seated, the interviewer begins by giving a brief explanation of his/her job and the purpose of the recording equipment. The child should be given an opportunity to glance around the room. School-aged children could even be allowed to inspect the recording equipment if they choose. There



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are varying policies and practices as to whether or not to introduce the child to observers or let the child view the observation room before the interview. Your county may want to adopt a policy.

Introductions can be brief or long depending upon how relaxed the child appears. The following is a simple example adapted from Sternberg et al. (1997):

- Introduction: “Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a police officer/detective/social worker and part of my job is to talk with children about things that have happened to them.”
- Explain taping: “As you can see, I have a video camera/tape recorder here. It will record what we say so that I can remember everything that you tell me. Sometimes I forget things and the tape let’s me listen to you without having to write everything down.”

Children might be confused about being questioned by a police officer or other professional, so interviewers are free to explain more about their job (e.g., “Do you know what a social worker/police officer does? Well, part of my job is to talk with children and to help them. I talk with a lot of children in [name of town]”). When children seem distressed, it is appropriate to ask them how they are feeling and to provide some orienting information about the interview. (“I talk with a lot of children about things that have happened to them. We are going to talk for a while and then I’ll take you back to the other room where your [mom, dad, etc.] is waiting for you”).

## Legal Competency

There are no uniform guidelines about the need to discuss truth and lies during forensic interviews, but many prosecuting attorneys prefer that interviewers briefly address this issue and get verbal assent that the child intends to tell the truth. This phase of the interview can be delayed until after the interviewer has built rapport with the child, or omitted if a supervisor advises against truth-lie questions. This phase is included for the reason that Michigan law requires a child witness under the age of 10 be qualified as competent by the judge.

*ask concrete questions such as, “My shirt is red. Is that the truth or a lie?” rather than abstract questions such as, “What does it mean to tell the truth?”*

During the truth/lie determination, the interviewer demonstrates that the child understands the difference between the truth and a lie by asking the child to label statements as “the truth” or “a lie” after

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which the interviewer gets a verbal acknowledgment that the child will tell the truth. Interviewers should avoid asking the child to define these concepts with questions such as, “What does it mean to tell a lie?” or “Can you tell me what the truth is?” These questions are difficult for children to answer and often lead to confusion.

The following example is adapted from Lamb and his colleagues:

“I meet with lots of children so that they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them. So, before we begin, I want to make sure that you understand the difference between the truth and a lie. What color are my shoes? My shoes are black. Is that the truth or a lie? [Wait for answer]. Yes, that would be a lie because my shoes are really \_\_\_\_\_. What color is my shirt? My shirt is \_\_\_\_\_. Is that the truth or a lie? [Wait for an answer]. Yes, that would be the truth because my shirt is \_\_\_\_\_. I see that you understand the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie. It’s very important that you only tell me the truth today. You should only tell me about things that really happened to you.”

The interviewer could then ask the child, “So you are going to tell me only things that are true today, okay?” For young children, interviewers could ask about the names of common objects “What do I have in my hand? I have a \_\_\_\_\_ in my hand. Is that the truth or a lie?”.

## **Establishing the Ground Rules**

Laboratory studies have shown that some children will try to answer any question an adult asks, even if the question makes no sense or they have no basis for answering the question. The interviewer should establish the ground rules with short, simple instructions such as, “Sometimes kids don’t know the answers to all my questions. That’s o.k. Don’t guess. Tell me only the things you really know.”

“If you don’t understand a question I ask, I want you to tell me that you don’t understand, okay?” For example, you may want to ask, “Can you tell me my dog’s name? That’s right, you don’t know my dog’s name, so ‘I don’t know’ is the right answer. Sometimes you might have to think about a question for a little bit. You don’t have to answer right away.”

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*tell children that they can correct you if you make a mistake*

The interviewer can also ask the child to correct mistakes that the interviewer might make. The interviewer could say, “If I make a mistake or say something that is not true, I want you to correct me.” For example, “You are 6 years old is that right? That’s right, you are not 6 years old, so you were right to tell me I made a mistake.”

## **Completing Rapport Building with a Practice Interview**

In daily conversations, adults tend to dominate conversations with children by asking numerous specific questions. Many children therefore expect that interviewers will ask a lot of questions, and that their job is to respond to each one with a short answer. The purposes of rapport building are (a) to make the child comfortable with the interview setting, (b) to get preliminary information about the child’s verbal skills and cognitive maturity and (c) to convey that the goal of the interview is for the child to talk.

*ask the child to describe a recent event from beginning to end*

Transcripts of investigative interviews show that many interviewers build rapport by asking questions about the child’s teacher, family, and likes or dislikes. Although such questions are useful for starting the interview, questions that can be answered in one or two words may lead the child to expect that the interviewer will control the conversation. A better technique is to begin with a few focused questions, then shift the discussion to a recent event the child has experienced (e.g., Sternberg et al., 1997). By asking the child to recall a personally-experienced event, the interviewer can gauge the child’s verbal skills and communicate that the child is expected to do the talking.

*use open-ended prompts such as “and then what happened?”*

One way to build rapport is to identify — during pre-interview preparation — a specific event that the child recently experienced (or experienced around the time of the alleged abuse). “Training to talk” events could be a birthday party, a recent holiday celebration, an event at school, or a significant family event (e.g., getting a new puppy). The interviewer asks the child to describe this event in detail, using open-ended prompts, and conveys complete fascination with everything the child has to say. The following example is from an ongoing study by Lamb and his colleagues:

1. “A few days ago (or “a few weeks ago”) was Easter (your birthday, Christmas, etc.). Tell me about your Easter (or whatever).”
2. “I want you to tell me all about Easter (or whatever). Think hard and tell me what happened from the time you got up that morning until (some incident or event the child mentioned).”

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3. “Then what happened?”
  4. “Tell me everything that happened after (incident mentioned by the child).”
  5. “Tell me more about (something the child just mentioned).”
  6. “It’s really important that you tell me everything you remember about things that have happened to you.”

*encourage the child to talk by showing interest and by not interrupting*

There are three general principles for rapport building:

- The interviewer tries to elicit information using only open-ended prompts that invite the child to provide multiple-word responses, such as, “Tell me everything you can about that.”
- The interviewer invites the child to be informative with comments such as, “Tell me everything that happened, even little things you don’t think are very important” or “Tell me everything that happened, from the very beginning to the very end.”
- The interviewer can encourage the child to talk during this phase of the interview with head nods, exclamations (e.g., “Ohhhh”), partial repetitions of the child’s last comment (e.g., Child: “And then he opened my present by mistake.” Interviewer: “Oh, he opened your present”), or even more direct encouragement (e.g., “You told me a lot about your birthday; I know a lot more about you now”).

*children who have little to say about specific events may be able to describe a repeated, scripted event*

If the child does not seem ready to talk, the interviewer could ask about another event. Young children, however, often have little to say about one-time events. If this is the case, it can be helpful to ask the child to describe a recurring, scripted event. A script is a general description of repeated events, such as what the child does to get ready for school each morning, what happens during a trip to the child’s favorite fast-food restaurant, or how the child plays a favorite game. The following are examples designed to elicit scripted events:

1. “I’d like to get to know a little bit more about you and your family. Tell me what you do every morning when you get ready for school. First you get out of bed — then what do you do?”
  2. “And then what do you do next? — Tell me everything you can, from the beginning until you get to school, even little things you don’t think are very important.”
  3. “Okay. Then what?”
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4. “I talk with a lot of children, and most of them really like to get hamburgers or pizza or tacos at their favorite restaurant. Do you have a favorite restaurant?”
  5. “Good. Tell me about everything that happens when you take a trip to \_\_\_\_\_ to eat \_\_\_\_\_. Tell me everything that happens, from the very beginning to the very end. First you drive there, right? Then what happens?”

To engage a reluctant child, it may be helpful to express interest in a topic the child is an “expert” on, with the interviewer feigning complete ignorance about the topic:

“I talked with your mom yesterday when we made plans for you to come here today and she said that you really like to play \_\_\_\_\_. I don’t know anything about that game, but I’ve heard a lot about it and think that my son might really like to learn how to play it. Tell me all about that game so I’ll know all about it too.”

During the rapport phase, interviewers can encourage a reluctant child with comments such as, “It is okay to start talking now or This is your special time to talk. I want you to be the talker today and I’ll listen.”

## **Introducing the Topic**

The substantive portion of the interview begins when the interviewer prompts a transition to the target topic. Interviewers should start with the least suggestive prompt that might raise the topic, avoiding mention of particular individuals or events. The following examples are from Poole and Lamb (1998):

1. “Now that I know you a little better, it’s time to talk about something else. Do you know why you are here today?”
2. “Now that we know each other a little better, I want to talk about the reason that you are here today. Tell me the reason you came to talk with me today.”
3. “Now it’s time to talk about something else. I understand there are some problems in your family (or, I understand that some things have been happening at camp). Tell me about them.”
4. “I know that you had to move recently, and Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ is taking care of you now. Tell me how that happened.”

*start with the least suggestive prompts that might raise the topic of abuse*

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Avoid words such as *hurt*, *bad*, *abuse*, or other terms that project adult interpretations of the allegation. If the child does not respond to these neutral prompts, the interviewer progresses to more specific opening remarks, still avoiding mention of a particular behavior. Examples include the following:

“I understand someone has been bothering you.”

“Does your mom think that someone has been bothering you?”

“I understand you were playing with someone yesterday and your teacher wanted you to stop playing. I’m really interested in the kinds of games that children play — tell me how you were playing.”

*closing the interview without a report of abuse is an acceptable outcome*

The interviewer is not required to get a report of abuse from the child. There are many reasons why a child may not disclose: because the abuse didn’t occur as reported, because the child is frightened or does not want to get a loved one in trouble, or because the event was not especially memorable and the child is not recalling the target event at this particular moment. The investigative team needs to decide in advance how directly a child should be prompted, taking into consideration the amount of corroborating evidence and the risk to the child from failing to obtain a disclosure.

Numerous techniques have been suggested for introducing the topic when children fail to respond to the above invitations, but interviewers need to be aware that the benefits or problems of these techniques are not yet known. Suggestions include creating a “favorite thing/least favorite thing” for various people in the child’s life (Morgan, 1995), or asking the child “Who are the people you like to be with?” and “Who are the people you don’t like to be with?” (Yuille, Hunter, Joffe, & Zaparniuk, 1993). Another technique is to ask, “Is there something you are worried about if you talk with me today?” The interviewer can also ask the child if there is something that would make it easier to talk, perhaps with a comment such as, “Is there something that would make it easier for you to talk with me today – would you rather sit someplace else, or have me sit someplace else?” Giving the child some control over the interview by changing the seating, removing a second interviewer, or letting the child write an initial answer on paper might be helpful.

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## The Free Narrative

The goal of these techniques is to avoid asking the child a direct question, such as, “Did somebody touch your privates last week?” Research shows some children (particularly preschoolers or children who have heard events discussed by adults) will say “yes” to these direct questions even when the events have not occurred. Consequently, answers to direct questions are less informative than answers to open-ended questions. Furthermore, direct questions about touching may elicit responses about routine caretaking (e.g., bathing, temperature-taking) or other sources of knowledge (e.g., information from a recent sexual abuse prevention program) that could escalate into false allegations, especially when these questions are followed by numerous specific questions. If the interviewer asks a direct question, it is important to shift to open-ended questions that encourage the child to describe events in his or her own words.

After the topic is raised, the interviewer asks the child to provide a narrative description of the event. Research shows that children’s responses to open-ended prompts are longer and more detailed than responses to focused questions (e.g., Lamb et al., 1996). Answers to open-ended questions are much more accurate than answers to focused questions because many children answer focused questions even if they do not really remember the information (e.g., Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Poole & Lindsay, 1995). The most common interviewer errors are omitting the free narrative phase or shifting prematurely to specific questions.

To elicit a free narrative, the interviewer simply tacks on an open invitation after raising the topic:

1. “Tell me everything you can about that.”
2. “I want to understand everything about that. Start with the first thing that happened and tell me everything you can, even things you don’t think are very important.”
3. “Tell me all about that, from the very beginning to the very end.”

After the child begins talking, the interviewer should be patient about pauses in the conversation and not feel pressured to jump to another prompt right away. The child’s free narrative can be encouraged with open-ended comments such as, “Then what?”, “Tell me more about that,” or “What else can you tell me about that?” The interviewer can also motivate the child with neutral acknowledgments (e.g., “uh huh”), by repeating the child’s comments (e.g., Child: “And

*encourage the child to describe the events in his or her own words by using open-ended invitations such as, “Tell me everything you can about that”*



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then he turned on the TV,” Interviewer: “He turned on the TV”) or by giving the child permission to talk about the target issues (e.g., Child: “And then he...,” Interviewer: “It’s okay to say it”). When necessary, the interviewer can remind the child that he/she is used to talking about such things, perhaps with a comment such as, “I talk with a lot of children about these sorts of things. It’s okay to tell me all about it, from the very beginning to the very end.”

*be tolerant of pauses in the conversation*

If a child becomes upset or non-responsive, acknowledge the child’s behavior and address it, but avoid extensive comments about it. Give the child time to regain his or her composure. If a child remains non-responsive, it may help to gently tell the child, “You’ve stopped talking.” He or she may then respond. If a child continues to cry, it may help to restate the child’s last statement or ask the child to tell you the reason that he or she is crying.

Children often make comments that adults do not understand or refer to people who have not yet been identified. Interrupting the child to request an immediate clarification may inhibit the child from talking. It is better to allow the child to complete the story with general comments such as “Then what?” before attempting to clarify information by entering the questioning and clarification phase. Interviewers can jot down short notes while the child is talking to remind themselves to revisit specific information later in the interview.

## **Questioning and Clarification**

The questioning phase begins after it is clear that the child has finished providing a free narrative. Throughout this phase, the interviewer should follow the guidelines for developmentally-appropriate questions that are listed in Quick Guide #2 found on page 27 of this Protocol.

The questioning phase is a time to seek legally-relevant information and to clarify the child’s comments. (Also, see Quick Guide #3 - Sample Question Frames found on page 29.) Interviewers should avoid jumping from topic to topic. In general, it is best to build the questioning phase around the child’s free narrative. For example, if the child reported a single event, the interviewer would clarify information about that event before asking whether there have been other similar events. The interviewer should monitor that the description of the allegation and the identity of the perpetrator are clear, explore whether there was a single event or multiple events, and determine whether there were other witnesses or whether the



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child witnessed similar events happening to other children. Other topics may be important depending upon the specific case, such as descriptions of physical evidence that have been retrieved from the scene of the alleged crimes (e.g., a description of cameras if pictures were taken). Interviewers should avoid probing for unnecessary details. Children generally try to be cooperative and may contradict themselves if the interviewer directly asks for information that is not remembered well. For example, it is not essential to get a detailed description of an alleged perpetrator and his clothing if the accused is someone who is familiar to the child (e.g., a relative or teacher). Although it is useful if the child can recall when and where each event occurred, children may have difficulty specifying this information if they are young, if the event happened some time ago, or if there has been ongoing abuse over a period of time. The section in this Protocol entitled, “Special Topics” discusses general guidelines for the time element in child criminal sexual conduct cases.

*use the least suggestive question possible, working for a complete description of one event before shifting to a different topic*

Interviewers should always use the most open-ended questions possible during questioning and clarification. If a specific question is necessary to raise an issue, interviewers should try to continue with an open-ended question. For example, if objects were retrieved from the scene of the alleged events, the question, “Did he usually bring anything with him when he came to see you?” might be followed by “Tell me what those things looked like.” Following the terminology used in the Memorandum of Good Practice (Home Office, 1992), questions can be ordered along a continuum from least suggestive (open-ended questions) to most suggestive (leading questions). The following hierarchy describes this progression of question types; interviewers should try to use questions at the top of the hierarchy and avoid leading questions altogether. (Also, see Quick Guide #4 - the Hierarchy of Interview Questions found on page 30.)

*when asking the child to tell you “everything,” be aware that delayed disclosure and disclosure in stages can occur*

Open-ended questions allow children to select which details they will report, and these questions generally require multiple-word responses. Examples are questions such as, “Sometimes we remember a lot about how things looked. Think about all of the things that were in the science room; tell me how everything looked” or “Sometimes we remember a lot about sounds, or things that people said. Tell me about all of the things you heard when (that happened, etc.)” These two questions might elicit information about objects and conversations. Preschoolers in one study answered these questions as accurately as they answered initial free recall questions (Poole & Lindsay, 1996). Open-ended questions can also ask children to expand

*complete information in one interview may not always be possible*

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(e.g., “Earlier you said something about a cream. Tell me everything about that”), provide a physical description (e.g., “What was he wearing?”), or clarify apparent contradictions (e.g., “You said you were alone, but you said your mom heard you talking. I’m confused about that ... can you tell me about that again?”).

Specific but nonleading questions ask for details about information the child has already mentioned, and these questions can be answered with a word or brief comment. Specific but nonleading questions might ask about the context of an event (e.g., “Do you remember what you were doing when...”), request clarification (e.g., “You said ‘Bob.’ Who is Bob?”), or ask about a specific detail (e.g., “What color was the towel?”).

Closed questions provide only a limited number of response options. Multiple-choice questions and yes-no questions are closed questions. These questions are more risky than open-ended or specific questions: Some children always choose one of the options in multiple-choice questions, and responses are generally less accurate to these questions than to more open-ended questions. If the interviewer wants to confirm a specific detail of an allegation and the child seems confused by open-ended or specific questions, it is best to delete the correct answer from a multiple-choice question. If an event happened in the bathroom, for example, the interviewer might ask, “Where did that happen, in the bedroom, the kitchen, or in another place?” Closed questions should be followed by open-ended questions to show that the child can provide information spontaneously. Because yes-no questions are considered inherently leading by some experts, such questions should be used with caution, particularly with preschoolers. When yes-no questions are deemed necessary, it is useful to remind children that they should not guess.

Leading questions imply an answer or assume facts that might be in dispute. In practice, there is no single definition of a leading question. Determination of whether a question is leading depends upon a host of variables, including the child’s age, maturity, and the tone of voice of the interviewer (Fallon & Pucci, 1994). Tag questions such as, “And then he touched you, didn’t he?” are explicitly leading, as is any question that includes information the child has not yet volunteered.

During this phase, the interviewer should continually monitor that the child’s statements are unambiguous. If the child talks about

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“grandpa,” for example, the interviewer should determine which individual is being discussed (e.g., “Which grandpa?” “Does grandpa have another name?” “Do you have one grandpa or more than one grandpa?”). Similarly, if the child uses an idiosyncratic or critical word (e.g., “my hot dog,” “my tushee”), the interviewer should attempt to clearly identify what that word means to the child (e.g., “Tell me what your hot dog is”).

*young children may stray off topic and begin to discuss other events during this phase of the interview*

Because young children often stray off topic and begin to discuss other events during this phase of the interview, it is important that the interviewer reiterate the topic under discussion. For example, it is very helpful to begin questions with identifying comments such as, “About this time in the kitchen with Uncle Bill, ...”. If the child reports new or unusual information, it is best to ask something like, “Are you talking about that time Timmy grabbed your privates, or is this another time?” It is easier for children to stay on topic if the interviewer warns the child when the topic is shifting (e.g., “I’m confused about that time in the park. Let me ask you something about that ...”). Another strategy to avoid confusion is to verbally label events that the interviewer might want to return to later in the interview (e.g., “Okay, let’s call that the kitchen time.”) (Yuille et al., 1993).

Interviewers should avoid covering topics in a predetermined order. Instead, interviewers should follow the child’s train of thought and ask questions that are related to the child’s narrative at that point in the interview. In sexual abuse cases, the interviewer may need to ask whether the alleged event happened one time or more than one time, whether the child has knowledge that other children had a similar experience, and whether other individuals were present. Before closing the interview, all references to people and events should be clarified to insure that there is only one interpretation of the child’s comments.

Questioning and clarification is the most difficult phase of the interview. The interviewer has to listen to the child, mentally review the information already provided, make decisions about further questioning, and decide when to close the interview. Interviewers should maintain a relaxed manner and feel free to take a few minutes to collect their thoughts before deciding how to proceed. If there is a second interviewer or team members in an adjoining observation room, the interviewer can ask these individuals whether or not they have any additional questions before closing the interview.

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## Closure

The interviewer closes the session by asking, “Is there something else you’d like to tell me about \_\_\_\_\_?” and “Are there any questions you would like to ask me?” The interviewer can chat with the child about neutral topics for a few minutes to end the interview on a relaxed note. The interviewers should thank the child for coming, but be careful not to specifically thank the child for disclosing the abuse. Be sure not to make promises that might not be kept (for example, saying that the child will not have to talk about the abuse again). A school-aged child or an accompanying adult may be given a contact name and phone number in case they later think of something they want to add.

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## Special Topics

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### Questions about Time

There are several reasons why it can be very difficult for children to describe when an event happened. Regarding language development, children learn words that mark temporal relationships only gradually. Three-year-olds, for example, often use “yesterday” to mean “not today,” and the words “before” and “after” are poorly understood before 7 years of age or even older. Regarding temporal concepts, children’s understanding of dates and clock time is limited before 8-10 years of age. Children may also fail to remember the time of an event if the event occurred a long time ago or was one of many similar events.

Although interviewers should try to identify when an event occurred, children may be inconsistent and appear less credible if interviewers demand details that the children cannot provide. Whenever an adult asks a question about the day of the week or the time of day, some children will respond as if they are in school and attempt to answer even if they are uncertain. Interviewers should therefore try to get information about the timing of an event by asking about the context of the event. For example, information about a TV show that the child was watching can be used to identify a time of day. Similarly, knowing that the child was playing with a toy received for Christmas, dates the event after Christmas. General questions about what grade the child was in or whether it was summer vacation can narrow down the time.

Interviewers should be aware that time is not an element in child sexual conduct cases in Michigan, and thus it may be unnecessary to

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narrow down the time of an event beyond specifying a period of several months (e.g., during summer vacation). The Michigan Court of Appeals set forth four factors to consider when determining how specific the time of assault must be: the nature of the crime charged, the victim's ability to specify a date, the prosecutor's efforts to pinpoint a date, and the prejudice to the defendant in preparing a defense (People v. Naugle, 1986). A specific date or even week is not expected when the child is young or when there were a series of related events. For example, the Naugle court cited State v. DBS (1985), which rejected a defendant's attempt to invoke an alibi defense to incest when the time variance was 10 months. Similarly, in People v. Miller (1987), the court affirmed a 3-month variance as sufficiently specific where "the facts demonstrate that the prosecutor has stated the date and time of the offense to the best of his or her knowledge after undertaking a reasonably thorough investigation" (Nancy Diehl, Office of the Wayne County Prosecuting Attorney, and Michelle Fisher, Fall 1996 intern, Wayne State University Law School, personal communication, November 18, 1996). Investigative teams should decide in advance of the interview how specifically a particular child should be questioned.

## Interviewing Aids

Because young children sometimes provide little information in response to open-ended questions, interviewers sometimes use interviewing aids such as anatomical dolls, body outlines, and timelines to elicit information about the alleged abuse. There can be serious problems with using these aids with preschool children, however, or with introducing these aids too early in an interview with an older child.

One problem with interview aids is that they are models that represent something else. To use an anatomical doll, for example, the child must realize that the doll is not only an object itself but also a representation of the child. Children between the ages of 2 and 4 years may not have the cognitive sophistication to use interview aids representationally (DeLoache, 1995). As a result, dolls often do not help young children report more information about events or help them report more accurately (e.g., Lamb et al., 1996). Furthermore, some preschool children who are not abused will insert fingers into anatomical dolls or show other sexualized behavior, and studies have shown that the presence of dolls combined with specific and leading questions can lead to false reports (Bruck, Ceci, Francoeur, & Renick, 1995). Similarly, although young children might provide an answer

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with a time-line that asks them to identify when an event occurred between some specified anchor-points, there is no empirical evidence that children report time more accurately with this aid than with developmentally-appropriate verbal questions.

Interviewers can be accused of suggesting sexual themes to children if they introduce interview aids before children have described abuse. All of the recent guidelines on anatomical dolls and drawings state that children's response to these aids are not diagnostic of abuse (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Although interview aids should be avoided, interviewers who are authorized to use aids should introduce them only after the child has made an allegation, or only to clarify information that cannot be clarified verbally. With aids such as a time-line, it is useful to identify that children understand the concept by first asking them to place a known event on the time-line, such as their birthdays, before asking about the target events.

## **Children with Special Needs**

Interviewers should identify whether children have special needs that require accommodation during their interview preparation. Separate developmental assessments are not routinely required or useful, but they may be helpful for children who suffer from a developmental disability or have a language impairment that raises questions about their ability to respond accurately to questions. The following summary is based on a longer discussion by Poole and Lamb (1998).

**Preschoolers.** Whenever possible, interviews with preschool children should be scheduled for a time of the day when the children are usually alert and have recently had a snack. No special adjustments to the interview protocol are required for preschool children, but interviewers should be aware that young children are more likely to attempt answers to closed questions than are older children. When interviewers use closed questions with young children, it is helpful to demonstrate that they are not simply going along with the social pressures of the interview. For example, omitting the correct answer from multiple choice questions will reduce concerns about acquiescence.

**Bilingual Children.** During pre-interview preparation, interviewers should make their best determination of the child's primary language based on information from available sources, such as official records, consultations with parents or school officials, and



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the child's self-report. Arrangements should be made for an interpreter in the child's primary mode of communication whenever there is concern that a child faces limitations in understanding or speaking English.

**Visual Impairments.** Children who have experienced vision loss before the age of 5 years frequently have delays in the development of language concepts. These children may have difficulty with personal and possessive pronouns (e.g., *her* versus *their*), and they may use words inconsistently across contexts. Because some of these children show echolalia, or a tendency to repeat the last phrases spoken to them, interviewers should avoid asking questions that can be answered by partial repetition. Additionally, a high proportion of children with vision impairments also have hearing loss or other handicaps, so interviewers should ask about additional problems if they determine that a child has a visual impairment.

**Hearing Impairments.** Children with hearing impairments differ widely in degree of hearing loss, the age at onset of loss, the degree to which they benefit from amplification, and their primary mode of communication (American Sign Language, Signed English, reading speech, etc.). As a general rule, a language specialist should be consulted about the child's primary mode of communication and facility with language. An interpreter, if needed, should not be an individual who might have an interest in the outcome of the case. Because children with hearing impairments tend to be poor at written English, writing generally is not an acceptable communication option for a forensic interview. Many authors report that children with hearing impairments are more impulsive than other children about responding, so interviewers should take care to warn these children about the ground rules for the interview.

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).** AAC includes any system that supplements or replaces traditional communication modes, including communication by eye gaze, picture boards, or computer-based technologies. Lynn Sweeney, a consultant in Michigan on legal issues related to AAC, suggests that the professional who has had the most contact with the child (and/or the development of the child's communication system) and an independent specialist be involved in evaluating the needs of children who communicate via AAC.

**Developmental Disabilities.** As a group, children who are developmentally disabled are more likely to acquiesce to yes-no

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questions and to provide inaccurate information to specific questions. Care should be taken during the rapport building and ground rules phases of the interview to insure that the child can report a past event and does not tend to make up responses to more specific questions. If there is serious uncertainty about the accuracy of the child's information, preliminary assessments may be helpful to identify how well the child discusses past events and how the child responds to various types of questions.



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## Quick Guide #1: Overview of a Phased Interview

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(Poole & Lamb, 1998. Adapted with permission from the American Psychological Association)

### Preparing the Environment

- Remove distracting materials from the room.
- Repeat identifying information on tapes, if used.

### The Introduction

- Introduce yourself to the child by name and occupation.
- Explain the taping equipment if used and permit the child to glance around the room.
- Answer spontaneous questions from the child.

### Legal Competency (The Truth/Lie)

- Ask the child to label statements as “truth” or “lies.”
- Get a verbal agreement from the child to tell the truth.

### Establishing the Ground Rules

- Remind the child that he/she should not guess at an answer.
- Explain the child’s responsibility to correct the interviewer when he/she is incorrect.
- Allow the child to demonstrate understanding of the rules with a practice question (e.g., “What is my dog’s name?”).

### Completing Rapport Building with a Practice Interview

- Ask the child to recall a recent significant event, or describe a scripted event (e.g., what he/she does to get ready for school each morning or how does he/she play a favorite game).
- Tell the child to report everything about the event from beginning to end, even things that might not seem very important.
- Reinforce the child for talking by displaying interest both nonverbally and verbally (e.g., “Really?” or “Ohhh”).

### Introducing the Topic

- Introduce the topic, starting with the least suggestive prompt.
- Avoid words such as *hurt*, *bad*, or *abuse*.

### The Free Narrative

- Prompt the child for a free narrative with general probes such as, “Tell me everything you can about that.”
- Encourage the child to continue with open-ended comments such as, “Then what?” or “Tell me more about that.”

### Questioning and Clarification

- Cover topics in an order that builds upon the child’s prior answers to avoid shifting topics during the interview.
- Select less directive question forms over more directive questions as much as possible.
- Do not assume that the child’s use of terms (e.g., “Uncle” or “pee pee”) is the same as an adult’s.
- Clarify important terms and descriptions of events that appear inconsistent, improbable or ambiguous.

### Closure

- Revert to neutral topics.
  - Thank the child for coming.
  - Provide a contact name and phone number.
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## Quick Guide #2: Guidelines for Questioning Children

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(Copyright 1998 by the American Psychological Association, Adopted with permission. For expanded discussions, see Walker, 1994, and Poole & Lamb, 1998)

### Understanding the Child

- If you cannot understand something the child said, ask the child to repeat the comment. Try not to “field” guesses with comments such as, “Did you say ‘Bob’?”
- Children often make systematic pronunciation errors; for example, *potty* may sound like *body* or *something* may sound like *some paint*. Do not take young children’s comments at face value; always try to clarify what the child was saying by asking the child to describe the event fully (e.g., “I’m not sure I understand where he peed; tell me more about where he peed”) or asking for an explicit clarification (e.g., “Did you say ‘Bob’ or ‘mom’ or some other person?”).
- Talk, using the usual adult pronunciation for words; do not mimic the child’s speech or use baby-talk. (Exception: do use the child’s words for body parts.)
- The child’s meaning for a word may not be the same as the adult’s meaning. Some children use particular words in a more restrictive way (e.g., *bathing suits* or *pajamas* may not be clothing to a young child), a more inclusive way (e.g., *in* often means *in* or *between*), or in an idiosyncratic way. Words that are critical to identifying an individual, event, or object should be clarified.
- Children may seem to contradict themselves because they use language differently than adults. For example, some children think that you only *touch* with your hands, and therefore they may so “no” to questions such as “Did he touch you?,” but then later in the interview report that they were kissed. Children also tend to be very literal; for example, they might say “no” to the question, “Did you put your mouth on his penis?” but later respond “yes” to the question, “Did he put his penis in your mouth?”. Interviewers should try to anticipate how a child will interpret a question, and vary the phrasing of questions to check the child’s understanding of the concept.

### Avoid Using Difficult Words or Introducing New Words

- Children under the age of about 7 years have difficulty with temporal words such as *before* and *after*. Try to narrow down the time of an event by asking about other activities or events, such as whether it was a school day or not a school day, or what the child was doing that day.
- Young children have difficulty with shifters, words whose meaning depends upon the location of the speaker or who is speaking. Shifters include kinship terms (e.g., *uncle*, *aunt*), and words such as *come/go*, *here/there*, *a/the*.

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- Even preschool children often do not understand common legal terms, such as *judge*, *jury* or *hearing*. Avoid legal terms or other adult jargon.
  - Avoid introducing key words, names, or phrases that the child has not yet volunteered, because children will often integrate new words into their narratives.

### **Phrasing Questions**

- Questions should ask about only one concept at a time. Avoid multiple questions.
- Use a noun-verb-noun order. In other words, use the active voice (e.g., “You said earlier that you hit him ...”) rather than the passive voice (e.g., “You said earlier that he was hit by you ...”)
- Do not use “tag” questions such as, “And then he left, didn’t he?”
- Words such as *she*, *he*, *that*, or *it* can be ambiguous to a child, even when these words are in the same sentence as their referents (e.g., “So when she came home, did mom take a nap?”). Be redundant and try to use the referent as often as possible (e.g., say, “So after your father pushed you, then what happened?” rather than, “So after he did that, then what happened?”).
- Children learn to answer *who*, *what*, and *where* questions earlier than *when*, *how*, and *why* questions.

### **Cultural Considerations**

- If a child is from a different culture, the interviewer should try to confer with someone from that culture to see if special cultural considerations should be understood prior to the interview.
  - Children are discouraged in some cultures from looking authority figures in the eye while answering. Avoid correcting children’s nonverbal behavior unless that behavior interferes with your ability to hear the child.
  - Interviewers should be aware that some cultural groups discourage children from correcting or contradicting an adult, and children from these environments may be more likely to answer multiple-choice or yes-no questions even when they are uncertain.
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## Quick Guide #3: Sample Question Frames

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Familiarity with a list of flexible question frames can help interviewers ask follow-up questions that are not leading.

### *Elaboration*

“You said \_\_\_\_\_ tell me more about that.”

“And then what happened?”

“Sometimes we remember a lot about sounds or things that people said. Tell me all the things you heard \_\_\_\_\_ (when that happened, in that room, etc.)

“Sometimes we remember a lot about how things looked. Tell me how everything looked \_\_\_\_\_ (when that happened, in that room, etc.)

### *Clarification*

Object or action: “You said \_\_\_\_\_ tell me what that is.”

Ambiguous person: “You said \_\_\_\_\_ (Grandpa, teacher, Uncle Bill, etc.). Do you have one or more than one \_\_\_\_\_?”

“Which \_\_\_\_\_?”

“Does your \_\_\_\_\_ have another name?” (or “What does your \_\_\_\_\_ [mom, dad, etc] call \_\_\_\_\_?”)

### *Inconsistency*

“You said \_\_\_\_\_ but then you said \_\_\_\_\_. I’m confused about that. Tell me again how that happened.”

“You said \_\_\_\_\_, but then you said \_\_\_\_\_. Was that the same time or different times?”

### *Repairing Conversational Breaks*

“Tell me more about that.”

“And then what happened?”

### *Embarrassed Pause*

“It’s OK to say it.”

“It’s OK to talk about this.”

### *Inaudible Comment*

“I couldn’t hear that. What did you say?”

### *Single or Repeated Event*

“Did it happen one time or more than one time?”

(if child says, “Lots of times”):

“Tell me about the last time something happened. I want to understand everything from the very beginning to the very end.” “Tell me about another time you remember.”

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## Quick Guide #4: The Hierarchy of Interview Questions

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This is a hierarchy of question types from least suggestive to most suggestive. Whenever possible, select questions from the top of the hierarchy.

### *Free Narrative and Other Open-Ended Questions*

Free-narrative questions are used at the beginning of the interview, after the topic has been introduced, to encourage children to describe events in *their own* words.

Examples: “Tell me everything you can about that.”  
“Start with the first thing that happened and tell me everything you can, even things you don’t think are very important.”

Open-ended questions allow children to select the specific details they will discuss. Open-ended questions encourage multiple-word responses.

Examples: “You said he took you into a room. Tell me about all of the things that were in that room.”  
“You said, ‘That other time.’ Tell me about that other time.”

### *Specific but Nonleading Questions*

Specific but nonleading questions ask for details about topics that children have already mentioned. Use these questions only when the details are important, because children often try to answer specific questions even when they do not know the relevant information.

Examples: “Do you remember what you were doing when he came over?”  
“What was he wearing when that happened?”

### *Closed Questions*

Closed questions provide only a limited number of options. Multiple-choice and yes-no questions are closed questions. Multiple-choice questions, particularly when they have more than two options, are preferable to yes-no questions because they permit a wider range of responses.

Example of a multiple-choice question: “Did that happen in the kitchen, the bathroom, or some other place?”

Example of a yes-no question: “Was your mom home when that happened?”

### *Explicitly Leading Questions*

Explicitly leading questions suggest the desired answer or contain information that the child has not yet volunteered. Even yes-no questions are considered leading by many psychologists, particularly if the child is young or the interviewer does not reiterate the child’s right to say “no.” Leading questions should be avoided during forensic interviews.

Examples: “You told your mom you were scared of him, didn’t you?”  
“Did he have his pants on or off when he lay next to you?” (when the child did not mention that he lay down).

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