



Forensic Interviewing: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals

Forensic interviewing is a means of gathering information from a victim or witness for use in a legal setting, such as a court hearing. It is a key component of many child protective services investigations. The purpose of these interviews is to gather factual information in a legally defensible and developmentally appropriate manner about whether a child (or other person) has been abused (Newlin et al., 2015). Forensic interviews are conducted by trained professionals, including child welfare caseworkers, law enforcement, and specialized forensic interviewers at children’s advocacy centers (CACs). These interviewers are frequently part of a multidisciplinary team investigating the case. This factsheet provides child welfare professionals with a brief overview of forensic interviewing so they can better understand how such interviews affect their practice with children and families.

WHAT’S INSIDE

Overview

Forensic interviewing models

Important considerations

Training

Conclusion

References

Overview

In the 1980s, the manner in which children were interviewed during child abuse investigations came under increased scrutiny (Faller, 2015). This was largely due to high-profile cases involving sexual abuse at child care centers. Critics of the interviews asserted children were coerced or otherwise improperly interviewed. The assertion that many interviews about alleged incidences of child abuse were conducted improperly helped energize a review and reformation of the interviewing process (Faller, 2015). The forensic interviews conducted with alleged victims of child abuse are often essential to the investigation because, particularly in sexual abuse cases, the alleged victim and alleged perpetrator may be the only people who know what really happened (Mart, 2010). Research on interview techniques, child development, and other related topics shaped what is now referred to as forensic interviewing in child welfare cases.

Forensic interviews are used by trained professionals to gather information about incidents of alleged child abuse in a manner that will yield factual information from the child and stand up to scrutiny in court. For example, forensic interviewing techniques are designed to remove or minimize the potential for the interviewer to use suggestive or leading questions that may call the child's statements into question. Forensic interviews can also help shape the investigation by highlighting areas for further investigation or evidence collection. There are more than a dozen well-respected interview models (see the Forensic Interviewing Models section of this publication). Model use varies by jurisdiction, agency, and interviewer training. Who conducts the forensic interview also varies. Many jurisdictions use specialized forensic interviewers whose primary role is to conduct forensic interviews; other jurisdictions rely on law enforcement, child welfare, or other professionals who have been trained in forensic interviewing. Other professionals may observe the interview either from behind a one-way mirror, by using a real-time video link, or by accessing audio or video recordings. Only trained professionals should conduct forensic interviews (McCoy & Keen, 2014).

The interviews are often conducted at CACs, which began in the 1980s. CACs use a multidisciplinary approach to coordinate the response to child maltreatment, which can help reduce the number of interviews children experience and provides a central process to coordinate all necessary services and supports. (For more information about CACs, visit the National Children's Advocacy Center website at <http://www.nationalcac.org/>.) Interviews may also be conducted in other locations in the community that are child friendly and otherwise appropriate for the interview (e.g., private, quiet).

The requirements or guidance about which cases should include a forensic interview may vary by jurisdiction. Child welfare professionals and others working on the case should consult their supervisors, other agency staff, or law enforcement about the circumstances under which a forensic interview should be conducted.

Forensic Interviewing Models

A variety of forensic interviewing models have been developed, and the one used in a child protective or criminal investigation may vary depending on jurisdiction, agency, or the training of the interviewer. The following are examples of forensic interviewing models; however, this is not an exhaustive list:

- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Practice Guidelines (<http://www.apsac.org/child-forensic-interview-clinics>)
- CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol (<https://www.cornerhousemn.org/training.html>)
- National Children's Advocacy Center Forensic Interview Structure (<http://www.nationalcac.org/forensic-interviewing-of-children-training/>)
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Forensic Interview Protocol
- ChildFirst Forensic Interviewing Protocol (<http://www.gundersenhealth.org/ncptc/childfirst-forensic-interviewing-protocol/>)

Although the exact methods employed in each model differ to some extent, they all tend to have the following phases in common (Newlin et al., 2015):

- **Rapport-building phase:** The interviewer attempts to build a trusting relationship with the child and explains some of the details about the interview process (e.g., documentation, instructions). This phase also allows the interviewer to better understand the child’s developmental level, linguistic capabilities, legal competency, and other characteristics and may provide the child with opportunities to practice providing narrative information.
- **Substantive phase:** The interviewer seeks information related to the alleged abuse. This may include obtaining a narrative description of the event, inquiring about additional details, and testing alternative or multiple hypotheses (e.g., other possible scenarios), if appropriate.
- **Closure phase:** The interviewer may address the child’s socioemotional or other immediate needs, transition to a topic not related to the alleged incident, or answer any questions.

The following are some of the ways in which forensic interviewing models differ:

- **Interview structure:** Models may be scripted (i.e., interviewers are provided what to say verbatim), semi-structured (i.e., interviewers are given guidance but are able to make certain decisions about how to proceed), or flexible (i.e., the interviewer is given great leeway so he or she can better follow the lead of the child) (Faller, 2015).
- **Instructions:** The exact instructions, or ground rules, presented to the child differ from one model to the next. Common topics covered by the instructions include requesting that the child only provide information about things that actually happened, giving the child permission to say “I don’t know,” advising the child to ask the interviewer to clarify a question if the child does not understand, and informing the child to alert the interviewer if the interviewer provides incorrect information. There is also some variation regarding when the interviewer

provides the instruction. For example, most models provide the instructions during the rapport phase, but the CornerHouse method calls for the interviewer to provide some instruction at the beginning and then incorporate instructions throughout the interview, where appropriate (Anderson, 2013). The interviewer also may provide the child with opportunities to practice following the instructions (e.g., asking the child a question to which he or she would not know the answer in order to see if he or she will respond with “I don’t know”).

- **Truthfulness discussion:** During the rapport-building phase, some models request that the interviewer ask the child to promise to tell the truth and/or for the interviewer to address the difference between telling the truth and a lie. Analogue research shows that children tend to be more likely to tell the truth if they promised to do so prior to being interviewed about the event in question, but the evidence is not as strong about whether having a moral discussion about truth and lies increases truthfulness (Evans & Lee, 2010).¹ State and local rules and practices may dictate if and how a truth/lie discussion should occur during a forensic interview (Newlin, 2015).
- **Appropriate questions:** The purpose of all forensic interviewing models is to discourage the use of leading questions or techniques, but they may vary to some degree about which are the most preferred types of questions. There is consensus that open-ended questions (i.e., a question that invites a detailed, multiword response, such as “Tell me what happened.”) are better than closed-ended questions (i.e., those that can be answered with a one-word response or little detail, such as “Did the man come into your bedroom?”). Some models, though, favor open-ended probes, such as “Tell me what happened,” rather than a question, such as “Do you remember what happened?” (Faller, 2007). There also may be variations in the order of preference given to other types of questions or probes along the continuum from open-ended to closed-ended, such as those that request more detail on a particular topic (Faller, 2015).

¹ Analogue studies take advantage of events (e.g., medical exams) or create events (e.g., child is alone with a stranger, who is part of the study, in a trailer) that are intended to be similar to the situation being studied, such as child maltreatment.

Use of Anatomical Dolls and Diagrams

The use of anatomical dolls and diagrams to help children describe or demonstrate their experiences is still up for debate in the field of forensic interviewing (Lyon, 2012). Open-ended questions and probes encourage free recall by the child (i.e., the child is not externally prompted to recall a particular memory) and are most accurate, but in children free recall is often limited (Faller, 2007). Anatomical dolls and drawings rely on recognition memory (i.e., the child chooses a response from a series of alternatives), which may be less accurate but more detailed. The cue of the anatomical doll or diagram could trigger the child's recognition of other body-related experiences. Proponents of anatomical dolls and diagrams rely on analogue research that indicates they can help a child disclose actual experiences with a very small increase in false positives. Opponents emphasize that free recall memory is more accurate and are concerned interviewers may use dolls or diagrams in leading or suggestive ways. Further, there is a modest body of research that indicates that children age 3 and younger cannot make the representational shift to understand that the doll is being used to represent themselves or the alleged offender (Faller, 2015). In addition, forensic interviewing models differ about if and when to introduce dolls or diagrams in the interview. For example, some models introduce dolls or diagrams in the rapport-building part of the interview to clarify a child's terminology for body parts. Other models advise only using them after the child has disclosed abuse (McCoy & Keen, 2014). Finally, some models caution about their use altogether. The use of anatomical dolls and diagrams will vary based on the model used by the interviewer and local practice. When given flexibility about the use of dolls and diagrams, interviewers should review the relevant research and determine if their use is appropriate given the context of each case.

For additional information, refer to *Anatomical Dolls and Diagrams* by the Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center and the ChildFirst/Finding Words Forensic Interview Training Programs (<http://www.gundersenhealth.org/app/files/public/3580/NCPTC-Anatomical-Dolls-and-Diagrams-position-paper.pdf>) and *Position Paper on the Use of Human Figure Drawings in Forensic Interviews* by the National CAC (<http://www.chicagocac.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/NCAC-Position-paper-use-of-human-figure-drawings.pdf>).

Important Considerations

Each forensic interview will be a unique experience for both the interviewer and the child, as no two interviews are exactly alike. The following factors are critical to the understanding and practice of forensic interviewing:

- **Age and developmental level:** A child's age and developmental levels should be factored into any forensic interview. These levels can affect a child's memory, comprehension, sense of time, linguistic capability, attention span, and other attributes relevant to recalling and recounting an experience (Newlin, 2015). Some jurisdictions have policies about the minimum age a child must be (often age 3 years) to participate in a forensic interview.
- **Effect of trauma on memory:** Traumatic experiences may shape how children store and recall memories of the event. Although some children may remember the traumatic event with the same clarity as a nontraumatic event, others may not be able to provide the same level of detail or coherence (Fanetti, O'Donohue, Happel, & Daly, 2015).
- **Suggestibility:** Analogue research indicates some children are more suggestible than others. Depending on a range of factors, such as cognitive ability, mental state, and culture, some children may be susceptible to having their memories altered based on how the interviewer phrases questions or otherwise presents information (Hritz, 2015). A false suggestion to a child could be made in many ways. For example, before the child has disclosed any abuse, the interviewer could explicitly say that something happened (e.g., "The man touched you inappropriately, didn't he?") or phrase a question in a way that implies an event occurred (e.g., "What did you smell when the man touched you?"). Interviewers also could increase a child's risk for suggestibility by repeating the same question, which may imply to the child that he or she provided incorrect information when responding to the original question (McCoy & Keen, 2014).
- **Multiple interviews:** There is a growing body of research that indicates that some children need more than one interview (Newlin, 2015). If more than one interview is needed, the same interviewer should interview the child. Communities and agencies should define cases that warrant more than one interview because, although interviewing children over multiple sessions can help yield more new information, including disclosures of abuse, they also have the potential to allow for a child to make contradictory statements over the course of the various sessions, which could complicate the investigation (Block, Foster, Pierce, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2014). Interviewers should ensure they adhere to good forensic interviewing practice to help limit any negative consequences of conducting multiple interviews, such as the child experiencing additional trauma when providing multiple accounts of the maltreatment (Faller, Cordisco-Steele, & Nelson-Gardell, 2010).
- **Bias:** Interviewers should be aware that they view allegations through the lens of their professional and personal experiences and that this could affect the child and the investigation. Interviewers who believe they already know what happened to the children or that no maltreatment occurred may try to elicit that information to confirm the bias or ignore information that does not conform to their preconceived narratives (McCoy & Keen, 2014). One way to help avoid bias is to use the interview to address a variety of hypotheses rather than to confirm or negate a particular one. Working with a team of professionals could help mitigate the effects of any biases.

Training

Caseworkers, law enforcement, or other professionals require training in order to conduct effective forensic interviews. Training generally ranges from 4 days to 1 week and is sponsored by a variety of organizations, including state agencies, professional organizations, and agencies responsible for conducting interviews. Advanced training is also available on a variety of topics, such as interviewing young children, interviewing across cultures, interviewing developmentally challenged children, managing bias, delivering court testimony, and secondary trauma. Many forensic interviewers are trained in the use of more than one model (Stephens, Martinez, & Braun, 2012).

To help strengthen their skills and address difficulties they have encountered, many forensic interviewers participate in supervision or peer review. Supervision involves the interviewer meeting individually with a more experienced interviewer, who can review interview transcripts or video and provide feedback. This may assist in ensuring the newer interviewer is adhering to the model being implemented as well as general best practices. Peer review allows interviewers to discuss cases and current research and provide feedback and support to each other in a group setting. To achieve accreditation by the National Children's Alliance (NCA), CACs must ensure forensic interviewers participate in peer review. (For additional information on accreditation, see the NCA website at <http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/ncas-standards-accredited-members>.)

Conclusion

Forensic interviewing is an extremely valuable tool for the investigation of child abuse allegations. When properly executed, it can assist in gathering factual information about the allegations using legally defensible techniques. A good forensic interview also can lead to the child and family receiving services and supports that best meet their needs. Given the intricate issues related to forensic interviews and the complexity of conducting such interviews, it is crucial that child welfare and other professionals be properly trained before attempting to conduct a forensic interview.

For a more detailed overview of forensic interviewing, refer to *Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices*, which was published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. It is available at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248749.pdf>. For information about conducting a forensic interview with Spanish-speaking children, refer to the *Guide for Forensic Interviewing of Spanish-Speaking Children from the Center for Innovation and Resources* at <http://cacnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Guide-for-Forensic-Interviewing-of-Spanish-Speaking-Children-English.pdf>.

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