

A Guide to Introducing the Topic of an Interview about Abuse with a Child

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INTRODUCTION

There are many components to an investigative interview about abuse with a child witness (i.e., greeting the child, building rapport, introducing the topic of concern, eliciting a free narrative account of the abuse, specific questioning and closure). Introducing the topic of the interview is sometimes regarded as one of the most challenging of these components (Bourg et al., 1999; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001). On the one hand, the interviewer needs to avoid unclear, vague or ambiguous statements so as to minimise the likelihood of obtaining irrelevant, incoherent or potentially misleading responses from the child. On the other hand, the interviewer must try to avoid any reference to the alleged offence in question. If details are mentioned about the abuse that the child has not previously volunteered, then the questioning will be considered leading and the child's responses may not be admissible in court. The need to achieve a compromise between being clear yet non-leading creates confusion among some police trainees about what how they should proceed during this stage of the interview. A likely reason for this confusion is that there has been very little discussion or formal guidance in the professional literature, to date, in relation to this issue.

AIM OF ARTICLE

The aim of this article is to briefly summarise the possible strategies for raising the topic of an investigative interview with a child witness and to reflect on the usefulness of these strategies from the perspective of a forensic psychologist

with expertise in children's suggestibility and memory. The pros and cons of the various strategies are discussed along with details about how and when they should best be implemented. While the specific focus of this article is on investigative interviews conducted with a child witness, the discussion is relevant to any interview involving a vulnerable witness (e.g., persons who do not speak English as a first language, persons with an intellectual disability). It is important to note, however, that this article does not present a standard protocol per se. The ideal approach may vary across interviews depending on the goal of the interview, the developmental level of the child, the nature of the alleged offence and the surrounding contextual factors. In addition, an individual interviewer's methodology will be dictated by legislation and case law, as well as agreed protocols between agencies engaged in assessing, investigating and prosecuting allegations of abuse against children.

Establish Interviewees Understanding of Purpose of Interview

Most investigative interview protocols state that for those professionals who are mandated to conduct investigative interviews with children, the most effective way to introduce the topic of concern is to ask the interviewee what (s)he understands the purpose of the interview is (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001). For example, if the child is attending the interview in a police station, or has been called to the school principal's office to attend the interview, the interviewer could say, "Tell me what you have come here to talk to me about



Editorial Note

Dr Powell has authored several other papers previously published in the APJ giving advice to police on interviewing techniques. This article sets out the possible strategies for raising the topic of an investigative interview with a child witness.

Author's Note

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today?"¹ In response to this prompt, it is possible that the child will disclose the alleged offence under investigation. This is especially the case if the child had already made informal disclosures to another adult (e.g., a caregiver or teacher; Sternberg et al, 1997). If the child discloses the offence, then the interviewer merely needs to state that his or her job is to find out about what happened in that event. Note that there is an important distinction between finding out what happened versus finding about what the child told another person. For example:

Interviewer: Tell me what you've come to talk to me about today

Child: To tell you what I told my mum about Uncle Joe hurting my bottom

Interviewer: I'm here to find out what Uncle Joe did to you.

There would be limited benefit in asking the child to recount what the child told the mother at this stage. If the child's account to the mother was only the partial story, or it deviated from the truth, then having the child recount what (s)he told the mother may limit the child's ability to recall the actual events fully. If it was necessary to find out what the child told the mother, this information should be obtained *after* the child's memory of the event had been exhausted.

The benefit of establishing the child's understanding of the purpose of the interview before moving on to the other techniques (outlined below) is threefold. First, the approach is non-leading and open-ended. That is, the interviewer has avoided mention of a particular individual, action or any other detail about the case and the child has been asked to provide a response in his/her own words. Experts in child eyewitness memory agree that it is always preferable for the interviewer to attempt to use open-ended prompts before progressing to more direct or specific utterances regarding the alleged offence (Home Office, 2000; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Powell & Wilson, 2001). Second, it allows the interviewer the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions the child may have about the purpose or the consequence of the interview. The child may feel that (s)he has done something

wrong and (s)he will be punished if (s)he tells. Such misunderstandings about the purpose of the interview can create undue stress on the child and can prevent the establishment of good interviewer-child rapport. Third, out of respect for the child or young person, (s)he is entitled to engage knowingly in the interview process (Siegal, 1991).

Provide some Information that Led to the Concern

If the child cannot state the purpose of the interview, or says 'I don't know' in response to the prompt, "Tell me what you have come to talk to me about today?", then another technique the interviewer could use is to raise details that led to the concern. If the child acknowledges that the information provided by the interviewer is true or correct, then the child can then be asked to give a narrative account of what occurred. The advantage of this strategy is that it is direct and can thereby save valuable time. This is important if the child has a limited attention span or there are immediate concerns regarding the child's safety. However, the disadvantage is that if the interviewer provides information that had not previously been mentioned by the child, there is a risk that this line of questioning could damage the evidence. The likelihood of this phase damaging the evidence would obviously depend on how specific the information provided by the interviewer was. Saying 'I heard that someone did something that upset you' is obviously less potentially damaging than 'Your Mum told me that you said Uncle Joe hurt your bottom'. In particular, the individual (i.e., alleged offender) or action (i.e., the alleged offence) are likely to be the sources of contention in court and should therefore be avoided by the interviewer (Bourg et al., 1999). If the interviewer is too vague, however, then the child may not know what 'event' is being referred to. One of the greatest challenges of this technique, therefore, is to avoid mention of the individual or action while providing a specific enough cue to the 'event'.

If an interviewer chooses to raise information about the case, then it would be wise to make some inquiries about the nature or context of the initial

Footnotes

¹ Many interviewers ask the question "Do you know why you are here today?" or "Can you tell me why you have come to talk to me today?" These questions are less appropriate for two reasons. First, they are closed questions (i.e., merely require a yes or no answer) and children who are reticent to talk may say 'no' even though they know the reason for the interview. Second, the questions include the term 'why' which needs to be avoided with children (Walker, 1999).

disclosure or concern prior to the interview. By doing some background research, the interviewer may be able to provide a highly salient or direct cue without having to mention any information about the alleged offence. For example, suppose a child had allegedly made a comment to his mother in a Coles supermarket about his uncle having abused him sexually. Suppose the mother, who was extremely shocked and upset by the child's comment, abandoned the shopping trolley and led the child outside to the supermarket car-park to elicit more details about the event out of the 'earshot' of other shoppers. A prompt that could later be used by the interviewer to establish the topic of concern could be; 'Your mum said you told her something in Coles and she got upset and took you outside to talk about it'. Note, however, that in some jurisdictions and with some professionals, the investigative interviewer is not allowed to disclose the source of the report without permission.

If the child acknowledges that the disclosure in Coles supermarket occurred, then the child could then be asked to tell about the alleged abuse in this way (i.e., "Tell me what *happened* to you"). It needs to be emphasised, however, that before doing so, an acknowledgement needs to be sought from the child about whether the information provided by the interviewer is actually true (Wilson & Powell, 2001). The clearest way to establish this is to directly restate the information provided in the form of a yes/no question. For example, in relation to the 'Coles supermarket' scenario, the interviewer might say, "Did you tell your mum something that upset her in Coles?" It would be too ambiguous to say, "I heard that you told your mum something in Coles. Is that true?" In this case it would be unclear whether the interviewer was seeking acknowledgement about the child's disclosure of abuse to the mother, or the mother's disclosure of the abuse to the interviewer.

Seeking an acknowledgement from the child as to whether background information provided by the interviewer is true is highly important because there is *always* a possibility that the child does not know what event the interviewer is referring to. For example, in relation to the

'Coles' scenario, the mother may have been lying about the child making a disclosure to her in Coles. The child may not remember having the discussion with his/her mother in Coles, or the child might not want to acknowledge that the discussion occurred because (s)he is too upset or embarrassed to talk about it. Interviewers who do not seek the child's acknowledgement, and who merely assume that the information provided is true are not being open-minded. While it is possible that the child may merely say 'yes' to please the interviewer, yes/no questions which contain false information are potentially less damaging than those that *presume* the accuracy of details that are not true (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). In fact, the use of a single misleading yes/no question in this context is not a major problem with well trained, open-minded interviewers who make the child feel that it is acceptable to say 'I don't know' or 'No', and who follow up the child's response with open-ended questions (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Indeed, it is well established that children are unlikely to provide a false report of an event to a single leading question, even young children such as preschoolers (Bruck, Ceci, Francoeur & Barr, 1995; Bruck, Ceci & Hembrooke, 2002; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Rudy & Goodman, 1991; Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Further, practitioners are now better able to predict which *individual* children are most resistant to misleading yes/no questions (Scullin, Kanaya & Ceci, 2002; McFarlane, Powell & Dudgeon, 2002).

Note that careful attention must be taken to use terminology that matches the way the child has conceptualised or encoded the behaviour or event. For example, saying "I understand you were playing a game yesterday that your teacher wanted you to stop playing" will only be effective if the child encoded the activity as a 'game'. Referring to a mark on the child's arm as a bruise or a burn may be ineffective if the child did not encode the marks as these injuries. This emphasises the importance of discussing with the informant or caregiver the context of the concern and the language that the child has used to refer to it. If the child does not acknowledge that the event occurred, then the interviewer may need to

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move to one of the other techniques (outlined in the next section) if they have not been attempted already. Alternatively, the interviewer could try progressively more directive or specific utterances. Ultimately, each interviewer must decide for him/herself whether to mention some or all of the allegation and whether to persist with this line of questioning if less specific utterances were not effective. Repeatedly pressuring the child to respond and/or repeatedly suggesting information can lead to false reports (Bruck, Ceci & Hembrooke, 2002; Powell, Jones & Campbell, in press).


Exploration of Related Topics that May Prompt Disclosure of Abuse

Another option for introducing the topic of concern is to ask the child a series of questions about topics or issues that may cue or prompt a disclosure of abuse. Possible topics of discussion include; (a) family members (e.g., people that the child does and does not like to be with, or things the child does or does not like to do with various people; Yuille et al., 1993; Morgan, 1995), (b) routines (e.g., a suspicion that the child was abused while being bathed could lead to a discussion of bath-time routines; Boat & Everson, 1986), and (c) concerns about privacy or safety (e.g., good/bad touch, secrets; MacFarlane, 1986; Morgan, 1995).

The advantage of these techniques is that they are generally non-leading. That is, when successful, they can elicit disclosures of abuse without the need for the interviewer to mention any prior information about the child or without directly asking about abuse. The disadvantages of these techniques, however, are fourfold. First, longwinded discussion about family and routines can damage rapport if the child is confused about the format and purpose of the interview and/or the interviewer is clearly frustrated about the lack of progress that is being made in the interview. Second, these approaches are often too opaque to elicit disclosures of abuse, especially with young children, or in situations where the child was not distressed by the events in question or did not label the abuse as a 'touch' or as 'bad' (Poole & Lamb, 1998). Third, discussion of routines (i.e., script or schematic memory) or discussion of general

likes/dislikes does not usually elicit accounts of atypical experiences (Hudson, 1986). Finally, as Poole and Lamb (1998) explained, these techniques "elicit discussions of non-abusive experiences that could mushroom into abuse allegations in the hands of unskilled interviewers" (p. 135). All parents, for example, touch their children's bodies during routine caretaking, first aid, and medical treatment.

CONCLUSION

In summary, eyewitness memory researchers agree that the best method of introducing the topic of the interview is to establish the child's understanding of the purpose of the interview (i.e., "Tell me what you have come to talk to me about today?"). This method is ideal because it is non-leading and open-ended, yet is usually successful in eliciting formal disclosures of abuse when the child has already disclosed the abuse to somebody else. If the child does not respond to the initial open-ended prompt, or says 'I don't know', then there are two alternative strategies the interviewer could try next. The interviewer could provide some information that led to the concern and seek an acknowledgement from the child as to whether the information is correct. Another option is to ask the child a series of questions about topics or issues that may cue or prompt a disclosure of abuse (e.g., family members, routines, concerns about privacy or safety). The use of the former option over the latter will depend on the degree to which the interviewer can cue the 'event-in question' without specifically stating the allegation, or (in cases where this cannot be avoided) whether the immediate benefit of raising the allegation outweighs the long-term risk of doing so. 

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