[[A1]] 1

[[A2]] Understanding a child's mind

To be able to interview a child, one must first have a basic understanding of how a child thinks and communicates. However, how children think and communicate can vary dramatically from one child to another. Research has shown that aspects of child development can be sped up or slowed down depending on the types of activities children experience (Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1995). For example, a child who has been grossly neglected is likely to have experienced limited opportunities to encourage her development compared to a child of the same age who has received a great deal of positive adult attention. This chapter specifically outlines the different aspects of child development that need to be considered when interviewing a child. However, as rates of development do vary from child to child, the age ranges mentioned should be used as a guide only.

[[B]] What does a child remember?

[[ENCLOSE FOLLOWING TEXT IN BOX]]

BOX 1.1 TRY THIS

Before reading on, write down on a piece of paper everything you can remember about the first ten minutes after you got up this morning. Start from the time you got out of bed and try to remember everything you can. Write down everything, even small things that you don't think are important. Try not to leave anything out.

[[END BOX]]

When you were doing the task in Box 1.1, you may have first used your knowledge of your home to imagine yourself in your bedroom. Then, using your knowledge of what you normally do each morning you may have prompted yourself to remember that this morning you got out of bed, had a shower and then had toast for breakfast. You know

this because this is what you normally do each morning, and this morning was a normal morning. You do not need to remember the exact details of this morning, as it will be similar to every other morning, although you will have some memories specific to this morning. Thus, you reconstructed your morning. Memory is based on reconstruction, that is, no one remembers everything absolutely (Baddeley, 1990).

There are three aspects of your description of this morning that are worth discussing further. First, you used your knowledge of what normally happens first thing in the morning to recreate your memory. Knowledge is an essential part of remembering. The more you know about something, the easier it is to remember information about it (Thomson & Tulving, 1970). For example, a young child may know her favorite storybook by heart, and will get very cross if someone tries to abbreviate the contents. Another child may be able to recall a great deal about television programs such as Thomas the Tank Engine or Bananas in Pajamas, whilst at the same time having no idea where he put his other shoe! This is because we tend to seek out information that is important to us. Events or activities that mean a lot to a child will be remembered a great deal more than events that do not interest him at all (e.g., where he left his shoe). In summary, a child's ability to remember an event or activity depends on the amount of knowledge she has; the more meaningful and important the event is to her, the more knowledge she will seek about it, and the better the child's memory will be.

[[ENCLOSE FOLLOWING TEXT IN BOX]]

BOX 1.2 Think About This.

When a child knows a lot about an event, that child will have a stronger memory for information related to that event. How would that affect a child who knew nothing about sex and was sexually assaulted for the first time compared to a child who had been assaulted a number of times?

You will find our suggestions in Appendix 1.

[[END BOX]]

Second, you may have noticed when you were writing down what you did first thing this morning that you automatically ordered the information into a meaningful sequence. You know what you generally do each morning. The information sequence of what you normally do is sometimes referred to as a memory 'script', that is, a list of action details, or routines, of how to do things (Hudson, Fivush & Keubli, 1992). Like adults, children have many routine scripts (e.g. getting ready for bed, going to school, or getting take-away food). In an interview it can be very useful to talk to the child about her routines, as this is usually something she is good at. Further, hearing her talk about her routines gives us a sense of her language and memory ability, and it may also prompt her memory. Anything odd that happens during a routine (e.g., seeing an accident on the way to school) is usually highlighted in the child's memory (Hudson, 1988).

Third, when you described your morning you probably wrote down only the main action details (i.e., what happened). In an interview, we invariably ask about what happened. The main or central details of what happened are often remembered with far greater accuracy than the highly specific (or seemingly irrelevant) details (Cole & Loftus, 1987). For example, you may have remembered to write down that you had a cup of tea, but may not have reported precisely which cup you chose or from where you took it. However, what is considered to be a "central" detail to an adult may seem irrelevant to a child. For example, the following excerpt from a court case demonstrates how a child may see some aspects of the abuse as more important (and therefore, more central) than the main offence:

> Lawyer: What did he do with his penis?
>
> Ten-year-old boy: I don't know, he was on top of me and he was real heavy, I couldn't breathe.

Lawyer: So you have no idea what he was doing with his penis?

Ten-year-old boy: I just remember I couldn’t breathe, I really couldn’t breathe.

In this case, the interviewer was attempting to establish the exact nature of the offence, which he saw as the central aspect of the abuse. However, the child had thought he was going to die from suffocation and was more concerned to tell the court about that. Another example comes from an interview with a sixteen year-old girl (as cited in Butler & Williamson, 1994).

Interviewer: So presumably being raped was the worst thing that has ever happened to you?

Young woman: It was bad, but it wasn’t the worst. The worst was when my stepbrother held me still – he used to get extra pocket money off my dad for helping him hit me – and my dad broke all my fingers, one by one.

The child in this example was able to correct the interviewer. A young child may simply have replied “yes” to the interviewer’s question. If the child is allowed to describe, uninterrupted, what happened to her, she will automatically describe what she thought were the main details.

While obtaining a good account of the main details may be important in an interview, descriptive information may also be needed (e.g., describing where the event took place, where other people were and what the person looked like). In our everyday conversations we hardly ever give descriptive details, so a child often thinks that such information is irrelevant. If specific descriptive details are requested without an explanation, a child may feel that the interviewer does not believe her and is trying to catch her out. Therefore, it is a good idea to explain to the child that you need to get a

picture of what happened, as you were not there. You may add that hearing about things in detail will help you clearly understand what happened.

As a general rule, the younger the child, the less knowledge and routine information she will have, and subsequently, the less details she will recall (Nelson & Gruendel, 1986). However, a three-year-old can still accurately report events that happened a year earlier (Hudson & Fivush, 1991). Further, young children can be better at describing routine information than other action details, so it can be useful to start an interview with a preschooler by asking her about the routines in her day.

[[B]] When does a child understand measurements?

Initially, a child's thinking is very concrete and relates to information about that which can be seen, heard, smelt, touched and tasted. In time, a child comes to use more abstract information (e.g. mathematical and hypothetical information). However, it is not until the teenage years that a child thinks in abstract ways (Siefert & Hoffnung, 1997). As measurements are abstract concepts, a young child will not easily understand them, as this transcript shows:

> Interviewer: "How old is Malcolm?"
>
> Five-year-old child: "He's very, very old."
>
> Interviewer: "How old in years?"
>
> Five-year-old child: "Twenty."

In this example, the biggest number the child knew was twenty so he thought that was extremely old. A child will sometimes use concrete objects to understand abstract ones. For example, up until the age of eight, a child may use a person's height to guess her age. Thus, a small elderly lady may be described as being younger than a tall teenage boy is (Wood, 1981). Asking a child to estimate the height and weight of another person is asking him to use units of measurement that he may not know how

to use (e.g. centimeters or feet, pounds or kilos). For example, the phrase ‘five foot tall’ is only meaningful if you know how large one foot is, can count to five, and can imagine what five feet put together might look like. If measurements are needed, ask the child if the person is about as tall (or as big) as someone else the child knows well. A child will normally find it easier if he can use someone else for comparison.

[[ENCLOSE FOLLOWING TEXT IN A BOX]]]

Box 1.3 TRY THIS

Next time you are in a café, supermarket or other public place, try to estimate the age, height and weight of the people around you. How accurate do you think you would be? Would you be happy for them to know your estimates? Now, imagine how much harder the task would be if you were trying to estimate the age, height and weight of these same people from memory.

[[END BOX]]

[[B]] How does a child understand time?

A child does not naturally understand time in a discrete, measured way (i.e., according to the clock). We must all be taught to do this. Instead, a child must locate the time of day or year using qualitative rather than quantitative terms (e.g., by describing where she was at the time, or what other things were happening around that time). When a child tries to describe the length of an event, she may instead report the intensity of the experience. For example, when asked about an abusive incident that took ten minutes, an eight-year-old child said “It felt like forever, it just went on and on”. Some people may misinterpret this as sheer exaggeration or inconsistency on the child’s part, when the child is using a different definition of time. Indeed, most of us experience time this way – a good day appears to fly by and a bad day drags on. By the ages of eight or nine years, however, a child comes to understand clock time, usually as part of her schooling or because she owns and can use a watch. As one eight-year-old girl replied

when asked what questions were difficult to answer in court, “They were asking me about times and last year I couldn’t tell the time. My mum got me a watch at Christmas and now I can tell the time. But I didn’t know the times they were asking me about” (as cited by Murray, 1995).

General approximations of time length make more useful questions than exact time quantities. For example, instead of asking “Exactly how long were you there for?” you could try “Were you there for a whole day, half a day or less than half a day?” Questions such as “How long ago?” a child will find difficult to answer until late childhood. When trying to pinpoint the time of an event in the past, a child should be encouraged to use events that are meaningful for her, for example, the class she was in, whether it was school holidays, what television shows or social events were on at the time. Perhaps the child’s parent or teacher can indicate significant events in the child’s routine or yearly calendar that may be useful to ask about (e.g., Christmas, Chinese New Year, child’s birthday, Passover etc). For example, “Was it before or after Christmas/Easter/your birthday”, “Was it a school day or a home day”, “Were you in Mrs. Brown’s class or a different class” or “Were you living at your new house or your old house?” The latter three examples are likely to be more effective than the first example because they rely solely on contextual cues rather than temporal terms (such as “before” and “after”). These terms are not always fully understood until seven or eight years of age (Walker, 1994). Thus, the terms “before” and “after” should only be used if the child understands them. You can find out a child’s understanding of the term “before” by asking her to count to five and then asking her which number comes before the number three. If the child cannot do this, then ask, “When counting, which comes first two or three?” Sometimes a child knows the term “first” prior to learning the term “before” (Walker, 1994). A child between four and five years of age can usually localize an event by time of day (morning, afternoon, bedtime) while an older child (six to eight years of age) can use longer time scales such as days of the week and seasons. If forced choice options are offered to the child (e.g., “Was it morning,

afternoon, or night?"), the child should be asked to explain his response (e.g., "How do you know?" or "What makes you say that?"). This may help the interviewer to determine whether the child had merely selected a response to please the interviewer.

[[B]] What does a child know about sex?

Research on children's understanding of sex and sexuality has been limited for ethical reasons (for an excellent review of the literature see Volbert & van der Zanden, 1996). However, three aspects are clear. First, there is a developmental trend for when a child seeks out information about sex. In general terms, a child between the ages of two and three years, tend to identify girls as girls and boys as boys (noting some genital differences) although she can generally label male parts better than female parts and she shows little or no knowledge of adult sexual behavior. A child between the ages of four and five years may demonstrate some knowledge of pregnancy (intrauterine growth). An older child may describe mainly non-sexual roles in procreation but knowledge of adult sex rapidly increases as puberty approaches. Around 50% of children who are ten to twelve years of age are aware of sexual touching, masturbation and intercourse (Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992). However, an older child may still be unsure about certain sexual concepts, for example, "intercourse", "seminal emission" or "ejaculation" (Volbert & van der Zanden, 1996), as are some adults.

Second, as mentioned earlier, a child's conceptual development depends on her experiences. This is equally relevant when talking about sex. A child's understanding of sex is not exclusively related to age, but depends on what information and experiences she has had (e.g., a child will typically use her parents' or peers' labels for body parts or sexual acts). These terms can vary markedly between regions and even families. That said, experience per se doesn't necessarily dictate how much sexual related information the child will report in the interview. The likelihood that a

child will disclose sensitive information about sex will depend on other factors as well. For example, a child (especially an older child) may be very embarrassed about talking to an adult stranger about sex and so may omit information that she knows or she may use slang phrases to imply she knows ‘everything’ when she does not. To check out the child’s understanding of the slang phrase, explain to her that you are unsure what that phrase means and you would like her to explain it. Be careful not to appear like you are testing the child as this may make the child feel stupid or defensive.

Sex is a sensitive topic and an interviewer as well as a child can run into difficulty. For example, the cartoon below was a lawyer’s attempt to make an ambiguous phrase (‘feel’ as in touch as opposed to ‘feel’ as an emotion) more concrete for an eight-year-old child.

INSERT CARTOON 1 ABOUT HERE

Needless to say, it is a good idea to avoid using the term ‘feel’ when you want to ask a child about touch, especially for abusive events. A child may mistakenly suppose the word refers to her emotional reaction. It would have been more appropriate for the lawyer to say, “Was the penis hard or soft?” and then “How did you know that?” The second question needs to be asked to make sure that the child isn’t guessing the answer to the first question. However, a preschooler may have no idea how she ‘knows’ something so you may need to ask for a description of it first. Further, touch may be a more complicated issue for a child who is disabled or chronically sick as many people may be in physical contact with them. Discussing this with the child’s career before the interview will clarify how best to talk to the child about touch.

Other problems that interviewers have when talking about sexual abuse usually relate to pinpointing whether the child was touched ‘in’ or ‘outside’ the body. For example, the child reports “Jo touched my front bottom”. This does not indicate whether Jo touched the child over or under her clothes or whether the child was wearing any clothes at all. To clarify this, interviewers often directly question the child further (e.g., “Did you have any clothes on?” or “Did he put his hand inside you?”). However, these direct questions do not establish whether the child understands the terms you are referring to. A child may not know the feeling of having something ‘inside’ her body. Often they know the word ‘inside’, for example, “Come inside, its raining!” but only in this limited context (Walker, 1994). Try to obtain a more detailed answer from the child by gently asking, “How do you know that he touched you inside?” or “Tell me more about what Jo was doing?” If the child simply reports that it hurt her or that she could feel it, encourage her to indicate where the feeling occurred. Next, establish the child’s understanding of the terms that you both use. For a preschool child, a demonstration may be more useful. For example, with the aid of building blocks, ask the child to put a doll “on top of” the house, “inside” the house, “outside” the house, etc.

[[ENCLOSE THE FOLLOWING TEXT IN A BOX]]

Box 1.4 Try This

A child is not always given the appropriate words to describe her genital area and may use words like ‘fairy’ (for vulva), ‘teapot’ (for penis) or most commonly ‘front bottom’ and ‘back bottom’. Take a few minutes to write down how you would find out those phrases the child uses. What would you ask the child? Would you use drawings or ask her to point to her own body? Why? How would you ask about sexual acts? Have a go at phrasing some questions.

You will find our suggestions in Appendix 1.

[[END BOX]]

[[B]] What is a child normally fearful and anxious about?

When interviewing a child, it is useful to know his fears and anxieties. To fully understand an individual child's fears, it helps to have some understanding of the normal fears and anxieties of children. Table 1.1 outlines common sources of fear and anxiety among children and adolescents. It is worth noting that as the child's world expands, so do the types of fears. For example, a one-year-old is very unlikely to be afraid of witches or ghosts as he does not know what witches are, let alone whether he should be scared of them or not.

Table 1.1. Common sources of fear and anxiety among children and adolescents.

Age	Examples of the Source of Fear and Anxiety
0-6 mths	Loss of support, loud noises (e.g., thunder), certain smells, hunger, spiders and snakes (it is thought that most mammals are born with a fear of spiders and snakes).
7-12 mths	Strangers, heights, sudden unexpected and looming objects.
1 yr	Separation from parent, falling into a toilet, being injured, and strangers.
2 yrs	A multitude of sources including loud noises, animals, darkness, separation from parent, changes in personal environment, strange peers and parents' moods.
3 yrs	Masks, darkness, animals, and separation from parent.
4 yrs	Separation from parent, animals, dark, noises.
5 yrs	Animals, 'bad people', darkness, separation from parent, and bodily harm.
6 yrs	Supernatural beings, bodily injuries, thunder, darkness, sleeping or staying alone, separation from parent.
7-8 yrs	Supernatural beings, darkness, media events (e.g., news report on child kidnapping, nuclear holocaust), staying alone, bodily injury.

9-12 yr	Tests in school, school performance, bodily injury, physical appearance, thunder and lightning, death, darkness.
Teens	Social performance, sexuality.

(Adapted from: Harnett Sheehan, Sheehan, & Shaw, 1988).

As Table 1.1 indicates, it is considered developmentally appropriate for a child aged between two and four years to respond to strangers or new adults with fear. This can apply to a caregiver that has undergone a sudden change in appearance. For example, if an absent father shaves off his beard, cuts his hair and loses weight, he may no longer be recognizable to his three-year-old child the next time he comes to visit. As a result the child may become frightened. Likewise, six-year-olds' obsession with witches should not be automatically taken to indicate he is involved in a cult. The source of the child's concerns would need to be carefully investigated. For example, it would need to be determined whether the concerns have evolved from a computer game, movie or television program. Therefore, knowing the child's favorite stories, games, and television programs can help, especially as a child's knowledge gained from these sources can in some cases be mistaken for direct experience. For example, a four-year-old child was terrified that a "Big man" was going to hurt him. The child had seen him on the television stare directly at him and say, "I'm coming to get you". He was an actor in an advertisement.

[[B]] How accurate and reliable are a child's memories?

Memory is complex and is affected by many factors operating at the time of the event (e.g. the time of day, level of stress experienced by the child, where the child's attention was focused, or the time delay between the abusive incident and the interview). In some circumstances, memory can be highly detailed, accurate and persistent. For example, in one study, five- to ten-year-old children were able to remember and accurately report information (including new information that they had not reported at

earlier interviews) two years after the event (Pipe, Gee, Wilson & E.g.erton, 1999). In other circumstances, however, memories can be rapidly forgotten or distorted. Probably what many people mean when they ask this question is "Can children provide forensically relevant and accurate information and how young can they do so?" The answer to this is more clear-cut. A three-year-old child can provide detailed and accurate information, although her ability to remember and express information will increase with age. Further, personally significant information is remembered better than other types of information (Goodman, et al, 1990).

The main problem with the reliability of a child's report is not his memory per se, but the way the interviewer conducts the interview. Even though a young child's memories may be more vulnerable to suggestions from the interviewer than an older child's memories, the onus is always on the interviewer to ask questions that maximize the accuracy of the child's report (see the next section and chapter 3 on how to do this).

[[B]] When is a child suggestible?

Suggestibility refers to the degree to which a child's reporting of events can be influenced by a range of social as well as psychological factors, operating before or after the event being reported (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). This definition allows for the many situations where an interviewer can influence what a child says, using leading questions, or letting the child know the interviewer's expectations and stereotypes. These interviewing techniques may alter a child's reports, irrespective of what the child actually remembers. This is because a desire to please the interviewer may outweigh a desire to be accurately heard. Table 1.2 briefly lists the main factors that are currently known to affect a child's suggestibility, and provides a brief explanation of their impact. Note that the greater the combination of factors from Table 1.2, the greater the possibility that the child's report will be affected.

Table 1.2 Factors known to affect children's suggestibility.

Factor	Qualification
Age	Preschoolers are more suggestible than older children and adults. Reasons include a smaller knowledge base, limited language and source monitoring skills, and an increased desire to please an authoritative interviewer.
Delay	The likelihood of reporting misinformation increases over time as actual details of an event are forgotten.
Status of the interviewer	Older, more knowledgeable and authoritative interviewers are able to sway children more than low status adults or peers.
Interviewer bias	Sometimes interviewers inadvertently attempt to shape the child’s report to be consistent with their own preconceptions.
Repeated interviewing	Children in a subsequent interview can reproduce false information suggested previously. In fact, simply asking children to repeatedly think about or imagine a fictional event can lead children to agree that the event happened. If an interviewer frequently repeats a question within an interview, the child may think that the first answer was wrong and he should change it.
Stereotyping	Communicating a negative stereotype of a person or an event may lead children to provide responses consistent with that stereotype (e.g., merely implying someone is bad may result in a child reporting that the person had lied or cheated when he had not done these things).

Peer Pressure	A child may report false information to make it consistent with that of a peer.
Reinforcing certain answers	Answers may be shaped through (unintentional) bribes (e.g. “Just tell me what happened, then we’ll stop”) and rewards (e.g. “You’re such a good girl for saying this!”).
Type of question	Specific questions (e.g. “What color was his hat?”) have greater potential for error than general questions (e.g. “What did he look like?”). This is because the information in the specific question may not be accurate (e.g. it assumes that there is a man, he has a hat and the child knows the color of it). Leading questions (e.g. “He was wearing a hat, wasn’t he) and suggestive questions tell the child what type of information is required. Questions may be suggestive merely because the interviewer’s tone, manner or phrasing suggests that a particular response is desired.
Visualization and socio-dramatic play	False disclosures of child sexual abuse can sometimes occur in response to techniques involving fantasy, imagery, visualization and re-enactment during play. Repeated visualization of events can lead to errors in monitoring the source of the events (i.e., confusing an imagined event for something that really happened).

(See Ceci, Powell & Crossman, 1999, for more information on these points).

While children are more suggestible than adults are, suggestibility is a matter of degree only. No age groups (not even adults) are immune to suggestion and there are large

differences in the extent to which an individual child may resist suggestions. Further, a child may be highly suggestible in some circumstances, while in other situations he is not. When a child is interviewed appropriately, even a young child can give very accurate accounts. Therefore, the information contained in Table 1.2 should not be used to undermine the credibility of a child, but to highlight to interviewers the techniques that are best avoided when interviewing children.

As a final note, some interviewers may have confused the terms "suggestibility", and "False Memory Syndrome". These are very different concepts. False Memory Syndrome refers to a cultivated memory that may have no basis in what has actually happened to a person. As discussed above, the act of being suggestible (for example, saying yes to an interviewer's leading question) may reflect a false belief that suggested information is true, or it may be the result of confusion in the questioning, or a desire to go along with what the interviewer is saying. For further discussion on false memories, recovered memories and trauma see Read & Lindsay (1997).

[[ENCLOSE THE FOLLOWING TEXT IN A BOX]]

Box 1.5 Think About This

In a custody dispute, suppose a parent wanted to convince a child that the other parent had abused that child so that the first parent would get sole custody. How might the parent go about this? How difficult would it be? Could a child make up such a claim by himself?

You will find our suggestions in Appendix 1.

[[END BOX]]

[[B]] When can a child be trusted to tell the truth?

Contrary to popular belief, the younger the child is, the more likely he is to tell the truth. This is because a very young child has yet to learn how to lie. By the age of two, young children can demonstrate deception (Chandler, Fritz & Hala, 1989). However, it is around the age of four to six years that a child is able to detect and convincingly tell lies. A child in this age range may consider a lie to be any untrue statement regardless of the intention to deceive (e.g. "I'm four not five, you are a liar!"), and that lying is morally wrong (Peterson, 1991). A more adult-like understanding of lying begins to develop around the age of eight when a child will start to understand that lying involves an intention to deceive and also understands how to apply different deceptive behaviors to different situations (e.g., Pipe & Wilson, 1994). For example, a child may tell his mother that he did his homework at his father's house over the weekend, and tell his father that the homework was done at his mother's house before coming over. The child understands would be unlikely to discuss this issue and therefore he would be unlikely to be caught out for not doing this task.

Most adults think that they can tell when a child is lying, but the truth is that adults are very poor judges of lies. There is nothing we can do during an interview that can accurately detect a lie told by a child (Bussey, 1992). We tend to think that the 'guilty' look gives a child away. However, often the 'guilty' look is not the result of guilt at all but of being nervous. When a child is nervous, often he will not maintain eye contact, he will speak hesitantly and fidget (that is, appear guilty).

[[B]] How do I ask a child about the competency test?

The competency test is an assessment of whether a child understands the duty to tell the truth and is usually conducted for legal purposes. If you are interviewing children about abusive incidents for a criminal prosecution you may need to conduct a competency test. It is a good idea to check that if a competency test is still required in your area, and if so, what type? Does the competency test involve the child understanding the need to tell the truth, does it require the child to demonstrate an

understanding of deception, or does it merely involve the child demonstrating the ability to accurately and reliably answer questions?

If you need to test that the child knows the difference between a truth and lie, it is better to first concentrate on what the child believes a lie is. It is best not to ask a child, "Tell me the difference between the truth and a lie?”, as she will often reply, “The truth is when you...um...tell the truth and a lie is when you lie". The following transcript illustrates how definitions such as this can be avoided:

Interviewer: I want to talk about what it means to tell the truth or to tell a lie. What do you think a lie is?
Child: Like if my brother says he took my truck but he didn't.
Interviewer: I see, so a lie is something that didn't happen.
Child: Yeah

A child will often refer to a lie as something that "didn't happen" but if he doesn’t (as in this example), it is useful to refer to the phrase yourself. If the child has not given a good description of a lie, you will need to get him to respond to a practical example. In this case, color references should be avoided, as the child may be color blind, and a very young child may not know his colors. Instead, actions or situations that the child has participated in are less ambiguous. For example, if you picked up the child in a car and drove him to the interview, you could say, "If I said that we caught a bus to get here today, is that a lie or is that what really happened?" If the child says a lie, you could then ask, "Why is that a lie?"

Once the child has defined a lie (i.e., something that didn't happen), then his understanding of the importance of telling the truth (i.e., something that really did happen) can then be assessed. This can be in the form of a statement (i.e., "It is very important that we both talk about things that have really happened"). It can also be a question that requires the child to respond (e.g., "Do you think it is important to only tell me what really happened?", or "Is it a good or bad thing to tell a lie?").

However, the latter questions are not particularly helpful as they merely require "yes/no" answers.

[[B]] How does a child understand secrets?

Normally, a child will be able to lie before she can keep a secret, as a child needs to know how to lie to conceal a secret. Thus, a two- to three-year-old child may have difficulty keeping secrets. It can be very obvious when a young child begins to keep secrets. The child is likely to get very excited and will be desperate to tell someone that she knows something that others don't. In doing so, she invariably tells the secret (e.g., a sibling's, or parent's birthday present). A child between the ages of four and six years may keep secrets well. This may be because the child is "rule bound" and tends to think a secret is something that you tell 'no one'. She understands that she knows something others don't know and that the person who told her not to tell may be offended or angry if she did so (Wilson & Pipe, 1995). A child between the ages of seven and nine years is beginning to learn when it is okay to tell a secret and when it is not (i.e., whether she will be punished). From the age of nine years, a child is becoming similar to adults in her understanding of whom she can tell and when it is appropriate to tell. This will depend on the consequences of telling and her own concept of justice.

The most successful strategy to get a child to tell a secret is to give her time to get to know and trust you. Secrecy is about trust and so is the sharing of secrets.

[[ENCLOSE THE FOLLOWING TEXT IN A BOX]]

Box 1.6 Think about this

A five-year-old child may think it is very bad to lie and she may also report that a secret is something that you don't tell anyone. Yet in order to keep a secret, they must

lie. How do you think a five-year-old would feel about telling a secret or lying to keep it? For the child, which would be worse?

You will find our suggestions in Appendix 1.
[[END BOX]]

[[B]] Does a young child's ability make the child vulnerable to abuse?

By seven or eight years of age a child's thinking becomes less concrete and more abstract (Flavell,1985). Until this age, a child may find it difficult to reason by implication (e.g., Jo is drunk, Jo is violent when drunk. Therefore, Jo may get violent). A child may also have difficulty remembering where and how he learned something (this is called "source monitoring"). Without the ability to connect ideas and to understand the consequences of behavior, a child finds it difficult to understand that someone's behavior may be intentional. A young child may have no sense of what sexual exploitation is and may believe that sex is special, fun or normal (Kuehnle, 1996). Further, there may be no negative symptoms arising from the abuse and so the child may think there is nothing to disclose. This may be especially problematic for children who have especially limited abilities (e.g., learning difficulties) (see chapter 4 for further discussion on learning disabilities).

A child's concrete thinking may also make it difficult for him to see the illogical nature of his own and other's stories. For example, he may genuinely believe an adult's claims that he has special powers (e.g. that he will automatically know when the child has told others). These factors may reduce the likelihood that the child will disclose.

The limits to a child's understanding also have implications for false allegations. A lack of understanding about the full consequences of telling may explain why false

allegations for the purpose of revenge or scape-goating rarely emerge until eleven or twelve years of age (Kuehnle, 1996).

[[B]] What do I need to know about a child's language abilities?

First, a child initially is very literal in his understanding of words. This is illustrated in the following example of a five-year-old child being cross-examined in court (as cited in Berliner & Barbieri, 1984).

> Lawyer: You said you put your mouth on his penis?
>
> Child: No.
>
> Lawyer: You didn't say that?
>
> Child: No.
>
> Lawyer: Did you ever put your mouth on his penis?
>
> Child: No.
>
> Lawyer: Well, why did you tell your mother that your dad put his penis in you mouth?
>
> Child: My brother told me to.
>
> (The lawyer for the prosecution tries to clarify the child's comments)
>
> Lawyer: Jennie, you said that you didn't put your mouth on Daddy's penis. Is that right?
>
> Child: Yes.
>
> Lawyer: Did Daddy put his penis in your mouth?
>
> Child: Yes.
>
> Lawyer: Did you tell your mom?
>
> Child: Yes.
>
> Lawyer: What made you decide to tell?
>
> Child: My brother and I talked about it, and he said I better tell or Dad would just keep doing it.

The above example shows how a child can appear to be contradicting herself when she is actually taking the interviewers information more literally than he intended.

Second, a child may only use or understand a word in a certain context. This is because a child's language skills are learnt in the environment in which she lives, and therefore, her understanding of words may be limited to specific contexts. For example, a child may understand what her mother means when she says "Do not run in and out of the house!". However, she may not understand the terms "in" and "out" when used in other phrases (e.g., "Did he have his shirt out or in?") or in other ways (e.g., "Did she ever have it out with you?"). A child will gradually develop a broader definition of words and phrases as she hears them in a greater variety of ways and places. Because every child's experiences and language skills are unique, a child will acquire broad definitions at different times (Walker & Warren, 1995). Once a child starts school she usually learns to use language less idiosyncratically. This is because her peers and teacher will moderate her developing skills. Thus, from school age, a child may talk more like an adult but that doesn't mean she can understand language in the same way. Many complex language rules are still to be learnt as well as the various meanings each word may have. For example, it is not until a child reaches about the age of twelve that she will begin to detect ambiguity in sentence structure (e.g. "What did it feel like" referring to touch or emotions) (Walker, 1994).

Third, a young child will initially have a limited vocabulary as she is learning new words. This results in some words being overgeneralized (e.g., any animal with four legs is called a dog), whilst other words are undergeneralized (e.g., "Did Jo touch you?" "No, he pinched me"). For example, the child in the cartoon knew that the animal she was looking at had a 'big' name and she knew only two big words (hippopotamus and caterpillar) so she realized it must be one of these! A five- to six-year-old child will have a more extensive vocabulary but will tend to overgeneralize grammatical constructions (e.g., adding 'ed' to the end of verbs to create past tense, as in "I runned

away as fast as I could”). Confusion may also arise if the child mistakes an unfamiliar word for a similar-sounding word with a different meaning. For example, a five-year-old girl reported to the court that her father had told her that he wanted to show her his spunk (slang for sperm) and when asked what that was, she described a black and white animal that smells (a skunk).

INSERT CARTOON 2 ABOUT HERE

[[B]] What questions are difficult for a child to answer?

There are three aspects of questions that children have difficulty coping with; a) the type of information asked for in the question (i.e., the concepts asked about), b) the way that information is asked for (i.e., the grammar used) and c) the form the question takes (i.e., the type of question asked). Each of these factors will be discussed in turn.

First, a child’s level of conceptual development and her life experience will predict what concepts she can and cannot understand. There are many concepts that a young child may have difficulty with. Some have already been discussed (e.g., measurements, sex, and lies). Other difficult concepts include; Body parts (e.g., “What do you call this?”, the interviewer points to the abdominal area, the child replied, “A shirt”); locations (e.g. “Where do you live?” “At my house”) and taking another’s perspective (e.g., “ Did he see you?”, the child may answer yes to this question because she saw him, she may have no idea if he saw her).

Second, sentence structure is an important factor to consider. Interviewers sometimes assume that just because the child knows all the individual words in a sentence, she will be able to understand the whole sentence (Saywitz, 1995). For example, note the way the lawyer questioned a ten-year-old child about being asked to keep information secret; “And did your mother ever say to you that if somebody

asks you the questions I am asking you, you should say that we didn't say what was going to be said" (as cited in Brennan & Brennan, 1990).

Misunderstandings can best be avoided by keeping sentences short. A short sentence is usually a simple sentence. Short, simple sentences tend to be easily understood because they avoid the following:

a) Awkward phrases, especially complicated past tense verb phrases (e.g., might have been) which are difficult for a child to understand. To a child, something either happened or it did not - the idea that something in the past might have happened seems silly. How to phrase questions while avoiding such phrases is outlined in Chapter 3.

b) The frequent use of pronouns (e.g., he, she, and they) makes it difficult for the child to keep track of who or what is being discussed. It becomes a memory test for the child if the proper names of people, places and objects being discussed, are not being used.

c) Using too many embedded clauses (i.e., a sentence or phrase within a sentence) can also put a strain on the child's memory. A child may find the sentence very difficult to follow and it will break up the flow of the conversation.

Third, the type of question asked influences the answer. The concrete questions, such as, "What", "Where", and "Who" questions may be understood by the age of three. However, questions beginning with "Why" or "How" can be difficult for any child to answer. A child may not be able to consistently answer "Why", "When", or "How" questions until five or six years of age as these questions tend to ask for more abstract, conceptual type of information (for example, "Why did he do it?"). Further, "Why" and "How" questions can appear very accusatory and may imply blame (e.g., "How did that happen!" implies the child may have had something to do with it). These questions, therefore, should be used cautiously with children of all ages.

Questions that require a "Yes" or "No" response only (see chapter 3) are particularly problematic when adult concepts are being used. This is because the child's answer

does not indicate whether she understands the question or not. The child may say "yes" merely because she thinks that this is what the interviewer wants to here.

Finally, asking questions in a developmentally appropriate manner is one of the most challenging tasks for interviewers and it may therefore be helpful to do some further reading on this issue. There are numerous reviews that focus on the use of language when interviewing children if further reading is required (see Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Walker, 1994).

[[ENCLOSE THE FOLLOWING TEXT IN A BOX]]

BOX 1.7 TRY THIS

Below is a list of phrases that police officers and lawyers often use when they are interviewing children. Have a go at rephrasing each of the questions so that a five-year-old child would be able to understand them more easily.

Tell me about that in more detail
I'd just like to pause the camera while..
Are you aware that
Can you describe the man
Can you clarify whether
You said earlier..
In reference to
Your mother alleged that
State your name
Speak about the matter concerning David
Subsequently..
I'd like to ascertain
In regard to the bathroom incident
At approximately
I put it to you that it was later
When did it commence
Can you clarify
Please indicate

I know it is difficult to explain
Suspect
In sequence
Please elaborate
Talk me through the incident
Observe how I
What is your current address?
Report
Take a written statement
Matter
Acknowledge
Now I’d like to review
Witnessed
The occasion of
Tell me the facts
His age
Did you hear the conversation?
Let me rephrase that
View this photograph
Prior to his arrival

You will find our suggestions in Appendix 1.

[[END BOX]]

It is important to remember that a child is always actively seeking to make sense of a conversation even if the question asked does not make sense. For example, in a study by Hughes and Grieve (1980), children between the ages of five and seven were asked a series of bizarre questions, such as, "Which is bigger, yellow or red?". Most children answered by attempting to apply some form of logic to the question (e.g. yellow is bigger as that yellow cushion is bigger than the red one). One might reasonably wonder why children do not reply " I don't know". However, research suggests that when a child is given the option to say that she does not know the answer, she may not choose it (Moston, 1987). A child may assume that if an adult asks her a question it must be answerable. This was apparent to Stern (1939) at the turn of the century.

> To many witnesses a question acts as an imperative: "You must answer". They dare not confess their ignorance. Even when they start with an "I don't know" they may be unable to maintain it against the insistence of an inquirer who repeats his question, hammering it home in persistent phrases.
>
> *Stern* (translated in English in 1939).

In summary, as Hughes and Grieve (1980) concluded "Psychologists and linguists - and all others who rely on questioning young children - can no longer treat the child as merely a passive recipient of questions and instructions, but must instead start to view the child as someone– who is actively trying to make sense of the situation he is in - however bizarre it may be."