SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE—ANNOTATION

INTERVIEWING CHILD WITNESSES: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract—This article reviews suggestions derived from the clinical and experimental literatures for interviewing child witnesses. We identify methods for which there is experimental support as well as key issues about which the available research offers little guidance. In a field brimming with polarization rather than integration, our goal is to locate and discuss practices that overlap with both clinical consensus and a growing body of research on child development. To accomplish this goal, the first half of the article considers general guidelines for questioning children at an age-appropriate level and in a manner that minimizes the potential for distortion. The second half of the article outlines the phases of a forensic interview in a step-by-step fashion. The suggestions presented highlight a developmental perspective designed to facilitate children’s memory and communicative competence, to address children’s fears, and to facilitate an honest exchange of reliable information. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

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INTRODUCTION

INTERVIEWERS FACE A dilemma. Increasingly practitioners find that interviewing children in the forensic context requires cognizance of a growing body of specialized knowledge rarely taught in traditional training programs. Reviewing the clinical and experimental literatures for guidance leaves the impression of a polarized field where recommendations are often contradictory. Hence, what follows are suggestions that overlap substantially (although not completely) with both clinical consensus and a growing body of research on child development. These are suggestions from a developmental perspective, informed by both experience and research, but they are not comprehensive or exhaustive. Gaps remain due to the lack of empirical evidence relevant to some areas of clinical concern. And there is no doubt that these suggestions will require revision as the knowledge base grows and public policies are modified. The first half of this article focuses on...
general guidelines for talking to children at an age-appropriate level in a manner that minimizes the potential for distortion. The second half of the article outlines phases of a forensic interview in a step by step fashion.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Developmental Sensitivity

When children are questioned as if they were adults, misunderstandings and avoidable errors can undermine children’s credibility and contaminate their statements. Problems arise when questions are asked in language too complex for young children to comprehend about concepts too abstract for them to understand. Children try to answer questions they do not fully understand, and adults misinterpret the meaning of children’s responses. Problems also arise when few precautions are taken to minimize suggestibility or to overcome children’s anxieties. As a result, children’s statements can contain omissions, inconsistences, and distortions that are more a function of the incompetence of the interviewer than the incompetence of the child. Age-related differences in memory, suggestibility, language, reasoning, knowledge, experience, and emotional maturity have been so well documented over the past century that one thing is clear: Interviewers should make every effort to mold the interview to the child’s level of functioning and to interpret responses from a developmental perspective. Developmental sensitivity is required to select age-appropriate interview procedures and interpret children’s statements accurately.

Developmental Assessment

Studies have revealed enough developmental differences in children’s abilities to recommend that interviewers either refer to the literature on normal development and/or make an informal assessment of a child’s developmental level in advance of questioning. This facilitates realistic expectations about the kinds of information and level of detail a given child is likely to be able to provide. Questions can then be matched to the child’s level of functioning in terms of form and content. The pace and structure of the interview can be matched to the child’s ability to cope with stress, and answers can be interpreted from a developmental framework. Informal procedures and/or standardized measures can be used to accomplish this task (e.g., Hewitt, in press; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1995; Nutall, Romero, & Kalesnik, 1992; Saywitz & Elliott, in press; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996; Yuille, Hunter, Joffe, & Zaparnui, 1993).

Phrasing Questions

Although there is a good deal of empirical evidence to recommend that questions be well matched to a child’s level of language development (Dickson, 1981), studies have found that the linguistic complexity and vocabulary of questions posed to actual child witnesses are often beyond the children’s stage of language acquisition (Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Perry, McAuliff, Tam, & Claycomb, 1995; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990; Saywitz, Nathanson, & Snyder, 1993; Walker, 1994). Researchers have found that when lawyers accommodate their language to that of the children, children are judged to be less anxious, more cooperative, more effective, and more likely to answer questions rather than responding with “I don’t know” or silence (Cashmore, 1992). Researchers who observed children’s testimony in court found that when questions were age-appropriate, child witnesses were rated by observers as more resistant to leading questions about peripheral details, less inconsistent, more fluent, and more confident (Davies & Noon, 1991).

Interviewers can assess a child’s stage of language acquisition by listening to the child’s language during the rapport building phase and matching questions in terms of grammar and vocabulary to the child’s level. Figures 1 and 2 present specific suggestions for accomplishing this
goal. The interviewer can listen to the child first, count the average number of words in an utterance, and use similarly short utterances in return. Simplifying grammar can be accomplished by replacing long compound or complex questions with short ones comprised of simple grammatical constructions. Interviewers can replace complicated tenses ("Might it have been . . .?"") and passive voice ("Were you spoken to by him?"") with simple past tense ("What happened?") and active voice ("Did he talk to you?").

An effective way to simplify vocabulary is to replace three- to four-syllable words with one- to two-syllable words (e.g., point to rather than identify). Studies have shown that legal jargon, such as testimony or molestation, is unfamiliar to young children who often believe that court is a place to play ball and a hearing is something you do with your ears. Interviewers may need to assess a child’s comprehension of various terms before using them with a child.

**Content of Questions**

Studies of cognitive development are clear that questions must be related to a child’s knowledge base and reasoning ability, and answers must be interpreted according to the child’s stage of cognitive development (e.g., Bjorklund, 1989; Singer & Revenson, 1996). For example, children who have not yet learned to count should not be asked how many times something happened. If they are, answers should be interpreted in light of the child’s limitations and be weighed accordingly. Conventional systems of measurement, such as feet, inches, pounds, hours, and dates, are learned gradually over the course of elementary school. Children who have not mastered these will be inconsistent if asked to use them to verify alibis or locations. The interviewer can find alternative methods. For example, instead of asking what time an event occurred, an interviewer could ask what television program was playing, and then reconstruct the time from the *Television Guide*. For dates, an interviewer could ask about the spring vacation during second grade, rather than April 1992. Figure 3 contains suggested skills to be assessed.

Additionally, the child’s reasoning ability must be considered. Preschoolers often reason on the basis of what they can see, not on the basis of invisible concepts or suppositions (Singer &
Revenson, 1996). In one instance a preschooler denied seeing a *weapon* at the scene of the murder, but later when asked more specifically if he saw a *gun*, he answered, “yes,” the correct response. In this case, the abstract, hierarchical, and categorical term, *weapon*, was either unfamiliar or insufficient to trigger recall of the specific, concrete, visualizable object, *gun*, that had been perceived, encoded, stored, and was potentially accessible to retrieval. Hence, terms that are concrete and visual elicit more accurate reports (e.g., *not* “How many times were you *abused*?” but

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**Figure 2. Talking to children.**

Too often questions are phrased in language too advanced for children to comprehend. The form of the question must be well matched to the child’s stage of language development. Below are guidelines extrapolated from the research on child development:

- Use short questions and sentences. 
  Avoid long, compound utterances.

- Use one-to-two syllable words. (point to)  
  Avoid three-to-four syllable words. (identify)

- Use simple grammatical constructions. 
  Avoid embedded clauses, double negatives, subjunctives, conditionals, hypotheticals.

- Use simple tenses. (-ed, was, did, has) (“What happened?”) 
  Avoid multi-word verbs. (might have been) (“Might it have been the case that...?”)

- Use concrete, visual terms. (gun) 
  Avoid hierarchical, categorical terms. (weapon, anything)

- Use the nonlegal meaning of the term. (use hearing to mean auditory, not a meeting) 
  Use simple nonlegal terms. (use people and child, not parties and minor) 
  Avoid the uncommon usage found in legalese, when words have two meanings.

- Use proper names: repeat antecedents. (“Did you talk to *Mary*?”) 
  Avoid pronouns, such as him, her, they, he, she. (“Did you talk to *her*?”) 
  Avoid unclear references. (those things, this, it, that)

- Use active voice. (Did Joe talk to Sue?) 
  Avoid passive voice. (Was Sue spoken to by Joe?)

- Use stable terms. (in the front of the room, in the back of the room) 
  Avoid words whose meaning varies with time or place. (here, there, yesterday, tomorrow) 
  Avoid relational terms, such as more or less. (“Did it happen more or less than two times?”)

- Use several short questions to replace one overloaded question. 
  Avoid questions that list several previously established facts before asking the question at hand. (“When you were in the house, on Sunday the third, and Sam entered the bedroom, did Mary say...?”).

Before asking questions about the facts of the case, assess the child’s understanding of relevant vocabulary and concepts. Below are words and skills that can be germane to answering questions about physical appearance, jurisdiction, alibi, number of counts, etc.,

**Conventional Systems of Measurement**

To determine if a child has the skills necessary to answer certain questions, pretest the child’s knowledge base on relevant topics. Ask questions about the day, the room, the interviewer and so forth that require answers to be formulated in terms of feet, inches, miles, pounds, years, hours, minutes, seasons, months, or days of the week. (e.g., How tall am I? How many feet is it from this side of the room to the other? What is today’s date? How long have we been sitting here? What time is it?).

**Body Parts and Functions**

To assess a child’s idiosyncratic terms for body parts. Use a line drawing of a body. Point to each part. Ask the child to name the part and what it is used for. Sometimes this elicits unexpected but relevant information in cases of suspected abuse.

**Basic Concepts**

Find out whether a child understands basic concepts that may be critical to the facts of a particular case (e.g., first, last, never, always, beside, before, after, inside, outside, forward). For example, line up a row of toys and ask children to identify the first and last one. Try a standardized measures like the *The Boehm Test of Basic Concepts*.

**Colors**

Children may be familiar with common colors (e.g., red) but unfamiliar with the appropriate terms for uncommon colors (e.g., tan, mauve, turquoise). Use a box of crayons to find out what words they use to identify certain colors if the color of an object is critical to the facts of a case to identify an automobile or article of clothing.

**Locations**

Children remember locations in terms of landmarks that are meaningful to them. They may recall a place by the color of the house or by the name of the neighbor rather than the street address. Ask children to name their city, state, or street before relying on their locations.

**Kinship Terms**

Many cases require children to discuss their relatives before they have mastered the adult understanding of kinship relations. Elicit children’s names for important people in their lives. Ask children to name the people in their family and anyone else who lives in their house.

**Numbers Skills**

Giving a child a set of objects and asking them to hand you a certain number is one test of counting ability. However, even if a child can count objects this does not necessarily mean he or she can count events in time. Adults typically estimate and reason out the number of instances using mathematical skills young children may not possess.

**Taking Another’s Perspective**

Try to assess a child’s ability to infer others’ intentions, feelings, and thoughts. For example, ask what they intend to get a parent for their birthday. Is it an appropriate gift? Ask what a character from a story might be thinking?


Figure 3. Assessing children’s cognitive skills.

“How many times did he hit you?”). Similarly, a question involving hypothetical-deductive reasoning (e.g., “If he went to work that night, then how could he have been at your house?”) requires cognitive skills not mastered by young children who reason on the basis of trial and error.

Further, young children often have difficulty viewing the world from other people’s perspectives, and inferring what others are intending, thinking, perceiving, and feeling (Shantz, 1975). A
question such as “Why didn’t you run away when he closed the doors and windows?” requires inferring someone else’s intentions. Children may contradict themselves in trying to puzzle out an answer. Hence, interviewers will benefit from some understanding of the norms of cognitive development to gauge the content of a question. Given that children can be advanced in one domain and delayed in another, an assessment of an individual child’s functioning, either by informal means or with the use of standardized measures, can be critical to case outcome.

Objectivity

Recent studies of young children’s suggestibility highlight the importance of an interviewer maintaining an objective, neutral stance toward the veracity of any allegations that arise (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). In every decision, interviewers should strive to minimize both false allegations and failure to detect genuine abuse to the greatest degree possible (e.g., Lamb, 1994; Lamb et al., 1994; Lyon, 1995; Myers, Saywitz, & Goodman, 1997). Biases can be conveyed inadvertently in tone of voice, facial expression, accusatory context, or questions that suggest a particular answer. Hence, the interviewer must generate alternate hypotheses and explanations for children’s statements, explore the context surrounding allegations, and continually revise hypotheses as new facts emerge (e.g., Yuille et al., 1993). For example, if a young child states that she was touched on her “pee pee,” the interviewer can consider the explanation of routine toilet training or bathing and explore the circumstances leading to the touch.

The psychosocial atmosphere created by the interviewer’s demeanor and comments can undermine objectivity (Warren & McGough, 1996). Laboratory studies suggest that interviewer characteristics such as intimidation and authority status can affect young children’s reliability by encouraging them to acquiesce to suggestive questions (Ceci, Ross, & Toglia, 1987). In one study, preschoolers were less suggestive when misleading questions were asked by older children than by adults, suggesting heightened authority status contributes to distortion (Ceci, Toglia, & Ross, 1987). In a study of older children (fourth, eighth and eleventh graders), researchers failed to find negative effects of authority status on the suggestibility (Brigham, VanVerst, & Bothwell, 1986). Certainly stereotyped and accusatory comments (e.g., “Tell me about the bad man.” “Tell me about the bad things he may have done to you.”) by authority figures (e.g., police officers) has led to greater errors with children 4 years old and younger in research studies (e.g., Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Additionally, there is some evidence for prohibiting comments that could be construed as condescending (e.g. “You probably don’t remember his hair color.”), or intimidating and coercive (“You can go to the bathroom after you answer this question.”), even if unintended. Studies have also highlighted the adverse effects of telling preschoolers that their parents believe a certain event has occurred and suggesting that the interviewer believes likewise, or asking a child to imagine and think real hard about what might have happened even though the child has denied remembering the event (Warren & McGough, 1996). There is ample evidence that such comments are best avoided.

Hence, the atmosphere should not be accusatory, intimidating, or condescending. Generally speaking, the atmosphere should be positive and nonjudgmental; the interviewer can be both kind and matter-of-fact, regardless of how unbelievable the child’s statements may seem, whether a child is describing a completely implausible event or denying sexual contact despite sexually transmitted disease. Additionally, children may appear uncooperative and reluctant due to their emotional state; however, bullying, bribing, contradicting, coercing, or threatening them may only increase suggestibility and further inhibit their output (e.g., Geiselman, Saywitz, & Bornstein, 1993; Reed, 1996). Inconsistencies can be probed by explaining that the interviewer is confused rather than by challenging the child.
Reducing Suggestibility

Young children present the interviewer with a dilemma. Studies of memory development have long documented that spontaneous reports of young children are fairly accurate when compared to their answers to specific questions. Unfortunately, such reports are often woefully incomplete for decision making in the forensic context. Prompts, cues, and questions elicit additional information stored in memory but not independently reported (Fivush & Hudson, 1990; Goodman & Bottoms, 1993; Kail, 1984). However, when prompts or questions are misleading, young children’s reports can be distorted (Warren & McGough, 1996).

Hence, many authors recommend that interviewers strive to create an opportunity for a child to provide the most independent and complete description of an event possible in their own words (e.g., Bull, 1995; Jones & McQuiston, 1986; Lamb, 1994; Saywitz & Elliott, in press; Yuille et al., 1993). This is accomplished by beginning the interview with the most open-ended and nonleading approaches first, even when interviewers anticipate such efforts might be fruitless (Lamb, 1994). Many children do respond to open-ended questions with relevant and meaningful information and it is difficult to anticipate who will be unresponsive.

A number of experimentally derived protocols adopt this approach for elementary school aged children, such as cognitive interviewing (Davies, Lloyd-Bostock, McMurryan, & Wilson, 1995; Fisher & McCauley, 1995; Saywitz, Geiselman, & Bornstein, 1992) and narrative elaboration (Saywitz & Snyder, 1996; Saywitz, Snyder, & Lamphear, 1996), as do clinically derived approaches that have been field tested, such as the step wise approach (Yuille et al., 1993), and the protocol developed by Lamb and his colleagues (Lamb et al., 1994). Consequently, interviewers will want to consider the merits of first eliciting an uninterrupted account of a past event and encouraging children to elaborate in their own words, with minimal prompting, before moving on to more specific and potentially leading questions.

Although there is disagreement on whether, when, and how to use more specific questions to clarify and expand the child’s words, or to introduce new topics, there does seem to be agreement that not all follow-up questions are equally dangerous (e.g., Greenstock & Pipe, 1996; Jones & McQuiston, 1988; Bull, 1995; Myers et al., 1997; Sternberg et al., 1996; Yuille et al., 1993). They fall along a continuum of suggestiveness from general prompts that encourage children to elaborate in their own words (“What happened next?”), to focused questions that merely draw the child’s attention to a particular topic (“Tell me about preschool now”), to specific questions that clarify information already provided by the child (“You said Mary was talking. What did she say?”), to leading questions that introduce information from other sources (“Was John there?”), to strongly worded and accusatory questions (“John hurt you, didn’t he?”). Most agree that strongly worded and accusatory questions should be avoided under all circumstances.

Interviewers can limit leading questions by phrasing questions in the least leading form possible. Studies do show developmental trends with yes-no questions as more problematic for younger children who respond better to “what, who, where” type questions (e.g., Greenstock & Pipe, 1996; Peterson & Biggs, 1997; Sternberg et al., 1996). For example, often yes-no questions can often be rephrased into open ended “wh” questions that possess less potential for distortion—“Did he hit you?” becomes “What did he do with his hands?” If yes-no questions are used, they can be followed by queries that require children to elaborate, justify, or clarify their responses in their own words (“Tell me more.” “What makes you think so?” “I’m confused.”). This ensures that a child’s “yes” or “no” means what the interviewer assumes it means.

General questions, however, do not guarantee accurate responses (e.g., Hutcherson, Baxter, Telfer, & Warden, 1995). Sometimes the more specific question is the more developmentally appropriate choice. For example, in one study of 5 and 7 year olds’ recall of a doctor visit, a majority of children answered incorrectly, (“No”) to “Did the doctor put something in your mouth?” but gave the correct response (“Yes”) to the more specific question “Did the doctor put
a thermometer in your mouth?” Although relatively less biasing, the general term something elicited an erroneous response.

Hence, interviewers will need to balance a variety of interests as they make decisions “on-line” about what kinds of questions to use during interviews. Focused and specific questions are sometimes considered necessary, depending on the specifics of a given case, to trigger reporting of critical information that might not otherwise be forthcoming (e.g., Jones & McQuiston, 1986; Lamb et al., 1995; Lyon, 1995; Yuille et al., 1993). Decisions regarding the use of specific and potentially leading questions are based on a host of case-specific factors and community standards. For example, many authors express greater justification for potentially leading questions when there is corroborating evidence indicating imminent risk of physical danger and issues of child protection are paramount, even when such questions complicate a criminal prosecution (e.g., Jones & McQuiston, 1986; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996; Yuille et al., 1993). Similarly, less justification is thought to exist when a suspect has no access to a child and corroborating evidence is slim.

Overcoming Children’s Anxieties

Studies of child witnesses consistently find that children are moderately to highly stressed at the time of pretrial referrals and interviews (Spencer & Flin, 1993; Whitcomb, Goodman, Runyan, & Hoak, 1994), expressing anxiety associated with fear of the unknown, of retaliation, and feelings of inadequacy (Sas, 1991; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). In cases of abuse, authors frequently describe children who present as silent, resistant, depressed, and avoidant. Moreover, preschoolers routinely experience anxiety when asked to separate from an attachment figure and accompany a stranger to an unfamiliar office (Goldberg, Muir, & Kerr, 1995). Maltreated children may be less equipped to cope with separation anxiety than others by virtue of their insecure or disorganized attachment to caretakers (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). When anxiety interferes with a child’s ability to recount their experiences, interviewers are challenged to find ways to overcome anxiety without contaminating children’s reports. Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that efforts to reduce a child’s anxiety may enhance his or her ability to function cognitively at an optimal level. Emotional states can divert attention, disorganize mental operations, or reduce the effort and motivation needed for successful retrieval, thus interfering with the memory process itself (Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberger, & Kuhn, 1994; Paris, 1988; Stein, Ornstein, Tversky, & Brainerd, in press).

Yet there is a dearth of research relevant to the use of anxiety reduction techniques in the forensic context. The few studies that exist suggest certain clinical procedures could be helpful when precautions are kept in mind. Field studies show benefits of stress inoculation training (e.g., deep breathing, self statements) to prepare child witnesses for courtroom examination (Sas, 1991), although field studies can not test effects on memory performance. Laboratory studies of the effects of emotion on memory accuracy have been inconsistent (Guenther, 1988) and individual differences appear to play an important role in determining whose memory will be adversely affected by what types of anxiety under what conditions (e.g., Smith, Ingram, & Brehm, 1983).

Empathy is a common clinical tool for promoting comfort. Empathic comments need not necessarily be biasing. Experience suggests that empathic comments can show understanding for a child’s dilemma without endorseing the veracity of his or her statements (“I wonder if it makes you nervous to be questioned by a stranger?”), whereas comments that minimize or devalue a child’s feelings (e.g., “Don’t feel nervous.”) may imply the interviewer does not understand. Child witnesses report fears of confusion and unrealistic expectations (Sas, 1991; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). These can be adapted into empathic statements (“Sometimes children worry because they don’t know what to expect here.” “. . . worry that they will be confused.”).

A related intervention, rapport development, is a standard in clinical interviewing. Again, empirical investigation of the effects of rapport on children’s anxiety, their willingness to report
abuse, or on their memory and communication performance during interviews is practically nonexistent. One study reported beneficial effects of rapport and social support on children’s recall in the form of “relaxed body language, eye contact, smiles, and general emotional approval, given without regard for the accuracy or inaccuracy of children’s responses” (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996, p. 353). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest maltreated children may have special difficulty establishing rapport, demonstrating greater need (e.g., Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Eltz, Shirk, & Sarlin, 1995). However, researchers have paid scant attention to this issue. The research literature is of limited value in helping interviewers find techniques that reduce anxiety and promote the discovery of genuine abuse without fostering false allegations.

Given their limited knowledge of the legal system and difficulty drawing inferences about other’s intentions, children often benefit from an outline of what will happen in the interview. The outline serves to reduce fears of the unknown and dispel unrealistic expectations (e.g., children fear they will get a shot, or go to jail). Along these lines, interviewers will want to consider introducing their role in the investigative process and the purpose of the interview. Children may need instructions to understand the unwritten rules for the session (e.g., “You can play with the toys but not break them. I will not let anyone get hurt.”) and the task demands unique to the forensic context (“Tell as much as you can remember, even the little things, but do not guess or make up anything.”).

Flexibility

The past two decades of child development research have highlighted the importance of individual differences among children of the same age group (Bjorklund, 1989; Weinert & Perlmutter, 1988). As a result, age alone is considered an insufficient predictor of children’s needs and reliability. For example, researchers have found that differences in temperament, attachment, and coping style can play a greater role in the recall of stressful events than in recall for the mundane (e.g., Goodman et al., 1994). Hence, interviewers must be willing to be flexible and to follow the child’s lead rather than adhere to rigid protocols or age limits (Jones & McQuiston, 1986). The pace, breadth, and depth of a single interview will depend on a number of factors, including the way the child copes with anxiety (e.g., avoidance, denial, oppositionality), aspects of the event to be recalled (e.g., use of force, threats to life and loved ones, duration, retention interval), and characteristics of the investigative-judicial process itself (e.g., number of times questioned). Interview techniques will be differentially effective in different cases. For example, a depressed 10-year-old, from a dysfunctional family, who copes with stress via suicidal ideation, social withdrawal, and running away may be able to endure less stress and require greater accommodation than a much younger child with high levels of mental health prior to the alleged victimization, solid coping strategies, and strong parental support.

Interpreting Responses

The past 50 years of developmental research teach us that children’s answers must be interpreted within a developmental framework. Placing a child’s response into a developmental context avoids its misinterpretation as an indicator of reliability (or the lack thereof) when in fact it might be a common characteristic of children at a given stage of development. When a child in a case of alleged sexual assault claims that “white glue came out his penis,” this response is not interpreted on the basis of its factual inaccuracy. Instead it is considered with the understanding that young children create their own explanations for what they observe around them. It is developmentally appropriate for a child to liken an unfamiliar substance (semen) to a familiar one (glue) on the basis of its physical characteristics in order to make sense of the unfamiliar experience. Mischaracterization of semen as glue is a developmentally expected reasoning error that highlights the authenticity of the response, not its incredulity.
Sometimes developmentally expected emotional reactions, such as avoidance or anxiety, are misinterpreted as indicators of reliability or incompetence. Avoidance is a common childhood strategy for coping with anxiety provoking situations (Cramer, 1991). Similarly, overt anxiety is not necessarily a sign of victimization, it can be a function of separation from attachment figures in unfamiliar surroundings. Children who are clinically depressed may act withdrawn, indecisive, indifferent, hopeless, and take a long time to answer questions. Their silences are due to psychomotor retardation, not confabulation and lying. In short, some children’s emotional reactions, like avoidance or indecisiveness, can be a function of developmentally expected ways of coping with stress, not credibility. Interviewers must interpret behaviors cautiously and from a developmental perspective.

PHASES OF AN INTERVIEW

Before the Interview

To shape a developmentally sensitive interview or to place the child’s statements and behaviors in developmental context, it is useful to gather a developmental history before the interview (Hewitt, in press; Nuttal et al., 1992; Saywitz & Elliott, in press). This is especially true of younger children and children from neglected or disadvantaged backgrounds. The interviewer may find it helpful to gather information about a child’s age, developmental milestones, history of illness and injury, school performance, culture, disabilities, language, emotional adjustment, and family functioning. This information may be obtained from school, psychological, and pediatric records, or family members, teachers, and other caretakers.

Some authors have suggested that interviewers can best protect against biasing a child’s statements by conducting the interview blind, that is, without prior knowledge of information related to the case. In addition, some courts have overturned case outcomes on the basis of biased interviewing by interviewers who used prior knowledge to lead children (State v. Wright, 1989). There is no doubt that interviewers need to be extremely careful about the use of background knowledge during the interview. Still there is little research to show blind interviewing eliminates leading questions. Some have argued that blind interviewers need to resort to more leading questions to make determinations of risk assessment because they do not have enough information to use the kind of general questions that merely direct the child’s attention to the topic at hand. The definitive studies have not been conducted. At present, however, blind interviewing is not the norm and a developmental history is often necessary to select developmentally appropriate interview procedures and place answers in developmental context.

In addition, some limited planning of the questions before the interview can be useful. There are a number of thorough checklists available to guide questioning content. Phrasing questions in an age-appropriate fashion can be an onerous task to accomplish on the spot, but manageable if the interviewer plans ahead. Before meeting with the child, the interviewer can make a list of the most important points to be covered in the interview, and then render each point into an age-appropriate, non-leading question.

Preliminary Phase: Setting, Context, and Rapport Development

The goal of the preliminary phase is twofold: (a) to create a context that optimizes rather than undermines children’s concentration, memory, communication, motivation, relatedness, and emotional regulation; and (b) to develop sufficient rapport to promote full and honest participation. All of these skills are vulnerable to context effects. Studies generally find that younger children are more easily influenced by the context than are older children or adults (e.g., Donaldson, 1978; Holtz & Lehman, 1995). Hence with young children, interviewers can expect inconsistency across
time and place, even in the reports of genuine abuse victims (e.g., Batterman-Faunce & Goodman, 1993). As children mature, they develop a greater ability to resist distraction, focus attention, and function independently across settings of varied familiarity and complexity levels (e.g., Plude, Enns, & Brodeur, 1994). Complicating matters further, children learn new skills gradually. Before a child has fully mastered a skill, he may be able to use it in some contexts (supportive, easy) but not others (difficult, complex), demonstrating an ability to answer a question in one interview but not in another. Hence, with young children, interviewers carry a greater burden to create an unbiased and facilitating context.

Physical surroundings. Laboratory studies have consistently demonstrated young children’s tendencies to perform differently in different physical surroundings (e.g., Ceci, Brofenbrenner, & Baker, 1988). Numerous studies show how visual and auditory distractions affect oral, cognitive, memory, and attentional performance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the preschooler’s tendency to be distracted by noise or novel, colorful objects. Children tend to communicate better in familiar settings with familiar adults (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Blaisdell, 1986) and on familiar well practised tasks than on their first attempt. However, not all studies show improved recall with increased familiarity (e.g., Nida & Lange, 1987). Some stimuli may be easy to recall regardless of the familiarity of the situation, especially when motivation and effort are high. Some settings or adults, although familiar, may represent high levels of distraction that offset benefits. Some children, such as those with a slow-to-warm-up temperament or attention deficit disorder, may be more affected by their surroundings than children with other behavioral styles.

Child-centered surroundings that minimize distractions and maximize familiarity can put children at ease and facilitate optimal processing of information. Chairs and tables that are appropriate to the child’s size are preferable. Although engaging toys seem like they make the setting more “child-friendly,” they may also serve to distract the child, pulling his or her attention away from the interview. To avoid this problem, interviewers can remove all intriguing and distracting gadgets and give children time to acclimate. For many children, it will suffice to offer crayons and paper. Along the same lines, one should protect the interview from interruptions; answering phone calls sends the message that the interviewer has more important things to do and may foreshorten the child’s responses.

Social Support. Many authors suggest interviewing the child outside the presence of caretakers and adults with an interest in the case whenever possible (e.g., Jones & McQuiston, 1986; Lamb et al., 1994). Others argue that isolating young children in order to protect their statements from contamination is unsupported by the empirical literature and causes stress that inhibits children’s eyewitness reports (Moston & Engelberg, 1992).

When social support has been studied in the laboratory, it often shows beneficial effects on cognitive functioning (e.g., Saranson & Saranson, 1986). In studies of 3 year olds and 5 to 7 year olds, social support was associated with greater resistance to misleading questions, although support had no effect on free recall or responses to questions about abuse (Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney, & Rudy, 1991; Carter et al., 1996). Developmental studies have shown that familiar adults and competent peers can facilitate children’s performance (e.g., Costanza, Derlega, & Winstead, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984).

However, support is not a one dimensional concept. Whether social support has a facilitating effect will depend on the nature of the relationship between the child, the person offering support, and the kind of support provided (e.g., Melamed & Siegel, 1985; Harari & McDavid, 1969). For example, when parents talk to children calmly and reassuringly during painful medical procedures children are less stressed than when parents showed anxiety themselves. Sometimes the people closest to the child have the most difficult time tolerating the child’s distress. If caretakers have a stake in the outcome of the child’s interview, or they are unable to tolerate the child’s emotion,
children can be heavily influenced by their presence. More research is clearly needed to clarify the guidelines by which social support should be used in forensic interviews.

Although most protocols recommend that attempts be made to interview children alone, keep in mind that children 6 years old and younger often experience separation anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They may be unbearably anxious about being alone with a stranger. In these cases, the interviewer can ask caretakers in advance to encourage the child to go alone. An interviewer can show the child where the caretaker will be waiting, and allow the child to check on the caretaker periodically. If this fails, the interviewer can arrange for a suitable support person outside the child’s immediate family (e.g., babysitter) to be present, seated behind the child and instructed not to intervene.

Introducing the Interviewer and Interview. When interviewers begin with open-ended questions, such as, “Is there something you want to tell me? Is there something you think I should know?” their success will depend on whether the child has already been appraised of the interviewer’s role and objectives. If the interviewer is a mental health professional, children can be told that the interviewer’s job is to help children with problems. This suggests that problems will be the topic of discussion. If the interviewer is a social worker or law enforcement agent, a child can be told that the interviewer’s job is to help children and families stay safe and healthy, suggesting violations of safety are legitimate topics for discussion. In custody cases, children may be told that the interviewer’s job is to help the judge make the best plan for the entire family’s optimal functioning. Then when the interviewer begins with “Is there anything you think I should tell the judge?” children understand the purpose of the question, reducing the likelihood that more leading questions will be necessary.

Children are often worried about limits on confidentiality. In some cases, children can be told simply that the interviewer will tell only those people who need to know so that they can keep the child and/or family safe. Older children can be told that the information they provide will be given to an attorney, and possibly a judge, to decide how to keep the child safe, how to make the best plan for the family, or whether to have a trial to decide if someone broke the law. This may reduce the child’s feelings of betrayal that can compromise later testimony when a child learns that information disclosed in private is now public knowledge in the courtroom.

Rapport Building. Most authors suggest that a moderate amount of rapport development has a facilitating effect, while intimidation and poor rapport can have detrimental effects (e.g., Jones & McQuiston, 1986; Lamb et al., 1994). Interviewers must strive to strike the appropriate balance. In cases of genuine abuse, greater rapport between a child and an interviewer could help to overcome reluctance due to fear, shame, or mistrust. In cases where the potential for coaching is high, greater rapport could facilitate disclosure of another adult’s attempt to coach. Greater rapport might even promote resistance to misleading questions by reducing fear of the interviewer, lowering perceptions of the interviewer’s authority status, or by facilitating the assertiveness necessary to contradict the interviewer’s suggestions. However, efforts to establish rapport that assume the child is a victim or presume the perpetrator’s identity can possess the potential to contaminate. Unfortunately, there is little useful research to guide practical efforts to establish rapport in the forensic context.

Establishing rapport may be especially important in cases of maltreated children who have been betrayed by adults in the past, crime victims whose sense of security and safety have been dashed, or neglected children who have never developed a sufficient level of basic trust in the world as a responsive, protective, and nurturing environment. Innocuous topics such as favorite foods or television shows can be discussed, avoiding sensitive topics that touch on the facts of the case, like family members.
Phase I: Developmental Assessment, Observations, and Instructions

Developmental Assessment. While building rapport with the child, interviewers can take note of a child’s level of language development, reasoning, and knowledge. During this time, one can also informally test out the child’s skill level in areas relevant for later questioning as suggested in Figures 1 and 3 (Saywitz & Elliott, in press). For example, to assess whether a child possesses the knowledge necessary to answer certain questions regarding dates, times, locations and physical descriptions, one can casually ask, the age or height of the interviewer, the date and time, or the name of the child’s state and city, the colors of the crayons, or the race of the interviewer. Of course, the specific tasks will depend on the facts of a given case.

Many authors suggest assessing the child’s understanding of truth and falsehood in order to document legal competence at the time of the interview (e.g., Yuille et al., 1993). This is done to aid legal decision makers in future determinations of the admissibility of evidence elicited during the interview (Myers, 1998). Traditionally, understanding is assessed by (a) asking children to explain the difference between the truth and lies; (b) asking children to define the terms; (c) asking children to identify a statement as the truth or a lie; or (d) asking children to give an example. Recent studies comparing these methods suggest several of them underestimate children’s competencies dramatically.

In research studies of maltreated and delayed 4 to 7 year olds, 60% to 70% of children who demonstrated competence by identifying statements as truthful or false were unable to do so using the other methods (Saywitz & Lyon, 1997). While the 5 to 7 year olds were able to identify statements correctly, some 4 year olds were unable to do so. When a simpler task was created, even maltreated 4 year olds with significant delays in language ability answered most questions correctly, as did 3 year olds from a university preschool. The new method entailed presenting children with a picture depicting two children and an object (apple) on a table in between them. Children are told that the child on the left called the object a banana and the child on the right called the object an apple. They are simply asked either “Which child is telling the truth?” Or “Which child is telling a lie?”

Preparation and Instructions. With limited knowledge of the legal system and idiosyncratic explanations for what they observe around them, young children may generate unrealistic expectations about the interviewer’s purpose and requirements (Flin, Stevenson, & Davies, 1989; Melton, Limber, Jacobs, & Oberlander, 1992; Saywitz, 1989; Singer & Revenson, 1996). Preparing children for the interview in an effort to demystify the process has been beneficial in research studies. Preparation can include instructions designed to clarify the interviewer’s expectations and unique aspects of the forensic questioning process (Lamb et al., 1994; Reed, 1996; Saywitz & Snyder, 1993).

A number of interview approaches recommend a warming up or preparation stage before questioning begins to familiarize a child with the format of a forensic interview. The step-wise interview (Yuille et al., 1993) recommends asking children to tell about two separate events, such as a recent birthday party, holiday celebration, or school outing. This step models the form of the interview for the child. Another innovative approach, narrative elaboration (Saywitz & Snyder, 1996), provides a more standardized practice procedure to be conducted before the interview in order to heighten children’s awareness of the level of detail and the kind of information they are expected to provide independently. It also teaches retrieval strategies for accomplishing this goal. Lamb and his colleagues have created a script that can be read to a child before the interview to promote shared expectations about the interview process ahead. Studies also show that cognitive interviewing works best with school-age children if they practice the format ahead of time (Saywitz, Geiselman, & Bornstein, 1992).

Memory development studies have often included a number of instructions to children. Extrap-
School-age children may benefit from several simple instructions (e.g., Goodman & Bottoms, 1993; Reed, 1996). An interviewer can consider the merits of:

(a) instructing a child that it is important to tell only what really happened, and not to guess; To listen carefully to questions and not to hurry into a wrong answer;
(b) warning a child that he or she may not understand all the questions, and instructing the child to announce when he or she does not understand (e.g., “If you don’t understand a question I ask, tell me ‘I don’t get it,’ ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ Ask me to say it again using new words.’”);
(c) reminding a child that the interviewer was not present when the event took place and could not know what happened, and giving permission to correct the interviewer if the interviewer says something wrong (e.g., “If I say something wrong, tell me, ‘No, that’s wrong.’”);
(d) instructing children to tell the interviewer everything they can remember, even the little things they may not think are very important, since children have difficulty judging forensic relevance;
(e) providing motivating instructions by telling children to try their hardest and do their best; and
(f) warning a child that some questions may be difficult to answer, and instructing the child to admit lack of knowledge but to tell the answer if it is known (e.g., “If you don’t know the answer to a question I ask, tell me ‘I don’t know,’ but if you know the answer, tell the answer.”).

**Phase II: Questioning the Child**

**General Approach.** Experts tend to agree that it is best to begin questioning about the event under investigation by offering children an opportunity to make a spontaneous statement (Bull, 1995; Lamb, 1994; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996; Yuille et al., 1993). In laboratory studies, free recall may be incomplete, but it has lower error rates than answers to specific questions. If school-age children have been educated about the interviewer’s role in the investigative process, the interviewer can start by asking them if there is anything they want to tell you, or anything they want you to tell the judge or attorney. However, this approach is often unproductive with very young children, ages 18 to 36 months, given their limited language, cognition, and retrieval abilities (e.g., Hewitt, in press). Consequently, there is greater consensus regarding interviewing strategies with older children.

**Raising the Topic.** Introducing the topic of interest (e.g., sexual abuse) seems to be the step in the interview where empirical research offers the least guidance. If the open-ended question fails to produce a description of the event under investigation, a number of other approaches have been recommended in the clinical literature as potentially producing forensically relevant statements (e.g., Jones & McQuiston, 1986). However, their efficacy has not been tested fully. If the location of the crime is known, a well researched memory aid that is part of the cognitive interview, known as context re-instatement, might be useful (Geiselman, 1988). The child can be asked to describe the physical and personal environment of the crime scene (e.g., what it looked like or how it smelled). These cues can trigger maximal recall of actual events. However, the effects of such techniques on recall of false events have yet to be investigated.

Often the location is unknown. In the clinical literature, a frequently suggested procedure is the use of gender-neutral line drawings. Children identify the name and function of body parts, and whether each has been injured. Then inquiries are made about how the injuries were obtained. Sometimes asking children to discuss safety and privacy rules in their home, their best and worst experiences, or whom they like and don’t like to be with, as well as the reasons, can elicit relevant information (Morgan, 1995). Children’s approaches to solving problems and coping with fears can be illuminating as well (e.g., “Do you have any problems that could use my help? What kinds of
problems can you solve on your own? What kinds of problems need someone outside of your family to help?”).

Once the child begins his or her description of the event, the child should be allowed to proceed at his or her own pace, without interruption, correction, or challenge. The interviewer will need to remain patient and tolerant during elaborations of irrelevant details, and prompt with statements such as, “and then what happened,” when the child pauses (Lamb et al., 1994; Yuille et al., 1993).

### Eliciting Further Details

Following the child’s free narrative, the interviewer can move to relatively open-ended “wh” questions (e.g., “Who was there?” “What did he look like?” “What did she do?” “What did they say?” “Where did it happen?”), but keep in mind that “when” and “why” may be more difficult for children 5- to 7-years-of-age and younger. These questions can be useful elicitors of information with preschoolers (e.g., Dorado & Saywitz, 1997; Sternberg et al., 1996). As mentioned previously, interviewers can limit the use of potentially leading yes-no questions by rephrasing them into “wh” questions that possess less potential for distortion. If yes-no questions are used, they can be followed by queries that require the child to elaborate, justify, or clarify his or her responses in his or her own words. Figure 4 displays this general step-by-step approach for school-age children. Of course, conversations do not unfold in real time as planned in step by step

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: General Open-ended Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Is there anything you want to tell me?”</td>
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<td>“...anything you think I should know?”</td>
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<td>“...anything you want me to tell the judge?”</td>
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<th>Step 2: Prompted Elaboration of Initial Narrative</th>
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<tr>
<td>If a narrative follows the open-ended question,</td>
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<td>Do not interrupt</td>
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<td>Urge children to elaborate on the facts mentioned.</td>
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<td>Use general prompts such as tell me more, what happened next, what else.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step 3: Categorical “Wh” questions to follow-up children’s leads</th>
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<tr>
<td>Who was there? What were they wearing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where were you? What did they say?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What happened next? When?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step 4: Request elaboration, clarification or justification of answers to follow-up questions</th>
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<td>Tell me more. I’m confused. What makes you think so?</td>
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<th>Step 5: Specific open-ended or short answer questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>What color was it? How tall was he?</td>
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<td>What kind of ..., was it?</td>
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<td>How did you feel? How did he feel?</td>
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<th>Step 6: Elaboration, clarification, justification of answers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tell me more. I’m confused. What makes you think so?</td>
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Figure 4. Eliciting information.
protocols; however, a general approach that advocates phrasing questions in the least leading fashion possible and using less leading questions before more leading questions appears to be frequently recommended in the literature, albeit an imperfect guide.

**Phase III: Closure**

Although little empirical attention has been paid to the benefits of establishing closure with the child, clinical experience indicates that it is instrumental. At a minimum, authors suggest that even if no forensically relevant information were provided, the child should be thanked for his or her help. The child’s effort can be praised but never the content of what was reported. If the child is upset, give him or her time to recompose. Offer empathy for doing something that was hard to do and praise him or her for being so brave. Interviewers can ask children for their impressions of the interview, and dispel any misunderstandings or misperceptions that may have arisen. To reduce fears about the future, an interviewer can tell a child what will happen next, explaining whom else the child will meet with, when you will meet again, and for what purpose.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Although these suggestions fall short of addressing all of the important issues challenging interviewers today, they do reflect a surprising amount of consonance between the clinical and experimental literatures—literatures that often appear more polarized than integrated. Our goal was to aid practitioners in becoming better informed of the practices for which there is some empirical support as well as the topics on which research offers little guidance. The suggestions accumulated here highlight a developmental perspective designed to optimize rather than undermine children’s memory and communicative competence, to address children’s fears, and to facilitate an honest exchange of reliable information.

**REFERENCES**


Interviewing children


**RÉSUMÉ**

French abstract not available at time of publication.

**RESUMEN**

**Objetivo:** En este artículo se revisan las sugerencias derivadas de la literatura clínica y experimental de las técnicas de entrevista con niños que han sido testigos de acontecimientos. Se identifican una serie de métodos que han recibido apoyo experimental así como una serie de cuestiones clave acerca de las cuales la investigación accesible ofrece unas directrices limitadas.

**Metodología:** En un ámbito de trabajo desbordado por la polarización más que por la integración, la meta de este estudio es localizar y comentar aquellas prácticas en las que coinciden tanto el consenso clínico como un creciente grupo de investigaciones sobre desarrollo infantil.

**Resultados:** Para alcanzar esta meta, en la primera mitad del artículo se toman en consideración una serie de pautas generales para entrevistar a los niños de una manera apropiada a la edad y de una manera que minimice las posibilidades de distorsión.

**Conclusiones:** La segunda mitad del artículo señala las fases de una entrevista forense con una descripción “paso-a-paso”. Las sugerencias que se presentan subrayan una perspectiva evolutiva diseñada para (1) facilitar en los niños los recuerdos y las habilidades de comunicación, (2) dirigir los miedos de los niños, y (3) para facilitar un intercambio honesto de información fiable.