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FEATURE ARTICLE

Best-practice guidelines for child forensic interviewing

We must continue to improve our practices and ensure quality control and consistency across forensic interviews.

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By Kelly McWilliams, PhD (https://www.apa.org/search?query=&fq=ContributorFilt:%22McWilliams, Kelly%22&sort=ContentDateSort desc)

Child maltreatment is widely recognized as a grave threat to children's well-being and development. An important step in the prevention of child maltreatment is the identification of cases of child sexual abuse (CSA). For many cases of CSA, children's disclosures are the strongest, if not only, pieces of evidence and are vital to identification and prosecution. To obtain complete and reliable disclosures, it is imperative that all professionals who question alleged victims of CSA are trained in empirically based, best-practice guidelines. Following the infamous day care cases of the 1980s (e.g., McMartin), a large body of research has examined children's eyewitness abilities and several consistent findings have emerged regarding optimal techniques for forensic interviewing.

One of the most robust findings in the literature is effect of question type on children's reports; specifically, the benefits of open-ended questions and cued invitations, as well as the dangers of closed-ended and suggestive questions (Andrews, Ahern, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, in press). Open-ended questions have been shown to elicit the most quality information from witnesses and are widely recognized as best practice when interviewing young children (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Abbott, 2007; Orbach et al., 2000). Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, often result in significantly less information and are more likely to include misinformation or suggestive influences (Lamb et al., 2007). Although most legal professionals and practitioners know the general benefits of open-ended questioning techniques, many are likely unaware of the differences in productivity among various types of open-ended questions (Ahern, Andrews, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, in press; Andrews et al., in press). For instance, "wh-" prompts (*who* , *what* , *where* , *when* , *why* and *how*) can vary greatly in the type of information they are attempting to elicit (e.g., static versus dynamic), as well as the specificity of the inquiry. The literature has widely ignored the reality that certain "wh-" prompts (e.g., "What color was his hat?") may not be pulling for the type and amount of information typically associated with the recommended open-ended questions (e.g., "What happened?"). Recent research has begun to examine the effectiveness of different types of "wh-" prompts in both forensic and courtroom settings. Results have indicated that "wh-" prompts about actions and "what/how happened" prompts were more productive than other "wh-" prompts in eliciting information from children in forensic interviews and court testimony, respectively (Ahern et al., in press; Andrews et al., in press). These findings suggest that there are significant differences in children's responses to different types of "wh-" prompts and that researchers, legal professionals and practitioners should be aware of the spectrum of productivity among open-ended questions and endorse the maximization of "wh-" dynamic prompts (e.g., "How did you get hurt?") and the minimization of "wh-" static prompts (e.g., "What did he wear?").

Another well-known finding in the child eyewitness research is the effect of suggestive questioning. A significant body of research has documented the negative influences of misinformation and suggestion on both children's and adults' memory reports (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Wright & Loftus, 1998), and many practitioners know to avoid leading questions. However, emerging research has begun to examine suggestive influences beyond the interview, namely the influence of parental suggestion on children's reports (Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995; McWilliams & Goodman, under review; Principe, DiPuppo, & Gammel, 2013; Rush, Stolzenberg, Quas, & Lyon, 2015). Several studies have examined how false information influences the way in which parents question their children and the potential effects of parental bias on children's reports. Studies seem to agree that when faced with misinformation, parents do engage in some forms of suggestive and misleading questioning (McWilliams & Goodman, under review; Principe et al, 2013); however, results are mixed regarding the influence on children's event memory. Specifically, some studies find that parental bias leads to children's error (Principe et al., 2013), while others do not find any influence (Goodman et al., 1995; McWilliams & Goodman, under review; Rush et al., 2015). Although it is still unclear the degree to which parental false belief may influence children's disclosures, it is important for those interviewing young children to be mindful of all possible suggestive influences and question children about previous

conversations they have had regarding the allegations. These questions may be helpful in identifying sources of suggestion, while eliminating suspicion surrounding innocent, nonbiased parental inquiry.

The field has come a long way since the day care cases of the 1980s. We have identified developmentally sensitive questioning techniques, explored potential sources of suggestion and developed structured interview protocols that are regularly used by trained professionals. However, forensic interviewing practices are far from perfect, and there is more that needs to be addressed. For instance, future studies could address finer manipulations with regards to question content and question type, nonsuggestive techniques for eliciting disclosures from reluctant children and strategies for adapting existing interview protocols for individual differences, such as developmental delays and disorders. Furthermore, further research is needed to identify best practices for training interviewers. An emerging body of research has begun to examine this question; results from one such study suggest that training programs that include extensive practice and repeated self-evaluation and peer review are related to increases in the use of open-invitations and decreases in option-posing questions (Stolzenberg & Lyon, in press). Additionally, there is evidence that online trainings are practical and effective alternatives to traditional classroom-based models, with some programs demonstrating beneficial effects lasting up to a year posttraining (Benson & Powell, 2015). However, despite all we now know, we must continue to strive to improve our practices and ensure quality control and consistency across all forensic interviews.

Selected References

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