

INTERVIEWING CHILDREN – GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICE

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THE FOLLOWING FICTITIOUS CONVERSATION WAS CONSTRUCTED BY THE AUTHOR FROM HUNDREDS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH DETECTIVES AND SOCIAL WORKERS WHO INTERVIEW CHILDREN. I = INTERVIEWER; K = KIM ROBERTS.

I. IMPORTANCE OF CHILD TESTIMONY

I: SO KIM, WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT THAT WE NEED TO BE TRAINED IN CHILD INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES?

K: Sadly, children are often the only witnesses to sexual and physical assault on them or other people in the home. Therefore, we depend on them to give us a complete account of what happened. The importance of child victim-witnesses' accounts is further emphasized by the fact that there is often no physical or material evidence, especially in the case of sexual abuse.

I: I CAN UNDERSTAND HOW IMPORTANT CHILDREN ARE WHEN INVESTIGATING, BUT SURELY EVERYONE CAN CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW TO A LEVEL THAT CHILDREN UNDERSTAND?

K: It may seem counter-intuitive, but the very fact that children are still developing makes it absolutely essential that we understand how they develop and use this to devise age-appropriate evidence-based techniques. It's just like if a nuclear physicist talked to you in the same way that s/he might talk to colleagues. There wouldn't be much gained from such an interview; you wouldn't be able to answer the questions because you don't know what you are being asked.

I: AH, THAT MAKES MORE SENSE. I SUPPOSE THAT ASKING QUESTIONS THAT ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE COMES WITH EXPERIENCE.

K: Provided that interviewers have a basic understanding of child development, yes, it takes practice and unbiased evaluations to develop the skills. All expert

skills require an enormous amount of practice, and interviewing children is an expert skill.

II. INTERNATIONALLY-ACCEPTED GUIDELINES

I: OK, SO GIVEN THAT WE'VE ESTABLISHED THAT INTERVIEWING CHILDREN EFFECTIVELY REQUIRES TRAINING AND PRACTICE, HOW DO YOU INTERVIEW A CHILD?

K: There are numerous techniques that interviewers can keep in their 'toolbox', but all of the techniques are based on the notion that the ideal scenario is to have the child (not the interviewer) doing the talking. We know that 6-year-olds have an arsenal of 10,000 words (range 8000-14000; ref). Studies have also shown that children as young as 3 can give accurate accounts of events they've experienced repeatedly (ref). So we know they have the skills to describe personal events – it's our job to let them.

I: I'VE HEARD INTERVIEWERS TALK ABOUT 'OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS'. THAT'S 'WH' QUESTIONS LIKE WHO, WHAT, WHERE, AND WHEN, RIGHT?

K: An open-ended question is an utterance that invites children to describe what they remember. Importantly, the interviewer does not indicate to the child what type of information s/he is looking for. So, although 'wh' questions allow children to provide the answer (rather than just agreeing or disagreeing with the interviewer), they push children towards talking about a topic that they may not have been thinking about. As our brains work by neurons (brain cells) communicating with each other through dense networks, it makes more sense to let the child continue with what s/he was talking about, than stopping that and requesting the child access another topic.

I: WHAT DOES AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION LOOK LIKE, THEN?

K: Some good examples are:

Tell me what happened from the very beginning to the very end

Tell me more

What else happened?

What happened after that?

Another useful technique is 'parroting' children's responses. For example, if a child says "we were in the swimming pool", the interviewer can say:

Tell me what happened when you were in the swimming pool.

I: SO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ARE THE GOLD STANDARD IN CANADA?

K: Not just in Canada. There is broad international consensus that open-ended questions are the most effective way to get reports from children about things

that have happened to them. Even more so, they are also the most likely method to elicit accurate information from children. Thus, their testimony elicited this way can be viewed as the most reliable evidence it can be.

I: SO IT SOUNDS LIKE EVERYONE WINS WHEN INTERVIEWS CONTAIN A LARGE PROPORTION OF THESE QUESTIONS? THE CHILDREN GET TO DESCRIBE THINGS THE WAY THEY REMEMBER, THE INTERVIEWER IS NOT LEADING THE INTERVIEW OR SUGGESTING WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED, AND THE CHILDREN'S TESTIMONY IS MORE RELIABLE.

K: Absolutely!

I: COULD THIS MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION?

K: Potentially, yes. In my experience, the alleged perpetrators are more likely to admit the offense, and possibly go into plea bargaining when children have given a good description. There are no Canadian data at present, but some statistics from the US suggest that prosecution is more likely when children have given an account elicited by open-ended questions.

III. PRACTICE INTERVIEWS

I: IT MAKES SENSE HOW OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ARE 'GOOD' QUESTIONS TO USE WITH CHILDREN. BUT I'VE TRIED TO ASK MY KIDS WHEN THEY GET HOME FROM SCHOOL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS, AND THEY USUALLY SAY 'STUFF' OR 'NOTHING'!

K: I know what you mean, and there are a couple of reasons I can think of for why this might happen. First, for the most part, school follows a predictable routine. Just like a work day for you, when you think back on it, there's really not much that stands out that seems worthy of reporting! When we do the same things over and over, we tend to retain knowledge of that routine, but not necessarily the details of each individual day. So when your kids say 'nothing', they really mean 'just the usual'.

I: I SEE! WHAT ELSE?

K: Responding to open-ended questions can be quite challenging. If I ask you 'what happened on your wedding day?' you would have to think back to what happened, put it in order in your head, and then find a way to report what happened so that I will understand. But if I first ask you questions about another day – say the day you got engaged – you would already be warmed up and thinking about important things in your life before I bring up the topic of the wedding.

I: AND THEN IT WOULD BE EASIER BECAUSE I WAS ALREADY PRACTICED IN DOING THAT?

K: Exactly. That's why one of the most effective things you can do when interviewing a child, is to first ask them about a recent event that they enjoyed and that they are likely to remember. In other words, something that they are willing to talk about.

I: SO WHAT SORT OF EVENTS CAN YOU ASK THEM ABOUT?

K: Significant events like a recent holiday like Canada Day, the first day at school, their first sleepover – you can also ask a caregiver for some other ideas. One time I interviewed a child and the only thing we could come up with was playing in the snow and making snow angels a few days before the interview. But it worked, and she chatted quite happily!

I: ONE THING THAT I CAN SEE BEING A PROBLEM IS THAT IF YOU ASK A LOT OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND YOU DO A 'PRACTICE INTERVIEW' BEFORE TALKING ABOUT THE HARMFUL EVENTS THAT THE CHILD MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED, THEN THE INTERVIEW MUST BE QUITE LONG. ISN'T THERE A DANGER THAT BY THE TIME YOU START TALKING ABOUT THE POTENTIAL INCIDENTS THAT THE CHILD IS TOO TIRED AND FED UP OF ANSWERING QUESTIONS?

K: You'd think so but actually no! Research has shown that when interviewers use a practice interview and open-ended questions throughout the interview, the interviews are shorter or at least no longer as other interviews using less appropriate techniques. One reason for this is that the interviewers ask less questions in an open-ended interview – because children give more information in response to open-ended questions than in response to narrower prompts where their responses are usually no longer than a word at a time (e.g., when was it? Yesterday. What did he say? Come here. Who else was there? No-one.), the interviewer actually doesn't need to ask as many questions.

I: MMM. YOU KNOW I WOULDN'T HAVE BELIEVED THAT IF THERE WASN'T SCIENTIFIC DATA AVAILABLE TO SHOW THAT.

K: Let me give you another example. Sometimes children will say something like 'He molested me'. The use of the word 'molested' would stand out to a lot of interviewers and so the next thing the interviewer says is 'What does molesting mean to you?'

I: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT?

K: Two things. First, the interviewer has now switched to asking abstract questions (the definition of the word), rather than keeping the child talking about the incident. But the second reason is even more compelling: If the interviewer follows the child's allegation with 'Tell me what happened from the very beginning to the very end' or 'Tell me what happened when he molested

you', then it would be obvious from the child's description about what happened what 'molested' means to her!

I: POINT TAKEN!

IV. POLICE TRAINING MODEL

I: SO HOW DO POLICE OFFICERS LEARN THESE CHILD-FRIENDLY TECHNIQUES?

K: Each province is a bit different but I will give you an idea of how it works in Southwest Ontario. Detectives who interview children (e.g., those from domestic violence or sexual assault units) can take a 2-week course at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer, Ontario (near London). Class size is about 25-30.

I: WHAT DO YOU TEACH THEM?

K: I teach for 2 days during the first week of the course. I cover two things. The most important thing that the officers need is a set of clear strategies for how to interview children. Thus, I recommend child-friendly techniques that they can use. All of the techniques are based on published research that show their effectiveness.

I: THAT PROBABLY PROTECTS THEM IF THEY EVER HAVE TO JUSTIFY THEIR INTERVIEWS IN COURT.

K: Exactly. Tried and tested techniques, many of which have been offered by some of the best child developmentalists in the world.

I: WHAT'S THE SECOND THING?

K: I give them a general overview of child development so that they understand the background to the techniques that I recommend. This also gives them age-appropriate expectations of children. This group of officers is quite diverse. Typically, Services can only afford to send 1 or 2 detectives, and they come from all over Ontario including some of the remote communities in the North. Some have children; some don't. So learning what can be expected of a 6-year-old, or a 10-year old with developmental delays, for example, can very important information for some of them!

I: WHAT CAN INTERVIEWERS DO IF THEY FEEL THAT THEY NEED MORE TRAINING?

K: I'm always open to requests from Police Services to put on advanced training. The key thing once the basic training is done is to practice the techniques and to get feedback on the techniques.

I: OH, SO YOU MEAN HAVING A PARTNER LET YOU KNOW WHETHER YOU'VE DONE A GOOD (OR A BAD!) JOB?

K: Well, that can be helpful, because the partner might have realized that there's some more information they need for the investigation, or have picked up on something that the child said that should be discussed further with the child.

I: IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE THINKING OF SOMETHING MORE THAN THIS THOUGH?

K: Yes. Scientific studies have clearly shown that training is only effective (i.e., results in the actual use of child-friendly techniques) if there is detailed feedback on the structure of the interview and the types of utterances from the interviewer.

I: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

K: When I am asked to look over an interview, I first look to see whether all the relevant phases have been covered. This is a clear Introduction of who the interviewer is and their job, a time to go over the 'ground rules' of the interview (e.g., tell the truth, 'I don't know' answers are OK), and a practice interview before discussing the alleged incidents. Then I go through each utterance and give it a code (e.g., open-ended question, paraphrase, closed question). I then tally the amount of information in the child's responses to these questions. This way it becomes clear whether the interviewer was able to rely on open-ended questions to get a statement.

I: IT SOUNDS LIKE THAT TAKES A LONG TIME.

K: Yes, it can! That's why university-community partnerships can work so well in this field. I have a team of trained individuals who can transcribe and code the interviews. I can then discuss the interview confidentially with the interviewer.

I: DO INTERVIEWERS HAVE TO DO THIS FOR EVERY INTERVIEW? IT MUST TAKE A LOT OF THEIR TIME TOO.

K: The need to discuss interviews declines as the interviewer becomes better able to use the techniques. So it's more of a time commitment up front while the skills are being learned, but if the interviewer is responsive then it might only take a half hour each month after that. It's really no different to any other skill – the learning curve is steep at first, but this soon leads to the expertise.

I: YES, THAT'S TRUE. ONCE YOU REALIZE THAT INTERVIEWING CHILDREN IS A SKILL, IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE; JUST LIKE PLAYING THE PIANO OR THE GUITAR. WHAT ABOUT SOCIAL WORKERS?

V. SOCIAL WORKER TRAINING MODEL

K: There is quite a bit of diversity in how individual Children's Aid Societies and similar organizations conduct their training. Since the early 2000s, there has been no commonly-accepted training model for social workers.

I: WHY DON'T THEY DO THE SAME TRAINING AS THE POLICE?

K: Some of them do. Other organizations are less willing to go with joint training as their mandates are different to those of the police, and this has sometimes led to quite different interviewing styles.

I: WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THAT?

K: While the two professions clearly do have different mandates, a common goal is to find out what sorts of experiences these children have had. Therefore, it makes sense to me that both professions should be trained according to the international guidelines I mentioned earlier.

I: WHAT TRAINING HAVE YOU DONE WITH SOCIAL WORKERS AND CHILD PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS?

K: I have a lot of respect for those from the Ottawa Children's Aid. Since 2002, they have been working to get training in open-ended interviewing of children. I spent just under a year involved in a training course for them.

I: WAS IT SUCCESSFUL?

K: Yes! We have been able to publish several studies showing the wonderful improvements that this committed group of interviewers have made.

I: WHAT SORT OF IMPROVEMENTS DID YOU SEE?

K: Following training and regular feedback over an 8-month period, interviewers doubled their use of open-ended questions and halved their use of narrower questions; further the amount of information elicited from children in response to open-ended prompts (i.e., when the information is likely to be more reliable) tripled!

I: AND WERE THESE IMPROVEMENTS SEEN WITH THE FEEDBACK METHOD YOU MENTIONED EARLIER?

K: YES, I AM SURE THAT IT WAS THE KEY TO DEVELOPING THE SKILL. I: AND THE POST-TRAINING INTERVIEWS WERE NOT LONGER THAN THE PRE-TRAINING INTERVIEWS?

K: That is correct.

I: ARE THEY STILL GOOD INTERVIEWERS? BE HONEST!

K: Yes they are! I saw one of their interviews recently and I was very impressed. I've seen literally thousands of investigative interviews, and this was in the top 10%.

I: GOOD FOR THEM!

K: Yes, they have taken on the training themselves now, and have done some really innovative things like holding monthly 'labs where they discuss an issue related to interviewing children.

VI. CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTRES

I: HOW DO YOU SEE CHILD DEVELOPMENT RESEARCHERS FITTING IN WITH THE PROPOSED CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTRES?

K: It's a bit difficult to give a general answer to that. One of the things that was very clear at the recent Knowledge Exchange was that CACs can come in all shapes and sizes. Each Centre can work out the model that best fits them.

I: BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCE, DO YOU THINK A JOINT TRAINING MODEL WOULD WORK?

K: I do. I think it could be very helpful for the different professions represented in a given Centre to have some training in common. That way, each profession knows how everyone else has been trained, and I think consistency would be good for the children and their families that they serve.

VII. CONCLUSION

I: TO CONCLUDE, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE THE TOP THREE CHILD-FRIENDLY TECHNIQUES THAT INTERVIEWERS CAN USE?

- 1. Tolerate silences (pause for at least 2 seconds after each utterance to give children time to collect their thoughts).**
- 2. Do a practice interview**
- 3. Be willing to use a series of open-ended questions, one after the other.**

I: IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY IN CONCLUSION?

K: I have enormous respect for those people on the front line who conduct these interviews frequently. Interviewing children is an expert skill – it's not something that 'comes naturally'. Even though there are people who seem to effortlessly establish rapport with children, there is a lot more work to do once rapport has been established. Finally, feedback is vitally important to develop this expert skill.

I: THANK YOU.

K: My pleasure.