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Forensic Interviewing: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals

Investigating child maltreatment is challenging. Most child abuse and neglect occurs in private, and only those involved know exactly what happened. Further, there is rarely medical evidence, and in most cases, there is no test or set of symptoms that can confirm whether a child has been maltreated. Forensic interviewing is a means of gathering information from an alleged victim or witness to help determine what may or may not have occurred, and it is a key component of many child protective services and criminal investigations. The purpose of a forensic interview is to gather factual information in a legally defensible and developmentally appropriate manner about whether a child (or other person) has been maltreated (Newlin et al., 2015). Forensic interviews are typically conducted at children's advocacy centers (CACs) by trained professionals, including child welfare caseworkers, law enforcement officers, and specialized forensic interviewers. These interviewers are frequently part of a multidisciplinary investigation of the maltreatment allegations. This factsheet provides child welfare professionals with a brief overview of forensic interviewing so they can better understand how such interviews affect child protection practice. In addition, it offers information about the investigative process that can potentially help support children and families going through this stressful and sensitive process.

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OVERVIEW

In the 1980s, the manner in which children were interviewed during child abuse investigations came under increased scrutiny (Faller, 2020a). This was largely due to high-profile cases involving sexual abuse at child care centers. Critics of the interviews asserted children were improperly interviewed by professionals who were convinced the children had been abused. The assertion that many interviews about alleged incidences of child abuse were conducted improperly resulted in concerted attention to interview methods and strategies (Faller, 2020a). The forensic interviews conducted with alleged victims of child maltreatment are often essential to the investigation because, particularly in sexual abuse cases, the alleged victim and alleged perpetrator may be the only people who know what really happened. Research on interview techniques, child development, and other related topics shape what is now referred to as forensic interviewing in child welfare and criminal cases.

Forensic interviews are used by trained professionals to gather information about incidents of alleged child maltreatment in a manner that will yield factual information from the child so that child welfare workers can make case management decisions and interview findings can stand up to scrutiny in court. For example, forensic interviewing techniques are designed to remove or minimize suggestive or leading questions and behaviors that may call the child's statements into question. Forensic interviews can also help shape the investigation by highlighting areas for further investigation, corroboration, or evidence collection.

There are more than a dozen well-respected interview models (see the Forensic Interviewing Models section of this publication). Model use varies by jurisdiction, agency, and interviewer training, and who conducts the forensic interview also varies. Increasingly, many jurisdictions use specialized forensic interviewers whose primary role is to conduct forensic interviews, while other jurisdictions rely on law enforcement, child welfare, or other professionals who have been trained in forensic interviewing. Other members of the case investigative team may observe the interview either from behind a one-way mirror, by using a real-time video link, or by accessing audio or video recordings. Only trained professionals should conduct forensic interviews.

The interviews are often conducted at CACs, which began in the 1980s. CACs coordinate a multidisciplinary response to child maltreatment, which can help reduce the number of interviews children experience, streamline the investigation, and coordinate the delivery of services and supports. (For more information about CACs, visit The National Children's Alliance's How the CAC Model Works webpage.) When necessary, forensic interviews may also be conducted in other locations in the community that are neutral, child friendly, and otherwise appropriate for the interview (e.g., private, quiet).

The requirements or guidance about which cases should include a forensic interview may vary by jurisdiction. Child welfare professionals and others working on the case should consult their supervisors, other agency staff, law enforcement, or the prosecutor's office about the circumstances under which a forensic interview should be conducted.

FORENSIC INTERVIEWING MODELS

A variety of forensic interviewing models have been developed, and the one used in a child protective or criminal investigation may vary depending on jurisdiction, agency, or the training of the interviewer. Many models have continued to evolve and adapt over time as new research becomes available. The following are examples of forensic interviewing models:

- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Forensic Interview Training
- ChildFirst Forensic Interview Protocol
- CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol Training
- National Children's Advocacy Center Forensic Interview Structure
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Forensic Interview Protocol
- RADAR Forensic Interviewing Models for Children

Although the exact methods and strategies employed in each model differ to some extent, they all tend to have the following phases in common (Newlin et al., 2015):

- **Rapport-building phase:** The interviewer attempts to build a trusting relationship with the child and explains some of the details about the interview process (e.g., documentation, interview rules). This phase also allows the interviewer to better understand the child's developmental level, linguistic capabilities, and legal competency. All the models referenced above provide the child with opportunities to practice providing narrative information in response to open-ended inquiries about neutral or positive events in the child's life.
- **Substantive phase:** The interviewer then uses an open-ended prompt to transition to the information-gathering phase of the interview, during which the interviewer seeks information related to the alleged maltreatment. Best practices include obtaining a narrative description of the event, using open-ended prompts when possible, gathering additional details related to the maltreatment, and exploring alternative or multiple hypotheses (e.g., other possible explanations for the allegation of child maltreatment), if appropriate.
- **Closure phase:** Once the interviewer concludes that there is no more information to be elicited from the child, the interviewer should engage in closure strategies. The interviewer may address the child's socioemotional or other immediate needs, transition to a neutral topic not related to the alleged incident, or answer any questions. Some protocols instruct the interviewer to thank the child regardless of whether the child has made a disclosure.

The following are some of the ways in which forensic interviewing models may differ:

- **Interview structure:** Models vary in the extent to which they may be scripted or structured. There is still debate in the field about whether the interviewer should follow the child or the interview structure (Faller, 2020a).

- **Instructions:** There is consensus that children should be provided instructions or ground rules for the interview, but the exact instructions differ depending upon the model. Common topics covered by the instructions include requesting that the child only provide information about things that actually happened, giving the child permission to say "I don't know" or "I don't remember," advising the child to ask the interviewer to clarify a question if the child does not understand, and informing the child to alert the interviewer if the interviewer provides incorrect information. There is also some variation regarding when the interviewer provides the instruction. For example, most models provide the instructions during the rapport phase, but the CornerHouse method calls for the interviewer to provide some guidance at the beginning and then incorporate orienting messages (messages that provide context about the interview process and the environment, such as "When I ask questions, it's because I don't know what happened.") throughout the interview, where appropriate (Stauffer, 2020). The interviewer also may provide the child with opportunities to practice following the instructions (e.g., asking the child a question to which they would not know the answer in order to see if they will respond with "I don't know"). Having an opportunity to practice the instructions may be especially helpful for younger children.
- **Truthfulness discussion:** During the rapport-building phase, some models request that the interviewer ask the child to promise to tell the truth and/or for the interviewer to address the child's understanding of the difference between telling the truth and a lie. Eliciting a promise to tell the truth may be more effective among older children (Quas et al., 2018). Other models (e.g., RADAR) advise the interviewer to say, "Only tell me what really happened and don't talk about pretend." State and local rules and practices may dictate if and how a truth/lie discussion should occur during a forensic interview (Newlin et al., 2015).
- **Appropriate questions:** The purpose of all forensic interviewing models is to discourage the use of leading questions or techniques, but they may vary to some degree about which are the most preferred types of questions. There is consensus that invitational questions or probes (phrases that invite a detailed, multiword response, such as "Can you tell me everything you remember?" and "Say more about that.") are better than closed-ended questions (i.e., those that can be answered with a one-word response or little detail, such as "Did the man come into your bedroom?"). "Wh-" questions—such as "Who did this?" "Where were you?" and "When did this happen?"—are commonly used to elicit additional details after a child has provided a narrative description of their experience(s). These "wh-" questions have the potential to elicit information that invitational probes often overlook (Lyon & Henderson, 2020).

Use of Anatomical Dolls and Diagrams

The use of anatomical dolls and diagrams to help children describe or demonstrate their experiences is still up for debate in the field of forensic interviewing. Open-ended questions and probes encourage free recall by the child (i.e., the child is not externally prompted to recall a particular memory) and are most accurate, but free recall by children is often limited (Faller, 2007). Anatomical dolls and drawings rely on recognition memory (i.e., the doll is a cue for the child to trigger memory), which may be less accurate but more detailed. The cue of the anatomical doll or diagram could trigger the child's recognition of other body-related experiences. Proponents of anatomical dolls and diagrams rely on analogue research that indicates they may assist a child in explaining their actual experiences with a very small increase in false positives.[1] Opponents emphasize that free recall memory is more accurate and are concerned interviewers may use dolls or diagrams in leading or suggestive ways. Further, there is a modest body of research that indicates that children age 3 and younger may not be able to make the representational shift to understand that the doll is being used to represent themselves or the alleged offender (Faller, 2015).

In addition, forensic interviewing models differ about if and when to introduce dolls or diagrams in the interview. Most of the major forensic interview training programs in the United States (listed in the Forensic Interviewing Models section of this publication) state that anatomical dolls or diagrams should not be used in every case but that they may have benefits in certain cases (Vieth, 2022). Most models also agree that the usage of dolls or diagrams should not occur until after a child has made a verbal disclosure of abuse. However, some models (e.g., CornerHouse, ChildFirst) use body maps in the rapport-building phase to do a body-parts inventory.

For additional information, refer to *Anatomical Dolls and Diagrams* and *Anatomical Diagrams and Dolls: Guidelines for Their Usage in Forensic Interviews and Courts of Law*.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Each forensic interview will be a unique experience for both the interviewer and the child, as no two interviews are exactly alike. The following factors are critical to the understanding and practice of forensic interviewing:

- **Age and developmental level:** A child's age and developmental levels should be factored into any forensic interview. Developmental level can affect a child's memory, comprehension, sense of time, linguistic capability, attention span, and other attributes relevant to recalling and recounting an experience (Newlin et al., 2015). Some jurisdictions have policies about the minimum age a child must be (often age 3 years) to participate in a forensic interview.

[1] Analogue studies take advantage of events (e.g., medical exams) or create events (e.g., child is alone with a stranger, who is part of the study, in a trailer) that are intended to be similar to the situation being studied, such as child maltreatment.

- **Trauma:** Many children and youth who have been maltreated have experienced trauma. When gathering details about these potentially traumatic events, forensic interviewers should take a trauma-informed approach in order to avoid causing additional trauma. For example, interviewers may take breaks from difficult topics and provide support and reassurance as needed. In addition, the affect of trauma on memory may impact how a child acts during an interview. Traumatic experiences can shape how children store and recall memories of the event (Evans & Graves, 2018) and may impact a child's verbal skills, including their ability to recount an event. For example, some children may remember the traumatic event with the same clarity as a nontraumatic event, while others may not be able to provide the same level of detail or coherence.
- **Suggestibility:** Analogue research indicates some children are more suggestible than others. Children with intellectual impairment and those with emerging language skills may be particularly vulnerable to suggestion (Klemfuss & Olaguez, 2020). In a forensic interview, a false suggestion to a child could be made in many ways. For example, before the child has disclosed any abuse, the interviewer could explicitly say that something happened or phrase a question in a way that implies an event occurred. Interviewers should also be acutely aware of the potential for others to influence a child's statement and inquire accordingly if this appears to be a possibility.
- **Multiple interview sessions:** A single-session forensic interview is the preferred practice in most situations, in order to minimize trauma and maximize limited resources for completing investigations (Duron & Remko, 2020). However, there is a growing body of research that indicates that some children need more than one interview (Newlin et al., 2015). Some children may require more time to feel comfortable discussing maltreatment, to remember details, and to overcome intrapersonal obstacles, such as feelings of shame or guilt, and interpersonal obstacles (e.g., pressure from a caregiver not to disclose information) (Duron & Remko, 2020). Other factors, such as development, culture, or response to trauma can influence an individual's communication. Children who many benefit from multiple interviews include those who are very young, have developmental or cognitive delays, have a different cultural background than the interviewer, or who experienced human trafficking or extreme trauma. In these cases, multiple interviews can support efforts to maximize child protection and interview integrity. It is recommended that the same interviewer conduct each interview.
- **Bias:** Interviewers should be aware that they view allegations through the lens of their professional and personal experiences and that this could affect the child and the investigation. Interviewers who believe they already know what happened to the children may provide inaccurate information or details in an effort to confirm their own beliefs, which can elicit inaccurate statements (O'Donohue & Cirlugea, 2021). Even well-intentioned interviewers can become biased and inadvertently influence children. One way to help avoid bias is to use the interview to address a variety of hypotheses rather than to confirm or negate a particular one.

For guidance on conducting virtual forensic interviews, read *Emergency Tele-Forensic Interview Guidelines* by the National Children's Alliance (NCA).

TRAINING

Forensic interviewers, caseworkers, law enforcement officers, or other professionals require training in order to conduct forensic interviews, and the development of one's forensic interviewing skills are refined over time. Initial training generally ranges from 4 days to 1 week and is sponsored by a variety of organizations, including State agencies, professional organizations, and agencies responsible for conducting interviews. Advanced training is also available on a variety of topics, such as interviewing young children, interviewing across cultures, interviewing children with disabilities, managing bias, delivering court testimony, secondary trauma, and more. Many forensic interviewers are trained in the use of more than one model (Rivard & Compo, 2017).

To help strengthen their skills and address difficulties they have encountered, many forensic interviewers participate in expert supervision and/or peer review. Expert supervision involves the interviewer meeting individually or in a group setting with a more experienced interviewer, who can review interview transcripts or recorded interviews and provide feedback. This may assist in ensuring the newer interviewer is adhering to the model being implemented as well as general best practices. Peer review allows interviewers to discuss cases and current research and provide feedback and support to each other in a group setting. To achieve accreditation by the NCA, CACs must ensure forensic interviewers participate in a structured forensic interviewer peer review process at least two times per year. (For more information on accreditation, see the NCA's *National Standards of Accreditation for Children's Advocacy Centers: 2025 Edition*.)

"Interviewer drift" after training (drifting away from best practice standards toward less favorable interview strategies) has been identified as a problem in the forensic interviewing field (Everson et al., 2020). Both new and experienced forensic interviewers may benefit from opportunities to maintain and expand their skills and practice (Cordisco Steele & National Children's Advocacy Center, 2018).

For a more detailed overview of forensic interviewing, refer to *Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices*, which was published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. For information about conducting forensic interviews with Spanish-speaking children, refer to the *Guide for Forensic Interviewing of Spanish-Speaking Children* from the Center for Innovation and Resources.

CONCLUSION

Forensic interviewing is an extremely valuable tool for the investigation of child maltreatment allegations. In many cases, the forensic interview is the first contact a child has with the criminal justice or child protection communities and will guide much of the subsequent investigation. When properly executed, a forensic interview can assist in gathering factual information about the allegations using legally defensible techniques. A good forensic interview also can lead to appropriate decisions about child safety and help the child and family receive services and supports that best meet their needs. Given the complexity of conducting such interviews, it is crucial that child welfare and other professionals be properly trained before attempting to conduct forensic interviews.

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