

Interviewing Children about Allegations of Sexual Abuse, II

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We have received many inquiries about the article in our Fall 2005 newsletter entitled, "Interviewing Children about Allegations of Sexual Abuse" (currently posted on the "forensic articles" page of our website.), and we want to provide further information on procedures designed to elicit accurate reports from children regarding their experiences.

Children use language differently from adults and interpret concepts in extremely concrete terms. Thus, if you ask a child what a sentence "says," the child may answer, "Nothing, paper can't talk." Young children, especially preschoolers, tend to answer questions even if they have no knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, children tend to answer "Yes" when uncertain because this answer implies cooperation and may be perceived as the desired answer, especially if it is part of a tag question (e.g., "He touched you, didn't he?").

A "tag question" is a declarative statement followed by a short question that seeks confirmation of the statement's truth. This form of question can be very suggestive, especially for young children, because children are taught not to disagree or argue with adults and the "tag" seeks confirmation of the statement's accuracy.

When questioning children, certain practices will enhance the accuracy of their responses and reduce the likelihood that the child is misunderstood or considered unreliable. It is important to use simple, ordinary, common words, phrased in short sentences containing a subject, verb and object.

Young children have limited or no experience with the legal system and, consequently, they do not understand the technical terms used in legal settings, such as testify, oath, deny, pursuant, notwithstanding, et cetera. When complex, unfamiliar words are used along with complicated phrases (e.g., "Isn't it true that you did not report that he touched you until three weeks after the last time you saw him?" or "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?") young children may become confused. Confusion in this circumstance is likely to create the appearance that a child's report of an experienced event is invalid or unreliable when, in fact, the problem may stem from how the question was phrased.

Young children do not possess good understanding of language and, in particular, they do not consistently understand pronouns, even though they may use them correctly in their own speech. Children understand questions better when proper names are used instead of pronouns. Thus, it is better to ask, "What did Bob do?" rather than "What did he do?", or "Who was at Sue's house?" instead of "Who was there?"

Children are very literal in their use and interpretation of words, especially in comparison to adults, and often do not understand the relationship between a general concept (furniture) and one that is more specific (bed). Thus, a child may deny being on

the furniture when an event happened, only later to report that he was sitting on the bed when he was touched. Or, a child may say 'No' when asked if he was "touched" at a particular time, but may subsequently report being "tickled," "poked" or "pinched".

Children use and understand the word "touch" much differently than adults. "Touch" is a "higher order" word that adults realize includes other forms of contact such as kissing, hugging, slapping, kicking, et cetera, but children do not share this understanding. Thus, a child may report that an adult did not "touch" him but later report that the same adult "poked" him in the butt or "hit" him on the arm.

Children also use adult-like words but may not understand their meaning. This is particularly true for concepts dealing with age, time, space, and kinship. For example, young children tend to equate age with size, so a person that is "tall" is also "old." To a four-year-old, all adults and most children are "old," and not taking the child's perspective into account when evaluating this kind of information can cast doubt on his/her credibility.

Children learn some things by rote well before they understand the underlying concept. Thus, knowing how to count to 20 does not mean a child understands that ten is larger than six, or that a child can accurately estimate how many times an event occurred. A child may respond to an inquiry ("How many times did Joe touch you?") with an answer ("One hundred times."), intending to satisfy the adult questioner without regard for accuracy. Young children tend to indiscriminately use large numbers to indicate that an event occurred many times because they do not understand the relationship between the number given and the actual frequency of the event.

Similarly, the ability to recite a list (days of the week, months of the year) does not mean a child understands that Sunday is the first day of each week, that June comes after May or that Thanksgiving follows Christmas. The concept of days, weeks, months, and years develops after the ability to recite these lists, and it can be misleading to assume that a child understands a particular concept simply because he possesses its vocabulary. Stated in different terms, there is no reason to assume that a preschooler is competent at spelling simply because she can recite the alphabet.

Children at different ages may or may not understand the concept underlying specific words. For example, children under six have difficulty with spatial concepts like "ahead of" and "behind" ("Was he ahead of you or behind you?"), while children younger than five do not grasp the absolutes of "never," "always," "any," or "ever." Questions such as, "Have you ever told a lie?" "Did anyone say anything to you?" or "Did he always do it that way?" require a child to make a thorough search of all relevant experiences, and are so vague they promote inconsistent answers. It is generally preferable to phrase the question more specifically, such as "Did someone tell you to keep a secret," or "Did something happen at Tommy's house?"

Obtaining accurate reports from children about their experiences require understanding of how they use language and conceptualize ideas, since cognitive and verbal skills

develop as they grow. The use of unfamiliar words or complicated questions can easily create the impression that a child's report is unreliable or lacks credibility, and these consequences may result from an interviewer's use of developmentally inappropriate words or phrase. There is considerable research that demonstrates young children are able to provide valid, consistent and accurate reports of events they experienced, provided that questions are asked in a developmentally appropriate and non-leading fashion.

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