

INTERVIEWING CHILDREN ABOUT ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

By Daniel H. Swerdlow-Freed, Ph.D.

The prevalence of child sexual abuse is a disputed topic marked by disagreement of whether national statistics accurately reflect its incidence rates. Some experts argue that studies underestimate the true extent because all cases are not reported to authorities, while others argue that studies overestimate the incidence rates because they include unproven claims. There are at least four difficulties preventing resolution of the prevalence controversy: First, child sexual abuse does not always produce incontrovertible physical evidence. Second, behavioral symptoms associated with sexual abuse also occur for other unrelated reasons. Third, interviews of children do not always yield indisputable results. Fourth, disclosure may be followed by recantation making it difficult to ascertain which assertion is credible.

Identifying sexual abuse is further complicated by many factors. These include the child's age, maturity and understanding of the events in question, the child's understanding of anatomy and familiarity with sexual behavior, whether the abuse occurred once or multiple times, and whether the abuse was experienced as stressful.

Research has shown that children are capable of providing accurate accounts of their experiences provided that questions are simply stated and worded using language they understand. The interviewer must be aware that children make idiosyncratic interpretations of terms that are well known to adults. For example, one study found that children do not necessarily classify clothes the same way as adults. Thus, a child wearing pajamas at the time he was sexually abused might answer "No" when asked if he was wearing clothes. However, the same child may answer "Yes," when asked if his pajamas were taken off.

Research shows that the accuracy of children's reports can be adversely affected by questions that are poorly phrased or suggestive. This literature indicates that children can be confused by questions that contain single or double negatives, complicated vocabulary, or that utilize multiple parts or embedded propositions. Because children do not necessarily realize when they misunderstand a question, they may not ask for clarification and the misunderstanding can go undetected.

Forensic interviews of children, whether they occur in criminal or civil litigation, should include two essential features. First, a forensic interview should be geared toward the developmental age of the child and its content should be developed from information furnished by the child. Interviewers must avoid suggesting events that have not been mentioned by the child or suggesting that a specific person was responsible for any alleged behavior.

Second, the interview should test alternative hypotheses that explain the allegation and differentiate plausible from implausible explanations. A well conducted interview should clarify whether sexual abuse actually occurred or whether the alleged behavior can be

accounted for by another explanation. Ideally, if it is determined that abuse took place the interview will reveal the perpetrator's identity. Violating either of these guidelines may contaminate the child's account, making it difficult to determine what exactly occurred.

A forensic interview should begin by explaining its purpose to the child and ensuring that the child is ready to proceed. It is good practice to establish ground rules such as that the child knows the difference between the truth and a lie and intends to tell the truth, and that the child will alert the interviewer if the interviewer says something the child does not understand.

The substantive portion of the interview should be conducted without suggestive comments or questions. Statements such as, "Tell me about when your father touched your privates," or "Let's talk about when your mom touched your butt" are highly suggestive and are likely to contaminate the child's response. It is preferable, for example, to ask if the child knows the reason for the interview or to discuss the problems that have been going on in the family.

It is important to initially permit the child to give a narrative of the event in question and to withhold questions or comments. Free narratives can be initiated by statements such as "Tell me everything that happened, from the beginning to the end," or "Tell me everything that happened when you and Bob were home." Follow-up questions should be open-ended (i.e., "Tell me what happened next.") because children respond to these with longer and more detailed answers, and some children will answer focused questions (i.e., "Did Bob touch your butt?") even if they do not remember what actually transpired.

A proper inquiry builds on the free narrative by soliciting elaboration of what the child has already volunteered. Open-ended questions seek elaboration of a specific aspect of an account (e.g., "You said Bob got into the bed with you. Tell me everything that happened when Bob got into bed with you."), or clarify information that is contradictory (e.g., "First you said you were in the kitchen with Bob, but then you said you and Bob were downstairs. I'm confused about where you and Bob were. Can you tell me about that again?")

Specific but non-leading questions seek clarification of information the child has already volunteered. For example, an interviewer might ask, "Do you remember what you were doing just before Bob got into bed with you?"

Closed questions include those that can be answered 'Yes' or 'No,' or provide for only a few answers. Multiple choice questions should be avoided whenever possible because some children choose only one of the options, and responses to these inquiries are less accurate than to open-ended questions. If multiple choice questions are used it is preferable not to include the correct answer to avoid being suggestive. Thus, if an event happened in the basement, the interviewer could ask, "Did that happen in the kitchen, your bedroom or somewhere else?"

Interviewing children about allegations of sexual abuse takes specialized skill and knowledge. Questions must be carefully worded to ensure responses provide accurate, reliable information.

This article has previously been posted on www.drswerdlow-freed.com and is reprinted here with permission. If you are interested in more information about this or a related topic, please contact Dr. Swerdlow-Freed.