THE STEP-WISE INTERVIEW

A PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

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Overview

1. The Step Wise Interview has been designed with three distinct goals in mind:

   1. To minimize any trauma the child may experience during the interview.

   2. To maximize the amount and quality of the information obtained from the child while, at the same time, minimizing any contamination of that information.

   3. To maintain the integrity of the investigative process for the agencies involved.

2. The Step Wise Interview is an investigative interview. The procedure encourages and facilitates the child's recall of events. Every opportunity is provided to obtain the child's version. This is done by always beginning with the most general, open phase of the interview, and proceeding to more narrow forms of questioning only when required. The less prompting the better. The interviewer must demonstrate PATIENCE and allow as much of the interview content as possible to come from the child.
3. The Step-Wise interview is part of the fact finding process. If the investigator entertains only a single hypothesis, there exists a chance that the investigation might turn into an effort to 'prove' that hypothesis rather than an effort to find the hypothesis that best matches the facts of the case. Not only is this a poor investigative technique (i.e. working against goal no. 2) but it goes against the best interests of the child (i.e. working against goal no. 1) if that hypothesis is not the correct one. It is important that the investigators generate several hypotheses about the case.

4. The interviewer must be alert to developmental differences in language and memory. Never assume that you know what a child means by the use of a particular word. Always ask if the meaning is not obvious. Similarly, make certain that you are employing words and concepts which the child understands.

General Considerations When Interviewing Children

a. LOCATION

1. If circumstances permit, the interview should be conducted in a room specifically designed for the purpose. The interview room should be quiet and as free as possible from distractions. This includes distractions from outside the room (e.g. noise, people attempting to enter the room, telephones and so on.) and from within the room (e.g. toys, wheeled furniture, interview aids, etc.). The interview room should be as comfortable as possible with a range of sizes of furniture so that both preschoolers and adolescents can be reasonably accommodated.

2. Built-in audio and video taping capabilities are an advantage of a dedicated interview room. Whether the taping equipment is visible or not, it is
essential that the interviewer acknowledge the presence of the equipment. The purpose of the equipment should be explained to the child.

3. If the interview room is contained within an official context (e.g., a police office), every effort should be made to provide a separate entrance and waiting area.

4. If the interview cannot be conducted in a specially designed room, arrange the room to conform as closely as possible to this protocol. It is not advisable to conduct the interview in the location in which the abuse occurred.

b. PARTICIPANTS

1. Inter-agency co-operation often requires that both a social worker and a police officer are present for the interview. In such cases, they must arrange, in advance, who will initially conduct the interview. The other person then takes the role of the recorder. Although the recorder introduces himself/herself at the start of the interview and responds, when appropriate, to the child, the recorder does not actively participate in the interview. The reason for this is that having two active interviewers can be confusing for a child. Instead, the recorder takes notes. If at any time the interviewer is having difficulty, the interviewer and the recorder can exchange roles. If the interviewer does not encounter any difficulties, the two workers will still exchange roles after the interviewer has exhausted his/her questions.

2. A parent, guardian, therapist, or other concerned adult should not be present during the interview. The concerned adult could watch the interview through a one way mirror or on a video monitor, if either is available, or later view the video tape of the interview. Be sure that some support is provided to the parent(s) who is observing the interview. The exception to this exclusion of other adults occurs when the child will not consent to being interviewed without the presence of a parent or other trusted adult. In this case every effort must be made
to impress on the adult the importance of not interfering in the interview. They should be asked to remain silent and not to participate in any way (unless instructed to do so). If at all possible, they should be seated out of the child's line of vision and not have any physical contact with the child during the interview. In addition, they should be cautioned about how easy it is to react, without necessarily being aware of doing so, to the topics being raised and how such reactions can potentially contaminate the child's account.

3. The interviewer and recorder should sit close to the child at a distance that is comfortable for everyone. Make sure that there are no objects (e.g., tables) between the interviewer and the child, although a table next to both of you may be useful. With younger children it may be preferable for everyone to sit on the floor.

c. RECORDING

1. The interview should be video taped. The video picture should be focused upon the child but also include the interviewer and recorder. An audio tape backup is very useful, for both safety's sake (equipment has been known to malfunction) and for making transcripts.

2. In the absence of video equipment an audio tape should be made. If audio taping is also not possible a verbatim written record should be kept by the recorder.

3. Continuity of the video and/or audio recording is important. Begin any tape with a statement of who is present, and when and where the interview is occurring. Any interruption in the recording should be explained on the tape. A policy for the storage of and access to these tapes should be carefully developed.

d. PREPARATION

1. There are many situations in which it is useful to interview a child's parent before the interview with the child. This will be true especially if the allegation is
one of extra-familial abuse. However, some cases of intra-familial abuse may also benefit from a parental interview. This interview, which will often be with the child's mother, will focus on the following:

a. Language the child employs, particularly related to private parts and sex acts.

e. THE CHILD'S NEEDS

1. For both the sake of the child and the interview the investigators need to be aware of the child's emotional and physical needs. Be aware of the attention span, nutritional requirements and body functions of the child. Try not to conduct the interview when the child normally naps.

2. An investigative interview cannot also be a therapeutic interview. Attempting to combine investigation and therapy is virtually impossible. Any such hybrid interview tends to be both poor investigation and poor therapy. This does not mean, however, that an investigative interview need be a traumatic experience.
On the contrary, a traumatic interview is likely to lead to poor investigath'e results. The investigator can be supportive and helpful, while maintaining an objecth'e stance concerning the investigation.

f. YOUR REACTIONS

An investigator needs to be as aware of his or her own needs and reactions as those of the child. Allegations of child sexual abuse are never pleasant and sometimes horrific but it is of paramount concern that the interviewer be relaxed during the child's disclosure. This can be a very difficult situation for the child and perceiving the inten'viewer's discomfort can only make it worse. This not only goes against the best interests of the child but against the investigation as well. The investigators are unlikely to get a very rich description of the abuse if the child has noticed that the interviewer is having a hard time dealing with it.
THE STEP WISE INTERVIEW

THE FIRST STEP: THE INTRODUCTION

1. After the recording devices have started, the interviewer should state the date, time and location of the interview and the full names of everyone present. There is no need to make this step formal. The interviewer can accomplish this in a manner which engages the child (e.g., "Do you what the date is?" or "Do you know how to spell your name?"). As well, the interviewer and recorder can give the child brief descriptions of their professional roles. Of course, this description should be fairly specific to the matters at hand while, at the same time, not leading. For instance, you could simply say: "I'm a police officer/social worker and an important part of my job is talking with kids".

THE SECOND STEP: BUILDING RAPPORT

1. The primary purpose of this step is to put the child at ease (goal #1 of the interview). The form this takes will vary from child to child and requires flexibility and an appreciation of the needs of children. In some instances, it may require more than one meeting with the child to complete this single step.

2. The child can be asked about her or his favorite subject at school, what (s)he likes to do during free time, etc. Whenever possible, the interviewer should attempt to prompt the child for more information (thus modeling the interview process for the child). For instance, if the child replies that her favorite class is arithmetic the interviewer could ask her "Can you tell me any more about arithmetic class?"
3. Depending on the age of the child the interviewer may wish to determine the child's understanding of certain concepts (e.g., over and under, before and after, inside and outside, etc.). This can be done during the rapport building stage by using objects at hand to portray the concepts (e.g., the child could be asked "Did I put the pen on the table before of after the paper?").

4. Another purpose of this step is to give the interviewer some baseline information about the child's language and memory skills. Children often develop at very different rates and what one child does at the age of 6, another will not be able to do so until reaching the age of eight. The interviewer should ask the child to describe in detail two events, both of which are unrelated to the abuse allegation, such as what they did on their last birthday, their last field trip or the like (possible topics may have been developed during an interview with the child's parent). The child's description of a birthday party, a trip to a museum, etc. can give the interviewer a picture of the quality and quantity of detail the child provides about a memorable event. By the time a good rapport phase is finished the interviewer should have a pretty fair idea of how much detail the child normally gives when talking about recent events and how coherent her or his accounts are. This can be used to assess the child's memory when the discussion turns to the allegations of abuse.

5. The interviewer should be paying careful attention to the child's language abilities. Note the length of sentences the child uses, the type of words, and so on. Also, note the body language of the child, the nature of the child's eye contact and his/her affect.

6. The interviewer must remain flexible at all times. If the suspect is the child's teacher the interviewer should not ask about school related issues during this step. If the 'child' is teenager, s/he might want to get straight to the allegation. Skipping or minimizing the rapport building phase might be appropriate.
THE THIRD STEP: INTERVIEW RULES (OPTIONAL)

1. Under some circumstances the child's understanding of the interview process may be assisted by going over some basic interview rules with the child. The appropriateness of this step would depend on the age of the child and the circumstances of the interview. This step would not be appropriate with pre-school age children (it would confuse them), nor would it be helpful with most adolescents. Howe'er, for primary school age children this step should be considered.

INTERVIEW RULES

1. If I misunderstand something you say please tell me. I want to know, I want to get it right.

2. If you don't understand something that I say, please tell me and I will try again.

3. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, please tell me or show me the stop sign.

4. Even if you think I already know something, please tell me anyway.

5. If you are not sure about an answer, please do not guess, tell me your not sure before you say it.

6. Please remember when you are describing something to me that I was not there when it happened. The more you can tell me about what happened, the more I will understand what happened.

7. Please remember that I will not get angry or upset with you

8. Only talk about things that are true and really happened.
2. The interviewer should stress that these are rules that the interviewer is following. Not only do these ground rules help ensure a good interview (goal no. two) but they also can contribute to the first goal of the Stepwise Interview, minimizing trauma for the child. This is accomplished in two ways. In the first place these rules give the child some idea of what is ahead in the interview and what his or her role is to be in that process. The interview rules are quite explicit in showing that the child has a great deal of control in the interview. Secondly, simply finding out about the "very existence of a set of rules for child sex abuse interviews can be comforting to the child.

THE FOURTH STEP: ESTABLISHING THE NEED TO TELL THE TRUTH

1. The interviewer should ask the child to describe the meaning of truth and the consequences of telling lies.

2. If the Interview Rules were used (Step Three), the eighth interview rule leads quite naturally to this step. A step-wise approach is taken here. The interviewer should start with simply asking the child what telling the truth means, what telling a lie means and what happens when people tell lies. If the child does not seem able to define truth and falsehood, the interviewer can then give an example of a true statement and a false one, each time asking the child whether or not the statement is the truth or a lie. For instance, if the child was wearing a blue shirt, you can ask the child "If I said your shirt was red, would that be the truth or a lie?" as an example of a lie. Similarly, if the child is wearing black pants, the interviewer can ask "If I said your pants were black, would that be the truth or a lie?" as an example of a true statement. If the child still appears unable to distinguish truth from falsehood the interviewer can then try telling her/him one story where the protagonist tells the truth and another story where the main
character tells a lie. Of course, stories where a child gets into trouble should be avoided.

3. If the child clearly does not have the concepts of truth and lies, the interviewer should continue with the interview but with caution. The child may be susceptible to suggestion. However, any child who is unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood is unlikely to be a sophisticated liar.

THE FIFTH STEP: INTRODUCING THE TOPIC OF CONCERN

1. Introducing the topic of concern should follow the same step-wise approach which generally guides the interview. The topic is first introduced in the most general fashion - e.g., "Do you know why we're talking here today?". If the child has already made some sort of disclosure before the interview, this question will usually introduce the topic. If this is unsuccessful the interviewer can say, "I'm a police officer (or a social worker, etc.) and I talk to kids all the time about things that happen to them. Do you want to talk to me about anything that's happened to you?" If this doesn't work the interviewer can try the following: "Kids tell me about good things that have happened to them and bad things that have happened to them. Do you want to tell me about something good that has happened to you?" And later, "Do you want to tell me about something bad that happened to you?".

2. If the child has not disclosed abuse before the interview, alternative techniques are often required. For older children, the interviewer may want to canvas the names and roles of various adults in the child's life. With a younger child, try discussing the names and functions of the different parts of the human body. The interviewer or the child can draw the outline figure of a person the same gender as the child. The interviewer could also use ready made outline drawings for this purpose. Point out the different body parts to the child and have her or him tell you its name and function. The process should then be repeated with a figure
depicting the other gender. This, of course, gives the investigators the names the child uses for the sexual organs. But an added advantage is that the child's answers to the questions "And what is that for?" regarding the genitals and anus can be a method to elicit a disclosure. If nothing comes of this the interviewer can ask the child who has seen and/or touched various parts of the child's body.

3. If none of these methods has elicited a disclosure, some child protection mandates may require even more direct questioning. This should only be done as a last resort and only when there are sound reasons to believe that the child is at risk of abuse. Such direct questions severely compromise any subsequent criminal proceedings, may negatively affect family court proceedings and make any sort of credibility analysis virtually impossible. Such questions can also be disturbing for the child in cases where no abuse has occurred. In addition, great caution should be taken here regarding the child's vulnerability to suggestive questioning. If the interviewer must resort to direct questioning the child should be given several alternatives such, as "Did Mr. Harris touch you there or did your Daddy touch you there or did nobody touch you there?". Questions such as these should be asked again, later in the interview, altering the order of the alternatives. If this form of direct questioning produces a disclosure, the interviewer should immediately return to the most general and open form of questions.

THE SIXTH STEP: FREE NARRATIVE

1. This is the most important step in the interview. You must provide every opportunity for the child to provide his/her own version of the events.

2. If the allegation is of a single incident of abuse, the interviewer should say to the child something like this: "I'd like you to tell me everything you remember about what happened starting from the beginning". The child should not be interrupted during the free narrative, even if the child starts to describe seemingly
irrelevant details or begins to contradict herself or himself. The investigators can make brief notes regarding any inconsistencies or other questions and save them for the Specific Questioning Step of the interview. The child should be allowed to go at her or his own pace and the interviewer must be patient when the child pauses. If, however, it seems that the child is not going to continue the account the interviewer should attempt to restart the narrative. The best method for this is to simply say: "What happened next?" or "You were saying that (here restate the last thing the child said). And then what happened?". The interviewer should keep a relaxed, non-judgmental tone and proceed at the child's pace.

3. If the allegation is one of repeated sexual abuse first obtain an outline of the usual pattern of abuse (i.e., the script). The interviewer can say something like this: "Tell me what would usually happen." After this, the child can be asked about particular incidents, following the same basic technique outlined in the previous paragraph (point 2). The interviewer should start by asking the child if there was any time it happened in a different place, or in a different way (i.e., prompt for script violations). The interviewer may also ask if the child remembers the first time or the last time the abuse occurred. Again, the child should not be interrupted no matter how verbose or inconsistent the story is. The investigators should make notes of any questions that they may have about the narrative and save them for later. The interviewer should be reasonably tolerant of pauses but if the child seems to be in need of prompting only non-leading prompts such as "What happened next?" should be used. After the child has finished the interviewer should help the child develop a label for that particular incident. The label should be mutually agreed upon and should be easily connected to that particular incident. Labels that could be connected to more than one incident should be avoided. The labeling of different abusive incidents helps organize both the child's memories and the investigators understanding of the sexual abuse.
4. The interviewer can also ask the child if there is any other abusive incident that s/he remembers quite well. If there is such an incident, the child's free narrative concerning it should be obtained.

5. If the child becomes upset at any point in the interview (during this or any other step), acknowledge the distress and see if the child wants to pause or talk about something else. When the child has regained his or her composure return to the topic which caused the distress. It may be necessary to move to and from this topic several times until the child is able to talk about it.

6. If the Interview Rules were not reviewed in Step Three, the interviewer may want to introduce the "Stop Sign" at an appropriate time. The interviewer holds out her/his hand, palm outward, to the child and says "This is your stop sign. If I ever ask you about something that makes you feel uncomfortable, hold out your hand like this and we'll talk about something else for a bit, okay?" This technique has several advantages. It has the obvious benefit of avoiding trauma for the child while still keeping the lines of communication open. It also gives the child a feeling of some control over the interview, thus making it a perhaps less frightening experience. In addition, it also tells the interviewer that the child has more to say. When the child uses the stop sign gesture (or becomes distressed) the interviewer should change the topic to something less unpleasant. After the child has recovered the interviewer can make another attempt at the distressing topic.

THE SEVENTH STEP: OPEN QUESTIONING
1. After the child has exhausted her/his free narrative for one incident, the interviewer can begin to ask open questions. The purpose of this step is to assist the child in recalling more details about the incident. If an open question causes a child to disclose a new incident, the interviewer should 'go back' a step and obtain a free narrative on that incident.
2. Open questions are requests for more details about the event disclosed in the free narrative such as "Do you remember any more about the time it happened in the kitchen?" In cases of multiple abusive incidents, the advantages of labeling each incident should become readily apparent here. When asking open questions it is absolutely imperative that the interviewer let the child know that "No, I don't remember." is a perfectly acceptable answer. By the same token, open questioning should never be leading.

3. A useful memory aid during the open question step is the construction of a "W-H chart". Just take a piece of paper and write on the top the label for the incident and along the side the prompts WHO, WHERE, WHEN, and WHAT. Then the interviewer can say something like this: "Tell me everything you can remember about who was there during the Park Time?" The interviewer would then repeat this for where the Park Time happened, when it happened and what occurred. The interviewer can thus non-suggestively obtain essential details that might be missing from the free narrative. This also can be used as an aid for the child in organizing her/his memories of the different abusive incidents.

THE EIGHTH STEP: SPECIFIC QUESTIONS (OPTIONAL)

1. The purpose of this step is to provide an opportunity to clarify and extend previous answers. This step is only taken when the previous steps have prompted insufficient information to assess the credibility of the allegations.

2. Avoid multiple choice questions. If you must take the step of using alternative answers, try to include more than two alternatives (e.g., "Did this happen in the autumn, winter, spring or summer or do you remember?"). At a later time repeat the question, changing the order of the alternatives.
3. Never include information you have obtained from another source in your questions (e.g., "I understand from your mother that your Uncle Bob took some pictures of you?"). The exception to this rule would be to use the information as a mnemonic. For example, if the pictures have not been mentioned through the free narrative and open question steps, you could ask, "Do you remember anything about some pictures?"

4. If there are inconsistencies in the child's statement they should be addressed toward the end of the interview. Probe the inconsistencies as gently as possible (e.g., "You said he put his finger inside you but you also said you had a snow suit on. Can you tell me how that happened?").

5. If the child has displayed language and/or knowledge that seems inappropriate for her or his age, this would be the time to determine where the child learned that knowledge or those words.

THE FINAL STEP: CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW

1. No matter what the outcome of the interview the interviewer should thank the child for participating.

2. The interviewer should ask the child if s/he has any questions for the investigators. Questions that can be answered should be answered.

3. The interviewer should explain to the child what will happen next in the investigation. The interviewer should refrain from making any promises that can not be kept.
OPTIONAL STEPS

These steps may be included in the interview under certain circumstances but are not an inevitable part of the interview process.

INTERVIEW AIDS

1. With younger children, children with language difficulties or children with emotional difficulties, it may be necessary to use interview aids during the interview. Such aids should only be used when the other steps of the interview have proved inadequate. The aids should not be suggestive and should not be used in a suggestive fashion. Use the Step-Wise approach when using interview aids. For example, if drawings are to be used begin with having the child do the drawing. If you must do the drawing, draw the minimum features necessary and have the child add the rest.

2. In rare cases anatomically detailed dolls may be required to assist the child with the description of a sexual act. These dolls should only be used as a last resort and the dolls should never be used to obtain a disclosure.

3. Never introduce interview aids as fun or play activity.

LEADING QUESTIONS OR SUGGESTION

1. Under unusual circumstances a child protection worker may have to probe a child who has not disclosed abuse. Using leading questions to probe for possible
abuse is a last resort and dramatically reduces the likelihood of criminal proceedings (and may negatively affect civil court decisions). This step should be taken only when every other step in the interview process has failed to yield any information and there is a strong reason to believe the child is at risk of abuse.

2. Younger children may be susceptible to suggestion. If the interviewer suspects the child is suggestible it is appropriate to check this toward the end of the interview. This can be done by asking a couple of leading questions that have nothing to do with the allegations.

REQUESTING A REPETITION

1. If the credibility of the child's statement is in doubt, it can be helpful to have the child repeat all or part of the allegations. Make sure that you communicate to the child that the purpose of the repetition is to help you understand what happened.

THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

1. If the child has had difficulty recalling sufficient detail or if credibility is in doubt, the cognitive interview can be a useful tool. It consists of four instructions, although they should all be used only with older children. The four parts of the cognitive interview are:
I. Context Reinstatement - ask the child to mentally recreate the circumstances in which the event occurred (e.g., how she felt before the event, what she was doing before the event, what the weather was like, etc.).

II. Exhaust Recall - tell the child not to leave anything out, regardless of how unimportant it seems.

III. New Perspective - ask the child to recall the event from a novel perspective (e.g., "If there had been a camera on the ceiling of the bedroom that day, what would the camera have seen?"). Avoid using words like imagine or pretend. This instruction should only be used with older children.

IV. Backward Recall, ask the child to recall the event backwards. This instruction should only be used with older children.

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