



Children of all ages can tell us what they know, if we ask them the right questions in the right way.

Anne Graffam Walker, 1

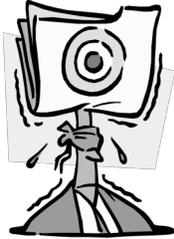


Child Development & Interviewing Skills

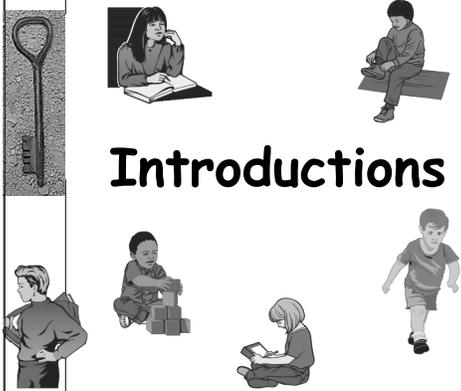
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Ever feel like this when asking children for information?



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Introductions

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Who interviews children?

- Parents & other family members
- Judges
- Prosecutors/Defense attorneys
- Guardians ad litem
- Child protective services workers
- Law enforcement personnel
- Medical personnel
- Mental health providers
- Victim's service providers
- Teachers & day care workers

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There are Several Potential Obstacles or Blocks to Communicating with Children

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Potential Blocks When Talking with Children

- ◆ Age
- ◆ Developmental level
- ◆ Verbal skills/ language
- ◆ Cultural/ethnic background
- ◆ Socioeconomic status
- ◆ Emotional issues
- ◆ Family dynamics
- ◆ Relationship to perp
- ◆ View of the "system" (system problems)
- ◆ Characteristics of professionals
- ◆ Time of day
- ◆ Environment

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Age/ Developmental Level

- ◆ Young children have very short attention spans.
- ◆ Child may not understand the questions being asked.
- ◆ Child may not have the language skills necessary to answer questions that are asked.

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Characteristics of Children's Language

- ◆ Children think you know what they know.
- ◆ Children change from topic to topic quickly.
- ◆ Children take things literally.
- ◆ Even older children are confused by double negatives.
- ◆ Confuse "wh--" questions (who, what, where, when).
- ◆ Think they have to have an answer.
- ◆ Confuse time concepts: today vs. tomorrow vs. yesterday.

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Language

- ◆ When children don't understand the meaning of a word, they attribute their own meaning to it, based on their own experiences and knowledge.
- ◆ Court
- ◆ Case
- ◆ Charges
- ◆ Allegations
- ◆ Hearing
- ◆ Parties

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Stages of Memory

- ◆ Code What we think is important (kids think differently)
Influenced by paying attention
Stress and anxiety interfere with encoding
- ◆ Retain Better retained the better encoded
Status of retained information may change over time
- ◆ Retrieve Dependent on language development
Influenced by context of interview and child's attention span
Influenced by emotion and stress

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Questions should be developmentally appropriate.

- ◆ Toddler: 18 months - 3 years
- ◆ Preschool: 4 - 7 years
- ◆ School Age: 8 - 11 years
- ◆ Adolescent: 12 - 16 years

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Toddler: 18 months - 3 years

- ◆ Under age 2 ½ it is very unlikely that you will get any usable information
- ◆ 2 ½ to 3 ½ presents a challenge
- ◆ Very short attention span
- ◆ Few or no details

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Communication is **Personal** and **Unstable**

- Child may use words that have special meaning in his/her world
- Child may use words without knowing what they mean
- Child may confuse pronouns like "him" and "her"

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Always check out who the child means when he/she uses a pronoun.
- ◆ Always check out what a child means by the term used. May need to ask a family member.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Communication appears **Disorganized**

Information is reported out of sequence - disjointed

- Doesn't begin at the beginning or end at the end
- Child will start with whatever part of the story "pops in their head"
- May report aspects of various incidents as if they all happened at one time
- In ongoing therapy more of the story often emerges

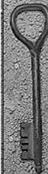
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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Assist the child with sequencing:
 - "When Mom & Dad smoke, how do they act?"
 - "They fight."
 - "What happens after they fight?"

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Communication appears **Fanciful** and **Improbable**

- Child may accurately report an event but misunderstand its meaning
- Never assume the child is making something up or is disturbed
- Seek help in understanding these elements

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Consider that the child may be repeating what he/she was told.
- ◆ Child may be using the only words he/she has for the unknown.
- ◆ Child may be right.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Thinking is **Pre-logical**

- Child cannot explain events
- Child cannot explain own thinking
- Child believes "BECAUSE" is an explanation
- Child cannot answer "How do you know...?"
- Child does not understand "cause & effect"
- Child does not understand "what if..." or hypothetical questions

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Avoid asking "why" questions.
- ◆ Usually poor at source monitoring.
- ◆ Don't set the child up to fail!!!!!!

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Children may **Fuse Separate Events**

- Children may fuse different events into a whole or remember parts of different events as one incident.
- They use "scripts" to aid memory.

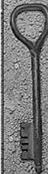
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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Help child separate events with questions.
 - Ask a specific time or place.
 - "When you were at your dad's for Christmas..."
 - "When you were camping and it was cold outside..."

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Communication is **Egocentric**

- Child uses names of people, places and things without explanation.
- Child is unable to do "perspective taking" or to take the view of other people.
- Child assumes that if you, the interviewer, know one thing, then you know everything.
(Therefore, there is no need to tell you.)

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Always ask the child to explain:
 - “Who are Brittany and Amy?”
 - “Where was the dog?”
 - “Where did the gun (vs. weapon) come from?”
 - “What happened to the gun?”
- ◆ Don’t assume you know what the child means.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Thinking and communication are Concrete

- Can talk about things that they can touch and see
 - People, objects, toys, furniture, animals, etc.
- Can’t talk about abstract concepts
 - Eternity, memory, why?
 - May not know numbers, sequences, colors, prepositions
 - Poor concept of time, space, distance

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

★ Questions should be

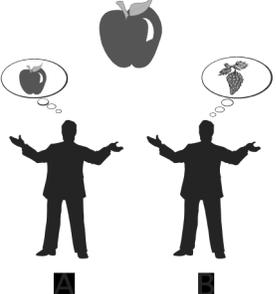
Simple and Concrete

NOT

complex or abstract!!

★

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Don’t expect correct answers to questions about time or dates.
- ◆ Remember that the child will do better at showing rather than at telling.
- ◆ Assess child’s knowledge before asking an abstract question:
 - Have child demonstrate knowledge of color, prepositions, sequences, etc.
 - Don’t discount child’s statement because they are inaccurate about times, distances, etc.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Short Attention Span

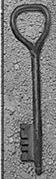
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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Limit interviews to 10 - 20 minutes
- ◆ Refocus attention
 - Repeating the child's name
 - Instructions, commands (Sit here and tell me...)

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

- Believe adults are always right.
- Are easily intimidated.
- Children are poor at catching their own mistakes.
- Are capable of lying, usually to deny something - very poor at it!
- Express feelings with their bodies.
 - Anxiety is expressed in movement.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Don't ask child to guess or acquiesce.
- ◆ Limit repetitive questioning.
- ◆ Ask questions to determine what child may have been told to say:
 - Did someone tell you about coming here today?
 - What did they tell you?
 - Did someone tell you what to say today?
- ◆ Provide reassurance.

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School Age: 4 - 7 years

Age 4	Age 5
➢ Who	➢ Who
➢ What	➢ What
➢ Where	➢ Where
➢ <i>Maybe</i> When	➢ <i>Maybe</i> When

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School Age: 6 - 7 years

Age 6 - 7

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Number of times (*maybe*)
- Circumstances (*maybe*)

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**A Child's perspective
Changes
with
Age and Experience**

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School Age: 8 - 11 years

- Attention span is longer but still not very long!
- Sitting still and paying attention are still difficult for more than ~20 minutes.

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School Age: 8 - 11 years

- Easily embarrassed
- Conscious of wanting approval
- Sensitive to issues of fairness, right and wrong
- Have feelings of guilt and responsibility

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School Age: 8 - 11 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Provide structure to the interview.
- ◆ Child may be the very anxious about court/proceedings or the line of questioning and he/she may know just enough to worry.

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School Age: 8 - 11 years

- ◆ Child will answer only what is asked.
- ◆ Thinking is still concrete:
 - They understand things they can touch and see better than "ideas"
- ◆ Thinking still focuses on one aspect of a situation.
- ◆ May ignore other details or not understand the need to report them.

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School Age: 8 - 11 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Keep questions simple.
- ◆ Don't assume you know the child's meaning.
- ◆ Child will interpret questions literally.
 - Clothes vs. pajamas
- ◆ Follow the child's lead.
- ◆ Do not assume the child can give you the details you expect.

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School Age: 8 - 11 years

Thinking remains **Egocentric**

- ◆ Child still has difficulty with perspective taking
- ◆ Still doesn't realize the listener can't "fill in the blanks"
- ◆ Views adults as all knowing
- ◆ Believes that when adults are upset, kids are automatically in trouble

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School Age: 8 - 11 years

- ◆ Not very good at “if - then” reasoning.
- ◆ Can’t predict what will happen based on past events.
- ◆ Can’t answer hypothetical questions.
 - “What would have happened if....”
- ◆ Questions about time are still hard.
 - Time sense is poorly developed
- ◆ Don’t do well with multiple questions.

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School Age: 8 - 11 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Avoid “How long did...” questions.
- ◆ Avoid “Was it a long time ago...”
- ◆ Use anchors:
 - “What grade were you in?”
 - “Was it close to a holiday?”
- ◆ Focus on one aspect of a question at a time:
 - “Where was Mom when the phone rang?”
 - “And where was your brother?”

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School Age (8 - 11 years)

Ages 8 - 11

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Number of times (*maybe*)
- Circumstances (*maybe*)

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Ever feel like you have to go around the world to get information from children?



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Adolescents: 12 - 16 years

- ◆ May be capable of abstract thinking (even though some adults are not).
- ◆ May now be able to engage in
 - “if - then” reasoning (this varies).
- ◆ Capable of perspective taking.
- ◆ Capable of deception, manipulation, but don’t assume child is engaging in these practices.

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Adolescents: 12 - 16 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Don’t assume they know what they seem to know.
- ◆ Don’t challenge their defensiveness.
- ◆ Validate their frustration or embarrassment.
- ◆ If the adolescent is a crime victim, he/she may feel responsible or like a “co-conspirator.”

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Adolescents: 12 - 16 years

- ◆ Not as suggestible as younger children, but very influenced by peers.
- ◆ Still not very good at narrative.
- ◆ Better at sequences and dates, but still lack adult understanding of time.
- ◆ Can be acutely self conscious and dramatic.
- ◆ May function more like a school age child, especially if from an impoverished background.

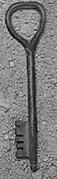
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Adolescents: 12 - 16 years Interviewing Tip

- ◆ Avoid double negatives.
- ◆ Keep questions short.
- ◆ Use simple language.
- ◆ Don't assume they know what you mean or that you mean the same thing (gun vs. weapon).

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Adolescents (12 - 16 years)

Ages 12 - up

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Number of times
- Circumstances

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Types of Questions

- ◆ Open or Free Recall
 - Narrative
- ◆ Focused Recall
 - Focused Narrative
- ◆ Multiple Choice
 - Limited Selection
- ◆ Yes/No
 - Yes/No
- ◆ Misleading/Suggestive
 - Inaccurate

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Examples of Types of Questions and Responses...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Open or Free Recall: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “What happened?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Narrative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Dad was smoking from the pipe and then the kitchen exploded and it was hard for me to breathe.”
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Types of Questions and Responses...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Focused Recall: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “When you are hungry, who feeds you?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Focused Narrative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Well, if my mom is not sleep or mad, she will give us something to eat, but she is mad a lot of times.”
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Types of Questions and Responses...

- ◆ **Multiple Choice:**
 - “Which beef jerky did you take, the original, spicy, or some other kind?”
- ◆ **Limited Selection:**
 - “Spicy”

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Types of Questions and Responses...

- ◆ **Yes/No:**
 - “Have you ever taken anything before?”
- ◆ **Yes/No:**
 - “No.”

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Types of Questions and Responses...

- ◆ **Misleading/Suggestive:**
 - “You also sell drugs, don’t you?”
- ◆ **Inaccurate:**
 - “What? No, not me, that’s the other guy, that guy dressed in the Santa suit.”

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Consider the Child’s Experiences with:

- ◆ The legal system
- ◆ Law enforcement
 - Prior negative experiences
 - Prior arrest of family members
- ◆ Social services
- ◆ Domestic violence
- ◆ Immigration issues

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Culture and Background

- ◆ In some cultures, anything or anyone who is considered to be part of the “system” is thought to be bad and avoided.
- ◆ This may lead to avoidance of questions/issues.

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Emotional Issues

- ◆ Feelings such as fear, shame, embarrassment, anger or guilt may influence child’s cooperation with the interview process.
- ◆ Worries about the outcome of court may inhibit a child’s responses to questions.

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Family Dynamics

- ◆ The degree of family support may impact how comfortable the child is in court and what the child is willing to say.
- ◆ If there is an offender in the family, this may also impact how willing the child is to provide information to the court.

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Relationship to the Offender/Perpetrator

- ◆ May determine the child's loyalty to the perpetrator/offender.
- ◆ Influences degree of blame child places on self.
- ◆ Determines how open the child will be in revealing details.
- ◆ Influences how willing the child is to talk to professionals involved in the case.

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Setting/ Environment

- ◆ Location of interview.
 - Is it a safe, non-threatening place?
- ◆ Time of day:
 - If the child is hungry or tired, he/she may be less willing to provide information.

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Characteristics of Professionals

- ◆ Children read body language: closed, aggressive, or "mean" body language indicates to the child that he/she should be guarded.
- ◆ Child may shut down.
- ◆ If professional reminds the child of someone familiar, this may influence how the child acts toward that person (either positively or negatively).

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Help Children Move from Topic to Topic

- ◆ "Now we're going to talk about what happened after the police came."
- ◆ "When Bobby, came into your room, what happened next?"
- ◆ Help separate events with questions.
 - "When you were at your mom's for Thanksgiving...?"

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Avoid use of legal terms/jargon
- ◆ Avoid use of technical terms
- ◆ Avoid using vague references
- ◆ Clarify who/what the child is referencing when using pronouns
- ◆ Keep questions short and language simple
- ◆ Avoid multisyllabic words

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Never substitute your words for the child's words
- ◆ Follow the child's lead
- ◆ Avoid using quantifiers - "a couple," "a few"
- ◆ Do not ask the child to guess
- ◆ Avoid inappropriate reinforcement or bribery

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Avoid "why" questions
- ◆ Avoid "Do you remember..." and "Can you tell me..." questions
- ◆ Ask only one question at a time
- ◆ Limit repetitive questioning
- ◆ Avoid shifting topics or incidents without warning

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Clarify meanings of words, even if you think you know what the child means
- ◆ Listen carefully to answers
- ◆ Avoid negative stereotypes
- ◆ Avoid double negatives
- ◆ Never end a question with a "tag," e.g.,
 - He told you not to tell, didn't he."

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Let the child know they can say, "I don't know."
- ◆ Let the child know that you don't know what they know
 - "I wasn't there so I will need you to tell me what happened."
- ◆ Use the child's name to get their attention

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Interviewing Tips: All Ages

- ◆ Allow for breaks as needed
- ◆ Do provide reassurance
- ◆ Acknowledge fears as well as courage
- ◆ Don't challenge defensiveness

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"On the evening of January third, you did, did you not, visit your grandmother's sister's house and didn't you see the defendant leave the house at 7:30, after which you stayed the night?"

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ask them the right
questions in the
right way.

Anne Graffam Walker, 73



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