Interviewing Children & Forensic Interviews: Developmental and Practical Considerations

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Objectives

• Understand how talking with children must differ from talking with adults.
• Identify what children can tell at different developmental stages.
• Understand how the Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) model works.
• Identify steps to take if a child discloses abuse while you are their G.A.L.
Differences to Consider

- Attention Span
- Suggestibility
- Language Skills
- Emotional Regulation
- Family Dynamics
Attention Span

• Short!
  • Often don’t pay attention to questions.
  • In the middle of a question, they may lose focus.
  • Have to pay attention to remember.
  • Pay more attention to things that have meaning to them (electronics, games, phone, friends).
  • Move from one topic to another quickly, without letting us know.
Language Skills

• All ages misunderstand adult terms/jargon.
• Confuse “wh. . “ questions
• Take things literally.
• Won’t say they don’t understand, will just respond with whatever seems salient at that moment or won’t respond at all.
• When questions are repeated, they may think they got it wrong before and may change their answer.
Suggestibility

- Tendency to want to please adults.
- The younger the child, the more highly suggestible.
- Implications for questioning: Must be non-leading.
- More open-ended questions tend to provide more reliable information.
Emotional Regulation

• May lack “filters”- say whatever comes to their minds.
• When they are ________ (tired, hungry, angry, anxious. . . ) they show it.
• May cry openly
• May engage in other behaviors that are either uncomfortable, distracting, or annoying to adults.
Family Dynamics

• Family relationships may influence what a child reports or does not report.
• Children may have been told what to say/not say.
• Children worry about losing a parent or being taken away from a parent.
• Even if a parent is neglectful or abusive, the child likely still loves that parent and is concerned about what will happen to him/her.
• Family problems are confusing to children and adolescents and typically cause a great deal of stress.

• Children may experience a broad range of emotions about the family (all at the same time).

• It’s not about you.
Take Home Point:

- In general, speaking to a child as if s/he is an adult will not only be ineffective, but it also may shut the child down and keep him/her from talking with you at all.
So, how do we talk with children?

- First, consider the child’s developmental level and approach the child in a developmentally appropriate manner.
Child Development Considerations

• Prior to age 2, language has typically not developed well enough for child to communicate viable information.

• Consider general characteristics in the following age groups:
  – Age 2 – 3 years
  – Age 4- 5 years
  – Age 6 – 9 years
  – Age 10 – 12 years
  – Age 13 to 16 years
Age 2 - 3

• May be able to provide “Who” and “What” information.
  – Such as who touched/hurt them.
  – Generally what happened.

Very short attention span.
Very few details.
Likely knows names for parts of the body.
Age 2-3 Continued

- Respond well to drawing.
- May think adult already knows everything that happened.
- May not be toilet trained.
- May ask you “nosy” questions.
- Typically are easily redirected
- Particularly important not to suggest information to this age group.
Age 4-5

• May be able to respond to “Who”, “What”, and “Where” questions.
• Better language skills, but not good with chronicity or ordering information.
• Tend to respond with “bits and pieces” or may appear to be linking events together when those events actually did not occur together.
Age 4-5 Continued

• More imaginative; check for what really happened.
• Confuse pronouns
• Confuse terms like yesterday and tomorrow
• Communication disorganized: Doesn’t start at the beginning and progress orderly.
• Reports whatever they happen to think of at a given moment.
Age 6 - 9

- May be able to respond to “Who”, “What”, “Where”, and General “When” questions (school day or not)
- Hear terms and use them inappropriately; always check for meaning.
- May report parts of different incidents as if they all happened at the same time.
Age 6-9 Continued

• May be able to tell more about circumstances of an event.
• Tend to focused on senses/sensory info.
• Tend to express feelings with body movements (i.e. anxiety = fidgeting or rocking)
• Are capable of lying, but are not good at it.
• May be easily intimidated by adults; concerned with pleasing others.
Age 10 - 12

- Longer attention span, but easily distracted.
- Easily embarrassed
- Sensitive to issues of fairness and right/wrong
- Tend to take on feelings of guilt and responsibility, especially for family problems.
- Likely will only answer what is asked; may leave out details.
Age 10 -12 Continued

• More aware of consequences of telling and what may happen to adults
• May be able to tell who, what, where, general when, circumstances, but may be shut down my fears.
• Not good with hypothetical questions (lack abstract reasoning ability).
Age 13 - 16

• May be able to provide specific details about full spectrum of information (although specific “When” remains poor).
• Capable of understanding another’s perspective.
• May be defensive, frustrated, protective, embarrassed, or may feel misunderstood.
• May feel like “co-conspirator”
Age 13-16 Continued

- Capable of deception and manipulation, but don’t assume the teen is engaging in these.
- Easily influenced by peers
- May be highly self-conscious
- May be overly dramatic
- May present at “pseudo-mature”
- If traumatized, may present as a younger child does.
Implications for Communicating with Children

• Keep questions short and simple
• Avoid using jargon
• Use the child’s name to focus them
• Use open and focus-open questions
• Use drawing to decrease intensity if needed.
• Listen to child’s response in order to know what to ask next.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Prompt</th>
<th>Type of Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open/Open Invitation</td>
<td>Provided by the child; requires more than one word response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused-recall</td>
<td>Provided by the child and focused on a particular topic; requires more than a one word response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-Choice/Option Posing</td>
<td>Selected Responses provided by interviewer; may offer open option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes/No (closed)</td>
<td>Simply require a “yes” or “no” answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading/Misleading</td>
<td>Directly or subtly suggest a response; information comes from the interviewer, not the child. Not appropriate to use leading questions with children/adolescents.</td>
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(Based on ChildFirst training, Gundersen)
Suggestions for Talking with Children

• Listen carefully to what the child says.
• Base your next question on what the child just told you.
• Ask as many open and focused-recall questions/invitations that you can. (Example: “Tell me all about that.”)
• Understand age and developmental ability.
When to Stop Questioning Children:

• When there is a report or disclosure of abuse or neglect.
In accordance with MS.Code 43-21-353, any professional having reasonable cause to suspect that a child is neglected or abused, shall make a verbal report immediately by phone, followed soon after by a written report, to the MS Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS).
Information to Include in Report to CPS

• 1. Name, age, and address of the child.
• 2. Name and addresses of parents/guardians
• 3. Nature of abuse being reported
• 4. Identity of the offender (if known).

*Reports should be made, even if you don’t have all of the above information.
MDCPS- Child Abuse Hotline

- The Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS) mans the child abuse reporting line 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year.

- 1-800-222-8000 or (601) 432-4570

- www.reportabuse@mdcps.ms.gov
What Are Forensic Interviews?

• Legally sound
• Fact-Finding
• Neutral, Objective, & Non-Leading
• Developmentally sound and age-appropriate
• Coordinated as a part of a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) response to a report of child abuse, neglect, domestic violence, child trafficking, and child witnesses to crime.
Forensic Interviews of children are conducted at Children’s Advocacy Centers
The Children’s Advocacy Center Model

• Multi-disciplinary approach
• Agencies work together: Law Enforcement, CPS, C.A.C.’s, Mental Health, Victim’s Advocates, District Attorney’s Office, Medical Provider
• Forensic Interviews:
  – Conducted by trained professionals
  – Observed by other discipline(s)
  – Audio/Video Recorded
Advantages of Forensic Interviews

• Help determine what, if anything, happened to the child.
• Prevent re-interviewing of children
• Recorded interviews may be used in court later.
• Chain of evidence
## CAC’s in Mississippi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canopy Children’s Solutions</td>
<td>Gulfport</td>
<td>(228) 868-8686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Crisis Services of NW MS</td>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>(662) 234-9929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Resource Center of North MS</td>
<td>Tupelo</td>
<td>(662) 432-2995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing Hearts</td>
<td>Southhaven</td>
<td>(662) 349-1555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope Haven</td>
<td>Waveland</td>
<td>(228) 466-6395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids’ Hub</td>
<td>Hattiesburg</td>
<td>(601) 909-6294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Children’s Advocacy Center</td>
<td>Pearl</td>
<td>(601) 969-7111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natchez Children’s Services</td>
<td>Natchez</td>
<td>(601) 442-6858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Kate Winters Family Services</td>
<td>West Point</td>
<td>(662) 494-4867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest MS CAC</td>
<td>McComb</td>
<td>(601) 684-4009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wesley House Community Center</td>
<td>Meridian</td>
<td>(601) 485-4736</td>
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Criteria for Referrals to C.A.C.’s

• Report has been made to CPS
• Child has not been interviewed by other professionals

• Note: It is not appropriate for the G.A.L. to conduct an investigation.
• MDT’s are best practices and protect the best interest of the child.
Steps to Take if a Child Discloses Abuse to You

• Listen to what is being reported and document it.
• Make a report to MDCPS hotline
• Don’t assume that the abuse reported is a ploy in a custody battle; sometimes, when one parent leaves the home, that is the first opportunity the child has to make a disclosure in perceived safety.
Role of G.A.L. when abuse is disclosed:

- Make report to CPS and document
- F/U on C.A.C. report
- Watch recording of C.A.C. interview and make recommendations based on findings.
- Maintain confidentiality of recordings and reports of child interviews
  - Sharing information with family may put the child at risk
When in Doubt:

- C.A.C.’s are a great resource when you have questions about communicating with children and are responding to an abuse disclosure.
References

• Child Advocacy Centers of Mississippi and the ChildFirst training program, Jackson, MS. www.childadvocacyms.org


• ChildFirst training, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center.