

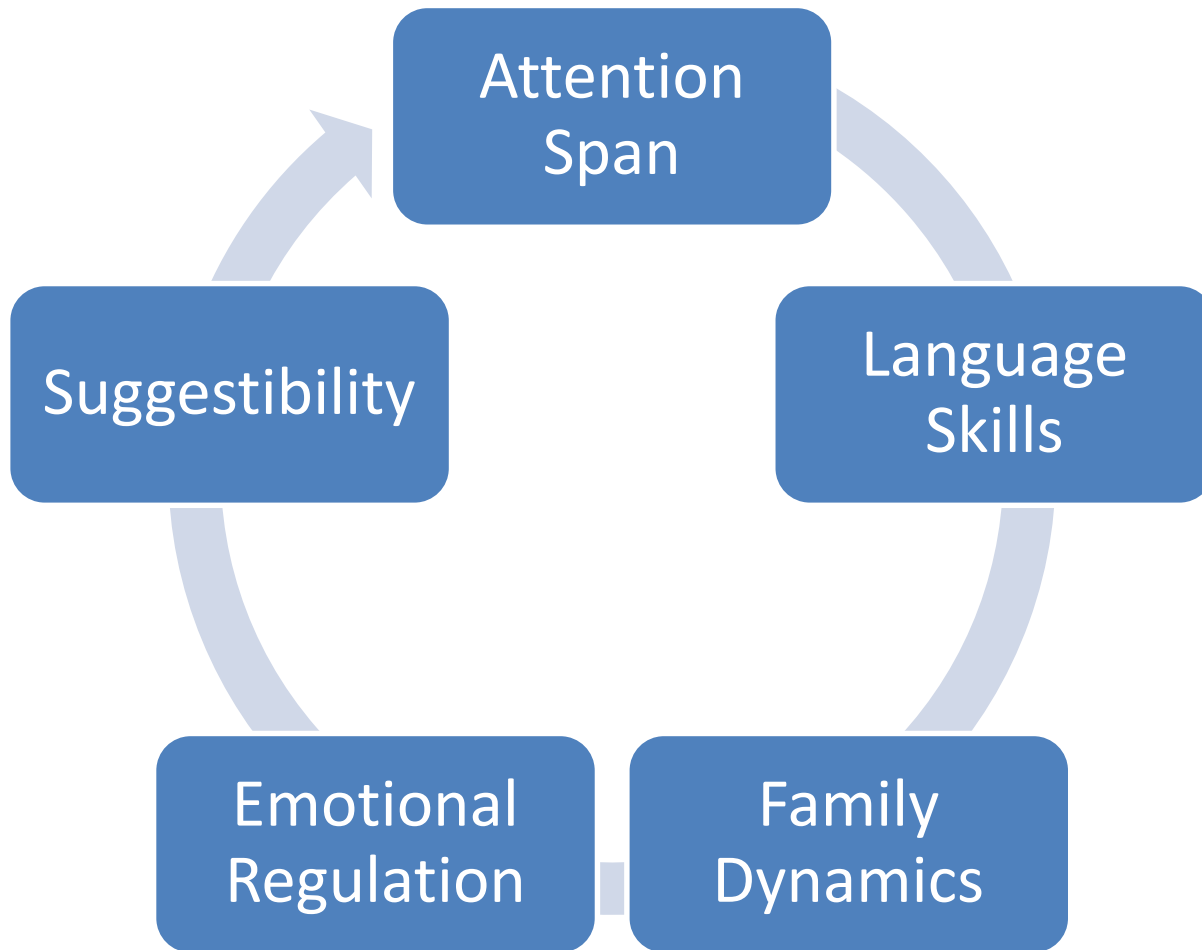
# Interviewing Children & Forensic Interviews: Developmental and Practical Considerations

**Lisa B. Yazdani, Ph.D.**  
**Trainer and Consultant**  
**Children's Advocacy Centers of**  
**Mississippi**

# 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

- 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 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 be 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 by 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.

# Types of Questions/Prompts

Question/Prompt	Type of Response
Open/Open Invitation	Provided by the child; requires more than one word response
Focused-recall	Provided by the child and focused on a particular topic; requires more than a one word response
Multiple-Choice/Option Posing	Selected Responses provided by interviewer; may offer open option
Yes/No (closed)	Simply require a “yes” or “no” answer
Leading/Misleading	Directly or subtly suggest a response; information comes from the interviewer, not the child. Not appropriate to use leading questions with children/adolescents.

(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](mailto: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

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

# 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.childadvocacymis.org](http://www.childadvocacymis.org)
- Walker, Anne Graffam. Handbook on Questioning Children: A linguistic perspective, ABA (1999).
- ChildFirst training, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center.