

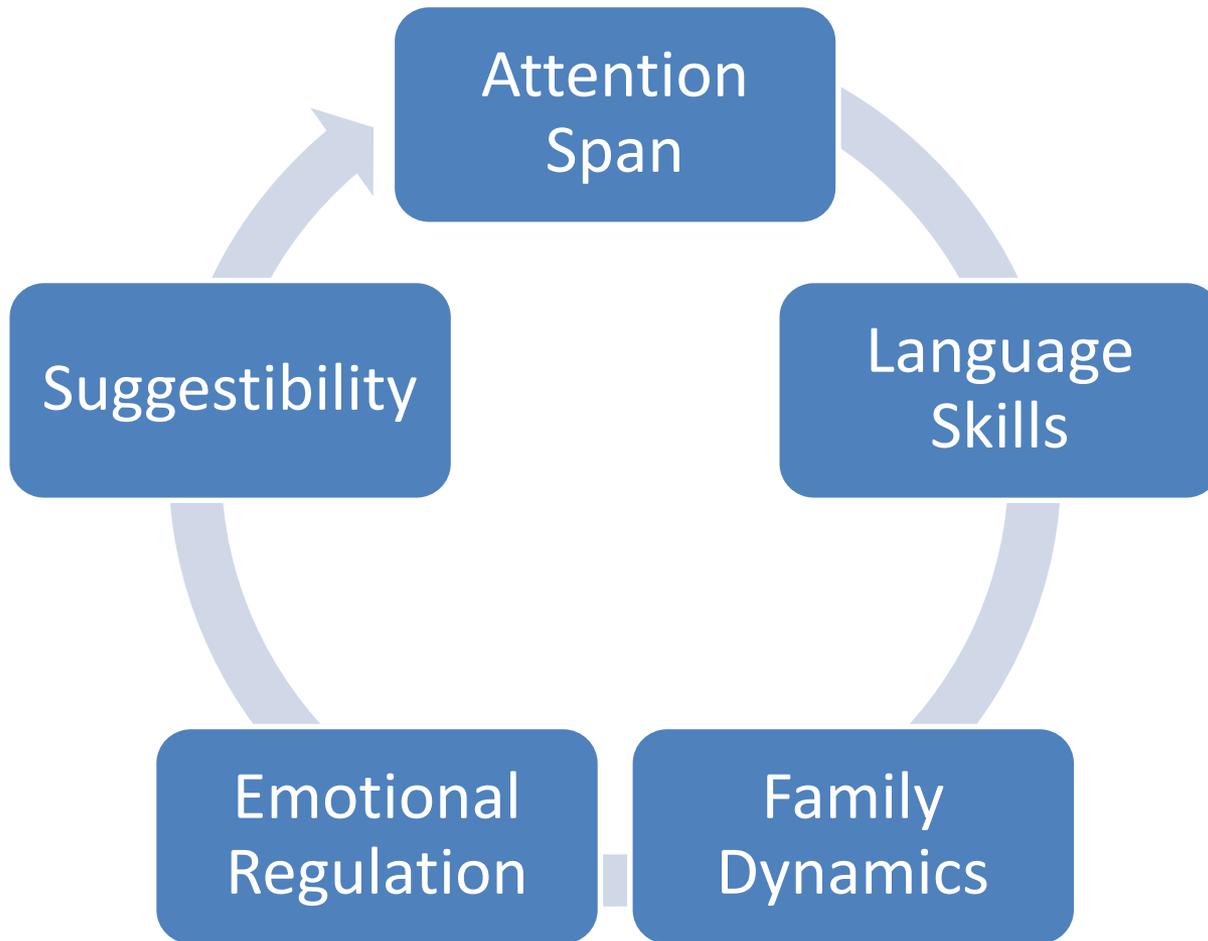
Interviewing Children & Forensic Interviews: Developmental and Practical Considerations

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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

- 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

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.childadvocacymiss.org
- Walker, Anne Graffam. Handbook on Questioning Children: A linguistic perspective, ABA (1999).
- ChildFirst training, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center.