

Section “E”

Guidelines for Conducting Interviews With Children

Introduction

Interviews are one of the tools used in child abuse investigations. In many cases, the information learned from interviewing the child(ren) is critical to the subsequent investigation, and impacts on the outcome of the case. In many cases of alleged sexual abuse, the child's statement may be the primary source of evidence.

Children are interviewed to gather information from them. Information is gathered to determine if there is enough evidence to lay criminal charges, to assess child safety, and to formulate an intervention plan for the child and her/his family. When interviewing children investigators require specific knowledge, skills, and abilities. This includes the ability to create a trusting atmosphere in which rapport can be established.

What follows are some principals and guidelines for conducting successful child interviews.

General Guidelines

1. Interviews will be planned by members of the investigative team.
2. Interviews will be conducted by the most suitable team member.
3. Interviews will be conducted in a safe environment.
4. Wherever possible, interviews will be conducted in a “soft room”.
5. Whenever possible, only one videotaped interview will be conducted.

Goal of Interview

A well conducted interview will obtain the required information in a manner which:

- minimizes trauma to the child,
- minimizes contamination of evidence,
- maintains the integrity of the investigation.
- provides sufficient information to assess the child protection issues.

Preparing the interview is critical to gathering information in a consistent and standardized fashion. Interviews facilitate in-depth discussion of events. The interview is a fact-finding process. Although an investigator may have some hypotheses in mind about events, the interview is not the forum to prove or disprove a particular assumption.

Some considerations to keep in mind before starting an interview are:

- Each case and child is unique.
- Consideration must be given to any special needs or age related factors. (See Section “Interviewing Children with Disabilities”)
- When possible, time the interview for that part of the day when the child is likely to be most alert. Ask the parent or guardian what time of day the child is most alert.
- When possible, choose interviewers according to the child's unique needs. Consider the circumstances of the allegations - if alleged abuse is by a male perpetrator, the child may respond more easily to a female team member. If the child is Aboriginal, they may respond easier to an Aboriginal team member.
- The information should come from the child – not the interviewer.
- Ensure that you use words and concepts that the child understands. Use language that is developmentally appropriate to the age/development of the child.
- Give the child permission to ask questions about anything the interviewer says that the child does not understand.
- Give the child permission to stop the interview at any time.
- Clarify with the child what she/he means by the use of a particular word or phrase and who they are talking about (for example, a child in a foster home may call the foster mother “Mom” as well as his/her own mother).
- Speak slowly and pause to allow the child to process what you have said. It is important to provide sufficient “wait time” between your question and the child’s response.
- Allow the child to use his/her own language/terminology without correction. (Do not “teach” proper terminology.)
- Phrase questions in such a way that the child does not feel that he/she is being corrected or his/her credibility is in doubt.
- Questions that begin with “Why” may result in self-blame by the child and/or focuses attention on motivation for behaviour that often is not fully understood by children or most adults.
- Interrupting a child is disrespectful and may stop the conversation. At the same

time, investigators may need to probe into a child's statements in a manner that encourages the child to talk in more detail. (Can you help me understand ? I'm mixed up can you tell me again about....?)

- Avoid multiple choice questions. They typically confuse a child, do not net information that can be used, and may undo an otherwise credible interview.
- Some children discuss events in great detail, much of which may appear to be irrelevant to the investigation. It has been found that often detail that may appear to be irrelevant turns out to be the basis of important information about the abuse. Detailed discussion by the child can also be indicative of the validity of their statement.
- Interviews should not overtax the child. Consider a two-part interview, with a sufficient break in between, if it appears the interview requires more than 1- 2 hours to complete.
- Conducting several interviews in one day may affect the quality of individual interviews. When there are several allegations about the same perpetrator, then several interviews should be used. Or, when there are several incidents with one victim, you may want to plan more than one interview.
- Parents, caregivers, and the child should be given information as to how to deal with pre and post interview anxiety, documenting behaviours, statements and actions of the child, the dangers of pressing for more information from the child, how to manage potential contact with the alleged offender and the contact names and numbers of those agencies that may help both the child and the parents through this process..
- Be patient.

Communication with children is part art, part learned skill and part application of the principles of child development, human behaviour, and the dynamics of child abuse. Understanding what both parties are saying is critical to obtaining a credible statement.

Preparing for the Interview

Preparing for an interview includes gathering background information, selecting the person who will conduct the interview, and the setting in which to conduct the interview.

- 1) Interviewers: Decide who will take the lead role in the interview before starting the interview.
- 2) Planning questions: Investigators must make every effort to avoid asking questions that could be deemed as "leading" in the court hearing. Leading questions are questions that suggest the answer. The interviewer can prepare by planning the sequence of questioning and planning how to phrase questions. A general rule to follow regarding the sequencing of questions is to start with general questions and move to specific questions. Specific questions should be based only on the information provided by the child. (See **Appendix A** for examples of leading and non-leading questions.)

Contamination of the statement and process may occur when discussing names and the nature of the allegation before the child has spoken about them. It is only after the child has provided the details that one can seek elaborate action.

It may be necessary in the interest of assessing child protection issues to ask the child questions that would be considered "leading". The decision to ask potentially leading questions should be made jointly by the police officer and social worker. If the interviewer has concerns about the child's susceptibility to suggestion, he/she may ask a few leading questions about irrelevant issues to which the interviewer knows the answer (e.g. "You came here by taxi, didn't you?") prior to starting the interview.

3. Setting:

If possible and when you know, conduct the interview in a location other than where the alleged abuse occurred.

- Reduce the risk of distraction during the interview (toys/ interview aids should be kept out of sight until needed).
- Comfortable furniture suited to the needs of a child (e.g. avoid furniture on wheels or furniture that is over-sized, etc).
- Keep video and audio recording equipment as unobtrusive as possible; however, any equipment used must be shown and explained to the child.

Interview

There are generally three phases to an interview: introductory, investigative, and conclusion. It is important to note that while the following outline provides a basic structure for an interview, the interviewer can maintain his/her own interviewing style.

1. Introductory Phase

- Start the video/audio tape, recording interview.
- The introductory phase is a time to establish rapport with the child. The interviewer begins to engage the child through creating an atmosphere of safety and security and to set the tone for the rest of the interview.
- Begin the interview by introducing the interviewer. Tell the child the reason for the interview. When talking with the child ensure that they understand why they are meeting with you and that they are not responsible for what happened to them.
- If the interview is being conducted in a neutral setting, the child could be told that this room is a special room where only the truth is told and he/she is not in trouble for talking to the investigators.
- This is also a time to begin to assess the developmental level of the child. Language, cognitive, and social developmental levels are of particular interest. Begin with non-threatening age-appropriate topics such as school interests, hobbies, or fun-time activities.

Note: When taping an interview, do not ask the child identifying information (child's name, address, name of school etc.) as this would identify the child to any person in the courtroom when the tape is played, including prospective offenders.

As part of this phase, the interviewer might ask the child to describe two specific past events.

These might be a description of a birthday party, recall of a Christmas celebration or a school outing. Although these events should be memorable in some fashion, they should be independent of any known abuse allegations. The purpose of this exercise is:

- To provide an opportunity to model the form of the interview for the child. As the child describes each event the interviewer encourages detailed recall by asking non-leading, open-ended questions, a pattern which will hold throughout the entire interview. It is more effective to introduce this pattern during the rapport

building phase than when the child is describing the events of concern.

- To assess the amount and quality of details the child provides for a specific experience. This can be used as a baseline from which to further assess the amount and quality of detail in later recall of the abuse events.
- To establish rapport with the child by giving the interviewer an opportunity to show interest in the child's experiences.

Interview rules can be introduced at this point. Rules give the child a sense of what to expect. (For many children it would help to post these rules in the interview room.) For an example of interview rules see **Appendix B**. You can show a copy to the child when age-appropriate. For young children a list of rules would likely be too confusing. Demonstrating or having a picture card of the rules can be more effective with the younger children.

The interviewer should raise the importance of telling the truth. This can be approached in a general manner (i.e.: "This is a place to tell the truth"). Determine if the child understands the difference between the truth and lies by asking questions like: "You have green hair. Is that the truth?" Do not use terms such as "pretend" or "make -believe" when interviewing younger children. For young children those terms could blur the distinction between telling the truth and talking about fantasy and detracts from the integrity of the interview.

2. Investigative Phase

The investigative phase is the segment of the interview whereby the actual information is gathered for a statement. It may be the most intense and time-consuming aspect of the interview. This phase starts with general open-ended questions generally a few "who" and "what" questions. From these questions move to "where" followed by "when". Finish off with "how" questions.

If there has been more than one incident, this portion of the interview will establish a chronological order of the incidents. Once the interviewers have general information, they can delve into the specifics of each incident. It is suggested that you begin with the most recent incident before proceeding to others.

These guidelines will assist in conducting the interview:

- Go slowly and build trust carefully.
- Ensure that the child understands why you are interviewing him/her.
- Consider the child's perceptions of why you are there.
- It may be helpful to ask if there are any problems the child wishes to share.
- If the child raises the topic of secrets, discuss when it is and is not appropriate to tell and ask the child if he/she has any secrets.
- Children may ask if their perpetrator will go to jail because of the child's disclosure. If this comes up, you should let the child know that it is possible.
- Encourage the child to provide a free narrative account of the event(s) by asking the child to describe each event from the beginning telling everything that the child can remember (like they did when telling about the party etc.).
- Do not interrupt, correct, or challenge the child's report. Rather, make written or mental notes to re-check necessary points.
- Show understanding but not surprise. Bridge to next step by explaining that clarifying points will help you to understand more clearly.
- Remember this is a process rather than an event. Allow the child to proceed at his/her own pace. It may take more than one interview to get a statement from a child.
- Pauses in the narrative may be followed with gentle prompts ("Then what happened?" or "Tell me about that ...").
- If the allegations concern repeated abuse, try to determine the general pattern of abuse. Let the child describe the patterns as best she/he can. For some children this may mean describing specific incidents of abuse before talking about the general pattern. Asking the child about exceptions to the general pattern (whether the abuse occurred at different times, places etc.) can help fill in needed detail about the pattern of abuse.
- Often, the child will specifically remember departures from general patterns of abuse. If multiple incidents are alleged, the incidents should be labeled ("you said it happened in the kitchen? ... Let's call it the 'kitchen time' "). The child may take part in the labeling process. This is very useful for helping the child organize his/her recall and for ensuring that the interviewer can clarify which incident is

being discussed at any given time.

- At some stage in the interview process it may be necessary to abandon the criminal investigation process (if the police determine that the child cannot provide enough information to substantiate a criminal code offence) and move into the area of assessing whether the child is in need of protection. This could mean using leading questions designed to determine the safety of the child.

Guidelines for framing questions:

- Questions should be based only on the information provided by the child and should use the child's own terminology. Children may not use terminology in an informed way. Interviewers should clarify what the child means by certain terms.
- Questions must not be leading.
- Questions should be phrased in such a way that an inability to recall or a lack of knowledge is acceptable ("You said ..., do you remember anything more about that?").
- If the child finds it difficult to talk about certain aspects of the event, consider that this might indicate a lack of memory/knowledge. Suggest that the child use a signal (raise hand) to indicate when he or she knows something but is not ready to talk about it. The topic can be raised at a later point in the interview or at another time.
- If the child becomes distressed about a topic, shift the focus to aspects of the child's recall, which are less stressful. When the child has regained composure, attempt to return to the distressing topic. It may be necessary to shift back and forth to a difficult topic several times before the child is ready to discuss it. **Be patient.**

Specific questions help to clarify and probe into information already presented for more in depth statements.

- Ask the child to describe the context of an event ("Do you remember what you were doing before ...?", "Do you remember what the weather was like that day?", "Do you remember any smells?", "Did you hear any sounds?").
- Follow up on what may appear to be inconsistencies in the child's account. Probe in a gentle and non-threatening manner ("You said that he was touching your private parts and you said you had your clothes on. Can you tell me how that happened? Can you help me understand?").
- Investigate origins of language or knowledge, which appears to be inappropriate

for a child of that age ("You said 'erection', do you remember where you learned this word? What does it mean?").

- When it appears that the child has exhausted his or her memory of the event, the interviewer may want to ask the child to give his or her recall of an event once again. It is important that the interviewer convey that the purpose of the repetition is to help understand the event more clearly rather than to question or discredit the child's report "*I think I understand most of what you told me. Will you help me by telling me once again everything you remember about the time in the kitchen?*".
- When videotaping the interview, the interviewer would excuse him/herself to confer with other team members who are not present in the room.
- In a non-videotaping situation, the interviewer can ask the recorder if he/she has any questions. The recorder will then move into the role of the active interviewer and can ask any questions which remain.

You may want to review what you have done to be assured that you have covered all the areas.

Recording of interviews

Videotaping should be used whenever possible. There are specific requirements to how videotaped interviews are conducted and are outlined in the Provincial Child Abuse Protocol section on Protocol for the Videotaping of Children's Evidence. Thus, it is recommended that the investigative team review the following sections prior to interviewing:

- "What should be on the Tape";
- "Monitoring the Interview"; and
- "Planning and Follow-up to the Videotaped Interview"

In those circumstances when an interview will not be videotaped, then the following guidelines should be followed:

- Interviewing in teams is preferred. When an investigative team is involved, either a social worker or police officer will take lead responsibility for conducting the interview.
- If possible, audiotape the interview from the beginning.
- The preferred option is to have both members of the investigation team present;

one serving as active interviewer; the other as active recorder. The recorder takes notes of both significant developments during the interview and of questions to be pursued; but does not verbally participate until the active interviewer has finished. The active interviewer then invites the recorder to present any additional questions to the child. This allows both agency mandates to be met and the professionals to support and assist each other. Sequential questioning (active interviewer first, recorder later) reduces the chance the child will be interrupted or confused.

- The active interviewer should sit facing or beside the child at a close but comfortable distance with no objects (e.g. tables) between the interviewer and child. The recorder should sit apart from the interviewer and child.
- The presence of other concerned adults (parents, school personnel, therapists, and guardians) may compromise the integrity of the interview and impede the child's open disclosure. If the child insists that another adult be present, this adult must sit out of the child's view and not participate in the interview.

3. Concluding the Interview

The manner in which the interview is closed is important. It affects how the child will deal with the experience and deal with the investigation.

- Thank the child for participating, regardless of any conclusions drawn by the interviewers.
- Explain to the child what will happen next in the investigative procedure. Do not make any promises about future developments, which cannot be kept, such as "We will make sure this never happens again".
- Give the child every opportunity to ask questions and answer them all as accurately as possible.
- As part of closure reassure the child, provide ways that the child might contact the investigator (give him/her your card with your telephone number), encourage a relationship with the child protection worker, if appropriate and ensure the safety of the child.
- Explain to the child that sometimes abuse happens again. Tell him/her what they can do or whom they can talk to if this happens again.
- Talk to the caregiver immediately following the interview to prepare them for possible effects of doing an investigative interview such as nightmares or anxiety. The parent or caregiver should be told how to handle the possibility of their child saying that s/he did not tell the interviewer everything. Ask them to record observations about behaviour and statements made including circumstances in

which made. Explain risks of pressing the child for more information.

- If, during this interview the child discloses abuse that happened to siblings, relatives, friends or others s/he may be required to attend another interview to gather witness information. This is a similar process but may be done at another time due to the length of the initial interview.

Interview Aids

In the past few years, the practice of using anatomically detailed dolls and other interview aids has come under close scrutiny and criticism. Interview aids can be very useful interview tools, but are not diagnostic tests for abuse. The effectiveness of these interview aids is dependent on the skills of the user.

Caution is advised if interview aids are used because it may be argued in court that a child may be susceptible to suggestion through the use of aids. Aids should only be used in exceptional circumstances when other approaches have not worked and it is necessary to obtain more detail about the abuse.

The following guidelines will help in the proper use of interview aids.:

- For investigative purposes, if a child has sufficiently described an allegation but is having difficulty describing the details, you may want to use an interview aid such as drawings or anatomically detailed dolls.
- Explain the nature of the dolls and that they are not for play. Start the session by presenting the dolls fully clothed and allow the child to remove the clothes.
- Dolls, drawings, puppets, toys, etc. may be considered with very young or non-verbal children and children with limited language, developmental disorders and/or emotional problems.
- Aids should not be presented as part of unstructured play activity.

Appendix “A” – NON-LEADING INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

The following material on Non-Leading Interview Techniques was presented by Sgt. I.W.T. (Wayne) Roberts of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at a Child Abuse Investigators Course on February 4, 1997 in Regina, Saskatchewan. It is reproduced in this document with Sgt. Roberts permission.

The most effective method of eliciting valid information from a child is to allow the child the opportunity to tell if anything has happened and what has happened.

Therefore, the discussion with the child, which will include questions, must not provide information to the child or contain any assumptions made by the interviewers.

INSTRUCTIONS

The following are examples of leading questions. Rephrase these questions into a non-leading style:

- 1) These questions contain the answers:

<u>Leading</u>	<u>Non-leading</u>
Were you at his house?	<i>Where were you?</i>
Was your Mom there?	<i>Who was there?</i>
Did he tell you not to tell anyone?	<i>What was said? Tell me about the conversation.</i>

- 2) These questions contain a choice of answers:

<u>Leading</u>	<u>Non-leading</u>
Was he wearing pants or shorts?	<i>What was he wearing?</i>
Did he ask you or make you do it?	<i>What happened?</i>
Did this scare you or make you angry?	<i>How did you feel?</i>
Were you in the bedroom or the livingroom?	<i>Where were you?</i>

- 3) These questions name the suspected offender before the child has identified the person:

Leading

We've been told you have a problem with your childcare worker

Where did your counsellor touch you?

Did your babysitter tell you to keep this a secret?

Non-leading

We've been told you have a problem with someone.

Were you touched? Where were you touched?

Tell me about the conversation. Tell me more about that...

- 4) These questions contain explicit details of the alleged offence:

Leading

Did he make you rub his penis up and down?

Did white stuff come out of his penis?

How did he hurt you with his hand?

Non-leading

What happened?

What did you see?

What happened next?

Then what happened?

- 5) These questions contain the interviewers assumptions:

Leading

We need to ask some questions about what happened to you

What kind of car did you go in?

Tell me about your Mom's house.

You told you Mom and your teacher?

Do other children know about this?

Non-leading

We need to ask you some questions/talk to you...

How did you go?

Tell me about the house.

Who did you tell?

Does anyone else know this?

Leading questions could be asked as long as the information has already been given to you by the child, i.e. if child tells you that the offender was wearing pants, then the interviewer could ask about the pants (Tell me about his pants.).

Appendix “B” – INTERVIEW RULES

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 the stop sign (a stop sign should be provided).
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 you're 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.

Only utilize as many ground-rules as the child is able to process cognitively. Young children may become preoccupied with remembering the rules and become blocked from proceeding with the interview. All children must be considered within their developmental context when assessing which ground-rules will be most relevant to them. Credibility in court will also depend to some degree on the child's understanding of the ground-rules.

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