State of Michigan

Governor’s Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Forensic Interviewing Protocol

Fifth Edition

Preface

This edition marks the 25th anniversary of Michigan’s forensic interviewing protocol. The interdisciplinary groups that assembled each edition aimed to give children a voice by promoting child-centered, evidence-based guidelines for asking children about their lives (see Timeline). The foundation of this protocol is a common framework for information gathering interviews that help individuals of all ages share difficult information while minimizing the potential for misunderstandings.[1]

But as Anne Graffam Walker explained, “We do not question ‘children.’ We question one child at a time.”[2] Evidence-based guidelines encourage interviewers to take the investigative context into account when deciding how to progress through an interview, along with the child’s age, level of cognitive ability, temperament, culture, and life circumstances. To encourage this adaptable mindset, this fifth edition illustrates ways to adjust practice to meet the needs of individual children, from customizing early interview phases to phrasing prompts that respect children’s cultures.

This protocol should be used in conjunction with the State of Michigan Governor’s Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Publication 794 (Rev. 6-21 or an updated version), *A Model Child Abuse and Neglect Protocol Utilizing a Multidisciplinary Team Approach*. Familiarity with this protocol is not a substitute for forensic interviewing training. Forensic interviews of children should be conducted by professionals who have completed forensic interview training provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) or their designee.

Timeline

1991: Governor’s Task Force on Children’s Justice (Task Force) created to respond to the challenges involved in cases of child abuse and neglect, particularly child sexual abuse, in Michigan.

1993: Task Force publishes Department of Human Services (DHS) Publication 794, *A Model Child Abuse Protocol – Coordinated Investigative Team Approach.*

1996: DHS initiates interviewing protocol development by establishing a steering committee and enlisting nine county DHS offices as pilot counties. From 1996 to 1998, DHS and the Task Force work together to develop and implement a protocol.

1998: First edition of the *Forensic Interviewing Protocol* published. Amended Child Protection Law requires each county to implement standard child abuse and neglect investigation and interviewing protocols using as models the protocols developed by the Task Force.

2005: Second edition of the interviewing protocol published.

2010: Task Force is renamed the Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect.

2012: Third edition of the interviewing protocol published.

2015: Michigan Department of Community Health and DHS merge to form the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

2017: Fourth edition of the interviewing protocol published.

2023: Fifth edition of the interviewing protocol published.

Forensic Interviewing Protocol

Introduction

The goal of a forensic interview is to obtain a statement from a child—in a developmentally sensitive and unbiased manner—to support accurate and fair decision-making in the criminal justice and child welfare systems.[3] There are three overriding features of a forensic interview:

- A child-centered approach.
- Hypothesis testing.
- Exploration of topics that support broader information gathering efforts.

First, forensic interviews are child-centered. Although interviewers guide the flow of conversation, children should determine the vocabulary and specific content of conversation as much as possible. Forensic interviewers should avoid suggesting events and details that have not been mentioned by children or projecting adult interpretations onto situations (e.g., do not say, "That must have been frightening").

Second, forensic interviews test alternative hypotheses (explanations) about the meaning of children's reports and origin of abuse allegations. For example, when children use words that suggest sexual touching, interviewers assess their understanding of those words and explore whether touching might have occurred in the context of routine caregiving or medical treatment. When children report seemingly inconsistent details, interviewers try to clarify whether the children are describing more than one event. Before closing interviews, interviewers strive to be reasonably confident that children's statements are not subject to multiple interpretations and that alleged perpetrators are clearly identified.

Several factors influence decisions about hypothesis testing in child forensic interviews:[4]

- Abuse investigations often involve conversations with individuals in children's lives, records retrieval, and other information gathering efforts. Some alternative hypotheses are best explored through these efforts.
- Some lines of questioning do not produce reliable information from children. For example, young children may provide incorrect answers to questions about what others have told them because they confuse ask and tell (e.g., saying "She tells me" when they mean "She asks me").[5] Interviewers consider children's ages, ability levels, and other factors when deciding what to explore.
- Hypothesis testing does not always require case specific questions. For example, early rapport-building conversation tests whether children could have been misunderstood due to a speech issue, and open-ended prompts elicit detailed narratives that speak to the plausibility of allegations.

Third, forensic interviews support broader information gathering efforts by exploring topics that might lead to corroborative evidence. For example, asking children if there was someone nearby during an event might identify other witnesses.

Finally, this protocol describes guidelines for exploring whether children have been victims of maltreatment. During these conversations, interviewers should not explore whether children are also offenders, and they should not assume a therapeutic role. Although information obtained from investigative interviews might be useful for making treatment decisions, these interviews are not part of a treatment process. Forensic interviews should not be conducted by mental health professionals who have seen or will see children as clients to provide therapy or professional counseling services.[6]

Number of Interviews

In dedicated interview settings, best practice is one-on-one interviews.[7] In these settings, investigating parties should observe in a space other than the forensic interview room. Observing parties should have the ability to communicate with interviewers, thus reducing the need for additional interviews of children.

There are circumstances when two professionals are in an interview space. When this occurs, it is best practice to appoint one as the primary interviewer. Interviewers should have sufficient preparation time to discuss goals for interviews and which topics need to be covered. When possible, seating plans should respect children's personal space, accommodate individual needs, and encourage children to focus on the primary interviewer. Interviewers should not discuss the case in front of children. At the start of an interview, both interviewers should be introduced to the child by name and job title. An interview break will allow interviewers to discuss additional questions before closing the interview.

Support Persons

The presence of a social support person during forensic interviews is discouraged. Although it makes intuitive sense that children might be more relaxed with social support, studies have failed to find consistent benefits from allowing support persons in interviews.[8] Support persons might be helpful during early portions of interviews or in early stages of a multisession interview, but they could also inhibit children from talking about details (e.g., sexual content). Individuals who could be accused of influencing children to make allegations, such as parents involved in custody disputes, should not be allowed to sit with children during interviews.

When a support person is deemed necessary, seat this individual out of the child's line of sight, if possible, to avoid criticism that the child was reacting to nonverbal signals from a trusted adult. In addition, the interviewer should instruct the support person that only the child is allowed to talk unless a question is directed to the support person.

Video of Audio Recording and Documentation

The Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect supports, as a best practice, the video recording of investigative forensic interviews of children at children's advocacy centers or in similar settings. When interviews are video or audio recorded, follow the procedures recommended in DHS-PUB 779 (Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Forensic Interviewing Protocol), and statutory mandates under MCL 712A.17b and MCL 600.2163a (or amended versions of those statutes).

Physical Setting

Forensic interviewers converse with children in many locations, including, but not limited to, children's advocacy centers (CACs), police stations, schools, residential care facilities, homes, and hospitals. Whenever possible and appropriate, interviews for abuse/neglect investigations requiring a coordinated, multidisciplinary team approach should occur at a CAC.[9] CACs are specifically designed to provide supportive environments for children, their caregivers, and multidisciplinary teams.

When interviews occur outside a CAC, interviewers should try to recreate some of the important features of a CAC:

- Select the most neutral location possible. When interviews must be conducted in children's homes, for example, the accused should not be present, and interviews are best conducted in private locations away from parents or siblings. In schools, a special purpose room might be a better choice than the principal's office because children often believe they are in trouble when they are called to the main office. Also, because children may worry about being interviewed in a police station, they might benefit from an explanation about why they are being interviewed there (e.g., "We like to talk to children in this room because the rooms are nice and bright, and we won't be disturbed").

- Minimize noise by selecting a location away from traffic and other disruptions. Cell phones, tablets, televisions, and other potential distractions should be temporarily removed or turned off.
- Choose an uncluttered space. Avoid playrooms or other locations with visible toys and books that can distract children. Smaller spaces are ideal for young children.
- Plan seating that respects children's personal space and accommodates individual needs (e.g., wheelchair access).

Interviewer Guidelines

There are several guidelines about interviewer behavior, demeanor, and communication throughout interviews:[10]

Provide a socially supportive environment.

- Avoid wearing uniforms or having guns visible.
- Maintain a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Avoid expressing surprise, disgust, disbelief, or other emotional reactions to descriptions of the abuse.
- Mention children's first names, express interest in them, and acknowledge their concerns in ways that do not assume you know how they feel. (See Examples: Nonsuggestive Social Support.)[11] Use nonsuggestive social support, give children space and time to respond, and avoid making promises. Examples of nonsuggestive Social Support:[12]
  - Convey warmth with nonverbal behavior. Smiling and an open body posture convey warmth.
  - Use the child's name. "Hello, [child's name]."
  - Greet the child warmly. "I am glad to meet you today, get to know you, get to talk to you."
  - Express interest. "How are you?"
  - Make good will gestures. "Are you comfortable? Would you like a short break?"
  - Reinforce talking. "You are giving a lot of details and that's important."
  - Express appreciation. "Thanks for trying hard to remember."

    - Explain they can talk to you. “It’s my job to listen to children.”
    - Show empathy. “I know it’s been a long interview.”
    - Explore emotions. “You said you cannot tell me. Tell me more about that.”
    - Echo emotions. “You said you [were sad, cried, got angry].”
    - Reassure. “It’s okay to talk about anything today. I talk to children all the time who tell me all types of things.”
    - Offer alternatives. “I’m here to listen. Would it be easier [to write about it, if we took a break, etc.]?”
    - Check the child’s feelings. “How are you feeling now?”
- Avoid asking questions about why children behaved in particular ways (e.g., “Why didn’t you tell your mother that night?”). Young children have difficulty answering such questions and may believe that you are blaming them for the situation.

Respect children’s personal space.

- Avoid touching children.
- Do not stare at children or sit uncomfortably close.

Encourage children to report events accurately and in their own words.

- Do not use the words pretend, imagine, or other words that suggest fantasy or play.
- Ask children to repeat comments when you have difficulty understanding what they said. Use phrases such as “What did you say?” or “I couldn’t hear that” and repeat the question instead of guessing. Do not say “Did you say [what you thought you heard]?” because young children sometimes go along with adults’ interpretations of their words.[13]

Give children time to respond.

- Be tolerant of pauses in conversation. It is appropriate to look away and give children time to continue talking. Similarly, it is often helpful to take a few moments to formulate your next question.[14]
- Use facilitators (also called minimal encouragers and still-your-turn feedback) to signal you are still listening (e.g., “Um hmm,” partial repetitions of something the child said, such as “Then you [what the child just said]”).[15]

Do not use reinforcement to encourage abuse-related answers or cooperation.

- Do not use bathroom breaks or drinks as reinforcements for cooperating during interviews. For example, do not make comments such as “Let’s finish up these questions and then I’ll get you a drink.”

- Do not make comments such as "Good girl," "We're buddies, aren't we?" or "Thank you for telling me your uncle touched you" that might be interpreted as reinforcing children for talking about abuse issues. Supportive comments should be noncontingent (not based on children talking about specific issues, e.g., "You are giving a lot of details and that's important"[16]). Good times to reinforce children for talking are during initial rapport building and at the close of interviews, after conversation has shifted to neutral topics.
- Be mindful of your nonverbal communication (e.g., when delivering questions, avoid adding hand gestures that illustrate requested information).[17]
- Avoid giving gifts to children.

Avoid correcting children's behavior unnecessarily. Children sometimes fidget with clothing, reposition chairs, and move about the room. When their behavior interferes with delivering prompts or hearing their answers, it can be helpful to direct their attention with meaningful explanations (e.g., "I am having a little trouble hearing, so it helps me a lot if you look at me when you are talking so that I can hear you"). However, avoid correcting nervous or avoidant behavior that is not risking injury or preventing the interview from proceeding.

Do not make promises. For example, do not say, "Everything will be okay" or "You will never have to talk about this again."

The Phased Interview

Most protocols advise interviewers to proceed through a series of interview phases, with each phase addressing a specific purpose. The goal of empowering children to describe events to the best of their ability are accomplished when interviewers:

- Orient children to the conversation by explaining their jobs, describing the interview environment, and delivering interview instructions,
- Encourage children to talk by building rapport and maintaining a relaxed and supportive manner, and
- Ask children to describe events in their own words.

Some investigations require more than one interview with a child. Interviewers should introduce themselves, spend time establishing rapport, and briefly revisit interview instructions even when children have participated in a previous forensic interview.

This protocol describes the general structure of a phased interview but does not dictate how interviewers will proceed through an interview or which questions they will ask. Each phase is explained and illustrated with examples, but interviewers can reorder phases, skip some phases, cover any topics the investigative team determines are relevant, and reword example prompts.[18] In this protocol, Examples text boxes illustrate common prompts but are not mandatory scripts. Pathways text boxes illustrate how interviewers might progress differently through the phases to accommodate different age groups, children who need more time for rapport building, children who do not disclose, and other factors. In Resources, Roadmap text boxes illustrate the types of information interviewers often try to elicit to better understand the history of abuse allegations and children's experiences.

The following phases are summarized, with examples, in Overview of an Interview (in Resources):

- Prepare for the Interview.
- Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport.
- Deliver Interview Instructions.
- Encourage Talking With a Practice Narrative.
- Introduce the Topic.
- Elicit a Free Narrative.
- Question and Clarify.
- Close the Interview.

Prepare for the Interview

Interviewers do several things to prepare for an interview:

- Gather/review background information.
- Plan the interview.
- Set up the interview environment.

Preinterview preparation will vary depending on the nature of allegations, the available resources, and the amount of time before interviews are conducted. If physical evidence is available, interviewers should consult with the investigative team before deciding whether to use this evidence during the forensic interview. (See a discussion of evidence in Resources.)

Gather/Review Background Information

Information about children, their families, and abuse allegations help interviewers understand children and craft questions. Background information is especially useful when children are preschool age, when allegations were based on ambiguous information (such as sexual acting out), and when factors such as medical treatment (e.g., applying ointment) or family hostilities make it challenging to distinguish between abuse and routine caregiving or unfounded concerns.

Relevant information can be obtained from a variety of sources, including Children's Protective Services files, police reports, and interviews with reporting parties and/or family members.[19]

The following list illustrates the types of information that might be useful for interviews about sexual abuse allegations:[20]

- Whether the interview was prompted by a report that someone had witnessed abuse, had heard the child disclose abuse, or only had suspicions of abuse (and the circumstances that precipitated concern). If there was an alleged disclosure, it is also helpful to know the content of the disclosure, when and where the disclosure occurred, and whether a specific event could have triggered the disclosure.
- Prior interviews conducted.
- The child's name, age, sex, gender, and relevant developmental or cultural considerations (e.g., developmental delay, hearing or speech impairment, bilingualism).
- The child's interests or hobbies that could be used to develop rapport.
- Family composition and custody arrangements.
- Family members' and relevant friends' or caregivers' names (especially how the child refers to significant others, with special attention to nicknames and duplicate names).
- The child's and caregivers' names for body parts.
- Caregiving environments and schedules, with the child's names for these environments.
- Medical treatments (e.g., applying ointment) and conditions (e.g., genital rashes) that suggest alternative explanations for a child's comment or why an adult may have developed suspicions of abuse.
- Family habits or events related to allegation issues (e.g., showering or bathing with the child, a mother who allows children in the bathroom while she changes tampons, physical play or tickling).
- Possible motivations for false allegations (e.g., family or neighborhood hostilities that predate suspicions of inappropriate behavior).

Plan the Interview

Interviewers use information about children's ages, conditions that could impact how children attend to and understand questions, and knowledge of allegations to plan how they might progress through an interview. When children are only 3 years old, for example, interviewers might explain less about their jobs and omit interview instructions (or deliver simpler instructions, such as only the ignorant interviewer instruction).[21] Case specific information is useful for planning transition prompts in the event children do not begin talking about the matters under investigation in response to an initial invitation such as "Tell me what you are here to talk about today."

Interviewers also (a) generate alternative hypotheses about the source and meaning of abuse allegations and (b) decide which alternatives might be informed by age-appropriate strategies during the interview.[22] For example, if a child said that a babysitter touched them on the butt, the interviewer would plan how to clarify what the child meant by butt and how to test the hypothesis that touching occurred during routine caregiving (such as wiping after a bowel movement). In this case, the question "What were you doing when [babysitter's name] touched you on the butt?" could be the first of a series of questions to determine if the babysitter was cleaning the child.

When multidisciplinary team members will observe, interviewers should attempt to discuss the needs and roles of all observers before interviews. Knowing team members' needs can reduce interruptions and the number of times children need to be interviewed.

Set Up the Interview Environment

Interviewers should remove distracting material from interview rooms and position chairs and recording equipment before children enter. It is a good idea to be sure children have had a recent bathroom break and are not hungry before beginning interviews.

When interviews will be recorded, interviewers should add identifying information to the recording (e.g., "My name is [first and last name]. It is [date] at [time]. I am interviewing [child's first and last name] at [location]. With us is [first and last name], who is [individual's role, e.g., language interpreter for Mandarin Chinese]").[23]

Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport

Some children were not informed or were misinformed about the purpose of visits. When this happens, they may be confused or worried that they are in trouble. Moreover, all children take time to adjust to new environments and may be distracted by the sights and sounds of interviewing rooms. Introductions acclimate children to interviews and model a relaxed, patient tone that will be carried throughout the conversation.

Children attend better when they are familiar with the environment and understand what will happen. After everyone is seated, interviewers begin by introducing themselves by name and briefly explaining their job. Introductions can be brief or longer, depending on children's ages, how relaxed they appear, and whether they might have concerns about the interviewer. Because children might be scared about being questioned by a police officer or social worker, these interviewers might explain more about their jobs. (See Examples: Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport.) When other adults are involved in interviews, such as interpreters, interviewers introduce them and explain their roles.

Building rapport begins with initial introductions and continues throughout interviews. Early interview phases offer unique opportunities to convey that children are safe and will be heard. Interviewers empower children to share by appearing relaxed, friendly, and interested while delivering prompts that encourage children to talk. In daily conversations, adults tend to dominate conversations with children by asking numerous specific questions. Many children therefore expect that interviewers will ask a lot of questions and that their job is to respond to each one with a short answer. The purposes of early rapport building are to:

- Make children comfortable with the interview setting and the interviewer.
- Gather preliminary information about children's verbal skills and cognitive maturity.
- Convey that the goal is for them to talk.
- Address early signs of reluctance to talk.
- Examples: Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport
    - **Young Child:** "Hello, [child's name]. My name is [interviewer's name]. My job is to listen to kids. Today is my day to listen to you. I talk with a lot of children about what's been happening in their lives. We are going to talk for a while and then I'll take you back to the other room where your [mom, dad, etc.] is waiting for you. [Ask a few simple questions to get to know the child, as needed.] I have a [video camera, recorder] here. It is recording what we say. Everything you say is important, and I want to get it right."
    - **School-Aged Child:** "Hello [child's name]. My name is [interviewer's name]. I'm a [social worker, police officer, etc.]. My job is to talk with children, teens, and young adults. I talk with a lot of [children, teens, people] in [name of town]. Do you know what a [social worker, police officer, etc.] does? [Wait for response and react to child's answer, e.g., "Some social workers/police officers do that, but part of my job is to get to know people and talk about what's been happening in their lives"]. As you can see, I have a [video camera, recorder, microphone] here. It will record what we say. Everything you say is important, and I want to get it right. Also, I'm part of a team that is helping me do my job, and the recording helps the team."

Use open-ended prompts that invite children to talk. Some interviewers build rapport by asking questions about children's teachers, family, and likes or dislikes. Although such questions can be useful for starting an interview, questions that can be answered in one or two words may lead children to expect that interviewers will control conversation. Therefore, open-ended questions that invite children to talk (e.g., "Tell me about things you like to do") are better than more focused questions (e.g., "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" "What is your teacher's name?").

During early rapport building, interviewers can encourage reluctant children by giving them time to think[24] and with comments such as “It is okay to start talking now” or “This is your time to talk. I want you to be the talker today and I’ll listen.” Smiling, using children’s name, expressing interest, and encouraging effort during early conversation (“I really want to know you better,” [25] “Thank you for telling me about [e.g., your favorite game]”) create a supportive atmosphere that helps children be more forthcoming.[26]

Here and throughout the conversation, interviewers can address feelings when children are reluctant to talk, show signs of distress, or are dealing with situations associated with heightened reluctance. Questions such as “How are you feeling so far about talking to me?”[27] and “Is there something you are worried about?”[28] create opportunities to explore children’s concerns.

Deliver Interview Instructions

Children—and even adults—sometimes answer questions when they have no basis for answering or did not understand a question. Also, children may think interviewers know what happened to them and may fail to correct adults who misunderstood what they said. Interview instructions:[29]

- Give children time to settle into the interview.[30]
- Reduce inaccurate answers to questions about event details.[31]
- Give children permission to correct interviewers’ mistakes.[32]
- Show interviewers how children respond when they do not understand a question (e.g., “Mmm,” “I don’t know”).[33]
- Increase accurate disclosures through an agreement to tell the truth.[34]

Interviewers select which interview instructions to deliver, and the wording of each instruction, based on factors such as children’s ages, their levels of cognitive ability, and cultural considerations. If there is more than one interview of a child, interviewers can repeat some instructions or briefly summarize the instructions from subsequent interviews. Interviewers should elicit a willingness to tell the truth from the child in a developmentally appropriate way.

There are five common instructions:

- Don’t guess.
- Tell me if a question doesn’t make sense or you don’t understand the question.
- Correct me if I make a mistake.
- I don’t know the answer to questions I will ask.[35]
- Promise to tell the truth.[36]

Instructions are not always effective without practice.[37] Therefore, interviewers sometimes (a) deliver an instruction, (b) ask a question that gives children practice using the instruction, (c) provide a second practice question when children do not give the desired response, and (d) get a verbal commitment that children will follow the instruction. Children are more successful with practice questions when it is hard to guess the answer (so they are more likely to say, "I don't know," "I don't understand," or "That's not right").[38] Interviewers can choose not to use the practice questions, however, or deliver practice questions for only one (e.g., Don't Guess) or two instructions. See Examples: Interview Instructions for example instructions and practice questions, and Pathways Through Interview Instructions for one way to customize interviews.

Interviewers can remind children about the instructions any time during conversations, as needed. For example, when a child gives a brief response to an open-ended invitation such as "Tell me what happened," the interviewer can say "I wasn't there, so I don't know what happened. Tell me everything that happened when [child's report]."

Performance on instruction practice questions is not a reliable predictor of accuracy in interviews,[39] and children can complete forensic interviews without understanding the truth. Therefore, interviewers should proceed with interviews even when children have not correctly answered practice questions.

Examples: Interview Instructions

Topic Shift Prompt

[Child's name], I'm interested in you, and we'll be talking about a lot of things today.[40] But first there are some important things to remember.[41] In this room, we talk differently than how people usually talk. So, I want to talk more about that.

Don't Guess

Instruction: If I ask a question and you don't know the answer, just say, "I don't know."

Optional addition for an older child/adolescent: Even adults sometimes guess answers or are embarrassed to tell someone they said something wrong. I like to ask practice questions, so you get comfortable talking with me.

Sometimes people remember better when we practice.

First practice question: So, if I ask, "What's my sister's name?" what do you say? [Wait for response.] Correct answer: That's right because you don't know. But if I ask, "Do YOU have a sister?" what do you say? [Wait for response.] Thank you for telling me because you do know. Incorrect answer: Do you really know my sister's name? If you don't know the answer, just say, "I don't know."

Second practice question: Let’s try again. What did I eat for breakfast? Correct answer: That’s right because you don’t know. But if I ask, “What did YOU eat for breakfast?” what do you say? [Wait for response.] Thank you for telling me because you know. Incorrect answer: But you don’t know what I ate for breakfast, so just say, “I don’t know.” But if I ask, “What did YOU eat for breakfast” what do you say? [Wait for response.] Thank you for telling me because you do know.

Tell me if a question doesn’t make sense or you don’t understand

Instruction: Another rule is if I say something that [doesn’t make sense, is confusing] or you don’t understand something, I want you to ask me about it.[42]

First practice question: So, if I ask, [“Where is your patella?”[43] “Is my shirt gridelin?”[44] or another difficult question], what do you say? Correct answer: Thank you for telling me you didn’t understand. I’ll ask a different way. [“Where is your knee?” “What color is my shirt?”] [Wait for response.] Good. While we are talking, will you [stop me if you don’t understand a question, tell me when you don’t understand a question]? Incorrect answer: Do you know [where your patella is, what gridelin is]? Actually [it’s here, it’s a color]. If I say something you don’t understand, just tell me you don’t understand.

Second practice question: Let’s try another one. Is my shirt burnet? [Wait for response.] Correct answer: Thank you for telling me you didn’t understand. I’ll ask a different way. What color is my shirt? Good. While we are talking, will you [stop me if you don’t understand a question, tell me when you don’t understand a question]? Incorrect answer: Do you know what burnet is? Actually, it’s a color. If I say something you don’t understand, just tell me you don’t understand. While we are talking, will you [stop me if you don’t understand a question, tell me when you don’t understand a question]?

Correct me if I make a mistake

Instruction: Sometimes I say something wrong by mistake. It’s important that you tell me if I say something wrong.

First practice question: Let’s try. [Hold up a pen or point to an object.] What color is this pair of scissors? [Wait for response.] Correct answer: That’s right, this isn’t a/an [object name], so I’m glad you told me. While we are talking, [correct me if I make a mistake, okay; will you correct me if I make a mistake]? Incorrect answer: But this isn’t a/an [object name], right? I made a mistake when I said scissors. It’s okay to tell me if I say something wrong.

Second practice question: Let’s try another one. So, if I say, “You are 20 years old,” what do you say? [Wait for response.] That’s right, you aren’t 20 years old, so I’m glad you told me. While we are talking, [correct me if I make a mistake, okay; will you correct me if I make a mistake]?

I don’t know the answer to questions

As we’re talking today, remember that I don’t know the answer to questions I will ask. I won’t be able to help you with any of the questions.[45]

Promise to tell the truth

Instruction alone: I meet with lots of [children, teens] so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. [Child’s name], do you promise that you will tell me [the truth, what really happened]?[46]

Demonstrate understanding before agreeing to tell the truth.[47] I meet with lots of [children, teens] so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. I want to make sure you know what the truth is. I’m sitting down right now. Is that [true or not true, right or wrong]? [Wait for response.] I AM sitting down, so sitting down is [the truth, right—it’s the truth]. You are running now. Is that [true or not true, right or wrong]? Yes, you are sitting, so saying you are running is [not true, wrong—it’s not true]. I see you understand [the truth, what is right and what is wrong]. While we are talking today, it is important to tell me [the truth—what really happened, things that are right—what really happened]. [Child’s name], do you promise that you will tell me [the truth, what really happened] when I ask questions?

Pathways Through Interview Instructions

Interviewers modify interview instructions based on children’s developmental levels and case needs. This decision tree example can be adapted for different situations.[48]

- Three-year-olds: Consider omitting interview instructions or delivering only *I Don’t Know the Answer to Questions I Will Ask.*
- 4, 5 and 6-year olds: Deliver Interview Instructions, with practice questions for *Don’t Guess* and *Correct Me if I Make a Mistake.*
- 7 to 12-year-olds: Deliver interview instructions with practice questions.
- 13-year-olds and older: Deliver interview instructions but consider adding a developmentally appropriate explanation if you deliver practice questions. After the *Don’t Guess* instructions, for example, the interviewer might say, “Even adults sometimes guess answers or are embarrassed to tell someone they said something wrong. I like to ask practice questions, so you get comfortable talking with me. For example, what’ my sister’s name?”

Encourage Talking With a Practice Narrative

To conduct a practice narrative, interviewers encourage children to talk about a neutral event or favorite activity. This phase helps children understand they will do most of the talking, and responding to many open-ended prompts can increase the amount[49] and accuracy[50] of the information children provide later in interviews. Asking about a neutral event builds rapport, familiarizes children with the prompts interviewers frequently use, acclimates interviewers to how children speak, and provides information about which prompts work best for individual children.[51]

Although even short practice narratives (3 to 5 minutes) help children and interviewers,[52] interviewers can bypass this phase when factors make it unlikely that discussions of neutral events will benefit children. For example, older adolescents who are suspected victims of trafficking might benefit from more extended rapport-building conversation, with interviewers providing a model statement (an example of detailed recall) after children acknowledge the matter under investigation.[53]

A good way to start a practice narrative is to select a recent and positive event children shared during early rapport-building conversation. This approach extends rapport building into the practice narrative and conveys that interviewers are listening and interested in what children are saying. Alternatively, interviewers can ask children to provide a recent and fun activity or select an enjoyable event caregivers reported during preinterview preparation. Interviewers then ask children to describe this event in detail, using open-ended prompts, and convey interest in everything children have to say. (See Examples: Narrative Practice Prompts.)

There are four guidelines for conducting a practice narrative:

- Deliver many open-ended prompts that invite children to provide multiple-word responses, such as “Tell me everything about [child’s neutral event], “What happened next?” and “Tell me more about [something the child mentioned].”[54]
- Use facilitators (also called minimal encouragers and still-your-turn feedback) to encourage children to talk. These behaviors include head nods, exclamations (e.g., “Ohhh”), and partial repetitions of the child’s last comment (e.g., Child: “And then he opened my present by mistake.” Interviewer: “He opened your present”). During this phase, interviewers can provide more direct encouragement (e.g., “You told me a lot about your birthday. I know a lot more about you now”).
- Give children adequate time to think. Because children take longer than adults to retrieve memories and plan what to say, it is best to avoid delivering another prompt immediately after children have stopped speaking.[55]
- Reinforce interview instructions, when needed.

Young children often have little to say about one-time events. When this is the case, interviewers can try these strategies:

- Ask children to describe a recurring (scripted) event. A script is a general description of repeated events, such as what children do on a typical school day, what happens during a trip to a favorite fast-food restaurant, or how to play a favorite game.[56] When interviewers are charged with broadly assessing children's safety, asking about a typical day provides a basis for later questions about who is home after school, how safe children feel at home and at school, and other important issues.
- Express interest in topics children are "experts" on and ask them to talk about a topic.

Examples: Narrative Practice Prompts

Introducing the Practice Narrative

- For a preschool child: I'd like to get to know you better.
- For a child 6 years or older: Now I want to try something different. Remember I told you earlier that my job is to listen to kids about things that have happened in their lives? When we talk in this room, I want to know about everything that happened, even the little details that don't seem important. But that's not how people usually talk. So, I like to practice it.
- For an older child or adolescent: Some people find it helpful to chat about something else before we get started—like something you've done recently or that you like to do. It may give you a chance to settle into the room and get used to how the interview will work.[57]

Child-nominated event/activity

- Have you ever taken a trip or gone somewhere that you really enjoyed? [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me about [event].
- Tell me something fun you've done recently. [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me everything about [event].
- Tell me something you like to do. [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me all about the last time you [activity].
- For an older child or adolescent: Is there an event you remember well and would like to talk about?[58] [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me everything about [event].

Interviewer-selected one-time event

- A [few days, few weeks] ago was [event reported by caregiver, e.g., Thanksgiving, last day of Ramadan]. Tell me everything that happened on [Thanksgiving, last day of Ramadan].

- If yesterday was not the day of the alleged event: Tell me everything that happened yesterday from the time you woke up until you went to bed.[59] Repeated (scripted) event
- I'd like to get to know more about you and your family. Tell me what you do on a school day, from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. (If further prompts are needed, the interviewer can say, "Tell me what you do to get ready to go to school." "Then what do you do?" "What do you do next?")
- I talk with a lot of children, and some of them like to get hamburgers or pizza at their favorite restaurant. Do you have a favorite place to eat? [Wait for response.] Good. Tell me everything that happens when you go to [restaurant], from the time you leave home to the time you get back.

Keep the conversation going

- [Repeat what the child just mentioned] And then what happened? [Repeat as necessary.]
- What happened after [incident the child mentioned]. [Repeat as necessary.]
- Tell me more about [something the child just mentioned].
- What happened between [something the child mentioned] and [something else the child mentioned].
- How did you feel when [something the child mentioned]?

Although preinterview preparation is the best time to learn about children's living arrangements, family, and other useful information, interviewers can collect background information any time during interviews.[60] (See *Examples: Exploring Background Information*.) By placing these questions after a practice narrative, conversation will transition seamlessly into subsequent interview phases that focus on the issues being investigated. This inquiry is also a simple way to prolong rapport building with reluctant children. Here interviewers can address topics that might cause misunderstandings later in interviews and topics that might come up. For example, questions about peers are useful when there is concern that allegations might have been influenced by peers or when peers might also be victims.

Examples: Exploring Background Information

Learning about living arrangements and caregivers

- I'd like to know more about where you live and who lives with you. [Child's name], do you live in an apartment, a house, or something else?
- Tell me all the people who live there with you.
- Does someone else live with you? [Repeat until the child says "no."]
- Is there another place where you stay when you are not [at home with your mom, in school, etc., and repeat until the child says "no"]?

- Tell me about the people at [child's name for caregiving environment].
- Does someone else ever take care of you when [your mom, your dad, etc.] is gone?
- Is there someone else who also takes care of you? [Repeat until the child says "no."]

Learning about friends

- Tell me about the kids you [play with, hang out with, spend time with the most].

Another way to transition to the issues being investigated is to end the practice narrative phase by checking children's perceptions of the interview.[61] Interviewers can thank children for describing the practice topic and ask, "How do you feel about coming to talk to me today?" or "How did you feel when you found out you were coming to talk to me today?" These prompts provide opportunities to reassure children and can help interviewers transition to the topic of interviews.

Interviewers take different pathways through early interview phases depending on children's behavior and demeanor. Early interview phases (the phases before interviewers address the purpose of the interview) are also called presubstantive phases.[62] The following Pathways decision tree illustrates possible paths through this part of interviews.

Pathways Through Early Interview Phases

During Initial introductions, interview instructions, and the practice narrative.

- Child spontaneously discloses: perhaps move to Elicit a Free Narrative (to follow the child's train of thought). After the child stops responding to invitations, you could pause to complete earlier interview phases before revisiting the disclosure and completing the interview.
- Child unresponsive or visibly upset. Younger child: offer a paper and crayons for free drawing while you build rapport (or use one of the following techniques for older children), and then proceed through the interview phases. Older child/teen: address the difficulty (e.g., "Can I do something to make you more comfortable?" or "Tell me how you are feeling about talking right now. [listen to answer.] Thanks for letting me know [child's words] – that'll help me as we're talking today. Let's try talking now") Perhaps follow with questions about their interests or another neutral topic before proceeding through the phases.
- Child engaged and appears comfortable: proceed through the interview phases.

During/after Introduce the Topic

- Child mostly unresponsive or visibly upset: depending on your options, break to consult with the team, terminate the interview and schedule a second interview, or proceed through the interview phases.
- Child engaged and responding: proceed through the interview phases.

Introduce the Topic

In the substantive interview phases (from Introduce the Topic to Close the Interview), interviewers encourage children to describe events in their own words (Elicit a Free Narrative) and deliver prompts that ask children to elaborate and clarify details (Question and Clarify). This cycle of introducing a topic, eliciting a free narrative, and questioning/clarifying is repeated several times when interviews explore multiple issues.

To introduce a topic, interviewers:

- Explain they are changing the topic of conversation.
- Begin with the least suggestive prompt that might raise the topic (avoiding mention of alleged perpetrators or abuse).
- Progress through increasingly specific remarks when children are unresponsive (while still avoiding mention of allegation details). (See Examples: Introduce the Topic.)

It is best to avoid words such as hurt, bad, abuse, and other terms that project adult interpretations onto events. For example, interviewers should not introduce the topic of sexual abuse using the terms good touch or bad touch. The goal of prompts in the Examples textbox is to avoid asking children direct questions, such as “Did someone touch your privates last week?” This is because some children (particularly preschoolers and children who have overheard adults’ suspicions) will say “yes” to questions such as this one even when the events mentioned did not occur.[63] Consequently, answers to questions that include specific acts of abuse are less informative than answers to questions that prompt children to describe their abuse.

Direct questions about touching are also less desirable than broader questions because questions about touching can elicit descriptions of nonabuse experiences—such as bathing, temperature-taking, and memories of abuse prevention books—that could be misunderstood as disclosures.

Once children report that something happened, interviewers shift to open-ended prompts that encourage them to describe events in their own words. (See Elicit a Free Narrative.) When children are nonresponsive or upset during topic introduction, interviewers can address their behavior (e.g., “I see you are [not talking, looking down, etc.]—tell me [how you feel, what’s going on] so I can understand”], introduce another topic or activity to prolong rapport-building (e.g., a comfort-drawing activity), or break to consult with the investigative team. (See Pathways Through Topic Introduction.)

Closing the interview without a report of abuse is an acceptable outcome. There are many reasons why children may not disclose: because the abuse did not occur, because children are frightened or do not want to get a loved one in trouble, or because they are not recalling a relevant event at this moment.

Examples: Introduce the Topic

Interviewers introduce the topic by starting with the most open prompts and funneling down to more specific prompts if necessary.

Exploring an Allegation or Suspicions of Abuse

- Topic Shifter
    - Now that I know you better, it's time to talk about something else.
    - Thank you for telling me about [practice narrative topic]. Now I'm going to ask about something else.
- Initial transition prompt[64]
    - Tell me what you are here to talk about.
    - Tell me what you think you are here to talk about.
    - How do you feel about coming to talk to me today? [Use child's response to address concerns and choose the next topic-raising prompt.]
    - How did you feel when you found out you were coming to talk to me today? [Use child's response to address concerns and choose the next topic-raising prompt.]
- More specific topic introduction prompts[65]
    - Visible injury: I see you have [a cast on your arm, a bruise, etc.]. What happened?
    - I heard you saw: I heard you saw [a police officer, doctor, etc.] last week. Tell me [what you talked about, about visiting the doctor, etc.].
    - Some problems: I understand there are some problems [in your family, at camp, etc.]. Tell me about them.
    - Concerning behavior: I understand you were playing with someone yesterday and your teacher wanted you to stop playing. Tell me about that.
    - Had to move: I know that you had to move recently, and [name of caregiver] is taking care of you now. Tell me how that happened.
    - Someone's worried: I heard [your mom, the police officer, etc.] is worried that something may have happened to you. [Pause to allow child to comment.] Tell me what [your mom, the police officer, etc.] is worried about.

  - Someone bothered you: I heard that someone might have bothered you. Tell me everything about that.
  - Something wasn't right: I heard something may have happened to you that wasn't right. Did something happen?
- Redirection for irrelevant remarks[66]
  - I hear what you are saying to me, [child's name]. If you want, we can talk about that later. Right now, I want to know about something else.

Exploring Overall Safety

- Topic Shifter
  - Thank you for telling me about [practice narrative topic]. I'm enjoying getting to know you better. Now I'm going to ask some questions about your family and how you are doing. [Proceed to safety assessment questions.]

Pathways Through Topic Introduction

Child discloses after initial transition prompt

- Proceed to *Elicit a Free Narrative.*

Child acknowledges something happened – without making a full disclosure – after initial transition prompt

- Clarify report with prompt based on the child's words:
  - Child "[Name] bothers me." Interviewer: "Tell me everything [child's words] does that bothers you."
  - Child: "Mom punished me." Interviewer: "What happened when your mom punished you?"

Child does not disclose or acknowledge anything happened after initial transition prompt.

- Proceed down a list of more specific topic introduction prompts
  - Child discloses or acknowledges something happened: Clarify report, if needed and proceed to *Elicit a Free Narrative.*
  - Child does not disclose: Choose one or more – address the child's discomfort before proceeding, introduce a neutral topic/activity to prolong rapport-building, break to consult with the investigative team, or proceed to *close the interview.*

Elicit a Free Narrative

After raising the topic, interviewers deliver a series of open-ended prompts called invitations that encourage children to describe events in their own words. Responses to invitations are longer and more detailed than responses to questions about specific details,[67] and children feel listened to when interviewers use many invitations.[68] Also, responses to invitations are typically more accurate because children report what they remember best and are unlikely to guess.[69] Because invitations allow children to follow their own trains of thought, narratives elicited with these prompts are called free narratives.

Three types of invitations help interviewers elicit free narratives: [70]

- Open-ended initial invitations (also called general invitations) are the first prompts interviewers deliver after raising the topic, such as "Tell me everything that happened" and "Tell me all about [the child's words], from the very beginning to the very end." Each time children mention a new incident, interviewers use an open-ended initial invitation to elicit descriptions of the newly mentioned event.
- Open-ended breadth prompts ask children to expand the list of activities they report (e.g., "Then what happened?" "What else happened when [event child reported]?").
- Open-ended depth prompts, including time-segmentation invitations and cued invitations, ask children to elaborate about something they already mentioned. For example, "Tell me everything that happened from the moment [something the child mentioned] to the moment [something the child mentioned that happened shortly afterwards]" asks for more detail about the sequence of events (a time-segmentation invitation), whereas "Tell me more about [child's words]" asks for more detail about a specific action or thing (a cued invitation).

To elicit a free narrative, interviewers deliver an open-ended initial invitation after raising the topic (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened" for a report of a single incident). When children start talking, interviewers should be patient about pauses and not jump to the next prompt right away. Because continued silence exerts a subtle but gentle pressure to respond, interviewers should deliver the next prompt only when children have clearly finished responding.

The order of prompts will vary across interviews, but interviewers often follow open-ended initial invitations with a series of open-ended breadth prompts that ask children to sketch out an event from start to finish. Next, interviewers use depth prompts to fill in missing information about what people did and the contextual details of events. (See Examples: Elicit a Free Narrative with Open-Ended Invitations.) During the free narrative, it is usually unnecessary to interrupt children to elicit information about who people are and where or when events occurred.

There are several reasons why it is useful to let children talk freely about central actions and items (e.g., touching, clothing placement) before asking about contextual details (e.g., where and when touching occurred). Children recall central information better than contextual details, interviewers will elicit the most central information before children fatigue, and children's responses to a long series of open-ended prompts often contain information about "who what when where" (thereby reducing the need to deliver many specific questions). Also, letting children follow their own trains of thought increases their self-confidence and maintains cooperativeness.[71]

Throughout this phase, interviewers motivate children with facilitators (minimal encouragers such as "Uh huh" or repeating children's comments, e.g., Child: ". . . and then he turned on the TV." Interviewer: "He turned on the TV.), by giving permission to talk (e.g., Child: "And then he put his hand on my . . ." Interviewer: "It's okay to use any words in this room"), and by reminding children that they are used to talking about such things (e.g., "I talk with a lot of children about all sorts of things. It's okay to tell me about it").

When children become non-responsive, one strategy is simply to say, "You've stopped talking" or "I'm still listening." It may help to restate children's last statement or say, for example, "I see you are [behavior interviewer is observing, e.g., not talking, looking down]—tell me [how you feel, what's going on] so I can understand."[72] When interviewers offer children a short break, recording should continue throughout the break. Before a break, interviewers can provide older children with paper and a pencil and say, for example, "If you think of something to tell me, you can write it down and tell me when I get back."

The most common interviewer errors are omitting the free narrative phase and shifting prematurely to focused questions. Children often make comments adults do not fully understand and refer to people who are not identified yet. Repeatedly interrupting children to request immediate clarification can inhibit them from talking. Instead, interviewers can revisit some comments later in this phase or in the Question and Clarify phase.

Examples: Elicit a Free Narrative With Open-Ended Invitations

Child reports a single episode (e.g., "He burned my arm").

- Open-ended initial invitations: Tell me what happened. Tell me all about [the child's words], from the very beginning to the very end.
- Open-ended breadth prompts: Then what happened? You said [child's report]. Then what happened? What else happened when [event child reported]?
- Open-ended depth prompts:[73] Tell me, [child's name], everything that happened from [something child said happened] until [something child said happened shortly afterward]. Tell me more about [event child reported]. What happened when [event or detail child reported]?

Child uses the generic language of a repeated event (e.g., “He burns my arm”).

- Open-ended initial invitations: Tell me what happens when [child’s report]. Tell me all about [the child’s words]. Tell me everything that happens.
- Open-ended breadth prompts: Then what happens? You said [child’s report]. Then what happens? What else happens when [event child reported]?
- Open-ended depth prompts:[73] Tell me, [child’s name]. everything that happens from [something child said happens] until [something child said happens shortly afterward]. Tell me more about [event child reported]. What happens when [event or detail child reported].

Question and Clarify

The Question and Clarify Phase begins after interviewers have delivered a series of invitations and children have stopped providing new information. This phase is a time to clarify children’s comments and seek legally relevant information. Interviewers consider the amount of corroborating evidence, risks to children’s safety, and children’s cognitive abilities when deciding how directly to question a child about event details.

During this phase, interviewers strive to (a) frequently return to more open-ended prompts, (b) follow guidelines for questioning children, and (c) explore required topics (issues related to allegations and any general safety issues that are part of the interview goals).

Frequently Return to Open-Ended Prompts

Because children volunteer only a portion of what they remember in response to each prompt, it usually takes a series of prompts to elicit complete descriptions of events.[74] For example, if a child mentions that someone showed them “a bad cartoon,” the interviewer could begin with an open-ended depth prompt (cued invitation), such as “You said something about a bad cartoon. Tell me about the cartoon.” To elicit more details, the interviewer may ask questions such as the following: “What did the cartoon look like?” “Did [name child said] show you one cartoon or more than one cartoon?” “Tell me what the second cartoon looked like” “Was the cartoon on paper, on a computer, or something else?”

While questioning and clarifying, it is best to use prompts that allow children to report what they remember best. When interviewers need to raise issues with option-posing (multiple-choice or yes-no) questions, they should follow up with more open-ended prompts, when possible. For example, if objects were retrieved from the scene of an alleged event, the question “Did [name] bring anything for you that day?” could elicit a response such as “He brought some clothes for me to wear.” In this case, “Tell me about the clothes” is more open than “What color were the clothes?”

Prompts fall on a continuum from most open to most suggestive (explicitly leading questions). The following hierarchy describes this progression of question types. Interviewers should favor questions higher in the question hierarchy and avoid explicitly leading questions:

- Open-ended invitations (also called free-narrative prompts) allow children to select which details to report and generally require multiple-word responses. These include open-ended initial invitations (e.g., "You said [name] hit you with a belt. Tell me everything about [name] hitting you with a belt"), open-ended breadth prompts (e.g., "What else happened when [name] hit you with a belt?"), and open-ended depth prompts (e.g., "Tell me more about the belt").[75] In a nonleading way, invitations ask children to report event details, provide physical descriptions, and clarify apparent contradictions (e.g., "You said you were alone, but then you said your mom heard you talking. I'm confused about that. Help me understand").
- Directive questions (also called specific questions and wh- questions) are wh-/how questions (who, what, when, where, how) that probe for specific details. [76] It is helpful to think of three types of directive questions:
  - Broad directives focus attention on some aspect of an event or situation while encouraging children to provide multiple-word narratives (e.g., "How did [name] touch you?" to a child who reported being touched by a specific person).[77] These questions are open-ended because children can provide any number of responses. Broad directives can elicit information about physical surroundings ("What did the [object child mentioned] look like?") and other issues.
  - Focused directives also request details about something, but these questions can be answered with a word or brief comment. Focused directives are also open-ended, but questions with easy-to-generate guesses (e.g., "What color was the [object child mentioned]?") produce more guesses from children than broader questions do.[78] Focused directives can ask about the context of an event (e.g., "What room were you in when [event child described]?"), request clarification (e.g., "You said [name]. Who is [name]?"), or ask for a specific detail (e.g., "What was [name] wearing?").
  - Suppositional directives, which can be broad or focused, assume there is something to report but do not mention specific content (e.g., "What did [name] say while [event child reported]?). Children are less likely to incorrectly say "no" to these questions compared to a preliminary yes-no question (e.g., "Did [name] say anything/something?) followed by a wh- question (e.g., "What did [name] say]?"). Because suppositional directives contain no specific content, and it is easy for children to respond with "Nothing," these questions are not very suggestive.[79] For example, even preschoolers are highly accurate in response to

prompts that assume they heard something during an event ("Tell me what you heard when [event child described]").[80]

- Option-posing questions (also called closed questions) provide a limited number of response options. Multiple- choice questions and yes-no questions are option-posing questions. These questions are riskier than invitations and directives because children sometimes feel they should choose one of the options. Therefore, responses to these questions are generally less accurate than responses to more open-ended forms.[81] When interviewers need to confirm specific details of allegations and children seem confused by a directive question, interviewers can delete the expected answer from a multiple-choice question. If an event allegedly happened in the bathroom, for example, the interviewer might ask, "Did that happen in the bedroom, the kitchen, or [in another place, somewhere else]?"[82] It is also best to follow closed questions (questions that suggest a limited number of answers) with more open questions to show that children can provide information spontaneously.
- Explicitly leading questions (also called suggestive questions) imply answers or assume important facts about cases that might be in dispute. Determination of whether a question is leading depends upon a host of variables, including children's ages, maturity levels, and interviewers' tone of voice.[83] Tag questions (e.g., "And then [name] hit you, didn't she?") are explicitly leading, as is any question that includes information which cannot be assumed and that children have not yet volunteered. These types of questions should be avoided.

There is no need to preface questions with "Do you know" or "Can you tell me," as in "Do you know if someone was home?" or "Can you tell me if someone was home?" These questions encourage unelaborated yes-no responses, and responses to these questions can be ambiguous. In the first example, for instance, "no" could mean the child does not know or that no one was home.[84] Instead, say, "Who was home?"

During this phase, interviewers should monitor that children's statements are unambiguous. If the child talks about "Grandpa," for example, the interviewer should clarify which individual is being discussed (e.g., "Which grandpa?" "Does Grandpa have another name?" "Do you have one grandpa or more than one grandpa?"). Similarly, if the child uses an unclear word (e.g., "my hot dog," "my front butt"), the interviewer should attempt to identify what that word means to the child (e.g., "Tell me what your hot dog is," "What do you do with your hot dog?").

Each time children mention new allegations, interviewers should return to Elicit a Free Narrative by delivering a series of open-ended invitations before returning to more focused questions in the Question and Clarify phase. Throughout the Question and Clarify phase, interviewers should frequently cycle back to more open-ended prompts (questions higher in the question hierarchy), when possible. This practice of following focused questions with more open-ended prompts is called the questioning cycle85 or pairing.86 (See Examples: The Questioning Cycle.)

Examples: The Questioning Cycle

When interviewers use the questioning cycle (also called pairing), they follow prompts lower in the question hierarchy with more open-ended prompts. For example, the question “Did [child’s words] happen one time or more than one time?” (an option-posing question) might be followed by “Tell me everything about the time you remember best” (an open-ended invitation).

Question Hierarchy. Most open to least open.

- Open-ended invitations
- Broad directives
- Focused directives
- Option-posing questions

Follow Guidelines for Questioning Children

These guidelines help interviewers understand children of all ages and ability levels:[87]

- Do not assume what children said or what they mean by words. Interviewers should avoid guessing when children’s speech is unclear. (For example, avoid questions such as “Did you say, ‘potty’?”) Instead, ask children to repeat what they said and ask clarification questions when needed (e.g., “I’m not sure I understand where [name] peed—tell me more about where [name] peed,” “Does [child’s word] have another name?”). And because young children sometimes use words restrictively (e.g., bathing suits are not “clothes”) and idiosyncratically (e.g., “sex” could mean kissing), interviewers cannot assume children meant what an adult would have meant. Some apparent contradictions in children’s testimony stem from how they understand words and sentences. For example, “Did you put your mouth on his penis” could elicit “No” even though “Did he put his penis on your mouth” would elicit “Yes” (because the child did not initiate this action).88 Questions that get information in different ways can confirm what children intended.
- Use children’s words for body parts and the people in their lives but pronounce words as adults do. Because children often realize they are mispronouncing words, they can become upset when adults mimic their speech or use baby talk.
- Use simple, concrete words, and avoid introducing new words. For example, children less than 7 years sometimes confuse temporal words, such as before/after, make errors with kinship terms and pronouns, such as aunt/uncle and he/she, and confuse the

meaning of paired words, such as come/go and here/there. Concrete questions include concepts children understand (e.g., “Was it a school day or not a school day?”), refer to people by name (e.g., “Tell me about Aunt Sue” rather than “Tell me about your aunt]”).

- Be cautious about “pointing” words such as he, she, and that. These words can be ambiguous to children because their meaning depends on something said earlier in conversation. Because young children do not always correctly infer the intent of these words, it is safer to repeat what a pointing word stands for (e.g., “Where were you when [name child used] [event child reported]?” rather than “Where were you when she did that?). Also, interviewers who refer to someone (e.g., an adolescent’s friend) by a gendered pronoun might select the wrong pronoun. To avoid this problem, after the child says, “I told Alex all about it,” the interviewer can say “What did you tell Alex?” rather than “What did you tell her?”
- Ask one simple question at a time. Children understand better when interviewers ask about one concept at a time and avoid overly specific questions. For example, “Tell me about the last time you visited your cousin’s house” is less likely to prompt recall of abuse in the back yard than the question “Tell me about the last time you visited your cousin.”
- Follow children’s trains of thought. Because it is mentally challenging for children to shift topics, interviewers should avoid jumping from topic to topic. Instead, it is best to build questions around children’s free narrative. For example, when children report a single event, it is best to clarify the details of that event before asking whether there were other similar events.
- Consider how culture might influence children’s behavior. Culture influences many conversational behaviors, including how much children say when talking to adults, what topics are appropriate to discuss, the amount of pressure children feel to answer option-posing questions, and the amount of eye contact they make with adults. Generally, it is best to ignore behavior that does not interfere with the ability to deliver questions and hear children’s responses. When interviewers and children come from different cultures, it can help to seek guidance from someone knowledgeable about a child’s culture as part of preinterview planning.

Explore Required Topics

The topics interviewers explore depend on the type of allegation, number of allegations, children’s relationship to alleged perpetrators, and whether interview goals include discussion of broad caregiving and safety issues.

Interviews often cover the following issues when there are allegations or suspicions of sexual or physical abuse:[89]

- What happened?
- Who was involved (alleged perpetrators, other victims, and witnesses)?
- What is the child's relationship with alleged abuser/s?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- How often did it happen?
- Who else knows what happened?
- Who else may have been abused?
- Who else may have harmed the child?
- How was the child impacted by what happened?
- Are there other sources of evidence related to what happened?

Other topics may be important, such as descriptions of physical evidence (e.g., a belt, a camera). Interviewers should avoid probing for unnecessary details, however. For example, it may not be essential to get a detailed description of an alleged perpetrator if the accused is someone familiar to the child, such as a relative or teacher. And although it is useful when children can recall when and where events occurred, they may have difficulty specifying this information if they are young, events happened a long time ago, or abuse has been ongoing. (See Sample Questions by Information Type, in Resources, for questions that explore when an event occurred.)

Interviewers who broadly investigate the quality of children's caregiving and risks of maltreatment may invite children to discuss other issues, such as how safe they feel, what they worry about, and issues related to neglect (e.g., questions about adequate food, supervision, and medical care).

When young children stray off topic during this interview phase, it is important to reiterate the topic under discussion. For example, it is helpful to begin questions with identifying comments such as "About the time in the kitchen with [name]. . ." When children report new or unusual information, it is best to ask something such as "Are you talking about that time [name] grabbed your privates, or is this another time?" It is easier for children to stay on topic when interviewers warn them the topic is shifting (e.g., "I'm confused about that time in the park. Let me ask you something about that"). Another strategy to avoid confusion is to verbally label events interviewers might want to return to later in interviews (e.g., "Okay, let's call that the kitchen time").[90] During this phase, all references to people and events should be clarified to ensure there is only one interpretation of children's statements.

During the Question and Clarify Phase, interviewers listen to children, make decisions about further questioning, explore alternative explanations for allegations, and decide when to close interviews. Interviewers should maintain a relaxed manner and feel free to take a few minutes to collect their thoughts before deciding how to proceed. When there are team members in an adjoining observation room, the interviewer can ask these individuals whether they have additional questions before closing the interview. Consultations with team members during a short break can occur at the end of the Question and Clarify Phase or any time children's behavior or responses pose challenges.

Close the Interview

There are three main objectives during Close the Interview:

- Answer children's questions.
- Provide information to children.
- Convey that the interview is over.

Interviewers usually ask if children have any questions. It is important to answer questions truthfully and to avoid making promises (e.g., saying they will not have to talk about the abuse again). When children ask about interviewers' lives (e.g., "Did this happen to you too?), interviewers can address the concern without disclosing personal information (e.g., "Everyone, including me, has had things happen that they did not like or things that were upsetting").[91]

The closing phase is also a time to provide information interviewers want children to know. For example, they can explain that there could be another interview or tell children that another interview will be scheduled and why (e.g., "You said there were other things [name] did that we haven't talked about yet. We'll talk again [tomorrow, as soon as you can come back] so I can learn more about what happened").

Some interviewers convey that interviews are over by briefly chatting about a neutral topic. They can also discuss the next steps for the appointment or ask if the child has any other questions before leaving the interview setting.

Customizing Interviews

Accommodating Disabilities

Chronic health problems and perceptual, movement, language, cognitive, and emotional disorders can influence children's informativeness during forensic interviews. The best approach for most children is an interview style that helps all individuals understand and respond to questions. Interviewers who use this style minimize distractions, gather information about children's strengths and difficulties during early rapport building, phrase questions in ways that remind children what the topic is, ignore irrelevant behavior that can be ignored, privilege open-ended prompts, deliver grammatically simple questions, double-check the meaning of children's answers, and give children ample time to respond.[92]

If an initial interview is unsuccessful, and investigative teams have the resources, it may be helpful to conduct a second interview after taking a more comprehensive approach to preinterview planning. For example, knowing children's primary and secondary diagnoses and educational accommodations (if any) helps interviewers anticipate children's strengths and areas of difficulty.

Communication Issues

Interviewers can identify whether children have communication issues that require accommodation during preinterview preparation. Separate developmental assessments are not routinely required or useful but may be helpful for children who have a developmental disability or language limitation that raises questions about their ability to respond accurately to questions.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to communication systems that help children express themselves when they cannot communicate by producing typical speech or writing. AAC allows children to communicate independently through eye gaze, picture boards, computer-based technologies, or other systems. The professional who has had the most contact with the child (and/or the development of the child's communication system) and an independent specialist should be involved in evaluating the needs of a child who communicates via AAC.

Unlike AAC, facilitated communication involves techniques in which adults touch or support children's arms or hands while children interact with a keyboard or other device. Research has found that information obtained through facilitated communication often reflects the adults' knowledge. Thus, facilitated communication is not a scientifically supported alternative to speaking or AAC.[93]

Interpreter-Assisted Interviews

Interpreters translate what people say into another language using a manual sign language or an oral language other than commonly spoken English. Cued speech transliterators use manual signs to disambiguate phonemes that are hard to distinguish when people use facial cues for speechreading. Federal, state, and local policies dictate when investigative teams should arrange for an interpreter or transliterator, the minimum qualifications for these professionals, and the number of interpreters present during interviews. For example, CAC interviews might have two interpreters, one in the interview room and one with the observing team, or only an interpreter for observers when the interviewer is multilingual.

Interpreters assist interviewers either in person or via video call. Regardless of format, the following guidelines can help mitigate the challenges of conducting interpreter-assisted interviews.

Select Interpreters Who Meet Case Needs

Interpreters should have the necessary credentials, understand confidentiality requirements, be familiar with children's dialects and culture, and be available for possible court appearances. Because it is best if the same interpreter participates in follow-up interviews, it is helpful to ask about interpreters' availability should there be a second interview. It is also important to explore whether interpreters are comfortable with the topics that might be discussed and are prepared to translate dialog containing disturbing or crude words, such as descriptions of sexual acts and sexual slang words.

Prepare Interpreters for the Forensic Interview Process

During preinterview meetings, interviewers or other team members can explain the physical setting to interpreters, such as recording systems and the presence of observers for interviews conducted in a CAC. Interpreters who are unfamiliar with forensic interviews might not realize that interviewers carefully select the words they use and the grammatical forms of their questions.[94] To reduce the risk that interpreters will recast interviewer's questions or modify children's answers, it is helpful to explain these ground rules for interpreting during a forensic interview:[95]

- Do not edit questions or responses for the forensic interviewer, the family, or the child.
- If one party does not understand, convey the misunderstanding rather than trying to explain it yourself. Let the interviewer know if the child or family does not understand something.
- Do not omit portions of questions or responses; do not add or embellish on them either.
- Translate in the first person, rather than adding, "He said/she said."
- Do not alter the phrasing as questions are translated.
- Convey the content and spirit of what was said—the real meaning, not just the literally translated word. Convey the cultural framework if that is appropriate.
- Interpret accurately, without comment. Even if you disagree with what is said, believe it is a lie, or feel that it is immoral, do not let your biases show.
- Do not have side conversations with the child or ask your own questions.
- Monitor your tone and body language. When children say shocking things, your tone and body language should remain neutral to maintain the integrity of the interview and not cause damage to the child.

Set Up the Interview Space to Accommodate Interpreters

Interpreters in interview rooms should be on camera for videorecorded interviews. One arrangement is to position interviewers and children across from each other with interpreters behind and to the side of interviewers. This allows interviewers to maintain eye contact with children while reducing children's tendency to engage interpreters in conversation.

Document the Presence of the Interpreter

Per Michigan law, the video-recorded statement shall state the date and time that the statement was taken, identify the persons present in the room, and state whether these individuals were present for the entire video recording or only a portion of the recording.[96]

Explain Interpreters' Roles to Children at the Beginning of Interviews

For example, interviewers who do not speak the child's language might say, "Another thing I want you to know about this room is that the interpreter is here to help me do my job. [Interpreter's name] will ask you my questions in [language] and will make sure I understand your answers. If you are confused, it is okay to let me know. If the interpreter or I get something wrong, it is okay to let me know that, too." To bilingual children, interviewers might say, "Part of my job is to make sure I get your words right. It's okay to use [language] or English while I listen to you today, and [interpreter's name] will help me understand if you use [language]."[97]

Realize That Interviews With Interpreters Have Different Dynamics

Interviewers may need to modify their usual practices to respond to these challenges of interpreter-facilitated interviews:

- Interviews take longer. There are several reasons why interpreter-facilitated interviews typically take longer: Some languages use more words to express ideas, children who are learning multiple languages often need more time to formulate responses, questions must be repeated by the interpreter, more time is needed to clarify questions and answers, and more breaks may be needed.
- Children may provide fewer details in response to each prompt. Reliance on the interpreter and cultural norms for talking to unfamiliar adults can make it harder to elicit details from children in interpreter-assisted interviews. Witnesses generally provide less information during these interviews,[98] and cultural issues might influence children's comfort with unfamiliar adults and the amount of information they provide.[99] Interviewers working with an interpreter may need to spend more time in the narrative practice phase to encourage children to talk, ask longer series of invitations, use longer pauses to convey they are still listening, and use more directives (wh- questions).
- There is greater risk for misunderstandings. Many languages have words that do not map onto a single word in another language, and words that appear to be direct

translations can have different meanings or usage. In Spanish, for example, molestar means to bother or annoy. Because interviewers might need to resolve more confusions in interpreter-assisted interviews, it is important that children not feel responsible for misunderstandings. Interviewers can reassure children with comments such as "I'm sorry that I didn't understand what you were saying to me. That was my fault; let me try again."[100]

Educate the Multidisciplinary Team About Potential Issues in Transcriptions of Recorded Interviews

Transcriptions from audio recordings can contain mistakes due to words that sound similar, difficulties hearing the child, and the failure of literal translation to capture some cultural nuances.

Interviewing Aids

Because children's behavior with anatomical dolls is not diagnostic of abuse, interviewers can be accused of suggesting sexual themes if they introduce this aid before children have mentioned abuse.[101] Moreover, asking children to label body parts on a human figure drawing, and then asking if they have been touched in any of the mentioned places, prompts some children to point thoughtlessly to the diagram.[102] Because of these concerns, and because most interviews can be successfully conducted without aids, interviewers should not use anatomical dolls or body diagrams to elicit abuse disclosures. Interviewing aids can be introduced during the Question and Clarify Phase to help resolve ambiguities in children's verbal reports when clarification questions have not been effective.[103]

Preschoolers

Whenever possible, CACs should schedule interviews with young children for a time of the day when they are usually alert and have recently had a snack. No special adjustments to the protocol are required for preschool children, but interviewers should be aware that young children are more likely than older children to answer multiple-choice and yes-no questions even when they do not know the answer. For example, "no" is a frequent answer to questions that are not understood and questions containing the word any (e.g., "Did [name] say anything else?"). When interviewers use option-posing questions, it is helpful to demonstrate that children are not answering thoughtlessly. For instance, following option-posing questions with prompts that invite children to elaborate can provide more information about what children remember.

Questions about Time

There are several reasons why children have difficulty reporting when an event happened. During language development, children learn words that mark temporal relationships only gradually. Three-year-olds, for example, often use yesterday to mean not today, and the words before and after are poorly understood before 7 years or even older.[104] Regarding temporal concepts, children's understanding of dates and clock time is limited before 8 to 10 years of age. Often, children simply fail to remember exactly when target events occurred. Memory failure is common when events occurred a long time ago and when there were many similar events.

Interviewers should try to identify when events occurred, but young children sometimes answer inaccurately when questions demand details they cannot provide. For example, children sometimes answer questions about the day of the week or the time of day even when they are uncertain. Therefore, interviewers should try to determine when events occurred by asking about the context of the events. General questions about what grade children were in or who their teachers were, how old children where, what they were wearing (which could reveal whether it was warm outside), and whether it was summer vacation can narrow down the time. Similarly, knowing that children were playing with a toy or using an electronic device they received for a birthday or holiday will date the event after those times. Some interviewers have asked children to point to a timeline that contains pictures of holidays and other events, but there is no evidence that children report the timing of past events more accurately with this aid than with developmentally appropriate verbal questions.[105]

Interviewers should be aware that time is not an element in child criminal sexual conduct cases in Michigan. A thorough investigation, including witness statements, can help investigators establish a date range for charging purposes,[106] but jury instructions do not require prosecutors to prove date or time of an offense.[107] Therefore, interviewers can ask a child about date or time but should proceed if a child is not able to provide that information.

Tele-Forensic Interviews

In 2020, Michigan's Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and the Department of Health and Human Services published provisional tele-forensic interview guidelines to continue services to children and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. As explained in the Introduction:

Tele-forensic interviewing (interviewing via a videoconference application) is a legally defensible alternative to face-to-face interviewing. Forensic interviewers[108] sometimes conduct conversations from a distance when they cannot arrange face-to-face interviews,[109] when usual practices would create delays that could compromise investigations, and when face-to-face interviewing would put children and/or professionals at risk.

Tele-forensic interviews can be the best choice for communicating with children who are currently out of local jurisdiction, hospitalized but capable of participating in an interview, or cared for by adults who are unable or refuse to travel due to health or other reasons. Tele-forensic interviews reduce the risk of disease transmission during community outbreaks (e.g., COVID-19, measles) and when children and/or families have, or might have, a communicable disease. Also, tele-forensic interviews offer an alternative delivery mode when interviewing facilities are unavailable and when cases require interviewers or translators with skills that are not available locally.

Tele-forensic interviewing changes the way children see and hear interviewers but does not alter the fundamental structure of interviews or waive interviewers' training requirements or agency policies. Like face-to-face interviews, tele-forensic interviews are part of broader efforts to reduce trauma to children and provide post-victimization services. Consequently, these guidelines include suggestions for maintaining multidisciplinary team involvement (when appropriate) and for ensuring that children interviewed via videoconference applications are connected to available victim services. (p. 2)

Because mobile devices have become a familiar way to communicate among children and adolescents, some CACs offer on-site tele-forensic interviewing (children and interviewers in different rooms at the CAC) as an option when an interviewer supportive of that option is available and the facility can meet requirements summarized in the tele-forensic interview guidelines. These guidelines caution that “due to differences across Michigan in resources and community needs, individual agencies and Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) may want to develop internal guidelines regarding interview preparation, documentation, and safety considerations” (p. 2).

Trafficking

Child Trafficking Definitions

Child trafficking includes sex and labor trafficking. Under Michigan law, “any child who has been recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, provided, or obtained for commercial sexual activity, a sexually explicit performance or the production of pornography, is a victim of sex trafficking"[110] (also called commercial sexual exploitation of children). Although traffickers often use force, threats, violence, false promises, manipulation, lies and other physical or psychological methods to control their victims, a child need only be sexually exploited to be considered a victim of sex trafficking in Michigan.”[111]

In Michigan, any child who has been recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, provided or obtained for forced labor is a victim of labor trafficking,[112] regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion.

Trafficking Screening

There are many signs that children may be trafficking victims, including, but not limited to, the unexplained appearance of expensive items or tattoos, excess cash, a history of running away, over-sexualized behavior, and the presence of an older boyfriend/girlfriend.

Traffickers often target LGBTQIA+ children, children in foster care, and children with low self-esteem, learning difficulties, cognitive impairments, and difficult and/or abusive home lives, but many trafficking victims do not present with obvious signs or risk factors.

The MDHHS Human Trafficking of Children Protocol provides links to approved trafficking screening tools for child welfare professionals involved in ongoing and closed cases. Child welfare professionals and MDHHS contract employees can complete trafficking screenings for ongoing cases even when a forensic interview is not required (e.g., children in foster care who display new signs).[113]

Forensic Interviewing of Potential Child Trafficking Victims

Effective interviewers consider victims' developmental needs and the ways traffickers gain and maintain control. More so than younger children, adolescent victims value their autonomy, which can heighten their reluctance to admit they were manipulated. At the same time, developmental increases in peer loyalty decreases their willingness to disclose information about other victims and traffickers they consider friends or romantic partners. From victims' perspectives, cooperating with authorities could mean losing access to the money, goods, or drugs their traffickers provided, getting into trouble for illegal activities they participated in, or risking their families' safety.[114]

As with all multiple-victim cases, it is important to interview possible victims separately from other children who might be involved in the same case. Forensic interviewers can customize information-gathering efforts to address the dynamics of trafficking cases, as in the following examples:

- Consider scheduling multiple sessions. Child trafficking victims need time to build trust. Moreover, some children are withdrawing from substances after rescue, recovering from lack of sleep, or experiencing medical issues. One or more early sessions that focus only on building trust can give children needed time to adjust. Giving children a say in the place and/or time of those conversations, dressing casually, keeping early conversation lighthearted, and discussing age-appropriate topics are some of the ways investigators connect with trafficked minors.[115] Once children begin sharing, it may take more than one interview to elicit full disclosures.[116]

- Provide a respectful and age-appropriate environment. Some best practice guidelines for interviewing children can be counterproductive with reluctant, and possibly hostile, youth. For example, early discussions about the truth followed by narrative practice could be viewed as controlling and interfere with rapport building. Instead, interviewers can prolong rapport-building and work for greater engagement through respectful, age-appropriate conversation.[117]
- Give victims a sense of control. Because adolescents like to feel in control, interviewers should let them guide early conversation and ask for more information about issues they mention. Pausing and listening are critical skills for building trust and rapport.
- Address barriers to disclosing. Expressing concern for victims' comfort, feelings, and fears may encourage them to be more forthcoming. Comments like "Please let me know if you would like to take a break or need something to drink" give victims control over the pace of interviews, and "I want to know how you are feeling about being here today" shows you value their feelings.[118] Addressing children's safety concerns early in conversation will promote sharing.
- Maintain a nonthreatening and conversational style. As in all forensic interviews, using open-ended invitations and avoiding rapid series of questions (see Elicit a Free Narrative) is typically more effective than interrogation-style questioning.[119]
- Request contextual information before asking for trafficking details. Trafficked minors are often evasive when interviewers use open-ended prompts to request details about trafficking activities. However, they are more willing to respond to prompts and option-posing questions that ask them to describe context or the events that preceded their involvement in trafficking. Interviewers can increase cooperation by requesting less sensitive information first.[120]
- Be thoughtful about what information you need. For example, if other evidence identifies someone as the person in charge, it might not be necessary to get that information from victims. Among other topics, interviewers should explore for nicknames used, signs or symbols used, whether items were purchased for children, whether children are aware of other victims, and whether photos or videos were taken. When interviewing sextortion victims, investigative teams should decide whether images should be used in interviews and how interviewers will introduce this evidence (see Evidence in Resources).
- Follow recommendations for interpreter-assisted interviews, when needed. Guidelines for interpreter-assisted interviews in this protocol (see Customizing Interviews) discuss the need for two interpreters for CAC interviews (one with the child and one for the observing team) and offer suggestions for preparing interpreters for the interview process.

Trafficking Resources

Consult the MDHHS website for more information about human trafficking, the MDHHS Human Trafficking of Children Policy, and the MDHHS Human Trafficking of Children Protocol. The Michigan Attorney General Human Trafficking website and websites for the Michigan Human Trafficking Health Advisory Board and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Blue Campaign also contain links to helpful resources, including information about human trafficking indicators and reporting systems.

Using Evidence in Interviews

Interviewers can present evidence of abuse or neglect to children during forensic interviews, if necessary. Presenting evidence in a thoughtful manner that minimizes trauma to children can prompt disclosures and elicit details that protect children who are at heightened risk of further abuse. Types of physical evidence include, but are not limited to:

- Medical photographs of bruises.
- Photographs of items used to cause injury (e.g., when children mentioned the object and interviewers want to confirm the exact item used).
- Photographs of conditions inside houses in neglect cases.
- Photographs or still images from video recordings in sexual abuse cases.
- Text messages and chat logs.

Investigative teams should consider several questions when deciding whether to use evidence during interviews, including whether it is necessary, whether the defense could claim that the evidence suggested answers to the child, and whether there are interview strategies that would counter claims of suggestion. Even when evidence could be useful, interviewers should attempt to introduce the topic and elicit a free narrative without using evidence.

Minimizing secondary trauma to children is an important goal for interviewers who use evidence. Often, interviewers select a subset of evidence and are transparent about that evidence early in conversations by saying, for example, “I have some pictures I may want to show you and talk about today, but first I want to get to know you better.” Interviewers can give children choices over the way information about evidence is revealed. For example, they can start by saying, “Remember earlier I said I had some [type of evidence]. I have the [type of evidence] here.” They can then give children a choice between viewing the evidence or first hearing a description of the evidence. When children are unaware that pictures or videos were taken, interviewers can say that the images were found and ask if children want to know what is in the images before letting them decide whether to see the images.[121]

There are special considerations for using photographs or recordings of children engaged in sexually abusive activity. Interviewers should contact the charging authority (prosecutor or attorney general) in their area before presenting these types of images to children because state and federal laws govern the possession and handling of child sexually abusive material. All child sexually abusive material should be returned to law enforcement immediately after interviews.

Training on best-practice guidelines for using physical evidence is highly recommended due to the specialized knowledge that is needed to prepare and use physical evidence in ways that minimize risks to children and cases.

Resources

Overview of an Interview

1. Prepare for the Interview
    a. Gather/review background information.
    b. Plan the interview.
    c. Set up the interview environment.
    d. Add identifying information to the recording.
2. Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport
    a. Introduce yourself and others in the room (e.g., an interpreter).
    b. Explain the recording equipment (if used) and allow time for the child to glance around the room.
    c. Begin a brief conversation about neutral events. Favor open-ended prompts over prompts that elicit single-word responses or lists.
    d. Throughout, use the child's name and other forms of nonsuggestive social support.

Young child: Hello, [child's name]. My name is [interviewer's name]. My job is to listen to kids. Today is my day to listen to you. I talk with a lot of children about what is happening in their lives. We are going to talk for a while and then I'll take you back to the other room where your [mom, dad, etc.] is waiting for you. [Ask a few simple questions to get to know the child, as needed.]

School-aged child: Hello [child's name]. My name is [interviewer's name]. I'm a [social worker, police officer, etc.]. My job is to talk with children, teens, and young adults. I talk with a lot of [children, teens, people] in [name of town]. Do you know what a [social worker, police officer, etc.] does? [Wait for response and react to child's answer, e.g., "Some social workers/police officers do that, but part of my job is to get to know people and talk about what's been happening in their lives"].

3. Deliver Interview Instructions: See *Pathways Through Interview Instructions* for some ways interviewers can customize this interview phase by omitting some instructions or omitting some practice questions.

[Child's name], I'm interested in you, and we'll be talking about a lot of things today. But first there are some important things to remember. In this room, we talk differently than how people usually talk. So, I want to talk more about that.

Don't guess. If I ask a question and you don't know the answer, just say, "I don't know." Let's practice. [Deliver practice questions.] Longer instruction for an older child. If I ask a question and you don't know the answer, just say, "I don't know." Even adults sometimes guess answers or are embarrassed to tell someone they said something wrong. I like to ask practice questions, so you get comfortable talking with me. [Deliver practice questions.]

Tell me if a question doesn't make sense or you don't understand. Another rule is if I say something that [doesn't make sense, is confusing] or you don't understand something, I want you to ask me about it. [Deliver practice questions.]

Correct me if I make a mistake. Sometimes I say something wrong by mistake. It's important that you tell me if I say something wrong. [Deliver practice questions.]

I don't know the answer to questions. As we're talking today, remember that I don't know the answer to questions I will ask. I won't be able to help you with any of the questions.

Promise to tell the truth. Agreement to tell the truth: I meet with lots of [children, teens, young adults] so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. [Child's name], do you promise that you will tell me [the truth, what really happened]?

Demonstrating understanding before the agreement: I meet with lots of [children, teens, young adults] so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. I want to make sure you know what the truth is. I'm sitting down right now. Is that [true or not true, right or wrong]? [Wait for response.] I AM sitting down, so sitting down is [the truth, right—it's the truth]. You are running now. Is that [true or not true, right or wrong]? Yes, you are sitting, so saying you are running is [not true, wrong—it's not true]. I see you understand [the truth, what is right and what is wrong]. While we are talking today, it is important to tell me [the truth—what really happened, things that are right—what really happened]. [Child's name], do you promise that you will tell me [the truth, what really happened] when I ask questions?

4. Encourage Talking With a Practice Narrative
    a. Ask the child to talk about a recent and positive event or favorite activity.

b. Deliver many open-ended prompts that invite
c. Multiple-word responses.
d. Use facilitators (minimal encouragers) to encourage the child to talk.
e. Give the child adequate time to think.
f. Prolong rapport building if the child is reluctant to talk.

Topic shift, preschool child: I'd like to get to know you better.

Topic shift, 6 years or older: Now I want to try something different. Remember I told you earlier that my job is to listen to kids about things that are happening in their lives? When we talk in this room, I want to know about everything that happened, even the little details that don't seem important, but that's not how people usually talk. So, I like to practice it.

Topic shift, older child or adolescent: Some people find it helpful to chat about something else before we get started—like something you've done recently or that you like to do. It may give you a chance to settle into the room and get used to how the interview will work.

Example Narrative Practice Topics

Child nominated event/activity. Have you ever taken a trip or gone somewhere that you really enjoyed? [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me everything about [event].

Tell me something fun you've done recently. [Wait for child to respond.] Tell me everything about [event].

Is there an event you remember well and would like to talk about? Tell me everything about [event].

Interviewer-selected one-time event. A few days ago (or a few weeks ago) was [event reported by caregiver, e.g., Thanksgiving, last day of Ramadan, etc.]. Tell me everything that happened on [event].

Tell me everything that happened yesterday from the time you woke up until you went to bed. (Use only if yesterday was not the day of the alleged event.).

Repeated (scripted) event. I'd like to get to know more about you and your family. Tell me what you do on a school day, from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. (If further prompts are necessary, the interviewer can say, "Tell me what you do to get ready to go to school." "Then what do you do?" "What do you do next?")

I talk with a lot of children, and most of them like to get hamburgers or pizza at their favorite restaurant. Do you have a favorite place to eat? [Wait for response.] Good. Tell me everything that happens when you go to [restaurant], from the time you leave home to the time you get back and everything in between.

5. Introduce the Topic
    a. Start with the least suggestive prompt.
    b. Follow with more specific prompts, if necessary, without mentioning alleged events or who might have been involved.
    c. Avoid words such as hurt, bad, good touch/bad touch, or abuse.

Topic shift. Now that I know you better, it's time to talk about something else.

Thank you for telling me about [practice narrative topic]. Now I'm going to ask about something else.

Introduce the topic. Tell me what you are here to talk about.

Tell me what you think you are here to talk about.

How do you feel about coming to talk to me today? [Use child's response to address concerns and choose the next topic-raising prompt.]

How did you feel when you found out you were coming to talk to me today? [Use child's response to address concerns and choose the next topic-raising prompt.]

(Follow with other transition prompts, as needed.)

6. Elicit a Free Narrative
    a. Deliver many invitations that encourage the child to fully describe the event.
    b. Start with an open-ended initial invitation.
    c. Use open-ended breadth and depth prompts to encourage the child to elaborate.
    d. Ask whether the event happened one time or more than one time and explore multiple events.
    e. Start with an open-ended initial invitation for each new allegation.
    f. Through this phase, use facilitators (minimal encouragers) to convey it is the child's turn to talk.

Open-ended initial invitation.

- Child reports a specific event: Tell me all about [the child's words], from the very beginning to the very end.
- Child uses the generic language of a repeated event: Tell me everything that happens when [the child's words].

Open-ended breadth prompts.

- Then what [happened, happens]?

Open-ended depth prompts.

- Tell me, [child's name], everything that [happened, happens] from [something child said happened] until [something child said happened shortly afterward].
- Tell me more about [event child reported].
- What [happened, happens] when [event or detail child reported].

7. Question and Clarify
    a. Return frequently to open-ended prompts.
    b. Follow Guidelines for Questioning Children.
    c. Explore required topics. (See Example Questions in Resources.)

Topic shift. I want to make sure I understand everything that happened. (See Sample Questions in Resources for examples of how to elicit needed information.)

8. Close the Interview
    a. Explain anything you want the child to know.
    b. Answer the child's questions.
    c. Chat about a neutral topic to end on a pleasant note.

Thank you for coming to talk to me, [child's name]. [Explain anything you want the child to know, e.g., how to contact you if they remember more, the possibility of another interview.] Do you have any questions for me? [Answer questions.] [End with conversation to relax the child, e.g., "What plans do you have for the rest of the day?"]

Overview of an Interview: Condensed

1. Prepare for the Interview (e.g., plan topic introduction prompts).
2. Introduce Yourself and Start Building Rapport.
    a. Young child: Hello __. My name is __. My job is to listen to kids. Today is my day to listen to you. I talk with a lot of children about what is happening in their lives. We are going to talk for a while and then I'll take you back to the other room where __ is waiting for you. [Start rapport-building conversation.]
    b. School-aged child: Hello __. My name is __. I'm a [social worker, police officer]. My job is to talk with children, teens, and young adults. I talk with a lot of [children, teens] in [name of town]. Do you know what a __ does? [Respond and start rapport-building conversation.]
3. Deliver Interview Instructions (proceed to #4 regardless of performance).

[Child's name], I'm interested in getting to know you, but first there are some important things to remember. In this room, we talk differently than how people usually talk. So, I want to talk about that.

   a. Don’t guess/young child. If I ask a question and you don’t know the answer, just say, “I don’t know.” Let’s practice. [What’s my sister’s name? What did I eat for breakfast?]
      Don’t guess/older child. If I ask a question and you don’t know the answer, just say, “I don’t know.” Even adults sometimes guess answers or are embarrassed to tell someone they said something wrong. I like to ask practice questions, so you get comfortable talking with me. For example, [what’s my sister’s name, what did I eat for breakfast?]?
   b. Tell me if a question doesn’t make sense or you don’t understand. If I say something that [doesn’t make sense, is confusing] or you don’t understand something, I want you to ask me about it. For example, [where is your patella, is my shirt gridelin, is my shirt burnet]?
   c. Correct me if I make a mistake. Sometimes I say something wrong by mistake. It’s important that you tell me if I say something wrong. For example, if I said you are 20 years old, what do you say?
   d. I don’t know the answer to questions I will ask. As we’re talking today, remember that I don’t know the answer to questions I will ask. I won’t be able to help you with any of the questions.
   e. Promise to tell the truth.
   f. Demonstrate understanding. I meet with lots of children so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. I want to make sure you know what the truth is. I’m sitting down right now. Is that true or not true? [Wait.] I AM sitting down, so sitting down is the truth. You are running now. Is that true or not true? [Wait.] Yes, you are sitting, so saying you are running is not true. I see you understand the truth. While we are talking today, it is important to tell me the truth—what really happened. [Child’s name], do you promise that you will tell me the truth today?
   g. Agreement only. I meet with lots of [children, teens] so they can tell me the truth about things that have happened to them—what really happened. [Child’s name], do you promise that you will tell me the truth today?
4. Encourage Talking With a Practice Narrative. Give the child time to respond.
   a. Transition. Young child: I'd like to get to know you better. Older child: Some people find it helpful to chat about something else before we get started—like something you've done recently or that you like to do. It may give you a chance to settle into the room and get used to how the interview will work.
   b. Raise a topic, e.g., Tell me something fun you’ve done recently.
   c. Invite the child to talk by using many invitations.
5. Introduce the Topic (when the child seems ready). Be tolerant of pauses.

    a. Now that I know you better, it's time to talk about something else. Tell me what you are here to talk about.
    b. Deliver other prompts as needed: I heard [you saw a police officer/doctor, someone's worried, someone bothered you], I see [you have a cast, you have a bruise], I understand [e.g., there are some problems in your family].

6. Elicit a Free Narrative. Delay clarifying details. Be tolerant of pauses.

See insert for sample invitations. Do not exit this phase prematurely.

7. Question and Clarify (return to Free Narrative for new allegations).

Cycle back to more open-ended prompts as you gather needed information.

8. Close the Interview (answer children's questions, provided needed information, and convey the interview is over).

Open-Ended Rapport Building

- Initial Invitations
    - Tell me everything about [topic].
    - Tell me all about [topic], from the very beginning to the very end.
- Breadth Prompts
    - Then what happened?
    - What else happened when [child's words]?
- Depth Prompts
    - cued: Tell me more about [child's words].
    - time segmentation: Tell me everything that happened from [child's words] to [child's words].

Invitations

- Initial Invitations
    - Tell me everything about [topic].
    - Tell me all about [topic], from the very beginning to the very end.
- Breadth prompts
    - Then what happened?
    - What else happened when [child's words]?
- Depth prompts
    - cued: Tell me more about [child's words].
    - time segmentation: Tell me everything that happened from [child's words] to [child's words].

Sample Questions by Information Type

Clarification

Abuse versus routine caregiving or folk medical treatment

- Young child: What were you doing when [event]?
- Older child: What were you and [name] doing just before [event]? Was there a reason [name] was [event]?

Body part: You said [name] touched your [child's word].

- What do you use your [child's word] for?
- Is there another name for your [child's word]?
- What [do other people] call your [child's word]?
- Introducing a body diagram to clarify a disclosure (for example, at the end of an interview): You used the word [child's word]. To help me understand more, I have a drawing I want to show you. The drawing is of a person with no clothes on and there is a front and back. Is it OK if I show you this drawing? [Wait for response.] Please circle the part you were talking about when you said [child's word]. [Wait for child to circle, write their name on the drawing, put it away, and proceed with the interview.]

"I don't know" response

- You don't know, or you don't want to talk about this right now?
- Tell me what you do know.

Inaudible comment

- I'm sorry, I didn't hear that. [Repeat the question.]
- I didn't hear that. What did you say?

Inconsistent information

- You said [child's first report] but then you said [child's second report]. I'm confused. Help me understand.
- You said [child's first report] but then you said [child's second report]. Was that the same time or different times?

Person mentioned

- Who is [name child used]?
- Does [name child used, e.g., Auntie] have another name?
- How do you know [name]?

Sexual touching (see Sexual Contact)

Touching (nature of, see Sexual Contact)

Recantation/retraction (see Recantation)

Sex and gender (see Sex and Gender)

Unfamiliar Word

- What do you mean when you say [child's word]?
- I don't know what a [child's word] is. What does [child's word] [do, look like]?

Clothing Placement

Young children often answer yes-no (e.g., "Were your clothes on?"), forced-choice (e.g., "Were your clothes on or off?'), and open-choice questions (e.g., 'Were your clothes on, off, or something else?") incorrectly when clothing is not fully on or off (e.g., pants pulled down).[122] "Where" questions elicit more accurate responses, although questions with when and how can also elicit reports of intermediate clothing placement.[123]

- What were [you, name of alleged perpetrator] wearing?
- Where were your clothes when [event child reported]?
- Where were/was your [pants/shirt]?
- When [name] touched your [body part], what happened to your [underwear, pants, shirt]?
- How did [clothing situation child reported]? (For example, "How did your underwear come off?")
- How were [name's] pants when he/she/they [child's report of event]?

Conversation

- What did [name] say before [event]?
- What did [name] say when it was over?
- Sometimes we remember sounds or things people say. Tell me what sounds you heard when [child's report of the event].

Disclosure Information

- Does anyone else know about [event]?
- Who knows about [event]? How did [name] find out about [event]? (Ask questions to determine when each person found out, what the child said, and what might have prompted the disclosure, e.g., "What happened that you decided to tell?")
- Is there a reason you decided to tell?

- Had you ever thought about telling before now?” (Follow up with “Tell me all the reasons you decided not to.”)

Event Context

- What made [name] [event]?” (For example, “What made [name] get mad?”)
- How did [illegal or unsafe event]? (For example, “How did the matches get out of the drawer?”)

Feelings and Reactions

- How did you feel when [event]?
- How did you feel after [event]?
- How did it feel when [event]?

Images Viewed or Taken

- Did [name] ever show you books, pictures, or movies when [event] happened? Tell me everything about [child’s report].
- Did [name] have a computer, cell phone, or tablet? Did [name] show you anything on [device child mentioned]? Tell me about [child’s report].
- Did [name] show you anything you think children shouldn’t see?” (Ask questions to find out what the child saw, where these items are located, and what the device looked like.)
- Did you ever watch movies with [name]?
- Did [name] take any pictures of you? How do you know? Tell me about [child’s report].
- Has [name] or someone else ever tried to take a picture of you [without clothes, that were sexy]?
- Has someone made you send them pictures of you?
- Describe the [media device] that [name] used to show you [videos, pictures]. [Ask questions to try to determine the color of the items or the appearance of their cases.]
- Did [name] share the [media device] with anyone? Was anyone else allowed to use that [media device]?
- Do you know if [name] still has the [media device]? When did you last see that [media device]? Where did you last see that [media device]?

Grooming (see Manipulation)

Location of an Event

- Where were you when [event]?
- If child mentions a home/building: What room were you in when [event]?
- Where in [location] were you? Tell me what [location child mentioned] looks like.

Manipulation[124]

- How did you feel about [name] before [event] started happening?
- What kinds of things did [name] first do with you?
- Did [name] give [you, you and your friends] things? (If “yes,” follow up with “tell me about ….”)
- Tell me about any rules [name] had.
- What would happen when you [or “you and the other kids/girls/boys”] broke the rules?
- Were you ever alone with [name]? Where would you be alone with [name]? Where would [your parents, your brothers/sisters, the other kids] be?
- Tell me about [name] starting. How did you feel about [name] after [event] started happening?
- Is there anything [name] allows you to do that you usually can’t do?
- Did [name] allow you to break any rules?

Number of Similar Events

Preschool and school-aged children have difficulty accurately reporting how often something happened, even when interviewers ask them to pick a category such as more than one time, more than five times, or more than 10 times.[125] For this reason, interviewers often get information about the number of similar events through a series of questions.

- Did [event] one time or more than one time?
- Tell me about the [first, last] time [event].
- Tell me about the time you remember best.
- Was there a time when something different happened?

Object Descriptions (also see Physical Evidence)

- Tell me more about [something the child mentioned, e.g., stickers].
- What did the [object] look like?
- Did you notice anything [special, different] about the [object]?

Other Incidents (see Number of Similar Events)

Other Victims

- Has [name] ever bothered or [event] someone else? (Follow up with questions to clarify the event, e.g., “What did [name] do?” “Who did [name] [event]?” “How do you know [name] [new report]?”)
- Tell me about knowing it happened to [name].

Other Perpetrators

- Has something like this ever happened with someone else?
- Has someone else ever [action]?

Other Types of Abuse (also see Safety)

- Has something else happened that made you feel scared, hurt, or bad?

People

Alleged perpetrator

- Who [event]?
- Tell me more about [name or pronoun child used].
- Does [name or pronoun child used] have another name?
- Did you know [name or pronoun child used] before [event]? (Follow up with clarifying questions, such as "How did you know [name or pronoun child used]?").

People child told (see Disclosure Information)

People present during event

- Who was in the [house, room, yard, etc.] when [event]?
- Did any of those people see [event]?

Physical description: unfamiliar suspect

- What did [child's words or pronoun child used] look like?
- I'm going to ask what [name] looked like from the top of their head down to their toes. Tell me everything you remember about their head and face. (Continue down body.)
- What did you notice about [child's words or pronoun child used] body?
- Tell me what [child's words or pronoun child used] was wearing from head to toe.
- What did [child's words or pronoun child used] say? Was there anything usual or different about the way they spoke?

Other victims (see Other Victims above)

Relationship to the child

- Who is [name]?
- How do you know [name]?
- Does [name child used] have another name?
- What do you know about [name]?

Physical Abuse

- You said [name] [event]. Tell me what your [face, arm, leg, etc.] looked like after [name] [event].
- What did [name] use to [event].
- What does the [object] look like?
- Where does [name] keep the [object]?

Physical Evidence (also see Images)

- Tell me all the things you saw when [name] [event].
- Tell me everything you heard when [name] [event].
- What did [name] use to [event]? (For example, “What did Mom use to spank you?” Follow up with open-ended prompts, e.g., “What did the [object] look like?” “Where does [name] keep the [object]?”)
- What did [name] do with the [object] after [event child described]?
- Do you know if the [object child mentioned] is still there now?
- Where did [name] get the [object]?
- Would the [object] still be there now? How do you know? Where can the [object] be found now?

Recantation

- You said [child’s first report], but then you said [child’s second report]. I’m confused. Help me understand.
- Tell me the reason you’re saying this today.
- We talked [earlier, yesterday, a couple weeks] ago and you told me [child’s disclosure]. Tell me the reason you told me about [child’s disclosure].
- Did someone tell you what to say the last time you were here? Did someone tell you what to say today?
- Tell me what’s been going on in your life since the last time we talked. How is your mom? How is your dad? (Use information obtained in the first interview about likes/dislikes, family, etc., to try to determine if any changes prompted the recantation.)

Safety[126]

- Tell me something you like about living [at home, here, etc.].
- Tell me something you don’t like about living [at home, here, etc.].
- Tell me something that makes you feel safe at home.
- Tell me something that makes you feel unsafe or scared at home.

- What do you worry about?
- What would help you to worry less?
- If you could change something about living [at home, here, etc.], what would you change?
- What does it mean to feel safe? Is there someone you could tell if you didn't feel safe?
- Do you feel safe when you are at home? (Follow up by having the child describe what makes them feel safe, and what makes them feel unsafe, when they are at home.)
- Is there somewhere you don't feel safe? (Follow up with questions to determine why the child feels unsafe.)

Condition of the House, Hygiene, Food, Heat

- What do you like about your house?
- Is there anything you do not like about your house?
- What happens when you get dirty?
- What happens when your clothes get dirty?
- Tell me about the last time you had a bath or shower.
- Tell me about the food you ate today, beginning with when you got up this morning.
- How do you stay warm in your house?
- Do you have any pets? Where does your pet go to the bathroom?

Discipline

- What happens if you don't do what [caregiver] tells you to do?
- What happens when you and your [brothers, sisters] get in trouble? What does [caregiver] do? What does [other caregiver] do? [Follow up with questions to assess harm to the child and how often suspected abuse happens.]

Domestic Violence

- How do [caregivers] get along? What do they do when they aren't getting along? (Explore whether fighting is verbal and/or physical, whether there are injuries, and whether police have been involved.)

Drug Use

- Do you know what drugs are? What do you know about drugs? Have you seen anyone at home use drugs? (Follow up with questions about what they use and how they act.) How do you feel when [name] [child's words for using a drug]?
- Do you know what alcohol is? What do you know about alcohol? Have you seen anyone at home drink alcohol? (Follow up with questions about what they drink and how they

act.) How do you feel when [name] [child's words for drinking alcohol or being intoxicated]?

Medical neglect: not taking prescribed medication

- I understand that you take pills, so you don't get sick. Tell me about that.
- Tell me about the pills you take.
- Tell me what your pills look like.
- How do you get your pills?
- Do you need help to take your pills?
- What happens if you don't take your pills?
- Has there ever been a time when you had no pills? Tell me about that time.
- Was there a time you didn't take your pills? What happened?

Supervision

- Have you ever been left home alone? Tell me about being home alone.
- Tell me about the last time you were home alone.
- If you need help and your [mom, dad] is not home, what do you do?
- Tell me how you feel when you are home alone.

Sensory Details

- How did it feel when [event]?
- What did you see when [event]?
- What did you hear when [event]?
- Sometimes we [remember, notice] how things looked, felt, or smelled. What [do you remember about, did you notice] the time [event]?

Sex and Gender

- What name and pronouns do you prefer?
- What sex were you assigned at birth?
- How would you describe your gender identity?

Sexual Contact

- Tell me everything about [child's report] from the beginning to the end and everything in the middle.
- What was [body part] doing when it [e.g., touched, rubbed] your [body part]?
- Where did you feel their [body part] touch on your body?

- How did your [body part] feel when their [body part] touched there? Tell me everywhere you felt that.

Sexualized Behavior

- I heard you were [e.g., playing a game in your room with ___, doing something at preschool] and your [mom, teacher] told you to stop. Tell me [what you were playing, about that game]. (Follow up with prompts based on the child's report, e.g., "Tell me more about [something child mentioned].")
- How did you think up or learn about [child's words for the activity]?
- How did you know to [activity]?
- Has someone taught you or showed you how to [child's words for activity]?
- Has something like that ever happened to you?
- Did you ever see someone else [child's words for the activity]? (Follow with questions to clarify where the child saw this, who was involved, and whether the child's exposure was intentional or unintentional.)
- Have you ever [child's words for the activity] with someone else? (Follow up with open-ended prompts and questions to clarify who is involved. With young children, probe individual responses to check they are not simply listing other names they know rather than retrieving discrete events from memory.)
- To explore when young teens or children are showing other children images: You said [name] showed you [pictures, videos]. Did they say where they learned about these [pictures, videos]?

Sexually Transmitted Infection

- Child knows about the infection: I heard you [have, had] an infection. Tell me about that.
- Tell me where everyone sleeps in your house.
- Where do you sleep?
- Does anyone ever come into your bed? (Follow up with questions about what happens.)
- I'm interested in how you get clean. Do you take baths, showers, or something else? Does someone help you get clean? (Follow up with questions about what happens.)

Threats/Secrecy

- What did [name] say to you after [event]?
- What did [name] say to you before [event]?
- What did you think would happen if you told? (Follow up with questions about why the child thought this.)

- Did [name] say anything about telling or not telling? (Follow up with "Tell me everything they said.")

Time of the Event

Children have difficulty reporting when events occurred. Because preschoolers are still learning temporal terms, yesterday could mean any day in the past, and even some 6-year-olds do not use this word accurately. Memory for the day of the week is poor even among 8-year-olds for events that were not very memorable, such as a classroom demonstration, although children 6 years and older do better when asked about a memorable event. It is not until 6 years when children are better than chance at reporting the month of an event, but 8- to 12-year-olds are often accurate within a 2-month period. Similarly, 6-year-olds, but not 4-year-olds, can often report the season of an event that happened in the last seven weeks. By 8 years, children are better at reporting the season, even for events that occurred four years ago.[127]

For children younger than 8 or 9 years, interviewers often limit the time of events by eliciting narratives that contain contextual details rather than asking direct questions about the time of day, day or the week, month, or year.

Recent event

- School-aged child: When did that happen?
- What else [happened, was happening] that same day?
- What happened after [event]?
- What happened right before [event]?
- Was it a school day or not a school day?

Longer time frames

- School-aged child: When do you think that happened?
- How old do you think you were when that happened? What makes you think that?
- Who was your teacher when that happened? What grade did you have [teacher's name]?
- Tell me some other things that were going on in your life when that happened.

Touching (see Sexual Contact)

What Happened

- Tell me everything about [child's words].
- Tell me all about [children's words], from the very beginning to the very end.
- Then what happened?

- What else happened when [child’s words]?
- Tell me more about [child’s words].
- Tell me everything that happened from [something child mentioned] to [something child mentioned].

Where an Event Occurred (see Location of an Event)

Witnesses

- Was someone else there when [event]? Did anyone see [event]?
- Did anyone hear you when [event]?
- Where was [name of the person the child said was there, saw, or heard]?
- Where in the [location child reported, e.g., house, yard, room] was [name] when [event child reported]?

Asking About Physical Abuse

This guide contains questions that may be helpful during physical abuse interviews. As with any forensic interview, interviewers should try to get as much information as possible during the free narrative phase by using a long list of invitations. During the Question and Clarify phase, it is best to ask about central event elements before clarifying details about who, where, and when. (See Roadmap: Questioning About Physical Abuse.) The sample questions below are not a script. (Case features and children’s responses determine which questions are most appropriate.) Throughout interviews, it is important to follow up on children’s answers with open-ended prompts such as “Tell me more about [child’s words].”

Raising the Topic

Interviewers introduce the topic by starting with the most open prompts and funneling down to more specific prompts if necessary. See Examples: Introduce the Topic.

Where Injured and How

- (After child discloses abuse.) Tell me about the last time you were [spanked, hit, kicked]. (Follow with a series of invitations, e.g., “Then what happened?” “Tell me more about [child’s words].”
- You said that [name] [event, e.g., “hit you with a fly swatter]. Tell me about that time with the fly swatter. (Follow with a series of invitations, e.g., “Then what happened?” “Tell me more about [child’s words].”]
- Tell me about the last time you were [spanked, hit, kicked). (Follow with a series of invitations, e.g., “Then what happened?” “Tell me more about [child’s words].”]
- Where on your body did [name] [hit, kick, etc.] you?

- (If clarification is needed.) What do you use your [child’s word] for? Is there another name for your [child’s word]? What [do other people] call your [child’s word]?

Possible Evidence

- What did [name] use to [child’s words for the event]?
- What did the [object] look like?
- Tell me more about the [object]?
- Where did [name] get the [object]?
- What did [name] do with the [object] after [event child described]?
- Do you know if the [object child mentioned] is still there now?
- Would the [object] still be there now? How do you know? Where can the [object] be found now?

Feelings, Reactions, and Impact on Body

- How did you feel when [event]?
- How did you feel after [event]?
- How did your [body, face, etc.] feel (or look) after [event]?

Clarification of Abuse Versus Routine Caregiving, Unintentional Contact

- Young child: What were you doing when [event]? Older child: What were you and [name] doing just before [event]? Was there a reason [name] was [event]?

Conversation

- What did [name] say before [event]?
- What did [name] say when it was over?

Threats, Secrecy

- Had you ever thought about telling before now? (Follow up with “Tell me all the reasons you decided not to.”)
- What did you think would happen if you told? (Follow up with questions about why the child thought this.)
- Did [name] say anything about telling or not telling? (Follow up with “Tell me everything they said.”)
- What did [name] say to you after [event]?
- What did [name] say to you before [event]?

People Present

- Who was in the [house, room, yard, etc.] when [event]?
- Did any of those people see [event]?

Alleged Perpetrator (Clarify)

- Do you have one [mom, dad, etc.] or more than one [mom, dad, etc.]?
- Does [name or pronoun child used] have another name?
- Tell me more about [name or pronoun child used].
- Did you know [name or pronoun child used] before [event]? (Follow up with clarifying questions, such as "How did you know [name or pronoun child used]?").

Location

- Where were you when [event]?
- If child mentions a home/building: What room were you in when [event]?

Time of the Event

Recent event

- School-aged child: When did that happen?
- What else [happened, was happening] that same day?
- What happened after [event]?
- What happened right before [event]?
- Was it a school day or not a school day?

Longer time frames

- School-aged child: When do you think that happened?
- How old do you think you were when that happened? What makes you think that?
- Who was your teacher when that happened? What grade did you have [teacher's name]?
- Tell me some other things that were going on in your life when that happened.

Disclosure Information

- Who else knows about this?
- Who else did you tell?
- Is there a reason you decided to tell?

Other Victims

- Has [name] ever bothered or [event] someone else? (Follow up with questions to clarify the event, e.g., “What did [name] do?” “Who did [name] [event]?” “How do you know [name] [new report]?”)
- Tell me about knowing it happened to [name].

Other Abuse Events and Alleged Perpetrators

- Did this happen one time or more than one time?
- Tell me about the [first time, last time, time you remember best].
- (For repeated abuse) Was there a time when something different happened? Tell me everything about that time.
- Has someone else ever [action]?

Typical forms of Discipline

- What usually happens if you don’t do what [caregiver] tells you to do?
- What usually happens when you and your [brothers, sisters] get in trouble? What does [caregiver] do? What does [other caregiver] do? [Follow up with questions to assess harm to the child and how often suspected abuse happens.]

Interview After a Recantation

- Do you know the reason you are here today?
- Tell me what you are here to talk about.
- You said [child’s initial statement], but then you said [child’s second statement.] I’m confused. Help me understand.
- Tell me what’s been going on in your life since the last time we talked. How is your mom? How is your dad? (Use information obtained in the first interview about likes/dislikes, family, etc. to try to determine what changes, if any, may have prompted a recantation.)
- Did someone tell you what to say today?
- Tell me the reason you’re saying this today.
- We talked a couple weeks ago. You told me [child’s disclosure]. Tell me the reason you told me about [child’s disclosure].

Roadmap: Questions About Physical Abuse

After children report something happened, use open-ended invitations to elicit a narrative about central actions before asking about unaddressed issues.

Invitations

1. Begin with an open-ended initial invitation.
    a. Example: Tell me all about [the child's words], from the very beginning to the very end—even little things.
2. Deliver a long series of open-ended breath prompts to sketch out the event.
    a. Example: Then what happened? What happened next? What happened after [child's words]?
3. Fill in information with open-ended depth prompts.
    a. Example Cued invitations: Tell me more about [child's words].
    b. Example Time-segmentation invitations: Tell me everything that happened from the moment [something the child mentioned] to the moment [something the child mentioned that happened shortly afterwards].
4. Ask about other incidents and repeat 1–3 for each incident.
    a. Example: Did this happen one time or more than one time? Tell me about the time you remember best.
5. Ask about unaddressed issues, covering central elements before questions about when and where. Ask about central event elements like type of physical abuse (where injured), appearance of [body part] after the event, possible evidence, feelings and reactions, clarification, conversation, threats, secrecy, and people present first. Then ask about contextual details like alleged perpetrator (clarify), location, time of the event, disclosure information, other victims, other abuse events, other alleged perpetrators, and case-specific questions.

Asking About Sexual Abuse

This guide contains questions that may be helpful during sexual abuse interviews. As with any forensic interview, interviewers should try to get as much information as possible during the free narrative phase by using a long list of invitations. During the Question and Clarify phase, it is best to ask about central event elements before clarifying details about who, where, and when. (See Roadmap: Questioning About Sexual Abuse.) The sample questions below are not a script. (Case features and children's responses determine which questions are most appropriate.) Throughout interviews, it is important to follow up on children's answers with open-ended prompts such as "Tell me more about [child's words]."

Raising the Topic

Interviewers introduce the topic by starting with the most open prompts and funneling down to more specific prompts if necessary. See Examples: Introduce the Topic.

What Part of the Body Was Touched and How (after child acknowledges touching)

- Tell me everything about [child's report] from the beginning to the end and everything in the middle.
- Where did you feel their [body part] touch on your body?
- Did some other part of [name's] body touch your [body part], or just [her, his, their] hand?
- What was [body part] doing when it [e.g., touched, rubbed] your [body part]?
- How did your [body part] feel when their [body part] touched there? Tell me everywhere you felt that.

On top or under clothes

- What were you wearing? What was [alleged perpetrator] wearing?
- Where were your clothes? Did anything happen to your clothes? Did anything happen to [alleged perpetrator's] clothes?
- Did your clothes move at all?
- You said [name] touched your [body part] with [her, his, their] hand, and you were wearing [child's words]. Was [alleged perpetrator's] hand on top of your [child's words] or under your [child's words]? (If child reports under shorts or pajamas, ask "Was [her, his, their] hand on top of your panties, on your skin, or somewhere else?")

Any penetration alleged

You said [name] [child's report, i.e., touched, felt, etc.] your [child's word] with [her, his, their] hand. (Determine child's name for body part and have child point to it.) Can you point to your [child's word]? (If a girl points to genital area, ask "What do you do with your [child's word, e.g., private, kitty cat, coochie]?") After you go pee pee (or whatever word child used), what do you do? (If child says "I wipe myself," ask "The area where you wipe yourself--what do you call it?" [Wait for response.] You said that [alleged perpetrator] touched your [child's word]. Did [alleged perpetrator] touch on the outside of [child's word] or inside where you wipe yourself? How did it feel when [alleged perpetrator] [child's report]?"

(If the child is young, you can begin this line of questioning by testing knowledge of inside and outside using props, such as a pencil box and a pencil. "Let me make sure I understand your words. Put the pencil outside the box. Put the pencil inside the box.")

Possible Evidence

Objects used

- Did [name] use anything when [he, she, they] touched you? What did the [object child mentioned] look like?

- Would the [object] still be there now? How do you know? Where can the [object] be found now?
- Where is the [object] kept? (If the child alleges penile contact, ask “What did his [child’s word for penis] look like?” “Did anything come out of [child’s word for penis]?” “What did [alleged perpetrator] do about [child’s word for what came out of penis]?”)
- What did [name] do with the [object] after [name] [event]?
- Do you know if the [object] is still there now?
- Would the [object] still be there now? How do you know? Where can the [object] be found now?

Images taken or sexually explicit materials used

- Did [name] show you anything when [child’s report] happened? Tell me about the [child’s report].
- Did [name] ever show you any books, pictures, or movies when [report of abuse] happened? Tell me everything about [child’s report].
- Did [name] show you anything on the TV or [named media device] that you think children your age shouldn’t see? (Ask questions to find out where these items are located in the house and what the child saw.)
- Did you ever watch movies with [name]?
- Did [name] take any pictures? How do you know? Tell me all about [child’s report].
- Did [name] say something about books, pictures, or movies when [report of abuse] happened? Tell me all about [what accused said].
- Did [name] have a computer, cell phone, or other media device? Did [name] show you anything on [named media device]? Tell me about [child’s report].
- Describe the [media device] that [name] used to show you [videos, pictures]. [Ask questions to try to determine the color of the items or the appearance of their cases.]
- Did [name] share the [media device] with anyone? Was anyone else allowed to use that [media device]?
- Do you know if [name] still has the [media device]? When did you last see that [media device]? Where did you last see that [media device]?

Feelings, Reactions

- How did you feel when [event]?
- How did you feel after [event]?

Clarification of Abuse Versus Routine Caregiving, Unintentional Contact

- Young child: What were you doing when [event]?

- Older child: What were you and [name] doing just before [event]? Was there a reason [name] was [event]?

Conversation

- What did [name] say before [event]?
- What did [name] say when it was over?

Threats, Secrecy

- Had you ever thought about telling before now? (Follow up with "Tell me all the reasons you decided not to.")
- What did you think would happen if you told? (Follow up with questions about why the child thought this.)
- Did [name] say anything about telling or not telling? (Follow up with "Tell me everything they said.")
- What did [name] say to you after [event]?
- What did [name] say to you before [event]?

People Present

- Who was in the [house, room, yard, etc.] when [event]?
- Did any of those people see [event]?

Alleged Perpetrator (Clarify)

- Do you have one [mom, dad, babysitter, etc.] or more than one [mom, dad, babysitter, etc.]?
- Does [name or pronoun child used] have another name?
- Tell me more about [name or pronoun child used].
- Did you know [name or pronoun child used] before [event]? (Follow up with clarifying questions, such as "How did you know [name or pronoun child used]?").

Location

- Where were you when [event]?
- Have you ever been there before?
- If child mentions a home/building: What room were you in when [event]?
- Where in [location] were you? Tell me what [location child mentioned] looks like.
- Tell me what the [house, room, furniture, walls, etc.] looked like.

Time of the Event

Recent event

- School-aged child: When did that happen?
- What else [happened, was happening] that same day?
- What happened after [event]?
- What happened right before [event]?
- Was it a school day or not a school day?

Longer time frames

- School-aged child: When do you think that happened?
- How old do you think you were when that happened? What makes you think that?
- Who was your teacher when that happened? What grade did you have [teacher's name]?
- Tell me some other things that were going on in your life when that happened.

Disclosure Information

- Who else knows about this?
- Who else did you tell?
- Is there a reason you decided to tell?

Other Victims

- Has [name] ever bothered or [event] someone else? (Follow up with questions to clarify the event, e.g., "What did [name] do?" "Who did [name] [event]?" "How do you know [name] [new report]?")
- Tell me about knowing it happened to [name].

Other Abuse Events and Alleged Perpetrators

- Did this happen one time or more than one time?
- Tell me about the [first time, last time, time you remember best].
- (For repeated abuse) Was there a time when something different happened? Tell me everything about that time.
- Has someone else ever [action]?

Interview After a Recantation

- Do you know the reason you are here today?
- Tell me what you are here to talk about.
- You said [child's initial statement], but then you said [child's second statement.] I'm confused. Help me understand.

- Tell me what’s been going on in your life since the last time we talked. How is your mom? How is your dad? (Use information obtained in the first interview about likes/dislikes, family, etc. to try to determine what changes, if any, may have prompted a recantation.)
- Did someone tell you what to say today?
- Tell me the reason you’re saying this today.
- We talked a couple weeks ago. You told me [child’s disclosure]. Tell me the reason you told me about [child’s disclosure].

Roadmap: Questions About Sexual Abuse

After children report something happened, use open-ended invitations to elicit a narrative about central actions before asking about unaddressed issues. Invitations Examples

1. Begin with an open-ended initial invitation.
    a. Examples: Tell me all about [the child’s words], from the very beginning to the very end—even little things.
2. Deliver a long series of open-ended breath prompts to sketch out the event.
    a. Examples: Then what happened? What happened next? What happened after [child’s words]?
3. Fill in information with open-ended depth prompts.
    a. Examples of Cued invitations: Tell me more about [child’s words].
    b. Examples of Time-segmentation invitations: Tell me everything that happened from the moment [something the child mentioned] to the moment [something the child mentioned that happened shortly afterwards].
4. Ask about other incidents and repeat 1–3 for each incident.
    a. Examples: Did this happen one time or more than one time? Tell me about the time you remember best.
5. Ask about unaddressed issues, covering central elements before questions about when and where. Ask about central event elements first like where touched and how, on top or under clothes, any penetration alleged, possible evidence, feelings and reactions, clarification, conversation, threats and secrecy. Then clarify contextual details like people present, alleged perpetrator (clarify), location, time of the event, disclosure information, other victims, other abuse events and alleged perpetrators, and case-specific questions.

Asking About Emotional Abuse and Neglect

This guide contains questions that may be helpful during interviews to explore concerns about emotional abuse or neglect. As with any forensic interview, interviewers should try to get as much information as possible during the free narrative phase by using a long list of invitations.

During the Question and Clarify phase, it is best to ask about central event elements before clarifying details about who, where, and when. The sample questions below are not a script. (Case features and children's responses determine which questions are most appropriate.) Throughout interviews, it is important to follow up on children's answers with open-ended prompts such as "Tell me more about [child's words]."

Emotional Abuse (e.g., child has been ridiculed, humiliated, threatened repeatedly)

- Tell me the best thing about your family.
- Is there something about your family that you do not like? Tell me about the things you don't like.
- Tell me about the last time you were afraid.
- If you could change three things about your family, what would you change?
- Tell me about the last time [your mom, your dad] was angry with you.
- Tell me about the last time someone made you feel bad about yourself.
- Tell me about the last time you felt like crying.
- I heard that someone was calling you names. Tell me about the name calling.

Failure to Supervise (e.g., child was left home alone)

- Have you ever been left home alone? Tell me about being home alone.
- Tell me about the last time you were home alone.
- If you need help and [your mom, your dad] is not home, what do you do?
- Tell me how you feel when you are home alone.
- Tell me what happened last night after [your mom, your dad, etc.] left the house.
- I understand the police were at your home last night. Tell me all about last night.

Dirty House or House Lacking Food, Heat, or Water

- What do you like about your house?
- Is there anything you do not like about your house?
- Tell me about the food you ate today, beginning with when you got up this morning.
- How do you stay warm in your house?
- What happens when you get dirty?
- What happens when your clothes get dirty?
- Tell me about the last time you had a bath or shower.
- Do you have any pets? Where does your pet go to the bathroom?

Medical Neglect (e.g., child is not taking prescribed medication/pills)

- I understand that you [take pills, breathe in medicine, etc.] so you don't get sick. Tell me about that.
- Tell me about the [pills, medicine] you take.
- Tell me what your [pills, medicine] look like.
- How do you get your [pills, medicine]?
- Do you need help to take your [pills, medicine]?
- What happens if you don't take your [pills, medicine]?
- Has there ever been a time when you had no [pills, medicine]? Tell me about that time.
- Was there a time you didn't take your [pills, medicine]—what happened?

Citations and Notes

[1] For discussions, see Fisher & Geiselman (2019), Lamb et al. (2018), and Powell & Brubacher (2020).

[2] Walker (2013), p. 11.

[3] A child is an individual less than 18 years of age (MCL 722.622).

[4] Steele (2016).

[5] Stolzenberg et al. (2017).

[6] Task Force MDHHS Publication 794 (Rev. 6-21), *A Model Child Abuse and Neglect Protocol Utilizing a Multidisciplinary Team Approach*, states that in CACs, "The forensic interviewer of a child for the investigation will not participate in any follow up mental health, advocacy, or medical services in that child's case" (p. 18).

[7] Ferra et al. (2022).

[8] Davis & Bottoms (2002).

[9] State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Publication 794 (Rev. 6-21 or an updated version), *A Model Child Abuse and Neglect Protocol Utilizing a Multidisciplinary Team Approach*.

[10] Poole & Lamb (1998).

[11] When interviewers provide socially supportive environments, children disclose more often, provide more accurate testimony, and are viewed as more credible (Blasbalg et al., 2018, Hershkowitz & Lamb, 2020, Saywitz et al., 2016). Because excessive attentiveness can be counterproductive (Johnston et al., 2019), however, interviewers should maintain supportive but natural demeanors, which could differ depending on children's cultural backgrounds.

[12] Adapted from the Appendix to the Revised NICHD Interview Protocol (2018), pp. 3–6.

[13] Hunt & Borgida (2001), Roberts & Lamb (1999).

[14] Rezmer et al. (2020).

[15] Cleveland et al. (2018), Poole (2016).

[16] Appendix to the Revised NICHD Interview Protocol (2018), p. 3.

[17] Broaders & Goldin-Meadow (2010).

[18] Prompts are utterances that encourage children to continue (e.g., "Okay"), requests to describe something (e.g., "Tell me more about [something the child said]"), and questions.

[19] There is no consensus about how much information interviewers should review before meeting with children. Interviews are conducted "blind" when interviewers know only children's names and ages, but this practice makes it difficult to introduce the topic and consider alternative hypotheses about the meaning of children's statements. Information about recent medical treatment, adults in children's lives who have duplicate names (e.g., two grandpas), and children's caretaking environments and playmates can help interviewers understand what children report. For these reasons, the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, the American Prosecutor's Research Institute, and the National District Attorney's Association (1993, p. 59) concluded, "Interviewing a child without knowing any of the details revealed to another is analogous to performing a medical examination without knowing the patient's history or looking for an unfamiliar destination without a road map." For a discussion of issues and information about a hybrid approach, see Poole (2016).

[20] Adapted from Poole & Lamb (1998), p. 114.

[21] It is not yet known whether 3-year-olds benefit from interview instructions (ground rules). Few studies have included 3-year-olds, and those that did combined 3-year-olds with older children for data analyses. Moreover, some studies that included 3-year-olds failed to find benefits of interview instructions. For instance, stating the appropriateness of saying "I don't know" did not increase accuracy in one study even though children were periodically reminded of the instruction (Peterson & Grant, 2001). In other study, young children did not benefit from instructions even though interviewers delivered practice examples until children demonstrated understanding (Geddie et al., 2001). Finally, the "I don't know" instruction sometimes decreased accurate responses in samples that included 3-year-olds (e.g., Nesbitt & Markam, 1999).

[22] See Poole (2016) for a discussion of hypothesis testing strategies.

[23] See MCL 600.2163a and MCL 712A.17b for more information about requirements for videorecorded statements.

[24] Rezmer et al. (2020).

[25] Ahern et al. (2014), p. 766.

[26] Hershkowitz et al. (2015).

[27] Everson et al. (2022), p. 14.

[28] Because many children will simply say “no” to a yes-no question such as this one, interviewers can add, “Okay. If you think of a worry later, you can tell me about it.”

[29] Interview instructions are also called *ground rules* and *orienting instructions*.

[30] McWilliams et al. (2021).

[31] McWilliams et al. (2021).

[32] Brubacher et al. (2015).

[33] Henderson & Lyon (2021).

[34] Evans & Lee (2010), Quas et al. (2018).

[35] This instruction is often called the *ignorant interviewer* instruction (Fessinger et al., 2021).

[36] By 6 to 7 years, children understand that *promise* is a stronger guarantee than saying they *will* do something, but younger children often view *promise* as synonymous with *will*. Therefore, Lyon and Evans (2014) recommend embedding both words in an agreement to tell the truth: “Do you promise that you will tell the truth?” (p. 162).

[37] Brubacher et al. (2015).

[38] Powell & Brubacher (2020).

[39] Brown et al. (2019).

[40] Prompt adapted from Lamb et al. (2018), p. 241.

[41] Prompt from Everson et al. (2022), p. 8.

[42] Prompt adapted from Anderson et al. (2016), p. 664.

[43] Prompt from Lyon (2021). p. 1.

[44] Prompt from laboratory protocols for Dickinson et al. (2021).

[45] Instruction wording adapted from Waterman & Blades (2011), p. 3.

[46] See Lyon and Evans (2014) for evidence supporting this wording. Some young children start talking about things that are true when interviewers only say, “Will you tell me the truth today?” When this happens, interviewers can thank children for sharing and say, “I’m going to ask you some questions today. Do you **promise** that you **will** tell me the truth?”

[47] Interviewers are not required to demonstrate that children understand *the truth*,” but demonstration questions extend early rapport-building and can further relax children, especially when questions are amusing (e.g., “If I said a big red dog was sitting at this table, would that be true or not true?”). Because children are not allowed to use the word *lie* in some cultures, and discussions of lying can sound accusatory, many protocols avoid asking children if a statement is “the truth or a lie.” However, interviewers can use their discretion when choosing wording for discussions about the truth.

[48] Few studies on the efficacy of interview instructions included 3-year-olds, and there are developmental reasons why 3-year-olds are unlikely to benefit from instructions. Therefore, some protocols omit interview instructions for this age group. This Pathways example also omits practice questions for the Tell Me if a Question Doesn’t Make Sense instruction for 4-year-olds, who often struggle to grasp this instruction (Dickinson et al., 2015). But even children who receive all instructions with practice questions may have difficulty keeping instructions in mind throughout an interview. Therefore, interviewers can remind children of an instruction anytime during an interview.

[49] Price et al. (2013).

[50] Whiting & Price (2017).

[51] For discussions of narrative practice benefits, see Danby et al. (2017), Roberts et al. (2011), and Steele (2010).

[52] Powell & Brubacher (2020).

[53] Interviewers deliver a model statement by describing something they did, such as what they did from the time they woke up to the time they got in the car that morning. During this description, interviewers share details about what they did, saw, heard, thought, and felt at every step in the process. Most research on the efficacy of a model statement studied adults, although many of these studies involved samples of college students who were only a few years older than the older adolescents who participate in child forensic interviews. Brackmann et al. (2017) found no benefit of the model statement with children (7- to 10-year-olds and 14- to 17-year-olds) when the statement replaced narrative practice, possibly because the model statement alone did not help rapport building or give children practice talking to the

interviewer. Until more is known about using model statements with children, this technique is best reserved for older adolescents and should not replace rapport-building conversation.

[54] Anderson et al. (2014), Price et al. (2013).

[55] In one study, many children who eventually responded to a prompt took longer than five seconds to start talking at least once in the interview (though most responses occurred within 10 seconds). They also often paused for many seconds during a response (Rezmer et al., 2020).

[56] Price & Connolly (2021).

[57] Topic shifter from Powell & Brubacher (2020), p. 7.

[58] Prompt from Powell & Brubacher (2020), p. 7.

[59] Prompt from Yi & Lamb (2018), p. 329. To encourage detailed reports, follow an initial invitation to talk with requests for more details. For example, ask about shorter time segments, such as what children did from the time they woke to an activity that occurred shortly afterward, and deliver cued invitations, such as "Tell me more about [something mentioned]."

[60] National Child's Advocacy Center (2019b).

[61] Everson et al. (2022).

[62] Poole (2016) called early and later interview phases *early interview phases* and case issues phases. Many authors divide interviews into *presubstantive* and *substantive* phases (e.g., Revised NICHD Protocol, Lamb et al., 2018).

[63] Myers et al. (2003), Lawson & London (2017), Poole & Lindsay (2001).

[64] The wording of transition prompts predicts whether children disclose and how many prompts interviewers need to deliver to raise the topic. Avoid asking "Do you know" or "Why" questions (e.g., "Why have you come to talk to me today?") because these wordings decrease the probability of eliciting an informative response (Garcia et al., 2022). By contrast, questions with "what" are more effective (Earhart et al., 2018).

[65] "I heard you saw," "Someone's worried," "Someone bothered you," and "Something wasn't right" prompts from or adapted from Lyon (2021), p. 2.

[66] Redirection prompt from Lamb et al. (2018), p. 7244. Because it is common in some cultures for people to describe a lot of background information before addressing their central points, interviewers should be cautious about concluding too quickly that what children are saying is off topic.

[67] There are several names for questions about specific event details, including *focused questions*, *specific questions*, *directive questions*, and *wh- questions* (because these questions

often ask *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, or *how*). See Lamb et al. (2018), and Orbach and Lamb (2000), for discussions of the benefits of open-ended prompts.

[68] Brubacher, Timms, et al. (2019).

[69] Lamb & Fauchier (2001).

[70] Prompt names are adapted from Powell and Snow (2007) and Martine Powell's question coding manual (personal communication, Sonja Brubacher, September 6, 2022). In the NICHD interview protocol, open-ended initial invitations and open-ended breadth prompts are called general invitations, and open-ended depth prompts include segmentation invitations and cued invitations.

[71] Cyr (2022).

[72] It is better to describe what children are doing rather than put a subjective (emotional) label on that behavior. For example, "You seem upset" assumes how children are feeling, whereas "I see you are shaking a little" lets children explain how they feel.

[73] Open-ended depth prompts are also called *cued invitations*.

[74] Brubacher, Peterson, et al. (2019).

[75] Powell & Snow (2007).

[76] Poole (2016).

[77] Researchers have different ways of categorizing questions and use different names for the question types. The distinction between broad and focused directive questions, from Poole and Dickinson (2023), recognizes that wh-/how questions vary in the degree to which they focus children on specific details (e.g., asking what a car looked like vs. asking about the color or model).

[78] McWilliams et al. (2021).

[79] Henderson et al. (2021).

[80] Poole & Lindsay (2001).

[81] For a review of the benefits of open-ended questions, see Lamb et al. (2018).

[82] Children perform better with the "something else" option when multiple-choice questions do not contain the correct answer, but adding "something else" does not improve accuracy when the children do not know the answer. Therefore, adding "something else" does not eliminate the increased risk of errors from multiple-choice questions (London et al., 2017).

[83] Fallon & Pucci (1994).

[84] Evans et al. (2014).

[85] Poole (2016).

[86] Orbach & Pipe (2011).

[87] Poole & Lamb (1998). For expanded discussions, see Walker (2013).

[88] Example from Berliner and Barbieri (1984).

[89] Adapted from the State of Maine Child and Family Services (2010).

[90] Brubacher et al. (2013), Yuille et al. (1993).

[91] Saywitz & Comparo (2014), p. 151.

[92] Poole (2016).

[93] American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1993), American Psychological Association (1994).

[94] See Ernberg et al. (2022), Powell et al. (2017), and Fontes and Tishelman (2016) for discussions of interviewer experiences with interpreter-assisted interviews.

[95] This list was reproduced from a textbox in Nevarez et al. (2011), p. 27, which was adapted from a handout by Kathy Burton and Martha Corona-Goldstein of Child Abuse Response and Evaluation Services (CARES) Northwest, a medical child abuse assessment center in Portland.

[96] MCL 600.2163a, MCL 712A.17b.

[97] Examples adapted from Johnson et al. (2022), p. 13.

[98] Pruss (2007).

[99] Wang (2011).

[100] Dialog example from Nevaraz (2011), p. 21.

[101] Dickinson et al. (2005).

[102] Bruck et al. (2016), Poole & Bruck (2012), Poole et al. (2011).

[103] Everson & Boat (2002).

[104] Walker (2013).

[105] Malloy & Poole (2002), Zhang et al. (2019).

[106] MCL 767.45(1)(b).

[107] MCJI 3.10a.

[108] Forensic interviewers include CAC staff, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, CPS workers, and others who completed required training to conduct forensic interviews.

[109] These guidelines do not supersede Children's Protective Services requirements for face-to-face contact with child victims.

[110] Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (2017), p. 5.

[111] For more information, see Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (2017).

[112] MCL 750.462e(b).

[113] Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (2017).

[114] For reviews, see Lavoie et al. (2019) and Wood (2020).

[115] Ahern et al. (2017).

[116] Dianiska et al. (2022).

[117] Lavoie et al. (2019).

[118] Steele (2019).

[119] For more information about trauma-informed victim interviewing, see Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, Office of Justice Programs (2022).

[120] Lindholm et al. (2015).

[121] Guidance from the Victim Services Unit, FBI (personal communication, July 20, 2022).

[122] Wylie et al. (2021).

[123] Stolzenberg & Lyon (2017).

[124] First seven questions from or adapted from the National Children’s Advocacy Center (2019a), p. 1.

[125] Wandrey et al. (2012).

[126] These are only examples of questions that assess children’s safety. Interviewers will select questions based on case needs, children’s ages, and other factors.

[127] Friedman (2014).

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2022 Governor’s Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Members

- Annie M. Harrison, Chairperson - Represents law enforcement.
- Joseph Merritt, Vice Chairperson - Represents law enforcement.
- Ursula Ahart - Represents individuals experienced in working with homeless children and youth.
- Alex Brace - Represents mental health professionals.
- Kimberly Clemons - Represents adult former victims of child abuse and/or neglect.
- Kyleen Gee - Represents child advocates.
- Tonya Goetz - Represents prosecuting attorneys.
- Jackie Igafo-Te’o - Represents individuals experienced in working with children with disabilities.
- Dr. Alane Laws-Barker - Represents health professionals.

- Ivana Maplanka - Represents child protective services.
- Lynda McGhee - Represents attorneys for children.
- Hon. Chris Ninomiya - Represents criminal court judges.
- Egypt Otis - Represents parents and parent groups.
- James Perlaki - Represents individuals experienced in working with homeless children and youth.
- Hon. Yasmine Poles - Represents civil court judges.
- Patricia Sabin - Represents court-appointed special advocates.
- Suzanna Shkreli - Represents child advocates.
- Nichole Smithson - Represents defense attorneys.
- Demetrius Starling - Designee of the Director, MDHHS

Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Coordinator

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Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Coordinator

Veronica Flores

Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Forensic Interviewing Protocol Revision Subcommittee

Alex Brace, Co-Chair
Executive Director
Small Talk Children's Advocacy Center
Lansing, MI
Member, GTFCAN

Annie M. Harrison, Co-Chair
Detective, Ingham County Sheriff's Office
Mason, MI
Chairperson, GTFCAN

Joshua Bissell
Program Director
Children's Advocacy Centers of Michigan
Grand Rapids, MI

Sarah Bullen
Children's Protective Services Supervisor
Jackson County Department of Health and Human Services
Jackson, MI

Sara Coaster
Criminal Defense Attorney
Manley & Manley
Flint, MI

Catherine Connell
Unit Chief
Child Victim Services Unit
FBI Victim Services Division
Detroit, MI

Jason Dickinson, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ

Veronica Flores
Governor’s Task Force Coordinator

Claudynse D. Holloman
CEO, Voices for Children Advocacy Center
Flint, MI
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Nichole King
Intervention Coordinator/Lead Forensic Interview Specialist
Care House—Macomb County
Child Advocacy Center, Inc.
Mount Clemens, MI

Pamela Maas
Director, Child Abuse Prosecution Resources
Prosecuting Attorney’s Association of Michigan
Lansing, MI

Dena Nazer, MD
Medical Director/ Kids TALK Children’s Advocacy Center
Associate Professor of Pediatrics
Wayne State University
Detroit, MI

Hon. Chris Ninomiya
41st Circuit Court Judge
State of Michigan
Iron Mountain, MI

Debra Poole, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Central Michigan University

Mt. Pleasant, MI

Demetrius Starling
Senior Deputy Director
Children's Services Administration
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
Lansing, MI

Aubree Vance
Director of Forensic Interviewing and Prevention
Small Talk Children's Advocacy Center
Lansing, MI

Matt Way
Chief Appellate Attorney
Jackson County Prosecutor's Office
Jackson, MI

Matt Wiese
Prosecuting Attorney
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