



How Old Are You and Do You Have a Dog?

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The forensic interview conducted with a child during the course of a child abuse investigation is a critical component of the information gathering process. This conversation, which usually occurs between strangers, is problematic, anxiety provoking, and complex for many reasons. An allegation of child abuse is stressful and potentially life altering for the suspected abuser. For the child, the conversation demands an unusual amount of detail about frightening, painful, and embarrassing experiences, which often involves a loved and trusted adult. Interviewers are charged with maintaining the child's cooperation, assessing his truthfulness, and obtaining detailed, specific, and complete explanations of difficult events. In response to the host of tasks and the demands of large caseloads, interviewers often feel pressure to move quickly to the abuse-specific portion of the conversation.

In the past ten years there has been a growing demand for protocols designed to increase the quantity and quality of information elicited from child witnesses and victims. Most child forensic interview structures call for an introduction and explanation of the process, a rapport building phase, screening activities to place the child developmentally, an abuse specific inquiry phase, and closure (APSAC, 2002; Cordisco Steele, 2004; Holmes & Vieth, 2003; Olafson & Kenniston, 2004; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Yuille, 1991). Some models are highly structured within each stage and in the

manner of transitioning from one stage to the next with the expectation that the child will adapt to a format that is comfortable for the interviewer (Sternberg et al, 2001). Other models allow for modification of the stages depending on the age and needs of the child.

It is recommended that the interviewer employ questioning strategies that progress from open-ended probes to more direct questions with a mandate to avoid leading or suggestive questions (Faller, 1990; Faller, 2000; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Some protocols allow for the use of tools such as drawings, anatomical body maps, or anatomical dolls. Abuse-specific inquiry is the phase which is of the most interest to the investigators observing or conducting the interview and often emerges as the "real" conversation or the goal of the interview.

Arguments for the goal-directed approach include concerns about the investigator's time and worries about the attention span of the child. There is a tendency to build rapport with a few questions perceived to be of interest to a child and to address the developmental screening phase with some prescribed questions about colors, numbers, and prepositions. Thus, our title was born from often-asked questions designed to build rapport such as, "How old are you?" and "Do you have a dog?" Other favorite topics during the early phases of an interview are sports, school performance, family activities, holidays, and birthday parties.

In a 1993 issue of *Topics in Language Disorders*, Karen Saywitz writes, "Children's apparent lack of credibility has as much to do with the competence of adults to relate to and communicate with children as it does with children's abilities to remember and relate their experiences accurately." Saywitz uses the term "communicative competence," which she describes as "the ability to communicate in a non-biased manner at the child's level of understanding of conversational rules and concepts, accounting for the child's age, vocabulary, and linguistic skill." Adept communication with a potentially traumatized child calls for the interviewer to consider developmental strengths and limitations; the impact of a single traumatic event or trauma history; and the influence of culture and family on memory and narration. As a professional group, we have made some progress in adapting our expectations to the linguistic and conceptual limitations of young children (developmental aspect) and more is being written about the impact of reoccurring exposure to violence on the development of the child's brain (trauma considerations). While the recommendation to be culturally sensitive has become a standard part of the rhetoric around child abuse investigation, little is incorporated into our literature or training that addresses the vast differences created by language, differing world views and values, socio-economic influences on development, and different family and attachment systems. What is culture and how does it effect the child's participation in the interview?

In a 2004 book, *Young Children and Trauma: Intervention and Treatment*, Maria Lewis and Chandra Ghosh Ippen state, "Culture provides the psychic structure for relationships among members of a social group while simultaneously helping them to make meaning of the physical world. Individuals are socialized into a culture that is learned and transmitted primarily through language and everyday interactions." Cultural groupings are not easily defined and may include dimensions of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, dominance or lack of power, religious beliefs, historical traumas, and varying degrees of acculturation to the dominant group. Culture transmits patterns of behavior, cognitive structuring, and social interaction. Cultural instruction also informs us about what is worthwhile and useful, determining which aspects of an experience we attend to and remember. This includes the interpretation of potentially traumatic

events and our reaction to such experiences. While we may assume that events are static and concrete and thus can be shared with another person, our brains are actually processing, explaining, and storing very different accounts. The pathways into those stored memories are also varied. Our preferred questioning strategies, which serve to assist us in organizing a child's account of his experience, could be confusing, distracting, or disempowering to the child.

We find ourselves questioning children with diverse backgrounds: age, cognitive abilities, language, family functioning and parenting style, socio-economic status, community and school functioning, cultural and religious background, and exposure to violence. Each child has been shaped by their life experience and arrived at his own sense of the world. The child has formed expectations of others and developed strategies to maintain safety for himself and his family. Even the very meaning of the term "self" may be different for members of another cultural group with some groups adopting an individualistic definition of self and other cultures assuming "self as a member of a group." While virtually all young children define themselves by the family within which they live; the goal of establishing a "self" as one, which is a separate, empowered, and independent entity is uniquely Euro-Anglo (Nisbett, 2003). For children of cultures that are allocentric (group-oriented) the process of speaking about topics that bring potentially harmful consequences to the family or its members is unnatural. It is almost as if the arm were accusing other parts of the body of doing harm. Approaching the disclosure as an adversarial process may be counter-productive with these children.

Our everyday experience of using language to describe life events takes on new dimensions when we question children who are bilingual or live in homes where a language other than English is spoken. The process of assigning words to recreate deeply lived emotional and physical experiences is fraught with difficulties even for those of us who come from similar personal and educational backgrounds. Because we use words and phrases so unconsciously, we may believe that a one-to-one correspondence exists for the word and the object, or the word and the act. Understanding, the "making of meaning," takes place within the context of our complicated, sensorial, and emotional lives. Languages (as well as worldviews) offer different possibilities for describing

objects, actions, feelings, and intent. A language can be heavy with nouns or verbs as primary means of description. One term may cover many nuances of meaning or, conversely, there may be a host of terms to address each nuance. Emphasis or tone may change the meaning of a word. Linguistic and cultural anthropologists take for granted that cultural context, native language, worldview, gender, age, and life experience shape our use and understanding of words (Hall, 1976; Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1977; Ibarra, 2001).

Additionally, these same children have encoded rules about communicating with adults (Siegal, 1991). A child cannot explain his "conversational rules" to you as this set of lessons was not taught in a linear and overt manner. However, the "conversational rules" are as evident to the child as breathing and have been acquired through his history of conversations with parents, teachers, mentors, tyrants, and protectors. Some cultural groups rely more on verbal description; while other groups are heavily dependent on non-verbal signals (gestures, body language, and facial expression) to fill out a less robust use of words. Silence, pacing, inflection, and use of *imuendo* in communication vary from group to group (Cooper, 1998; Hall, 1959; Ibarra, 2001). While we may provide guidelines for this conversation and even practice the new rules, we cannot expect that the child is able to ignore the lessons learned from all of their years and fully conform to our "conversational rules." Rules governing how a child speaks with an adult or a stranger, permission to correct or challenge adults, the power of the spoken word to effect the environment, the perception and description of time, taboos around the use of certain words or discussion of some topics, and variation in the use of questions, voice tone, or gesture may be vastly different for the child and the interviewer (Cooper, 1998; Hall, 1959; Kluckhohn, 1974). Indeed, every communication with an unknown child is best approached with an openness to learn about this child, his view of the world, and his predilection for describing experiences and concerns.

Given that we have a mandated task (collect information about possible criminal or non-protective behavior,) a limited amount of time, and perhaps a reluctant child participant, where can we begin to address these concerns? Doing one's homework prior to the interview is the starting place. Familiarity with the child's identified cultural group (noting that culture is not only determined

by a different country of origin) assists the interviewer in recognizing conversational and behavioral differences. Such preparation can be accomplished through reading and through talking with cultural mentors (people of the same group or familiar with the group who can explain patterns of behavior, communication, and interaction). We must move out of the realm of assuming that our own behavior, thought, and language patterns are "ordinary and natural" (Scollon & Scollon, 1989). The interviewer can avoid labeling differences as deficits in the child and prepare to make adjustments in conversational patterns. We can adapt our environment, body language, facial expressions, use of materials, pacing, voice tone, turn-taking patterns, and methods for eliciting further description without sacrificing forensic principles. A child's most personal and emotional experiences are encoded in their own language and defined by their sense of meaning. These are the memories that we want to elicit. The more closely our questions and responses can match the manner and form of the child's spontaneous questions and statements, the closer we move to a true conversation with this child.

We learn about the child's communication style and conversational rules by listening, rather than by talking, testing, and controlling the conversation. The extensive work of Dr. Michael Lamb, Dr. Kathleen Sternberg, and colleagues has demonstrated the benefits of encouraging, practicing, and assessing narrative communication in the introductory portion of the interview. I propose we take the format another step with the Structured Interview approach and encourage a more natural and conversational approach to the rapport and developmental screening portion of the interview, particularly for the child from a different cultural background. Time well spent in the early part of the interview can be instructive and productive for the interviewer and the investigator. The goal is to encourage narrative description about topics of interest to the child, while exercising little control of content or form other than encouraging elaboration. This interaction allows the interviewer to observe the child's non-verbal expressions, his language patterns and use of words, the structure of his narrative descriptions, and the content he chooses to include. It may take a little time to hit on a topic of interest for the child, but the interest shows in the change in expression, animation of speech, amount of detail, and spontaneous inclusion of information.

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This is the topic to explore more thoroughly observing affective style, content elements, narrative ability, degree of detail, and use of expressive skills (such as drawing or demonstration). As well as an opportunity to learn about this child, the interviewer can communicate interest, acceptance, lack of knowledge about the child's life, and a willingness to work to understand the other's experience.

This more in-depth conversation helps to establish a pattern of interaction that hopefully can influence all phases of the interview. The interviewer is able to establish a baseline for the child's communicative and descriptive abilities and to learn about the child's nonverbal behaviors, eye contact, pacing, spontaneity, and response to specific types of questions or requests by the interviewer. Information gathered and observations of the child should assist the interviewer in structuring her approach, choice of questions, organization of information, and use of tools and techniques. The interviewer also may alter her expectations of the abusive incident(s) description and make better choices about when and how to seek additional detail. Our goal is always to adapt our questioning style to meet the child's communication style and needs without resorting to leading questions. We also strive to introduce only those techniques and tools that might be helpful to the child in sharing his memories and describing his lived experience and to avoid those techniques that are not congruent with the child's communication style. Careful use of the rapport-building and developmental screening portion of the child forensic interview can lay the groundwork for a more thorough and meaningful discussion in the abuse specific questioning portion of the interview. Only by showing a profound and sincere respect for the communication differences and the child's view of the world, can we hope to understand his experience.

Gathering detailed information from a child is a complex and challenging task. Given the serious nature of the topics under discussion, the moral imperative to provide protection to the child, and our goal of rendering justice, we must continue to consider all influences on the child's ability to fully

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describe his experiences and our skill and willingness to hear and understand. As we continue to acknowledge the dimensions of childhood cognition and memory that need to be further explored and understood, it is as though we are sorting through a set of Russian nesting dolls in search of the "truth," the child's lived experience. We must consider the context of the child's cultural background, language of origin, and personal history to be one of those layers. Preparation before the conversation, true respect and a willingness to hear the child's words, and a willingness to be guided by the child will assist us in these goals.

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