

Interviewing Children: Asking about experiences and preferences

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Overview of the Ten-step interview

- Interview instructions (Steps 1-5)
 - Teaches child how an interview is different than other child-adult interactions
- Narrative practice rapport building (Step 6)
 - Helps you and the child practice open-ended questions and narrative responses
- Allegation phase (Step 7)
 - Introduces the reason for investigation without leading the child
- Open-ended followups (Steps 8-10)
 - Avoids suggestion or shutting the child down

The *single best step* towards improving children's reports

- Stop asking closed-ended questions.
- Closed-ended questions are those that can be answered with a single word or detail
 - Yes/no
 - Forced-choice
 - Specific wh- questions

Why not closed-ended

- Because children will answer with a single word rather than use their words.
- Because they often suggest what *you think happened* rather than what the child knows.
- Because they require you to use *your words*, and those words may be difficult or ambiguous.
- Because sometimes children have response biases (always say yes, always say no).
- Because children will guess when they don't know the answer.

Open-ended questions

- Tell me about things you like to do...
- Tell me everything that happened on your last birthday...
- Tell me why I came to see you...
- Tell me everything that happened...
- You said X...
 - Tell me more about X.
 - What happened next?
- Wh- questions (who, what, where, when, how)
 - But these are also overused
- Don't turn "tell me" questions into yes/no questions
 - Can you tell me?
 - Do you know why you are here?

Case Study: Jana J. (4 years old)

- Double homicide
- Jana J. only eyewitness
- Mother the chief suspect ("Kenya")
- Victims: Jana J.'s great grandmother ("Gramma Great") and her caretaker
- Police interview Jana day after the murders.
- Potential defense:
 - Misidentification: Kenya had argument with Gramma Great and left before the murders occurred.

Direct Approach (Jana J., 4 years old)

Q: Let me ask you something Jana, you're a very smart girl, and because the other officers were telling me you're very smart,

Q: We wanted to know what happened yesterday at the house, at the apartment on Coco avenue there. Can you tell me in your own words what happened yesterday?
 A: Hm?
 Q: What happened yesterday? At the apartment. Did somebody get hurt?
 A: Hm?
 Q: Did somebody get hurt yesterday? Who got hurt? Who got hurt?
 A: Kenya.
 Q: Could, could, can you tell me what happened?
 A: Yes.
 Q: Okay, what happened? Can I see that for a sec? Okay, I'll give you that in just a second. Wondering what happened?
 A: Hm?

1. Interviewer uses words that child may not know/understand (house, apartment, Coco Avenue)
2. Jana uses "hm" to indicate non-comprehension, but with yes/no questions, easy to mistake for "yes" or "what?"
3. Nods in response to yes/no question keeps Jana non-verbal
4. Turning good question into yes/no question leads to "yes" (Can you tell me what happened).

5. Problem: "What happened" doesn't seem to work. What then?

Narrative Practice Rapport Building

- Tell me about things you like to do.
 - [Soccer] Tell me everything that happened the last time you played soccer.
- Tell me about things you don't like to do.
 - [Homework] Tell me everything that happened the last time you did your homework.
- Tell me everything you did for your last birthday.
- (or) Tell me everything you did from when you got up to when you came here.

Narrative Practice Rapport Building

- Purpose is to elicit complete details about
 - Actions and reactions
 - From the beginning of the event to the end
- Use *cued invitations*:
 - You said X. Tell me more about X.
 - You said X. What happened next?

Narrative approach (Jana J., 4 years old)

Q: Tell me everything that happened on your last birthday.
 A: You remember I had ice cream and chocolate and cake.

Q: You had what?
 A: Ice cream and chocolate and cake.
 Q: Oh. Ice cream and chocolate and cake. Tell me more about...
 A: Kenya made it for me.
 Q: Kenya made it for you.
 A: Yes. Kenya put chocolate on the cake, cause it wasn't sweet when it was no chocolate on it.

1. Repeating child's words is often enough.
2. Followup with "tell me more"
3. Followup with "what happened next/after/first" (but be careful with "before")

Disclosure Phase (Jana J., 4 years old)

Disclosure Phase

Q: Now that I know you a little better, Jana, tell me why you came to talk to me...

Q: Well, I heard something about Kenya. Tell me what happened.

A: I heard Kenya fighting... Grandma Great.

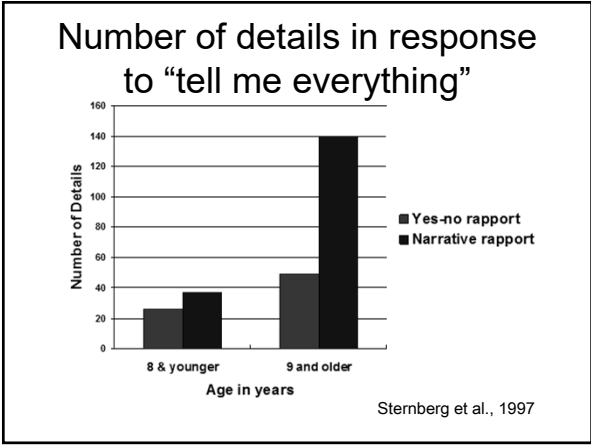
Q: Oh.

A: Yes. Kenya was killing her. By the bike. Yes. My grandmother's bike. That's what Kenya was doing....

Q: And how did she kill her?

A: With a sharp knife.

1. Use wait-time. E.g., 10 seconds after "tell me why you came to talk to me"
2. "Tell me why" will work 50% of the time children disclose abuse.
3. Script follow-up disclosure phase questions in advance. "I heard something about"



Modifying the Ten-Step to ask about preferences

Explaining roles

- There are a lot of people whose job is to make you safe and healthy.
- When you talk to anybody from court, you should tell them what you want and what you think is best.
- When you go to court you see the judge. If you get to talk to the judge...
- Your social worker...
- Your lawyer...

Asking about preferences

- Rapport building: I'm going to ask you how you feel about [your mom and dad], but first I want to get to know you better...
- Transition to substantive interview: Tell me why I came to talk to you.
- The judge will decide who you will live with. Tell me what you want the judge to know.

Asking about preferences

- Tell me about staying with X.
- How do you feel about staying with X?
- What do you like about staying with X?
- What don't you like about staying with X?
- What's the best thing/worst thing

Better to ask indirect questions?

- "You get to court and they tell you 'Oh, no, your opinion isn't important. We just want to know what you think about this and that...who you'd go to McDonald's with...'
They must think you are just plain stupid."
(Meehan, 1982, p. 80.)

For more information

- Email Tom Lyon at tlyon@law.usc.edu
- Google "bepress lyon" for
 - Ten step interview
 - Articles on interviewing children