

Child Abuse & Investigative Interviews

In 1999, the public child welfare service agencies received almost three million reports of child abuse or neglect (Barth, 2003). In many cases, young children are the only resource of information about the alleged abusive experiences. Thus, it is important for forensic interviewers to know the most appropriate ways to capture children's testimonies.

Research has demonstrated the most effective interview practice involves asking open-ended questions. The open-ended format allows the child to recall events. Research has found that information from free-recall memory is more accurate information than information from recognition memory.

For example, an interviewer would ask, "What did you do last night?" compared to "Did you take a bath before you went to bed?" Most interview protocols warn strongly against asking specific questions that receive a yes or no response. In addition, children should be interviewed as soon as possible after the alleged offenses. If focused prompts are needed, they should be used as little as possible and towards the end of the interview.

Despite the scientific evidence, forensic interviewers seldom follow open-ended formats. A study found that out of 42 sexual abuse interviews, 66% of the questions to children age 2-13 years were yes-no type of questions. Detailed training with ongoing supervision and feedback may be necessary to create long lasting changes in interview techniques.

To read more on this topic:

Investigative Interviews of Children: A guide for helping professionals.
Debra A. Poole and Michael E. Lamb. (1998)

Sources:

- Barth, R. P. (2003). Abusive and neglecting parents and the care of their children. In M. A. Mason, A. Skolnick, & S. D. Sugarman (Ed.), *All our families: New policies for a new century* (pp. 265-284). New York: Oxford University Press.
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