

Considerations: When Interviewing Reluctant Children

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The field of forensic interviewing is constantly evolving and so must the skills of those who conduct these interviews. As research provides the interviewer with best practice and evidence based knowledge on reluctant children, the interviewer must also consider the unique culture of the forensic interview itself and be prepared to address the many facets of interviewing those children reluctant to disclose.

Research says “reluctant children are likely to experience forensic interviews as stressful and to perceive the interviewers as threatening.”¹ In addition, even well trained interviewers can become frustrated and start to utilize less open-ended questions with reluctant children. Research conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development on support and reluctance during the forensic interview examined not only the importance of rapport in forensic interviews, but also statements of support an interviewer gives immediately following statements of reluctance by the child. Interviewers should (but often don’t) respond to reluctance with support.²

There are several important factors when interviewing reluctant children. First, understanding the dynamics involved in child maltreatment should be considered. Roland Summit explains dynamics that may be involved with child sexual abuse such as, secrecy, helplessness, entrapment and accommodation, delayed/unconvincing disclosure and retraction.³ What do these dynamics look like when a child is reluctant? Children may say, “Who’s going to know about this?”, “It doesn’t matter,” “I really love my dad,” “I keep not remembering” or “I don’t know.”

In addition to the dynamics, interviewers should consider the barriers to disclose. Schaeffer and Leventhal define the barriers as: threats made by perpetrator, fears, lack of opportunity, lack of understanding and relationship with the perpetrator.⁴ Each interview is different and not all children will struggle with reluctance, but if the forensic interviewer is not looking at all of the ways that children communicate and indicators of potential barriers, the interviewer may be missing something. The main challenge for children: staying where they are and what has become normal for them or move ahead to the unknown.

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¹ Cederborg et al, 2007

² Ahern et al, 2014

³ Summit, 1983

⁴ Schaeffer, Leventhal, 2011

Interviewers should also be cognizant of disclosure patterns that may be present when talking to alleged child victims. There are many reasons why children don't disclose, including consequences, not being believed, what others will think of them, fear, not wanting someone to get in trouble, and loss of offender. "Fear of family rejection and fear of disbelief are major factors leading children not to disclose."⁵ We have also learned through research that a non-supportive caregiver, especially a non-offending mother, can directly affect whether a child discloses. "Children whose mothers were not supportive had drastically lower rates of disclosure than those who children were both believed and supported."⁶ In addition, children with adverse childhood experiences are predisposed to a life riddled with addiction, criminal activity, patterns of destructive relationships, health and mental health challenges or self-harm.⁷

Interviewer preparation is the first step to understanding if there are any issues that could make the child reluctant. Interviewers should discuss with their team any factors that could affect the child's willingness to participate: child/family history with system, supportive caregiver, developmental factors and family dynamics. Interviewers should not go into an interview "blind" or with no information on the child and family. On the other hand, interviewers should also avoid reading the hotline or intake report to prevent any assumptions being made by interviewer.

After the interviewer has adequately prepared for the interview, other recommendations when interviewing reluctant children include: always spend as much time in rapport as needed for the child, recognize the need and give reassurance, provide supportive statements following reluctant statements, ask open-ended questions eliciting a narrative response, utilize age-appropriate questions, refrain from asking direct questions with reluctant children, consider using an expanded, non-duplicative interview process, immediately recognize any block and mediate to remove and meet the child where s/he is and provide an appropriate level of comfort for the child.

Interviewers must be aware of the pace of the interview. Silence can be your friend, and if we allow for silence with reluctant children, it will decrease the possibility of interviewer frustration and allow the child time to move through the narrative. The most important

⁵ Lamb et al, 2008

⁶ Olafson, Lederman, 2006

⁷ Felitti, 2002

consideration when interviewing reluctant children is to listen. If interviewers listen more, they will begin to recognize if there is reluctance and can provide the necessary supportive responses. Often times in our practice, we think about our next question before the child has answered the first question. This creates a conversation and environment that is less supportive and potentially more intimidating for some children.

In conclusion, don't forget that disclosure is a process, not an event⁸. Interviewers need to immediately acknowledge and address any statements of reluctance made by the child. Any statements by the child that indicate forgetting, distancing, minimizing or behaviors and emotions that express unwillingness should immediately be explored and the child should be supported. Interviewers need to take a holistic approach to interviewing: explore all forms of maltreatment and allow the child to provide the most accurate statement regarding his or her experiences. Everything we do must be purposeful and legally sound. We must be able to articulate what we do, why we do it, and the research behind what we do!

⁸ Sorensen, Snow, 1991