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Association of Professionals  
Solving the Abuse of Children

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# The Use of Media in Forensic Assessment of Children

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## Abstract

This article provides guidance for forensic interviewers and evaluators about the use of media (also called props, aids, and tools) in forensic assessments. It assumes that these professionals determine when in the assessment to use media. The article describes the rationale for the use of media, cites research that supports the use of media, and describes specific media and how to use them during the beginning phase, maltreatment phase, and closure phase of the assessment.

**Key words:** *Forensic interviewing, forensic assessment, media, anatomical dolls, drawings, body diagrams*

## Introduction

This article aims to update practitioners, especially those who are interviewing and/or evaluating children who may have been maltreated, about the potential use of media (also called props, aids, and tools) which can augment the use of language when communicating with children. This article is not only based upon research on the use of media versus interviews relying only on verbal communication, but also upon the author's practice experience, which began before there were any guidelines or protocols for interviewing children who may have been maltreated.

This article is not about the pros and cons of using media in forensic assessments, but rather about how to use them when professionals decide to use them. The article acknowledges that, although most evaluation and interview strategies allow the use of media at some point, use of media remains a contested issue (Poole et al., 2011; Veith, 2022).

## Contextualizing the Perspectives about Use of Media in Forensic Interviews and Evaluation of Children Who May Have Been Maltreated

Passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA, 1974) led to the inclusion of child sexual abuse as a reportable type of maltreatment in 1981 (Faller, 2015). When CAPTA passed, child welfare and child maltreatment professionals had no guidelines about how to assess for child sexual abuse. Guidelines for assessing physical abuse and neglect were not useful (Faller, 2007). In most cases of alleged sexual abuse, there were no physical signs nor medical evidence (Palusci et al., 2024).

Professionals logically decided that talking to and observing the child were the best means to determine the likelihood of sexual abuse. The practice of interviewing children who might have been sexually abused was highlighted in a highly contested case entitled the "McMartin Pre-school Case" (Water-

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man et al., 1993). In this case, the evaluators, in the interest of transparency, videotaped their 395 interviews of children in daycare in California. Discussion of the criminal litigation of the McMartin case is beyond the scope of this article but can be found in the following references (Cheit, 2016; Waterman, et al., 1993; Wyatt, 2002). That said, the criticisms of the interview practices of the professionals in the McMartin case, specifically the use of media in forensic interviews and evaluations, including the use of puppets in displacement, and especially the use of anatomical dolls, led to the rejection of the use of media for understanding whether or not a child had been sexually abused (Baker et al., 2016).

A consequence of the controversy has been a bifurcation in the fields of forensic interviews and evaluation of children about the clinical and forensic utility of media in forensic interviews and evaluations (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2016; Veith, 2022). The two different perspectives are captured by CornerHouse (1989) and its affiliates, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol (Lamb et al., 2018) and its affiliates. There are two distinguishing features of these two approaches.

First, CornerHouse has relied on media as well as language for communicating with children who may have been abused, including the use of an easel board, drawings, body diagrams, and sometimes anatomical dolls. Second, CornerHouse and its affiliates have conducted more child interview training in the U.S. than any other programs, including thousands of professionals in 50 U.S. States and professionals in 22 countries (CornerHouse, n.d.).

With regard to NICHD and its affiliates, first, the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol has benefited from a formidable research infrastructure, in the U.S. and especially in Israel (Lamb et al., 2018). Moreover, the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol has been translated into at least 23 languages, indicating the wide appeal of an interview protocol based upon research (The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD Protocol n.d.). Second, NICHD has focused on verbal

interview techniques by interviewers and resulting disclosures from children, likely in part derived from the fact NICHD researchers have primarily used audiotaped interviews for their research (Lamb et al., 2018). NICHD has also partnered to undertake field research with field sites in the developed world; for example, in the U.S., with Salt Lake City law enforcement (Pipe et al., 2008). Thus, the research on the NICHD that provides forensic interview knowledge and guidance is impressive. One outcome is that NICHD has focused on open-ended inquiries of children, which elicit more accurate information (Faller, 2007; Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2023; Lamb et al., 2007). That said, NICHD researchers and their field colleagues have also engaged in some research supporting the use of media (which will be described in this article).

Following the NICHD protocol and research, the *APSAC Practice Guidelines: Forensic Interviewing of Children* (2023) provides major support for verbal communication and less support for the use of media in child forensic interviews. These more recent *Guidelines* do state that interviewers may use "comfort drawings" (p. 18) during the introductory part of the interview. These *Guidelines* also acknowledge that some children may need "accommodations," such as being allowed to write what happened to them or even to draw their reports of maltreatment or its context (p. 19), but the *Guidelines* caution that some "accommodations" may lead to less accurate disclosures because they rely on recognition, rather than free recall memory. Similarly, the *Guidelines* allow the use of anatomical dolls as a demonstration aid **after the child's disclosure**, but with admonitions, for example that the interviewer/evaluator needs to be trained on using anatomical dolls (pp.14-15). This advice is not based on settled science but rather based upon legal considerations (Veith, 2022).

As Everson has argued, many guidelines (e.g., Lamb et al., 2018), including the *APSAC Guidelines* (2023), privilege the needs of the accused over the needs of alleged victims (Everson & Rodriguez, 2020). Arguably, most guidelines fail to appreciate that the



balance of power between the alleged victim and the alleged offender favors the alleged offender (Everson & Rodriguez, 2020). Moreover, alleged offenders may provide coherent and persuasive explanations denying maltreatment, while alleged child victim accounts are not nearly as coherent and persuasive (Faller, 2007).

This article will inform forensic interviewers and evaluators about the rationale for the use of media, other than or in addition to language, to communicate with alleged victims. It will also discuss the range of uses of media, when in the interview/evaluation to use media, and types of media that can be employed to determine the likelihood of child maltreatment.

### Rationale for the Use of Media

First, forensic assessors must appreciate there are two general reasons that children fail to disclose verbally: 1) children don't know to tell, and 2) children don't want to tell. In both cases, media can possibly facilitate disclosure. Of course, forensic assessors must be mindful that there may be nothing to tell, that is, the child has not experienced maltreatment. That said, the use of media in interviews can facilitate information from both children who don't know to tell, and children who don't want to tell, as well as when there is nothing to tell.

There are several advantages of the use of media other than or in addition to verbal communication. First, media generally allows the child both to use verbal and an additional medium, such as drawings, as means for communication. The fact that the child communicates in both language and another form of communication can increase the assessor's confidence about the child's disclosures (Faller, 2007). For example, an assessor might be concerned that a caregiver might have instructed a child to falsely state that the child has been abused; it is less likely the caregiver would have instructed the child to draw this abuse.

Second, young children, especially preschoolers, may be more accomplished in demonstrations than in

language. Young children's enactments are likely to precede language development. Typically, movement precedes language and may enhance their communication skills in a forensic assessment (Faller & Hewitt, 2007). In addition, young children, rather than merely responding verbally, may demonstrate on their own bodies (Faller & Hewitt, 2007).

Third, perhaps somewhat older children, who have been admonished or threatened not to tell, may take this admonition literally and may respond to invitations to communicate by other means. These invitations may overcome their fear of telling (Faller, 2007).

### The Historical Context for the Use of Media in Forensic Assessment

Important articles describing the use of media in forensic interviews in the 1980s and 1990s document that professionals assessing children for sexual abuse commonly used media in their interviews (Conte et al., 1991), for example, anatomical dolls (e.g., Boat & Everson, 1988a, b, 1993; Conte et al., 1991; Kendall-Tackett & Watson, 1991). However, support for the use of media in child forensic interviewing declined and use of verbal communication with children became privileged.

This change derived primarily from challenges to anatomical dolls, especially in legal arenas, where those accused of sexual abuse and their attorneys highlighted select research on anatomical dolls (e.g., Bruck et al., 1995). The ecological validity of this research can be questioned, because it relies on using "light touch" as an analogue to sexual abuse, which, however, does not involve "light touch".

Forensic assessors and developers of interview protocols succumbed to these challenges, and protocols began to focus solely on verbal methods of eliciting accounts of abuse. Those interview protocols derived from the CornerHouse protocol were exceptions; they maintained their focus on using multiple types of media for communication (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Veith, 2022), [TC7].

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### Research on Use of Media in Forensic Assessments

In 1999, Lamb and Sternberg at the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) took on the task of developing evidence-informed child forensic interviewing (Lamb & Sternberg, 1999). These developmental psychologists focused on the questions interviewers should ask and responses from children, and not on non-verbal domains to facilitate disclosures of maltreatment (Lamb et al., 2018). They did, however, undertake one study using a human figure drawing (HFD) after verbally interviewing 90 children ages 4 to 13 (Aldridge et al., 2004). The HFD elicited additional disclosures after initial verbal disclosure or after failure to disclose. Use of the HFDs was associated with reports of new touches not mentioned before and elaborations regarding the body parts reportedly touched. On average, the HFD drawing elicited 86 new forensically relevant details. The drawing was especially productive with children 4 to 7 years of age. The HFDs also helped clarify reports by the oldest rather than the youngest children. The clarity of children's accounts of touch was also greater when details were sought using recall prompts.

It is unclear why Lamb, Sternberg, and colleagues did not continue to pursue media for communication as an avenue of research after the Aldridge et al. (2004) study, which was fairly early in their research on forensic interviewing. That said, the findings from the Aldridge et al. study are instructive. So are other studies that demonstrate the utility of media, especially free drawings, in eliciting information relevant to maltreatment (e.g., Katz et al., 2018). This research supports the argument that children may be more accomplished in communicating through demonstrations on their own bodies or using media than in communicating using language and may be less stressed when using media in communicating information about their abuse.

The first of these studies was undertaken by Katz and Hershkowitz (2010), and the database has been used in subsequent studies. The original study involved 125 children, ages 4 to 14, suspected of sexual abuse,

interviewed initially using the NICHD Protocol. After the initial interview, children were randomly assigned to the free drawing and non-drawing conditions and then re-interviewed. Children in the free drawing group disclosed more free recall information about the abusive events than children in the comparison group, including central details about people, actions, time, and location of the incidents. The effect of drawing was evident regardless of child's age, gender, type of abuse, and time delay.

Using these interviews and follow-up to them, subsequent studies have demonstrated the superiority of the use of free drawings during forensic interviews, in terms of both the richness of information disclosed (Katz et al., 2018) and children's subsequent positive reports about interviews (Katz et al., 2014). Why these positive findings regarding the use of free drawings have not been incorporated into forensic interview guidelines and most protocols is not clear.

That said, forensic assessors should be mindful that very young children, when presented with media, HFD and dolls may not be capable of making the representational shift to using a drawing or a doll to represent themselves or someone else (DeLoache, 1995; DeLoache & Marzolf, 1995). The assessment may precede the child's ability to understand that a drawing or doll represents her or him (Faller, 2007). The child's capacity to make this shift should be evaluated during the initial part of the interview. That said, the use of dolls or human figure drawings are not the optimal uses of media for eliciting free recall.

### Media: When to Use Them, What Media to Use, and How

Arguably, forensic assessors should consider the use of media in the beginning, middle, and maybe even in closure stages of forensic assessments. Media can be used both to encourage reluctant and challenged possible victims of child maltreatment and to de-escalate children toward the end of the interview. Forensic assessors should consider the use of not just the maligned anatomical dolls, but a spectrum of media including comfort drawings, human figure

drawings, and written responses. This article bases its media practice recommendations on field research using laboratory analogues, and practice experience, the greatest weight being placed on field research.

Despite the support media can provide children in a forensic assessment, best practice in most cases is to begin the maltreatment phase of the interview with open-ended questions, not media. Open-ended questions are more likely to access free recall memory, which is more accurate, but may be sparse, while some media uses rely on recognition memory (e.g. human figure drawings, anatomical dolls), which is likely to be more detailed, but may be less accurate (Faller, 2007). There are, however, media uses related to maltreatment that rely on free recall, which will be described later.

Forensic assessors also need to appreciate that media such as free drawings, written responses, and annotated anatomical drawings may generate “demonstrative evidence.” These pieces of evidence are included in the child’s case record and may be admitted into evidence in court proceedings under the business records exception to the hearsay rule (Marks, 2004). Thus, they should be carefully annotated by the assessor, for example questions/probes employed by the assessor, the child’s verbal responses, date, name of the assessor, and name of the child.

In assessments, professionals may employ generic drawing and generic drawing tasks, free drawing of alleged maltreatment and location of maltreatment, anatomical drawings, ginger bread person drawings, and anatomical dolls, although used rarely. That said, as already noted, because of the vigorous attack on the dolls by those defending persons accused of sexual abuse and a small number of disconfirming but methodologically flawed studies, forensic assessors may avoid using anatomical dolls because their use may undermine forensic assessment findings.

### *Generic drawing tasks*

The author of this article, a forensic evaluator, often uses newsprint on the table where the evaluator and the child are seated during forensic evaluations, with the child drawing and writing on one half of the

paper and the evaluator taking notes on the other half. Assessors allow young children to choose markers or crayons. Children are allowed to draw during the rapport-building or beginning stage and actually throughout the interview if they wish (Poole & Dickinson, 2014).

One of the transition probes assessors can use is asking children about their families/households. As children verbally describe the people in their family or household, they may be invited to write their names or draw them. Children are then asked to tell all about each of these people. Sometimes talking about family members elicits information related to maltreatment. Other assessors merely give the child paper and crayons, markers, etc., and allow the child to draw as a way to decrease the child’s anxiety about the forensic encounter (Poole & Dickinson, 2014).

### *Media uses during the maltreatment-related phase of the assessment*

In the maltreatment phase of the interview, media can assist in the following:

1. facilitate disclosure,
2. augment verbal disclosure and demonstrations—gathering details,
3. clarify disclosure,
4. corroborate verbal disclosure and demonstrations, and
5. rule in or out false reports.

Although some interview protocols advise against the introduction of media before a verbal disclosure, there are at least three justifiable uses of media before verbal disclosure. First, assessors may invite children who are reluctant to talk to write responses to probes or draw what happened. Of course, this method of eliciting information can also be used after disclosure. Second, introducing media (e.g., human figure drawings) before disclosure may be useful in understanding the child’s names for body parts. Third, introducing media before a disclosure may be useful if the maltreatment event or events do not appear salient to



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the child. For children who have experienced multiple types and sources of trauma (for example, their house burning down, a shootout at their house), child maltreatment may not be salient.

With regard to the second and third uses before disclosure, if a range of transitional probes do not yield responses that address the issue of concern, the assessor may introduce anatomical drawings. The drawings can clarify the terms the child uses for body parts and may trigger the child's recollections (Dickinson & Poole, 2017). Relevant drawings are introduced, a body parts inventory is conducted, and then the child is asked if anything (something) happened to any part of her/his body. The child may also be asked if any part of their body got hurt. If the child responds affirmatively, the child is invited to mark any parts on the drawing where something has happened to her/him. The assessor then asks the child to tell about each part the child marked. Gingerbread person drawings can also be employed in this way but have not been demonstrated to be as effective as anatomical drawings (or anatomical dolls) (Faller et al., 2011). A similar strategy can be employed with a drawing that could represent the alleged offender. After the body parts inventory, the child is asked questions about the functions of body parts, including private parts, for example, who has these parts and if the child has ever seen private parts. If the child responds affirmatively, the assessor invites the child to say more. If the assessor obtains a disclosure, the child may be asked to mark all parts of the alleged offender's body that were used. The child is then asked what happened with each part the child has marked on the anatomical drawing.

A number of analogue studies have used body diagrams, yielding inconsistent findings (Brown et al., 2005; Bruck et al., 2016; Dickinson & Poole, 2017; Willcock et al., 2003). More relevant is the Aldridge et al. (2004) study in the U.K., cited above, in which researchers employed a human figure drawing in real forensic interviews. After the children had exhausted verbal recall using the NICHD protocol, the NICHD human figure drawing was introduced. As already noted, on average the drawing elicited 86 new forensically relevant details. The drawing was especially productive with children 4 to 7 years of age.

Inviting the child to use free drawing to communicate what happened has advantages over the use of anatomical drawings/human figure drawings. First, children access free recall memory, which should be more accurate. Second, drawing may decrease the trauma of telling. The child engages in kinesthetic activity. The child does not have to maintain eye contact with the assessor during the drawing activity.

Other maltreatment-related free drawing tasks can also prove useful. The child can be invited to draw the alleged offender and then be asked what the person is thinking, doing, feeling; and what makes the person happy, sad, mad, and scared. If the child has already made a disclosure, the child can be asked to identify what part of her/him was used in the maltreatment.

Asking the child to draw the place where the alleged maltreatment occurred can be employed to assist the assessor in understanding the logistics of the maltreatment. In addition, drawing may decrease avoidance and reduce stress for the child. Communicating about the context of the maltreatment is usually less difficult for the child than communicating about the abusive acts and the person who committed them.

If the child has made a disclosure, asking the child to draw the abuse may be used. Katz and Hershkowitz (2010) interviewed 125 children aged 4 to 14 years using the NICHD Protocol and open-ended invitations. Then additional information was gathered with ( $n = 69$ ) or without ( $n = 56$ ) event drawing. Children in the drawing group disclosed more free recall information about the abusive events than children in the comparison group, including central details about people, actions, time, and location of the incidents. Drawing the abuse was especially effective with younger children.

Moreover, there are times when the child has indicated an instrument was used in the abuse, but the assessor needs to clarify this. For example, the child might say a knife was used, but the assessor is not sure whether the abuse felt like it was inflicted with a knife or whether the abuse was actually inflicted with a knife. When anal penetration is alleged, clarification about the instrument may be particularly instructive.

Finally, if the assessor is concerned that the child has

been coached or is making a false statement, asking the child to communicate what has happened using a medium other than words may assist the evaluator in determining whether the event the child has described verbally actually happened or is a fabrication. This is because coaching usually involves a verbal exchange and not instruction about how to draw an event, use anatomical drawings, or demonstrate with anatomical dolls. (Faller, 2007).

### *Closure of the Forensic Assessment*

Although most forensic interview protocols advise a closure phase, protocols provide minimal details about what this phase should contain. For example, the current NICHD protocol advises the interviewer to talk to the child for a couple of minutes about a neutral topic and about what they are going to do next (Lamb et al., 2018).

For a child who has just disclosed maltreatment about someone close, this is a tall order (Hershkowitz et al., 2006). For most children, disclosing abuse is a deeply disturbing experience. Assessors need to allow children sufficient time to process and decompress, despite evaluators' busy schedules. Comfort drawing may be useful, drawing of a beautiful scene or their favorite family scene. These activities, and allowing children to share their experiences of disclosure, may mitigate the impact of the forensic assessment and the disclosure.

### **Conclusion**

Think about it. Media are additional strategies to help children who may have been maltreated to share their truth.





## About the Author

**Kathleen Coulborn Faller, PhD, ACSW, DCSW, FAPSAC** is Marion Elizabeth Blue Professor Emerita of Children and Families at the University of Michigan, and Co-Director of the Family Assessment Clinic in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is the author, editor, or co-editor of 10 books, *Social Work with Abused and Neglected Children* (The Free Press, 1981), *Child Sexual Abuse: An Interdisciplinary Manual for Diagnosis, Case Management, and Treatment* (Columbia University Press, 1988), *Understanding Child Sexual Maltreatment* (Sage Publications, 1990), *Child Sexual Abuse: Intervention and Treatment* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993) the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Study Guide: *Interviewing Children Suspected of Having Been Sexually Abused* (Sage Publications, 1996), *Maltreatment in Early Childhood: Tools for Research-based Intervention* (Haworth Press, 2000), *Understanding and Assessing Child Sexual Maltreatment, Second Edition* (Sage Publications, 2003), *Interviewing Children about Sexual Abuse: Controversies and Best Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2007), *Seeking Justice in Child Sexual Abuse: Shifting Burdens and Sharing Responsibilities* (Columbia University Press, 2010) and *Contested Issues in Child Sexual Abuse Evaluation* (Routledge 2014). She has conducted over 300 juried conference presentations at international, national, and state conferences and provided over 250 workshops. She is the recipient of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Lifetime Achievement Award (2021), National Association of Forensic Social Workers' Sol Gothard Lifetime Achievement Award (2018), Michigan Child Abuse and Neglect Social Work Award (2014), Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma (IVAT). William Friedrich Memorial Child Sexual Abuse Research, Assessment and/or Treatment Award (2012), Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers' Lifetime Achievement Award (2012), National Children's Advocacy Center's Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award (2011), University of Michigan School of Social Work Distinguished Faculty Award (2010), American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children's Outstanding Research Achievement Award, (2008), and American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children's Outstanding Service Award (1998).

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# The Use of Anticipatory Guidance in Forensic Interviews

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## Abstract

Using anticipatory guidance, a method of providing a youth with information about what to expect, is an easily buildable skill that can enhance a youth's experience of the forensic interview. This article describes methods of reducing a youth's anxiety throughout the forensic interviewing process by using anticipatory guidance. Specific methods are described for anticipatory guidance during each phase: the pre-interview, interview instructions and expectations, narrative event practice, transition to the topic of concern, gathering details, taking a break/communicating with the MDT, clarification and closure, and presenting physical evidence (if applicable). The goal of anticipatory guidance is to minimize negative impact for youth while conducting legally sound interviews. Anticipatory guidance reframes the forensic interview as something we do WITH youth instead of TO youth.

**Keywords:** *child forensic interview, anticipatory guidance, child sexual abuse, presenting evidence, prepare and predict*

The National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College offers a wide range of training and technical assistance opportunities. In two of these courses that focus on forensic interviewing skills (Child Sex Trafficking Forensic Interview Training and Presenting Evidence in Child Forensic Interviews), NCJTC staff and faculty identified an interviewing behavior that learners were struggling to implement. The behavior is nuanced and blends clinical skills into the forensic interview. Faculty readily acknowledged that federal partners, specifically Homeland Security Investigations' Forensic Interview Specialists (HSI FIS) and Federal Bureau of Investigations' Child/Adolescent Forensic Interviewers (FBI CAFI), were already employing this skill in interviews, each in their own way. NCJTC faculty sought to label the skill to help learners understand it better, think critically about it, and expand its use in interviews. During one of many curriculum updates, NCJTC began using the term "anticipatory guidance," borrowed and adapted from health care. Anticipatory guidance, as referenced in medical practice, is defined as:

information provided to a patient by a health care professional to prepare them for what to expect in a variety of different situations. Changes and transitions may be easier for some patients to deal with if they know what to expect in advance. Anticipatory guidance can be used by professionals in a variety of healthcare situations to educate, reassure, and advise their patients. (Banaszak & Padgett, 2024)

Anticipatory guidance is an easily buildable skill that can enhance a youth's experience of the forensic interview. It shifts power from the interviewer to the youth and makes the process transparent. Anticipatory guidance increases confidence, opens the door for communication, alleviates unnecessary worry, and allows problems to be caught early on.

By identifying and labeling this interview strategy, trainers heighten interviewers' awareness and help them blend clinical skills into the forensic interview in a way that minimizes negative impact for the youth and addresses the youth's needs throughout the entire process. Most interviewers use some type of anticipatory guidance in their interviews whether

they know it or not. Some steps of the forensic interview, by their very nature, provide anticipatory guidance. Those will be discussed later.

### Offering Choice, Consent and Control

Adapting anticipatory guidance to forensic interviewing is a direct result of learning from the work of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P). Both NCMEC and C3P have worked with survivors of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and produced documents that provide insight for helping professionals. One of the primary motivators for NCJTC to continually update curricula is to ensure content presented is up-to-date and relevant and, in this case, to ensure that survivor voices shape the approach being taught.

Forensic interviews are different than other interactions. By adapting anticipatory guidance to the forensic interview, interviewers decrease the anxiety of not knowing. Anticipatory guidance adds an element of predictability to an otherwise foreign process and provides youth with choice, consent, and control during the duration of the conversation. That phrase, “choice, consent, and control,” comes directly from survivors. It sits at the heart of sound anticipatory guidance practice. To learn more about choice, consent and control, see NCMEC and C3P publications (NCMEC, 2019; Salter & Woodlock, 2024a; Salter & Woodlock, 2024b).

### Preparing for an Interview with Anticipatory Guidance in Mind

Anticipatory guidance begins pre-interview. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Guidelines support informed interviews (APSAC, 2023). This means that interviewers have information about the case and the youth before the interview. This information helps the interviewer create the best physical space and emotional and intellectual environment that suits the youth. The youth does not carry the burden of setting the tone and providing all pertinent

information to create the right atmosphere. All the youth has to do is show up and be themselves. By gathering information about the youth prior to the interview from caregivers and professionals serving the family, the interviewer can prepare to reduce the youth's anxiety. What if the youth hasn't eaten? Can arrangements be made for food? If the youth has been placed in foster care or residential treatment and arrives with concerns about visitation with family members, is the interviewer able to get answers to those questions? If the youth is in a wheelchair, will it fit in the interview room? Does the youth's communication style require an interpreter, tools, or interviewer education? Has the youth made an outcry? If so, what happened, how was it handled, and what has happened since? Is there some type of evidence in the case that needs to be reviewed and discussed with the multidisciplinary team (MDT)? There are many things that can impact a youth's experience in the interview, and it behooves the interviewer to prepare accordingly.

The youth's understanding of both the interview process and reason for the interview can affect their experience of the interview. It is helpful to ask the caregiver what the youth knows about the interview. The interviewer or someone on the MDT should ask the caregiver what words were used to explain the interview process to the youth and how that conversation went. In addition, it is helpful to know how the youth feels about being interviewed, if that is known. If the youth disclosed previously, it is helpful to learn how that disclosure was handled and what has happened since. An MDT member should also inquire about the alleged perpetrator's reactions to the disclosure and any subsequent interaction between the alleged perpetrator and the youth. All this information guides the use of anticipatory guidance throughout the interview.

Imagine knowing you have a serious medical issue. You tell a loved one about it. One day they tell you that they need to run an errand and ask you to accompany them. They take you to a building you have never seen before and ask you to walk in with them. You quickly realize that you might be the focus

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of the visit and not the alleged errand. Then someone you have never met before comes out and asks you to come with them down a hallway to a room to perform some procedure you know nothing about. How do you feel?

Think about all the gaps where knowledge about the process could reduce stress and anxiety. Your feelings about your medical issue might not go away, but how you feel about the process could have been exponentially mitigated if someone talked through what was going to happen and why. Instead, the way it was handled made it all worse. That, in a nutshell, is the reason for anticipatory guidance. Information gives people control. We work the process *with* them instead of doing this process *to* them. Not every youth we interview has experienced trauma. Regardless, our goal is to create positive outcomes for all youth who experience our services.

Caregivers should be supported prior to the interview with information regarding how to explain the interview process so that youth are not blindsided. Otherwise, caregivers find themselves trying to explain a process that they themselves do not understand. This causes confusion for the youth and can create awkward situations in forensic interviews. How this conversation happens depends on many factors. Generally speaking, it is helpful to provide caregivers words to say to youth about the interview process unless there are concerns that providing the caregiver information about the interview will negatively impact the child, make the child unavailable for interviewing, or put the child in harm's way.

We decrease stress by providing information to youth before the interview begins. This includes information about the process, the location, and the interviewer. Think about how your center offers this information. Are families provided a descriptive pamphlet from someone on the MDT? Does your website have a description of the forensic interview or a virtual tour of your space? Is there a tour of your facility when the family arrives? How does the child first meet you? Have they read a booklet with a caregiver that shows your picture as the interviewer?

Do you go to the lobby for a quick introduction before the interview? There are many ways to provide anticipatory guidance. The goal is to meet the individual needs of each youth. This article could not possibly cover all iterations and every situation. The hope is that interviewers and MDTs begin to think about incorporating anticipatory guidance throughout the entire process to best meet the needs of youth.

### Guiding Principles and Checking In

Each step of a forensic interview offers its own opportunities. Some steps are anticipatory guidance by their very nature. In other steps, interviewers will need to make decisions based on the needs of the youth when employing anticipatory guidance. Every use of anticipatory guidance should be purpose-driven because every action in a forensic interview should be purpose-driven. Interviewers should know why they are choosing to employ each approach. Critical thinking helps the interviewer meet the youth's needs during the interview and also assists the interviewer if they end up testifying about the interview later.

To fully understand the impact of anticipatory guidance on an individual, an interviewer should practice the art of "checking in." Checking in is taking a mental note of the youth's current state, paying attention to non-verbal behaviors, tone, pace, volume, emotion, and all the other paralinguistic being communicated. Interviewers should pay attention, and not assume. When an interviewer needs confirmation on the youth's state, verbal inquiries might be necessary. Some examples include:

- "We have been talking for a while. How are you doing?"
- "Tell me what you are thinking."
- "Tell me how you are feeling."
- "I see a look on your face. Tell me what is going on for you."
- "Let me know when you are ready."



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- “What are your thoughts/feelings right now?”
- “What questions do you have for me about what we are going to do?”
- “Do you have questions about that?”
- “Let me know if you need to take a break.”

The check-in is crucial. In providing anticipatory guidance, interviewers need to pay attention to how the information is received. The check-in indicates whether follow-up is necessary. Interviewers should consistently “read the room” throughout the entire interview.

### Anticipatory Guidance at Each Step

The following steps are intended to cover the basic parts of a forensic interview. Although there is no consensus on naming the parts, the following sections capture the basic components of all the major models of forensic interviewing. The order might differ across models.

#### Pre-Interview

Some interviewers might approach the youth in the lobby before the interview to offer some anticipatory guidance in the form of a quick meet so that the youth can see the interviewer’s face prior to the interview. This might include a brief statement that provides information to the youth about the upcoming process and timing. This technique can be used in situations where there are no booklets, tours (in person or virtual), or other pre-interview interactions that provide anticipatory guidance about the interviewer.

**Example:** Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_ and I am the one who gets to talk with you today. I wanted you to be able to see me before we got started. I am going to get the room ready where we are going to be talking. The next time you see me it will be time for us to talk. If you need anything before I come back, just ask \_\_\_\_ [pointing to the advocate in the lobby]. I will be back soon.

The purpose is to reduce anxiety for the youth by providing information while also providing quick exposure to the interviewer before the interview. This contact is usually not recorded because it happens in a waiting room. Thus, interviewers should discuss with prosecutors how to handle the off-camera interaction.

When the time comes for the interview, a youth is transitioned from the waiting area to the interview room. Each MDT should consider how this happens and think about whether anticipatory guidance could be added—Is someone taking the child to the interviewer who is sitting in the interview room? Or is the interviewer getting the child and taking them to the room? Every interaction is an opportunity. Saying, “We are walking down this hallway to the right and going to that door on the left,” provides anticipatory guidance by decreasing the anxiety of not knowing. Once they enter the room, the interviewer can provide additional anticipatory guidance by letting the youth know which seat is theirs or offering a choice of where to sit.

Once seated, the interview begins. The interviewer shares (or restates) their name and confirms what the child will be called during the interview. The interviewer explains how the interview will be documented (e.g., video recording, note-taking) and who will be observing. Letting youth know about recording equipment, notetaking and observers is a common practice in forensic interviews and is excellent anticipatory guidance for youth. It begins to orient the youth to the differences between this interaction and other conversations that the youth has had with other adults. If crayons, paper, fidgets, or other items are available in the room for the youth, the interviewer gives the youth permission to use them. It is also good practice to let youth know that tissues or blankets that are available in the room are there for the youth’s comfort if needed. By letting the youth know that these items are accessible, this anticipatory guidance gives the youth choice and control of the environment. Careful planning prior to the interview can guide interviewer decisions

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regarding use of each of these. Some interviewers find it useful to offer a statement about breaks, especially for adolescents, at the beginning of the interview, by saying, “if you need a break, let me know.” Another option for breaks is to be very purposeful in check-ins with youth and offer a break during the interview at the time it is indicated.

Other things might be important to consider when there are unique circumstances specific to the particular environment.

### **Examples:**

“This room can get cold. That blanket is here for you to use if you want.”

“Sometimes it gets noisy outside on the street. I wanted to let you know that.”

“We can sometimes hear a bang when people go out a side door. I wanted you to know what that is in case we hear that noise.”

### *Interview Instructions/Expectations*

Interview instructions (also known as expectations or rules) inherently provide anticipatory guidance by letting the youth know what to expect and offering information that empowers the child when they are responding to questions and makes the child the expert. Allowing a child to correct the interviewer if they are wrong and to communicate not understanding and not knowing sets clear guidelines and empowers the youth by granting them permission. Explaining that the interviewer is not all-knowing and asking the youth to commit to telling the truth also helps set clear guidelines. Coupled with narrative event practice (see below), these instructions help make the process transparent and predictable. They provide anticipatory guidance by distinguishing the interview from normal conversations with adults, especially those with whom a youth does not have a relationship.

This step also provides an opportunity for the interviewer to identify blocks and barriers. The interview can then deal with these blocks and barriers. For example, if the youth states that they cannot promise to tell the truth, the interviewer has an opportunity to inquire about the reason and work through concerns the youth might have about the interviewer process. In addition to dealing with potential challenges to conducting an effective interview, this process changes the typical dynamic of adult/child interactions by giving the youth control. As in all steps of the forensic interview, check-ins are essential. The interviewer should be consistently checking in to assess whether the youth understands and to make sure the youth is ready to proceed to the next steps of the interview.

### *Narrative Event Practice*

Narrative event practice (also known as the practice narrative or episodic training) demystifies the questioning process and makes lengthy, narrative responses commonplace in the interview. This step demonstrates the flow of conversation and how questions will be asked and should be answered and allows the youth the opportunity to practice accessing a memory and reporting it completely. This type of anticipatory guidance early in the interview can help reduce the child’s stress throughout the interview, because the youth often provides narration during the interview, not just when they are disclosing abuse. Through practice with a neutral or positive event, the youth learns the expectations for communication in the interview while simultaneously building rapport with the interviewer. By its very nature, narrative event practice is anticipatory guidance. It “increases confidence, opens the door of communication, alleviates unnecessary worry, and allows problems to be caught early on” (Banaszak & Padgett, 2024). Youth have the choice to respond to narrative invitations and the ability to consent to the process or not. Ultimately, they control the way the information flows. This is what we interviewers often refer to as “obtaining the baseline” of the youth’s communication. Often, how narrative event practice goes, so goes the interview.

### *Transition to the Topic of Concern*

Many of our common techniques in forensic interviewing fit the concept of anticipatory guidance. Framing first and asking second (also known as cueing, prompts, or reinstating the context) is an excellent anticipatory guidance approach. Interviewers minimize anxiety by letting the youth know ahead of time what the prompt will reference.

#### **Examples:**

“I understand the police came to your house last weekend. Tell me everything that happened.”

“You told me Sam hit your mom. Tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end.”

By consistently reading the room with check-ins, interviewers can make choices regarding the best transition statements for the youth. For example, for the youth who has no knowledge of the purpose of the interview and whose caregiver never discussed coming to the center, the prompt, “Tell me what you came to talk about today,” might not work. However, noting that the youth mentioned earlier in rapport that their father no longer lived in the home (and the interviewer chose to wait to address that comment), it might be a better transition to use the youth’s words (e.g., “Earlier you mentioned that your dad doesn’t live with you anymore. Tell me more about that.”) The purpose of anticipatory guidance at this stage of the interview is to prepare the youth to move to the reason for the interview. Check-ins might be needed to identify blocks and barriers, and strategies might then be used to remove them. Anticipatory guidance helps to minimize anxiety and create safety for discussing difficult content. In this example, it shows that the interviewer is a listener because the youth brought up the topic earlier and the interviewer used the youth’s words to refer to the topic after giving the youth some space before discussing it. In addition, narrative event practice was anticipatory guidance for this moment. The youth knows what to expect and how to talk about things.

### *Gathering Details*

Gathering details also uses some basic forensic interview skills as anticipatory guidance. Signaling topic changes or shifts is a good use of anticipatory guidance at this stage of the interview. As before, this would be done by framing first and asking second.

#### **Examples:**

“When you were talking before about the things happening at home, you also mentioned that something happened in the bathroom. Tell me everything that happened in the bathroom.”

“We have been talking about what your dad did to your brother. I want to understand what happened to you. Tell me more about what your dad did to you.”

Repeating the need to hear about everything by reiterating the uninformed interviewer prompt (“I wasn’t there when that happened and I need your help to understand”) can help, as does reflecting back on narrative event practice (“Tell me just like you told me about your last soccer game”). At this stage of the interview, reiterating interview expectations (don’t know/don’t guess, correct me) can be good reminders, when needed, and provide anticipatory guidance. As always, consistent check-ins are necessary throughout to assess and address any needs of the youth. The purpose of using anticipatory guidance during this phase of the interview is to gather maximum information and context about the youth’s life experiences while minimizing negative impact and suggestibility.

### *Taking a Break/Communicating with the MDT*

Although taking a break and communicating with the MDT might not seem to be important steps in the forensic interview, it nevertheless offers many opportunities for anticipatory guidance. Think about how and when you explain the break and/or communication with your MDT. Are you mentioning the break at the beginning during your



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introduction as a part of anticipatory guidance when you mention observers? Or maybe, if you wear an earpiece to communicate with your team, you have shared some information with the youth about that at the beginning of the interview. Now it is time to take your official break. Anticipatory guidance is incredibly important. Waiting is difficult for anyone. So, providing information at this point is helpful to the youth and will reduce anxiety. What prompts are you saying to the youth as you are about to leave the room or receive communication from your team? How do you transition back into the room or back into the conversation with the youth? All of these things are anticipatory guidance and require planning.

### ***Clarification and Closure***

The final step of the interview allows time to clarify outstanding questions and concerns and leaves the door open for subsequent contacts while providing the youth the means to do so. The interviewer takes time to address the youth's concerns and to assess and address safety concerns that remain unanswered for the MDT. Conversations about next steps could discuss follow-up services and reconnecting to everyday life as well as simply transitioning out of the room and back to caregivers. If the youth requires a medical exam or follow-up assessment, anticipatory guidance will discuss when these will occur. The words used to communicate at this stage provide the youth anticipatory guidance and help set the stage for positive outcomes moving forward. The step is anticipatory guidance for the youth to complete the forensic interview process.

### ***Presenting Physical Evidence***

In some cases, MDT members provide physical evidence to the forensic interviewer to present to the youth in the forensic interview. This evidence can be anything tangible that can be shown to the child, such as a photo, document or report, or a copy, picture, or screen capture of the evidence. Some

examples include journal entries, drawn pictures, letters, texts, phone logs, and images of people or places. Presenting evidence requires planning and should always be purpose-driven. With the increase of technology use, much evidence comes from cell phones. Thus, an interviewer might have a forensics report that shows a chat between two people, however, the report requires interpretation to understand all the data that can be seen on the report. This requires preparation on the part of the forensic interviewer. Evidence can also be child sexual abuse material (CSAM). CSAM cases must be handled delicately. The needs of the youth supersede everything else. Anticipatory guidance offers a respectful way to provide the youth power through transparency of the process. To interview youth skillfully when presenting evidence, interviewers should be trained and recognize that preparation is essential. NCJTC created a two-day advanced forensic interviewing skill-based course that provides crucial training on presenting evidence. A key element in training is providing anticipatory guidance. To successfully present evidence in a trauma-informed, victim-centered manner, anticipatory guidance puts choice, consent and control front and center. Youth are told at the beginning of the interview that there is evidence that might be discussed later in the interview. The explanation might sound like this, "I have some pictures and screen shots in this folder that we might talk about later. First, I want to get to know you." When the time to present evidence arises, the interviewer checks in with the youth to assess readiness and explains the process with anticipatory guidance. Once the interviewer establishes that the youth can continue, anticipatory guidance for the presentation of evidence might begin in this way, "When we first started talking, I said that I had some pictures and screen shots to talk with you about and I need your help to understand them." The interviewer should pause and assess the youth's readiness through check-ins. The youth can choose to engage or not and can stop the process at any time.

**Example:** The first thing I want to show you is a picture of two people. They are both smiling and looking at the camera. One has blonde hair and a nose ring and the other has black hair and glasses. They are wearing matching purple tank tops and jean shorts. (Pause.) Tell me when you are ready to look at it.

By describing the evidence, victim survivors are prepared for what is coming. In addition, a description of the process allows youth to know what is happening before it happens and have a choice whether to engage in the process. This choice gives them the ability to consent (or not) and control whether they see the evidence. One of the key phrases is, “Tell me when you are ready” (which can also be phrased, “let me know when you are ready”). This prompt gives the pacing and the power to the youth.

### Conclusion

By adapting anticipatory guidance to the entire interview, interviewers become more proficient in its use and can hone their practice. Then when difficult cases and cases with evidence occur, interviewers are more likely to feel confident and competent and make the experience positive for youth. The goal is to minimize negative impact for youth while conducting legally sound interviews. Interviewers should remember that all actions should be purpose-driven and that choices should be made based on the individual youth. The idea is that anticipatory guidance creates transparency and predictability which inspires trust and safety. We do not expect youth to know what is about to happen. We tell them. This is a respectful way to give youth power over the process and reduce their anxiety and apprehension. We engage them and we acknowledge the right to choice, consent and control. Anticipatory guidance reframes the forensic interview as something we do WITH youth instead of TO youth. It is a beautiful way to blend our clinical skills with our forensic practice.

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# Understanding Spanish-Speaking and Bilingual Children in the Forensic Interview

*Dulce Solis*

## Abstract

This article discusses cultural competency principles and best practices when conducting forensic interviews with Spanish-speaking and bilingual children. Among the factors that interviewers need to consider are the many regional dialects of Spanish, the differences in social interaction between bilingual and monolingual children, the additional time required for Spanish-language interviews, the effects of a cultural practice of storytelling connected to family history, the ambiguity of some Spanish words, and code switching between English and Spanish in interviews. One important reality is that children find it very difficult to access and articulate feelings in a language in which they have less emotional connection.

**Keywords:** *child abuse, forensic interviews, Spanish language forensic interviews, bilingual forensic interviews, cultural competency, cultural practice, code-switching, narrative practice, best practice.*

The 2020 U.S. Census found that Latino children make up 26 percent of the nation's total child population. (United States Census Bureau, 2023). While Latino children disproportionately reside in the Southwest, they comprise a sizeable percentage of the child population in all 50 states (Chen & Guzman, 2021). The National Education Association predicts that by 2025, 1 out of 4 children in classrooms across the nation will be an English-language learner, and states that the country is not ready for this reality (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2020).

Interviewing children who have been abused has never been easy. An array of dedicated researchers has supported the work of child abuse investigations and provided professionals in the field a wealth of knowledge to help us understand child development, trauma, best question types, and overall best practice as these topics relate to interviewing children. However, despite the growing literature related to interviewing victims of child abuse and neglect, there is little guidance and research on how to apply cultural competency principles and best practice when interviewing Spanish-speaking and bilingual children.

As forensic interviewers, it is critical that we understand children's linguistic backgrounds to know how to best serve different populations. We need to focus

on how to accommodate the needs of those children without compromising the integrity of best practice. Forensic interviewers conducting these interviews need to be cognizant of such challenges as educational concerns, cultural and social norms, complexity of the language (grammar, word meaning, linguistic structure and styles of the communication, including that of non-verbal children), family dynamics, and families' perception of and relationship with the legal and child protection systems.

Further complicating matters are the issues of regional language and dialect—not all children speak the same Spanish either. There are eleven major dialects of Spanish spoken in the United States: Castilian, Central American, Mexican, Caribbean, Latin America, Andean, Rioplatense, Canadian, Chilean, Colombian and Ecuadorian (Language testing International Exclusive license of ACTFL 2024). Understanding the number of dialects and familiarizing oneself with the different dialects is vital as it impacts the child's communication, culture and identity. Interviewers need to be aware of the Spanish dialect that the child speaks and decide the best way to introduce narrative prompts throughout the forensic interview. If necessary, take the time before starting the forensic interview to map out some of those narrative prompts, which will be very helpful in the interview.

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Spanish-speaking children and bilingual children are different too. They present to the interviewer differently in the way they communicate their social interactions, cognitive development, and language skills. For example, bilingual children often display greater social interactions, demonstrating the ability to adapt faster and more easily in the forensic interview setting versus monolingual, Spanish-speaking children. Spanish-speaking children will need extra time during the rapport building phase of the interview to adapt to the setting. Also, bilingual children tend to jump from one event to another quickly during narrative due to the constant language switching practice in their lives, versus monolingual children who proceed slowly. Depending on the topic, most bilingual children will utilize both Spanish and English versus the monolingual child who will use only Spanish vocabulary and grammar.

Direct Spanish interviews take longer than English interviews for various reasons. Spanish-speaking children tend to use more words when speaking, because the Spanish language uses more words to express an idea than the English language. In Spanish, it is natural to specify the purpose of an action and add information to intensify an action when speaking, which makes the sentence longer. For example, during the narrative event practice phase, the child begins to talk about everything that happened from the moment they woke up until they arrive at the interview. They talk about breakfast and how they didn't want to eat it. The child will add the details as to why they didn't eat it versus them just saying, "I didn't eat it."

When Spanish-speaking children narrate, they will often mention or describe family members, consistent with a cultural practice of storytelling connected to family history. References to family members provides cohesion within a narrative to specify time and place, which orients the child as they narrate. References to family members will connect actions and events to help children sequence during their narratives. For example, if you ask a Spanish-speaking child if they have even been to a farm and to milk a cow, they will likely also talk about their cousin who lives on a farm with his uncle who had to milk the

cows every morning for many years. Then talk about how the uncle passes away, how the cousin became responsible for the cows, and finish by saying they have never milked a cow, but they know how it's done because they have watched their cousin do it. This is not a common practice in U.S. culture.

Many words in Spanish are ambiguous, meaning that one word can mean two different things. For example, the word *apuntar* can mean to write something down or to point at someone. The word *cinta* can be a rope or a pregnant woman. The word *heroína* can mean cocaine and or a woman. These are just a few of countless examples. Additionally, some Spanish words and concepts do not translate well. For example, when asking the transition prompt in an interview, "What are you here to talk to me about today?" interviewers should avoid asking the child, "Why?" Asking "Why?" implies blame or responsibility on the victim's part. The word *que* and the word *porque* in Spanish in this context can mean the same thing. To pose this prompt and avoid asking "why?" the interviewer can ask, "¿De que quieres hablarme hoy?" "¿Que tema vamos a platicar aqui hoy?" The interviewer may need to try multiple ways of saying something for the child to comprehend, and for the child to respond in a way that the interviewers can understand.

Most Spanish-speaking children that we interview are English learners in schools, which can present challenges for the interviewer. Spanish-speaking children who are learning or have learned English mix the languages or *code switch* the languages. This is not a lack of knowledge nor a sign of weakness. Rather, it is a complex function that allows the speaker to access both languages at once.

Code switching is the ability of the bilingual brain to alternate between two languages or dialects. It incorporates elements from one language to another within a single utterance. This includes the child borrowing words, phrases or grammatical structures from one language and integrating them into another. Children will use different words to convey the same meaning, or diverse ways of pronouncing the same word or phoneme (from different dialects of Spanish) within a single conversation, single situation, and

sometimes within a single sentence. During the narrative event practice with children, you may hear a child respond like this: “My mom woke me up saying ‘¿Que ya era de ir?’ and to get ready. I got out of bed y me fui a cepillar los dientes and washed my face. Despues, I had to change my clothes and go in the car to come here.” Code switching is common when speaking to someone who understands both languages and/or dialects. It is unpredictable, and speakers often impulsively switch languages without a conscious choice. The brain is unable to detect when the switch happens from one language to another because it uses shared mechanisms to combine the words and be able to express them more easily. Code switching does not signal confusion; it is a natural sign of multilingual children’s development. When children stop code switching it is a sign of proficiency in the language. Appel & Muysen (2005) state the following reasons children switch from one language to another:

- **Expressive function.** They want to express some part of their identity.
- **Referential function.** They are unable to express an idea easily in one language.
- **Phatic function.** They want to emphasize what they are communicating and say it in both languages.
- **Metalinguistic function.** They are reporting something in the other language or commenting on something that was said in the other language.
- **Social context.** They use the language that they think will best help them fit into the social situation.
- **Interpersonal interaction.** They choose the language that they perceive to be most responsive to the person with whom they are talking.
- **Emotional emphasis.** They choose the language that they feel best communicates their feelings in each situation.

Many may think that children who code switch are confused, but this is not accurate. Children’s code

switching is a natural way of learning a second language; for them, this is the fastest and most efficient way to communicate. Some children do not know that they are speaking in two different languages; they mix them as if they were one, resulting in what most of us know as Spanglish. Their mind doesn’t always distinguish between the two languages, and they don’t identify which language they know best either. It is the child putting the languages that they know together in a category called languages to convey what they are thinking.

Sometimes finding the word that describes a state requires more words and more description than the “lazy brain” wants to engage with, and children use the other language word because it is easier and faster at the time of describing something. For example, in Spanish there is the word, *empalagado/empalagada*. That is an adjective that describes a situation in which your stomach feels full, but not with food in general, but specifically with sweets. In other words, you have had enough of sweet stuff. When exploring grooming in a forensic interview, children often use the word *carinoso(a)*—an adjective used to describe someone showing affection by buying the other person new things, saying nice things, doing random things to help the other person, being extra sweet and/or stroking the other person in a gentle way. Children often talk about being called *mi cielo* when talking about things said to them. *Mi cielo* translates to, “my sky” or “my heaven,” but in fact it’s used as a term of endearment, like “my darling” or similar often used between lovers. These words don’t exist in the English language. Thus, bilingual children speaking in English are going to use that same exact word or words in Spanish instead of having to use more words or give an explanation that is going to be harder or longer for them.

When Spanish-speaking children are forced to stick to English, the child will have to work very hard to make a conscious effort to suppress the Spanish language and be able to communicate effectively. This will affect the way children provide details or narrate in forensic interviews. They may not be able to be specific about details because of their limited vocab-



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ulary, preventing them from providing rich details and an exact description of events. Sometimes these kids will recant the allegations because it is too hard, as well as embarrassing, to talk about it; it is easier to say that nothing happened than to try to find the words to describe their experiences. For example, I reviewed a case in which an 11-year-old female had been abducted and sexually assaulted. The child was recovered hours later and immediately had a forensic interview. The child lived in a monolingual home where parents only spoke Spanish, and she was in her second year of all-English instruction in school. The multidisciplinary team determined that the child would have an interview with an English (non-Bilingual) interviewer. It was very difficult for the child to find the correct words in English to report to the interviewer and as a result, she did not disclose the sexual assault. After the interview, the child was taken to the hospital where she talked about the sexual assault to the bilingual nurse who spoke directly in Spanish. The nurse then reported it back to law enforcement. The team then made the decision to bring the child back for a second interview, using the language in which the child was most comfortable in. The child then provided a very detailed account of the events. When the interviewer explored her denial from the previous interview, the child stated it was too hard for her to find the right words in English to talk about it.

Best practice is to allow children to jump back and forth between the languages. Although they are learning English and may know it very well, Spanish is going to be their strongest language, and the language in which children will be able to provide narrative detail responses. Allowing children to go back and forth will allow the child to provide rich details and emotion when providing a narrative of the assault. Most English learners' brains encode and store events, especially traumatic events in Spanish, their first language. This makes it extremely difficult for children to provide a rich narrative with a detailed account of the events in English. Language is deeply intertwined with emotions and experiences. Children find it very difficult to access and articulate feelings in a language to which they have less emo-

tional connection. It is critical that the interviewer pays close attention to the child's way of communicating using the two languages and be able to guide the conversation using both languages to maximize understanding of what is being asked and said to minimize misunderstandings.

Interviewing children directly in Spanish is relatively new in our field and not everyone has accessibility to a bilingual forensic interviewer for Spanish-speaking or bilingual children. In instances in which a bilingual forensic interviewer is not available, it is going to be highly important that, in the best interest of the child, the interview, the investigation, and prosecution work in collaboration with professional interpreters. This will facilitate full understanding between the child and the forensic interviewer. A professionally trained interpreter will help break down cultural barriers and help build trust and rapport with children.



### Author Bio

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# Research from January 2022 to February 2025 on Child Forensic Interviewing Questions and Related Methods

*Theodore P. Cross, PhD, FAPSAC*

## Abstract

This article reviews selected findings from research published from January 2022 to February 2025 that pertains to forensic interview questions and related methods. The article examines new research on a) practice narratives about children's birthdays, b) different types of yes-no questions and an alternative to them, c) different types of prompts and transitions, d) different types of questions that use the word *time*, e) other types of questions, and f) wait times and breaks. The article then presents a brief list of recommendations from these researchers.

**Keywords:** *child sexual abuse, child forensic interviewing, questioning methods*

Useful research on child forensic interviewing is continually emerging, but most forensic interviewers lack access to journals, lack research training, and lack time for extensive reading. This article examines selected useful findings from research published from January 2022 to February 2025 that pertain to forensic interview questions and related methods. This researcher conducted searches in the EBSCO and SCOPUS research databases and Primo online library catalog to find articles using the terms "child forensic interviewing." Also a search was done in the Child Abuse Library Online (CALIO, see NCAC CALIO, 2021; Wells, 2025) and in several of CALIO's bibliographies for the same term. Focusing on those years, this researcher also searched the table of contents of several prominent journals that regularly publish articles about child forensic interviewing: *Child Maltreatment*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*. The reference lists of many studies were reviewed to find additional studies. The number of articles found was substantial enough that two review articles were written for this issue of *APSAC Advisor*. The current article focuses on types of forensic interview questions and related methods for conducting the interviews. A companion article in this issue reviews other child forensic interview topics: specific youth populations, child psychological factors, professional factors, and inter-

view supports. This article is selective, not exhaustive. There are likely to be several useful articles *not* discussed here. Below is a review of the research on interview questions and related methods, organized by topic.

## The Birthday Narrative

Forensic interviewers are taught to use a *practice narrative* inviting the child to provide a narrative of something neutral or positive that happened (see, e.g., Henderson et al., 2024; Saywitz et al., 1993). The practice narrative helps prepare the child to give a narrative account later in the interview about the abuse in question if it occurred. The practice narrative also helps the interviewer and the child build rapport. One practice narrative method is the *birthday narrative*, in which the interviewer asks the child to talk about everything that happened during their birthday (Lamb et al., 2018). Birthdays are a useful topic because they are "ubiquitous, eventful, and memorable" (Wylie et al., 2024, p. 2).

However, concerns have been raised that the birthday narrative may be ineffective because children may not remember details about their birthday and because children who have been maltreated may be more likely to have negative birthday experiences. Wylie and colleagues (2024) surveyed 170 forensic



interviewers who had participated in a webinar promoting use of the birthday narrative. They found that most interviewers rarely used the birthday narrative. Compared to other practice narrative methods, the interviewers thought that birthday narratives were less productive and more likely to lead to memory failure. Problems with the birthday narrative that interviewers mentioned in the survey included birthdays possibly being negative (39% of respondents), children not always celebrating their birthday (35%), children being too poor to celebrate (15%), and abuse occurring on their birthday (13%). In response to the question “What is the best way to ask the Birthday prompt?”, 49% suggested what Wylie et al. (2024, p. 6) called “potentially problematic strategies,” such as asking the overly specific question “What did you do?” rather than making the more general request to tell “everything that happened.”

Henderson, Wylie and colleagues conducted research on children’s responses to the birthday narrative. Henderson and colleagues (2022, 2024) studied analogue interview questions with children recruited for the research, while Wylie et al. (2024) studied actual forensic interviews. Henderson et al. (2022) included both maltreated and non-maltreated children while Henderson et al. (2024) included only maltreated children.

These studies found success rates on the birthday narrative of 90% to 96%. However, two of the studies found that extra effort by the interviewer was sometimes or often required. Henderson et al. (2022) found that 11% of maltreated children did not initially produce details when asked about their birthdays, but this number dropped to 3% with interviewer encouragement, such as repeating the question, offering a supportive statement (“It’s really important that I get to know you,”) or slightly narrowing the question (“What did you do on your last birthday?”). Wylie et al. (2024) found that 41% of children initially failed to provide details about their birthday in the forensic interviews that used the birthday narrative; the high success rate they found in the study was for interviews in which the interviewer asked children up to three times to do the birthday narrative. Interview-

ers gave up and did not persist 11% of the time. In the two studies that measured it, children expressed something negative about their birthday in 15% of cases (Henderson et al., 2024) and 21% of cases (Wylie et al., 2024).

Henderson et al. (2024) recommend that interviewers may want to start narrative practice with something easy, such as activities the child enjoys. They may then want to do the birthday narrative, but they should be prepared to encourage children who may need several tries to recall information. If the birthday narrative fails after repeated attempts, they may want to shift to a practice narrative that lacks the advantages of the birthday narrative but is easier, such as asking about a child’s morning.

### Yes-No Questions

Open-ended questions are preferred in forensic interviews (see, e.g., Lamb et al., 2018). Yes-no questions are discouraged, but forensic interviewers use them nevertheless (see, e.g., Szojka et al., 2023; Szojka & Lyon, 2024). Szojka and Lyon (2024) studied age differences in 4- to 12-year-old children’s responses to yes-no questions in forensic interviews about sexual abuse. They coded transcripts of 379 forensic interviews with children aged 4 to 12 years. Not surprisingly, compared to older children, younger children provided less information in response to yes-no questions. Regarding specific types of information, younger children were less likely to

- provide additional narrative information about the event being discussed,
- provide information in response to such yes-no questions as “Do you know where it was?” that implicitly ask for more information (see also the discussion of such questions in the review of Szojka et al., 2023 below),
- explain that the correct answer is neither a simple yes or no, or that it is both yes and no.

Younger children also provided fewer “I don’t know” responses and more irrelevant responses. “Don’t

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know” responses and requests for clarification were rare for children of all ages.

Szojka and Lyon (2024) state that their results “highlight the dangers of yes-no questions” (p. 644) and emphasize using wh-questions (e.g., “What did he say?”) and open-ended invitations (e.g., “Tell me what happened?”) as alternatives. They reported one new argument against yes-no questions: In response to them, children are less likely to provide qualifications that help clarify what happened.

Szojka et al. (2023) studied any/some yes-no questions, a particular type of yes-no question that is common but may have its own specific problems. Such questions imply a request for more information. Examples are, “Did he say anything?” and “Did he say something?” Adults and older youth understand that the person asking the question wants them to report what was said. Young children, however, may not understand the implied request. They may simply answer “yes” and not provide the information needed. Moreover, in forensic interviews such any/some questions risk false “no” responses. Szojka and colleagues (2023) compared the response to any/some questions to the responses to other yes-no questions. They coded the same 379 interview transcripts that were used in Szojka and Lyon (2024).

Comparing the two, “any” yes-no questions produced more information than “some” yes-no questions, but also more denials than “some” yes-no questions. A limitation of the study is that the researchers were unable to determine if the denials were accurate or false; some of the denials were in response to supplementary questions about low probability events—such requests generate a lot of true denials. The youngest children usually failed to elaborate when they said “yes” in response to a “some” or “any” yes-no question.

Szojka et al. (2023) advises interviewers to avoid any/some yes-no questions whenever possible in order to sidestep under-informative responses and false denials. If interviewers do ask yes-no questions, they should usually follow up immediately with an open-ended question. Henderson, London and

Lyon (2023) cite an example from Lamb et al. (2018) of questions that could be asked about the alleged perpetrator: “Did he say anything?”/“Yes”/“Tell me more about that.” Sometimes interviewers can follow up a question such as “Did you see anything?” with a related but open-ended question such as “What did you see?” even if children initially say no, but questions such as this need to be very generic to avoid children mistakenly providing false details.

An alternative to yes-no questions is to ask straight away a question such as “What did he say?” presupposing that the alleged perpetrator said something. Henderson, London and Lyon (2023) studied these so-called *suppositional* questions. The authors did research interviews with a sample of 6- to 11-year-old victims of maltreatment. The children were asked about three narrative practice topics: what they liked to do outside, what they did yesterday, and what happened on their last birthday. At the end of the narrative practice, children were asked either a yes-no question or a suppositional question (which of these questions was asked was determined by random assignment). Suppositional questions produced fewer denials of content, more substantive responses, and more details.

### Prompts and Invitations

Garcia and colleagues (2022) studied *transition prompts*, in which interviewers first inquire about abuse with a nonleading invitation to talk about the purpose of the interview. An example is “What have you come to talk to me about today?” Garcia et al. coded data from transcripts of recorded police interviews in four Australian states. They found that “the phrasing of the transition prompt was the most important factor in obtaining informative immediate responses from children” (p. 261). Transition prompts such as the above that used the word “what” produced more information than transition prompts that used the word “why” (e.g., “Why are you here today?”). Phrasing questions directly (e.g., “What have you come to talk to me about today?”) was better than phrasing questions indirectly (e.g., “Do you know what you have come to talk to me about

today?”). The latter are implied request questions, similar to the ones studied by Szojka et al. (2023), and children often answered simply “yes” (more often) or “no” (less often). Garcia et al. note that, even though the effects of poor transition prompt phrasing may seem small and easily corrected, they can affect the rest of the interview and have a large cumulative impact. They recommend that agencies instruct interviewers how to ask transition prompts and not allow it to be discretionary.

Danby and Sharman (2024) studied three types of open-ended prompts used in child forensic interviews. *Initial invitations* are usually the first requests of children in the substantive phase and ask children to provide as much information as possible about the abuse. Danby and Sharman (p. 2) give this example: “Tell me everything that happened when Uncle Joe hurt you. Start from the very beginning and go all the way through to the end. Don’t leave anything out.” *Breadth prompts* (also known as *general invitations*) ask about additional activities that occurred during the abuse. The examples given were “What else happened?” and “What happened next?” (p. 2). *Depth prompts* include a detail already disclosed by the child as a cue to help the child provide more information. An example given was “What happened when his hand was on your leg?” (p. 5). To provide data for Danby and Sharman’s (2024) study, 53 police interviewers from one Australian jurisdiction each supplied a transcript of one of their child forensic interviews, and the transcripts were coded. Danby and Sharman (2024) found that initial invitations elicited significantly more forensically relevant information than breadth prompts and depth prompts. Danby and Sharman (2024) recommend that interviewers use an initial invitation with children and youth of all ages to begin free recall narratives of abusive incidents.

### Questions Using the Word “Time”

Forensic interviewers asking for information about specific episodes of abuse often use the word “time” in phrases such as “tell me about the last time this happened” or “tell me about a time this happened that you remember really well” (Friend et al., 2022;

McWilliams et al., 2023). But there is a potential problem with using the word “time” in this way: Children may misconstrue it as meaning the date or time of day rather than an episode. Friend et al (2022, p. 3) give an example from an actual forensic interview:

Q: So tell me everything that happened the last time your stepfather sexually abused you.

A: It was, yeah I can’t remember the month or the day, but...

In one study, McWilliams and colleagues (2023) asked a sample of 6- to 9-year-old maltreated children about an innocuous event such as a trip to the park. They found that 30% of children responded with information about the month or day when the experimenters told them “Tell me about the time [you went to the park],” but only 5% of children made this mistake when they were told “Tell me what happened the time [you went to the park].”

Friend and colleagues (2022) did a similar study using forensic interview transcripts. They compared children’s responses when interviewers invited them to “Tell me about the time [the perpetrator did something]” for example, compared to their responses when the wording was slightly different: “Tell me what happened the time [the perpetrator did something].” Again, children were more likely to misconstrue the question and respond with information about a month or day when they were asked “about a time.” About one-third of the time this happened interviewers failed to clarify this ambiguity. The problem can be worse if interviewers ask “do you remember the time” questions or questions that use “time” twice, such as “[t]ell me everything that happened today from the time you arrived [at the perpetrator’s camp]until the time you left” for example. There are two simple recommendations from these studies: interviewers should replace questions asking “about the time” with questions asking “what happened the time” and they should monitor children’s responses to check whether they are misconstruing questions or invitations using the word “time.”



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### Other Types of Questions

Henderson, Sullivan and colleagues' (2023) study explored *how* questions and found that the result depended on what type of *how* question was asked. They coded transcripts of forensic interviews with 5- to 17-year-olds. Children produced more information in response to *how* questions that ask for an evaluation (e.g., "How do you feel?") than to *how* questions that asked about the method or manner in which something was done (e.g., "How did he touch you?"), although even this latter type of *how* question yielded a productive response 80% of the time. Five-year-olds had the most difficulty, though they had productive responses in response to 83% of *how* method/manner question.

Coding data from 197 forensic interviews, Friend et al. (2024) assessed the usefulness of two direct hand questions: "What did he do with his hands?" and "What did you do with your hands?" More than half of children produced new details about the abuse in response to these questions. The responses yielded information on such matters as the use of force, the duress placed on the child, physical and verbal/passive resistance, and touch and body mechanics. The authors suggest that direct hand questions may be useful both for forensic interviewers and for attorneys questioning children in court.

### Wait Time and Breaks

Shiau et al. (2024) reviewed research regarding the amount of time taken to answer a question (i.e., wait time), which tends to be longer for children than for adults. The need for wait time in forensic interviews is even greater than in other circumstances because of the complex, emotional nature of the task, although too much wait time could allow reluctant children to put off talking or lead to excessively long interviews. Shiau et al. found only one study that was designed explicitly to be informative about wait times in forensic interviewing, an analogue study in which four- to eight-year-old children were interviewed about a science experiment they had participated in six days earlier (Rezmer et al., 2020). Rezmer et al. found that a 10-second wait time yielded more

information from children than shorter wait times. However, a number of other studies of wait time, mostly in education, were relevant. These studies found that extending wait time had benefits for both children and adults. Training questioners was effective in extending wait time for adults, and the authors recommend future research on training forensic interviewers and other professionals who receive child disclosures regarding wait time. Shiau et al. (p. 3441) state that allowing extended wait time "is a promising and simple interviewing practice with the potential to facilitate children's disclosure."

Danby and Sharman (2024)'s research suggests the value of breaks in child forensic interviews. At least one break was taken in every interview in their sample of 54 transcripts. Interviewers also completed questionnaires for the research. Breaks averaged about three minutes. Interviewers reported that children did not lose focus during the breaks. The vast majority of breaks were taken because the interviewer wanted to check whether they had "exhausted the child's account" (p. 5) or any information was missing. Breaks were rarely needed because of the child's comfort or motivation. During the breaks, interview monitors frequently pointed to missing details in the child's account. Advice from the monitor about best practice questioning led the interviewers to ask a larger proportion of open-ended questions post-break.

### Discussion

As other articles in this special issue suggest, the most important resources in a forensic interview are the rapport developed between the interviewer and the child, and the interviewer's ability to understand the child and help them feel safe and heard. The current article suggests additional benefit can be gained from careful attention to what questions are asked and how they are phrased, and to other methods related to questioning (wait times and breaks). The questions used and related methods can have a noticeable effect on children's understanding of what the interviewer wants and the amount of useful information children provide.

At the risk of over-simplifying, the recommendations from these studies can be summarized in a brief set of bullet points:

- Consider using the birthday narrative after starting with an easier practice narrative, making several tries if necessary, and being prepared to switch to a different narrative if necessary.
- Avoid yes-no questions, including any/some yes-no questions such as “Did he say anything?” or “Did he say something?”
- In the right circumstances, consider skipping over asking a yes-no question and instead ask a suppositional question, such as “What did he say?”
- When using prompts to transition the child to the substantive phase of the interview, use *what* questions such as “What have you come to talk to me about today?” rather than *why* questions such as “Why are you here?”
- Phrase transition prompts directly, such as “What have you come to talk to me about today?” rather than indirectly (e.g., “Do you know what you have you come to talk to me about today?”).
- In the substantive phase of the interview, use initial invitations that ask children to provide as much information as possible about the abuse, such as “Tell me everything that happened when Uncle Joe hurt you. Start from the very beginning and go all the way through to the end. Don’t leave anything out.”
- When asking about an event, avoid confusing children about the word *time* by replacing questions such as “Tell me about the time [the event happened]” with questions such as “Tell me what happened the time [the event happened].”
- *How* questions such as “How do you feel?” that ask the child for an evaluation may be acceptable, even though other *how* questions that ask about the method or manner in which something was done can be somewhat problematic for young children.
- Direct hand questions such as “What did he do with his hands?” and “What did you do with your hands?” may be useful.
- Allowing extended wait time after asking a question is promising
- Taking breaks and checking with interview monitors during breaks may improve the quality of interviews.

Research provides a wealth of practical information for forensic interviewers to improve their interviews. That information is not always easy to access and the research articles in which it is presented are not always easy for practicing forensic interviewers to read. We hope the current article promotes the use of the latest research findings.

There are many questions about the relationship between research and forensic interviewing practice that need to be addressed:

- What are the most effective methods for disseminating research findings to the field?
- To what extent are forensic interviewers accessing and implementing research findings?
- What has been their experience implementing recommendations from research?

Researchers are encouraged to partner with forensic interviewers to find the best ways to disseminate their findings, and likewise for forensic interviewers to share their experience related to the latest research. The *APSAC Advisor* is a good place for articles that explore the connection between forensic interviewing research and practice.

## Child Forensic Interviewing, Questions and Related Method

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# Literature on Child Forensic Interviewing from January 2022 to February 2025: Other Topics

*Theodore P. Cross, PhD, FAPSAC; Kennedi Foster*

## Abstract

This article reviews selected findings from research published from 2022 to February 2025 that pertains to other aspects of child forensic interviewing not directly related to questioning methods (a companion article examines research on questions and related methods). The review is divided into five broad categories: specific child populations, child psychological factors, professional factors, forensic interviewing supports, and general reviews of the field. The article then discusses implications for child forensic interviewing practice.

**Keywords:** *child sexual abuse, child forensic interviewing*

The companion article in this issue (Cross, 2025) examined research from January 2022 to February 2025 pertaining to questioning methods in child forensic interviews, but many articles and reports have been published during that time period that deal with a variety of other aspects of child forensic interviewing. The current article discusses a selection of these articles and reports. As mentioned in the companion article, we conducted searches in the EBSCO and Scopus research databases and Primo online library catalog to find articles, using the term “child forensic interviewing.” We also searched the Child Abuse Library Online (CALIO™, see NCAC CALIO, 2021; Wells, 2025) and used several of CALIO’s bibliographies. Focusing on those years, we also searched the table of contents of several prominent journals that regularly publish articles about child forensic interviewing: *Child Maltreatment*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*. We also looked in the reference lists of studies to find additional studies. The articles reviewed in this current article address a wide array of topics and some examine the field of forensic interviewing as a whole. We have organized our review into five broad categories: specific child populations, child psychological factors, professional factors, forensic interviewing supports, and general reviews of the field.

## Specific Youth Populations

### Adolescents

Deck, Quas and Powell (2024) studied expert insights and recommendations regarding forensic interviews with adolescents. Research interviews were conducted with 21 American child forensic interviewers who, on average, had completed more than 16 interviews per month and had been conducting interviews for more than 14 years. The interviews asked participants to provide an overview of their experiences conducting forensic interviews with adolescents, describe the strategies they used to support adolescents, and talk about the challenges they encountered with adolescents they were interviewing and how they dealt with them. Deck, Quas and Powell identified four general themes. The first theme was that interviews with adolescents could be longer, ask about more complicated information, and yield more detailed narratives, but adolescents were often more reluctant to disclose than younger children. The second theme was the importance of respecting adolescents’ identity and need for autonomy. The third theme concerned interviewers showing unconditional respect and understanding the potential consequences of disclosure for adolescents. The fourth theme concerned the adaptations interviewers needed to make for adoles-

cents in the preparatory stage of the interview. The review of ground rules needs to be conversational, as adolescents will perceive a rote presentation of the ground rules as “disingenuous” (p. 7) and think that the interviewer has an “agenda” (p. 7). Adaptations are also needed because adolescents often perceive as “childish” (pp. 7–8) such preparatory elements as explaining the interviewing process and practicing ground rules and narratives. Building rapport and trust with adolescents is necessary but takes longer than with younger children. The participants recommended that interviewers choose rapport-building topics that adolescents were excited about and had some expertise in.

Dianiska and colleagues (2024) reviewed international research on establishing rapport with adolescents in forensic interviews. This can be challenging because of adolescents’ increasing autonomy, frequent distrust of adults, and reluctance to disclose information about disapproved behaviors. Despite an extensive literature search, the authors found only one relevant experimental study (Sauerland et al., 2018), which found that adolescents who were shown a video about a theft provided more details about the video when the researchers provided substantial rapport-building. Dianiska et al. provide specific ideas for new research, such as testing strategies for rapport-building that emphasize adolescents’ attachment to peers. An example of such a strategy is appealing to adolescents’ loyalty and protective instincts by discussing how their help can keep their peers safe.

Using cases from Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) in Southern California, Nogalska et al. (2023) examined adolescent child sexual abuse victims’ reluctance to disclose abuse in a forensic interview, which previous research has identified as an issue in some samples of adolescents. However, in Nogalska’s sample of adolescent victims, 93% of whom had disclosed abuse prior to the forensic interview, only 8% of responses expressed reluctance. Reluctance was measured by coding specific responses during the interview, such as actively resisting the interviewer, using passive avoidance, and attempting to redirect the conversation. Not surprisingly, a

comparison sample of commercially sexually exploited adolescents who had contact with police, most of whom had not previously disclosed, had a much higher rate of reluctance: 26% of responses.

### *Children with Disabilities*

The Zero Abuse Project (2022) published a guide on forensic interviews with children with disabilities. He points out how vulnerable children with disabilities are to abuse and maltreatment, while at the same time their impairments often make it more difficult to disclose abuse. Interviewers should collaborate with caregivers and multidisciplinary team members to grasp the child’s specific needs, such as the need to consider sensory sensitivity, assistive devices (e.g., communication boards or speech-generating devices), and accommodations in the interviewing environment. While sensitivity to individual needs is necessary for all child forensic interviews, additional preparation might be needed for children with disabilities. For example, it may be helpful to allow extra time for response, adjust the lighting, and try to remove any distractions for sensory sensitivities. The use of specially designed visual aids, like diagrams, can help to facilitate disclosure and clarify responses. It is also crucial to build rapport through patience and flexibility. Interviewers should adapt their questioning style and be sensitive to the child’s individual needs. Post-interview, teams need to carefully discuss and work through how to support the child going forward. It is also important to be able to justify accommodations made during interviews if a case goes to court.

### *Children of Different Religious-Ethnic Backgrounds*

Mordi and Katz’s Israeli study (2024) examined how the conduct and outcomes of forensic interviews differed depending on children’s religious-ethnic background. They coded data from forensic interviews to compare children in the following categories: Arab Muslim, secular Jewish, religious Jewish, and ultra-Orthodox Jewish. Arab Muslim children scored higher than Jewish children on richness of their report, based on the number of details they



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provided, but the three Jewish groups did not differ. The researchers thought that the influence of traditional Arab societal norms of obedience, discipline, and deference to adult authority and the prohibition of perjury by Sharia law and the Quran might explain this difference. They thought the lack of difference between the different Jewish groups might be explained by the interviewers' skill in adapting their methods to the needs of children with different forms of involvement with Judaism.

### Young Suspected Sexual Offenders

Hershkowitz and Lamb (2024) reported on an adaptation of the NICHD protocol that was implemented in Israel to interview youths who are suspected of committing sexual abuse. They point out that many of these youths are themselves victims of child sexual abuse, and most pose minimal future risk of reoffending if they are identified quickly and provided effective therapy. This protocol includes a developmentally sensitive module informing young suspects of their rights such as their right to remain silent and their right to have a supportive adult present during the interview. Standard methods leave many young people in the dark about their rights. The new protocol also includes evidence-based methods to increase rapport with young suspects and stress the use of open-ended questions. Compared to youths interviewed with a previous protocol, youths interviewed with the new protocol understood their rights better, responded more during rapport-building, responded more to interviewer support, and made full rather than partial confessions more frequently. In the interview, they were also less reluctant, more emotionally expressive, and more informative.

## Child Psychological Factors

### Children's Emotions

Using Israeli cases, Karni-Visel and colleagues (2022) coded data on the emotions children experience at each conversation turn in a forensic interview and related it to the information they provided. Coding revealed that when children verbalized negative

emotions, they produced more central and peripheral details and more specific information. When they verbalized positive emotions, they also produced more peripheral details and more specific information. Information related to negative emotions was remembered in greater detail and more vividly. The authors suggest the value of facilitating children's emotional expression during the forensic interview while recognizing that the expression of negative emotions can be difficult for children.

Karni-Visel and colleagues also coded data on children's non-verbal emotions in Israeli forensic interviews (Karni-Visel et al., 2023). They found that nonverbal expressions of emotion preceded verbal expressions of emotion and were more than 10 times as frequent as verbal expressions of emotions. When interviewers made supportive comments, such as "You're doing a great job" or "It's okay to take your time," children's nonverbal expressions of emotion were more likely, and in turn children were more likely to provide forensically relevant details.

### Children's Justice Goals

Holder and colleagues' (2023) Australian study explored what "justice goals" children revealed in forensic interviews, that is, what they hoped would be achieved in the criminal justice system in their cases. Analyzing 243 forensic interview transcripts, the authors found that 82% of children hoped for one or more forms of acknowledgment, which included acknowledgement that they were a victim (57%), that they were harmed (40%), that they were believed (19%), and that they should not be blamed (34%). They found that 64% of children stated the wrongfulness of what the perpetrator did. Another common justice goal was a desire for protection (41%), which included protection for themselves (29%), for themselves and others (8%), just for others (2%), and for the perpetrator (2%). Children who expressed a wish for the perpetrator to be held accountable and/or take responsibility for the abuse were 33% of the sample. Only 14% expressed wanting punishment for the perpetrator, and 1% expressed a wish for rehabilitation for the perpetrator. Children were more

likely to express a justice goal if they had experienced penetration and if they had suffered through multiple acts of sexual victimization.

### *Children's Memory*

Danby (2024) reviewed research to explain *why* best practice in forensic interviewing supports children's memory. Knowing *why* may help forensic interviewers follow best practice. Much of the research she cites focuses on younger children, especially pre-school and early primary school-aged children who tend to forget peripheral details more quickly than adolescents. She first points out that children's rate of forgetting information requires interviews that are prompt, though not unplanned and hasty. Children's memory for peripheral details deteriorates rapidly, although their recall of the central events of the abuse stabilizes and can remain intact for extended periods, even months or years. Danby states, however, that "memory loss concerns cannot justify conducting these interviews hastily or without appropriate preparation" (p. 2). Even when interviews must be conducted rapidly because of safety concerns—the need to collect physical evidence or the suspect not being in custody—some degree of preparation is imperative to conduct a trauma-informed interview that maximizes the child's comfort. When interviews are conducted, using initial invitations such as "Tell me everything that happened" and other open-ended questions (see, e.g., Powell & Snow, 2007) facilitate a "deep level" (Danby, 2024, p. 4) of memory retrieval that tend to be accurate. Forced choice or yes-no questions, on the other hand, lead to a "superficial memory retrieval process" (Danby, 2024, p. 4) which is more likely to be erroneous; children may not remember the specific detail asked about and guess.

Danby recommends that interviewers prioritize children completing the account of abusive episodes and wait until later to ask about related factual details. Episodic memory is hard for children, she explains, involving a different memory system from remembering facts. It is difficult for children to switch back to episodic memory from a different memory system. It is especially hard for children to recall individual episodes of abuse when children have been abused

multiple times. The memory system gravitates to what is generic to all the episodes, but filing criminal charges and obtaining convictions requires the details of individual episodes. Danby reviews techniques to help children remember one particular episode; often children's memory is best for the first or the last time that it happened.

Because episodic memory is reconstructive, involving pulling together stored details at the time of remembering, Danby (2024) cautions that some memory errors in child forensic interviews are to be expected. Its reconstructive nature also means that leading questions and post-event information can influence memory. Principe and London (2022) expressed concern about one specific possible influence on children's memory: informal conversations the child has had with family members after the child has been abused but before the forensic interview is conducted. They review research that shows that the conversations parents normally have with their children about events in the child's life can influence the child's memory about what happened to them. In talking to parents about their child's life, parents may supply their own details. ("Remember how you cried in the backseat?") or use forced choice questions ("Were Lisa or Amy mean to you?") or leading yes-no questions ("Tommy offered you a cigarette, didn't he?").

To study the effect of parental influence on children's memory, Principe and London (2022) conducted laboratory research in the United States in which experimenters staged a magic show for children (Principe et al., 2013). They gave half of the children's mothers false information about it, asked the mother to talk with their child about the show, and then conducted an interview with the child about the show. When mothers were given false information, children's memory in the interview was less likely to be accurate, particularly if the mother controlled the pre-interview conversation with the child and elaborated with questions and statements. In a follow-up study (Principe, Kirkpatrick & Langley, 2022), some mothers were both given false information and asked to elicit an accurate account from children—this led mothers to be more controlling and offer more suggestions.

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This increased children's memory errors and even led to "novel embellishments" (p. 292) in which children provided incorrect information not suggested by their mothers. Moreover, instructing mothers to elicit correct information from their children led to memory errors even when mothers were *not* given false information. Mothers in this situation were prone to use leading or suggestive questions (such as those listed above) that can affect children's memory.

The effect of parent-child interactions on the accuracy of children's memory is usually benign in everyday life, but Principe and London (2022) argue that it can be problematic in the context of a child abuse investigation, although there are no data indicating the frequency with which parent interactions lead to memory errors in actual forensic interviews. They recommend that when parents are making initial reports of abuse to law enforcement, children should not be allowed to hear the parent's report. They suggest that minimal facts interviewing of the child (see Northeast Regional Children's Advocacy Center, 2023) and rapid forensic interviews may minimize the parental influence on children's memory. They also recommend that professionals be trained in and are alert to possible parental influence.

In a commentary on Principe and London (2022), Brown and Lamb (2022) point out that the differences between a laboratory analogue study about a magic show and an actual child abuse investigation may be so different that we cannot yet know the implications of Principe and London's study. Brown and Lamb think that Principe et al.'s research suggests that parental influence *can* affect children's memory but not whether it *typically* affects children's memory. Brown and Lamb point out that we also lack information about whether good forensic interviewing practice can help counter the effects of parental influence. They recommend more research examining whether parental interactions with children around suspicions of abuse lead to memory errors in child forensic interviews and interviewing methods that would minimize the potential effect of parental influence on memory.

Wu and colleagues (2023) studied the memory accuracy of American adults 20 years after they had been forensically interviewed in child maltreatment investigations. The researchers checked participants' current recollections against documents compiled at the time of the forensic interview. Just over one-third of participants had no memory of the forensic interview. Using age as a continuous variable, they found that those who were older at the time of the forensic interview remembered more abuse-specific information from the forensic interview than those who were younger. Those with a higher Trauma Symptom Checklist score (measuring symptoms such as anxiety, sleeplessness, and dissociation) remembered more information from the forensic interview about trauma and personal safety. The memory problems that participants had tended to be memory lapses; they did not tend to recall incorrect information.

### Professional Factors

#### Mock Training Interviews

Powell and colleagues (2022) reviewed research supporting the use of mock interviews as a training tool for child forensic interviewing. Mock interviews offer the opportunity to practice skills, receive feedback on one's skills, facilitate the discussion of challenges in interviewing, and assist trainers with assessing trainees. Because trainees often play the role of interviewee in mock interviews, it also offers trainees insight into the experience of interviewees. The experiential learning inherent to mock interviews offers greater opportunities for trainee self-reflection. Powell and colleagues suggest that it is particularly important for learning how to ask open-ended questions, which is difficult to teach solely through trainers' verbal instruction. One challenge in using mock interviews is that the interviewee is an adult who may have difficulty simulating the responses of a child. This is not optimal for learning interviewing skills that match a child's developmental level. Mock interviews are more effective when interviewees are highly trained to respond to well-constructed and poorly constructed questions in a way that a child would respond.



Powell et al. describe a multi-stage process of developing effective scenarios to use, using standardized procedures for playing the role of a child, and rehearsing playing a child and responding in a life-like way to well-constructed and poorly constructed questions. An alternative to using adult actors is to use children recruited to be interviewed about a harmless event, although there is some concern that children in this situation may disclose actual abuse. Powell and colleagues (2022) also summarize the use of computer avatars in mock interviews (for more literature on avatars, see below).

Nicol and colleagues (2023) examined preparedness following initial training of forensic interviewers in Scotland by coding data on mock interviews of adult actors playing the role of a child. They found that trainee interviewers were inconsistent about communicating interview principles and about preparing the interviewees to provide narrative accounts, which is needed to enhance the quality of the narratives children provide about the abuse they have experienced. The substantive phase of the interview about the abuse tended to be conducted well, although directive questions were used just as frequently as invitations, which are the recommended type of questions to elicit the most information from children. Focused questions tended to be used prematurely, before children had finished a free narrative account of their experience.

### *Developing Avatars as a Training Tool*

From 2022 to 2024, several publications from research teams based in Europe reported on the development of experimental virtual reality forensic interviewing training environments using avatars. Such publications as Hassan et al. (2022a, 2023) and Salehi et al. (2022) discuss the technical details. Segal et al. (2024) measured psychology students' emotional reactions to avatars in child sexual abuse scenarios and found students' experienced more anger, sadness and disgust when the avatar reported details that confirmed abuse and relief when the avatar's details disconfirmed abuse.

Studies have utilized mock forensic interviewing of avatars conducted by university students in child welfare, social work, and psychology (Hassan et al., 2023; Roed et al., 2023; Segal et al., 2024); child maltreatment and child protection professionals (Baugerud et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2022b, 2023); and police investigators (Kask et al., 2022). Across several studies, participants gave moderate to high ratings on average on the quality of the experience and the functionality and usefulness of the avatar programs (Baugerud et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2022b, 2023), though Baugerud et al. (2025) reported that some participants had mixed or negative attitudes about the avatar. The systems tested by Hassan et al. (2023) and Roed et al. (2023) demonstrated substantial accuracy in classifying type of interview question, suggesting promise in developing a system that can provide data on the quality of the mock forensic interviews with the avatars. Baugerud et al. (2025) found that the avatar gave more informative responses to recall questions that elicit more information from children in interviews, indicating that the program is responsive to the quality of the mock interviewing. Kask et al. (2022) found that providing feedback to police investigators who were using an avatar program improved the quality of the mock interviews and of subsequent real forensic interviews they conducted. For example, they used more open-ended invitations that elicit narrative responses. Several studies also reported limitations of the avatar programs such as a lack of visual realism and noticeable delays in response time, which reduced participants' sense that the interaction was natural interaction. Several of these studies (e.g., Baugerud et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2023) report that further development of avatar programs is needed and in progress.

### *Peer Review*

Danby and colleagues (2022) tested whether a 19-item interview assessment checklist used in Australia could help interviewers provide accurate peer reviews of interviews conducted by others. The checklist included sections assessing the opening and transitional phases and three sections for the sub-

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stantive phase—questioning, repeated abuse considerations, and evidential requirements. The researchers prepared mock interview transcripts in which some of the phases were well-conducted, some were poorly conducted, and some were mixed in quality. A sample of 56 recently trained police interviewers peer reviewed the mock transcripts using the checklist. The peer reviewers accurately perceived the well-conducted interview phases but had poor or mediocre accuracy on the mixed quality or poorly conducted interview phases. The researchers concluded that the checklist was “too rigid” (p. 721) for interviews in which adherence to best practice was mixed and recommended developing peer review tools that used rating scales and written comments.

### *Professional Identity*

Deck, Powell and Cordisco-Steele (2024) studied American forensic interviewers’ professional identity in the same interviews that were used in Deck, Quas and Powell (2024), discussed above. To “avoid eliciting stereotypical or idealized responses” (p. 934), Deck and colleagues did not ask about professional identity directly. Instead, they identified themes related to professional identity from participants’ responses to a question about their experiences as a forensic interviewer and questions asking them to describe the strategies they employed and the challenges they encountered as forensic interviewers.

One theme was the forensic interviewer as holder of the child’s information. The interviewer’s personality recedes to the point that the child may not recognize them later, and the interviewer focuses totally on facilitating the child’s having a “positive experience” (p. 936) sharing their account. Participants used two metaphors that illustrate this theme. One is of the interviewer as a “sponge” absorbing the child’s account, and the other is of the interviewer “unpacking” the child’s account and then neatly packing it up again by the end of the interview.

A second theme was forensic interviewers as protectors of the “integrity and reliability” (p. 938) of the evidence. To do this, forensic interviewers employ best practice interviewing methods, utilize knowl-

edge of children’s development and memory, and support children in ways that maintain interviewers’ neutrality (e.g., by responding empathically but non-committally when children ask them questions such as “Has this ever happened to you?”). A third theme was prioritizing the child’s well-being. Participants defined a successful interview as one in which the child felt “valued and respected,” regardless of what the child shared. Sincerity, respect, and attention to helping the child feel comfortable and respected characterizes the interaction with the child. A fourth theme was being adaptive and using best practice skills flexibly in response to each child’s needs and characteristics. Examples of flexibility included spending more time on rapport building if necessary or temporarily stopping questioning to help children with emotions that arose. The authors point out that knowledge gained from this line of research can inform the support of forensic interviewers’ professional identity formation, which can positively influence decision-making in their work.

## Forensic Interviewing Supports

### *Screening for Suicidality*

Shepard and colleagues (2024) created and implemented a tool for CACs in Utah to screen for suicidality among youth aged 11 to 18 who present for forensic interviews. They screened 1,651 children and revealed that 46.2% endorsed thoughts of suicide or self-harm with 13.6% being high risk for suicide. The study highlights the need for integrating suicide screenings into the forensic interview process to identify and address the mental health needs of this population.

### *Use of Ground Rules*

Lee and Chung’s (2023) analogue study in Korea had potentially useful findings on the use of ground rules in child forensic interviews. One researcher engaged children in a play activity for 15 to 20 minutes and then, 10 minutes later, a qualified interviewer interviewed the children about the play activity, following the NICHD protocol. Parents completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire on their

children, which includes a scale for prosocial orientation (e.g., being considerate of others' feelings). Half of the children were given ground rules at the beginning of the interview, modeled after ground rules in a real forensic interview. For example, they were told to tell the truth, not to guess, and to tell the interviewer if they did not understand something or correct them if they said something incorrect. Ground rules had no effect on the free recall and resistance to suggestive questions of children with a prosocial orientation. Ground rules did, however, have a positive effect on these outcomes for children who lacked a prosocial orientation.

### Note-taking

Williams and McWilliams (2024) surveyed 137 forensic interviewers across Canada and the U.S. and asked about note-taking during the forensic interview. A majority (81%) of forensic interviewers take notes to aid their memory recall and guide their follow-up questions. Note-taking usually involves strategic methods such as recording keywords. Interviewers who did not take notes cite concerns that they would distract the child and disrupt eye contact. Only half of forensic interviewers had training on note-taking, suggesting that this is a gap in forensic interviewer training programs.

### Facility Dogs

Cyr and colleagues' Canadian study (2024) compared forensic interviews in which a facility dog was present to comfort the child versus forensic interviews without a dog. There were no differences between the groups in case characteristics. The presence of the dog had no impact on the quality of the questions asked by the forensic interviewer and rarely led to interruptions to the interview. The researchers raised questions about whether the dog had any effect on the interviews. They noted that the interviewers commented on the dog more than the children did, apparently to encourage the child to feel comfortable with it (e.g., "You can pet him," or "He is there for you"). However, the children's responses to the dog—typically neutral or observational questions such as "Is he old?" or offhand comments like "He snores"—

suggest that they may not have viewed the dog as a source of comfort. Instead of expressing affection or seeking closeness, the children often seemed just curious or indifferent, indicating that the presence of the dog did not necessarily produce a comforting effect.

### Interpreters

Two publications from the same research team concerned interpreter-mediated child forensic interviews in Sweden (Ernberg et al. 2023; Koponen et al., 2024), though the results are relevant for child forensic interviews everywhere. This is a particularly important topic in Sweden, where, due to substantial immigration in recent decades (see, e.g., Chutel, 2024), nearly a third of school-age children do not speak Swedish in their homes (Parkvall, 2019, as cited in Ernberg et al., 2023). Koponen and colleagues conducted an online survey with Swedish interpreters of child forensic interviews. On rating scales, most interpreters reported that interpretation generally worked well and gladly accepted these interpreting jobs, though a majority also reported that it was emotionally challenging. Several themes emerged from text responses about their experience of interpreting child forensic interviews:

- the pressure on interpreters,
- how much both children and interviewers vary,
- the challenges of communicating with children because of their developmental limitations,
- the need for interpreters with experience with children and understanding of child forensic interviewing,
- the challenge of faithfully reproducing what the interviewer asked while still responding to the immediate demands of the situation.

Ernberg and colleagues analyzed written documentation of the verdicts in court cases and found results that contradicted the interpreters' positive self-appraisal found by Koponen et al. Courts frequently expressed concern about language difficulties, confusion, and misinterpretation in interpreter-mediated



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interviews. Often, these problems were cited as reasons for reduced value of the interviews as evidence and caution was given about using them to make decisions. Among this research team's recommendations are improved communication with children about the interpreter's role, improved guidelines for best practice, and specialized training for interpreters.

### *Interview Monitors*

Interview monitors (also known as interview observers) observe the child forensic interview through a closed-circuit TV system or one-way mirror system in which they can communicate with the interviewer through audio electronics and/or during breaks (Price & Brand, 2024). They can provide immediate support and feedback to the interviewer, identify gaps in a child's account, help clarify inconsistent statements, suggest certain questions, and fact-check time-sensitive details. Price and Brand interviewed 13 experienced Canadian interviewers and monitors about their experience with and perceptions of interview monitoring. This resulted in the following recommendations (pp. 13-14):

1. Provide clear guidelines for interview monitors.
2. Ensure sufficient time for a pre-interview meeting in which expectations for the monitor and interviewer are clear and the objectives of the interview are understood by all parties.
3. Discuss the method of within-interview communication prior to the interview.
4. Breaks to confer should focus on actionable items that enhance the quality of the child's statement.
5. Allow time for immediate feedback on interview and interview monitoring after the interview.
6. Integrate peer review feedback from monitors into regular practice.

### *Cross Examination of Defense Experts Challenging Forensic Interviews*

In a recent Zero Abuse Project publication, Victor Vieth, former director of the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, provided advice on how to counter court challenges to forensic interviews by defense experts (Vieth, 2022b). The primary audience for this publication is prosecutors in the United States, but forensic interviewers and multidisciplinary teams will find it useful, as will legal professionals in other countries. The article stresses the importance of collaboration between prosecutors and forensic interviewers, who may have expertise and court experience that can help prosecutors prepare for the cross-examination of the defense expert. Prosecutors should research the defense expert's background to see what training and experience they have had with forensic interviews, and, if indicated by this research, file pre-trial motions to limit or exclude the expert's testimony. In the direct examination of the forensic interviewer by the prosecutor in the trial, any interviewing errors should be proactively acknowledged. The direct examination should also review forensic interviewing standards; the forensic interviewer's training, experience, membership in professional organizations, and adherence to practice guidelines; and the science behind interview protocols. In cross-examination, the prosecutor should:

- Query the defense expert on their credentials.
- Examine the ethical guidelines of the expert's profession.
- Ask the expert for specific examples of flaws in the forensic interview (assuming it is sound) and not let them get away with general criticisms of it or ask the expert what the forensic interviewer did correctly.
- Ask the expert to define the components of a good interview and then show how the interviewer provided those components.

- Cross-examine the expert on any prior inconsistent statements they made.
- Point out research that contradicts the defense expert's report or claims.
- Cross-examine the expert to show the victim's consistency and explain any alleged inconsistencies in their statements.
- Counter claims that therapy tainted the child's interview by critiquing the ethics of delaying treatment.
- Highlight evidence that corroborates the child.
- Consider cross-examining the expert on their compensation, particularly if they are opposed in court only by the forensic interviewer, who is testifying as part of their job.

Vieth offers many specific suggestions for questions to ask in the direct examination of the interviewer and cross-examination of the defense expert. These are beyond the scope of this article, but readily accessible to those who seek out this publicly available document.

### General Reviews

Three articles conducted different types of general reviews on child forensic interviewing. Fernandes and colleagues (2024) conducted a review of 146 research studies from around the world to determine which child forensic interviewing protocols were used in them. Some version of the NICHD protocol was used in 46.5% of studies. The next most common protocol studied was the Memorandum of Good Practice from the United Kingdom (6.5% of studies), and in 25.9% of studies, no particular protocol was used. Some protocols that have been commonly used in the United States, such as the APSAC protocol and the Cornerhouse RATAC protocol were represented in only a handful of studies. Fernandes et al. concluded, however, that the protocols had a similar structure, and thus research findings can often be generalized across protocols.

In another article, 23 international experts on child forensic interviewing and/or child abuse investigation and prosecution collaborated to discuss urgent issues in child forensic interviewing that future research needs to address (Talwar et al., 2025). The authors include such luminaries as Thomas Lyon, Gail Goodman and Linda Cordisco Steele. The article was organized around a set of 10 commentaries that were independently written, and most authors contributed to one commentary. Thus, the recommendations represent an array of different experts' opinions and not a consensus list. The ten topics for which future research was recommended were as follows:

- rapport in child forensic interviews
- investigative interviewing with adolescents
- interpreter-mediated interviews
- adolescent victims of trafficking
- enhancing the ecological validity of research on multiple interviews (in other words, conducting research more closely related to the fact that children often have multiple informal and formal opportunities to recount what happened to them)
- how training and organizational environments can facilitate or interfere with best practice interviewing
- lessons from exoneration of alleged perpetrators in child sexual abuse cases
- the impact of psychotherapy on children's memory
- questioning children about sexual abuse who have never disclosed
- expert testimony about child sexual abuse.

A team of experts from the European Association of Psychology and Law issued a white paper with 10 key research-based recommendations on forensic child interviewing (Korkman et al., 2024). Among the practices recommended are the use of forensic interviewers trained to understand all relevant aspects

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of child development, the use of evidence-based interview protocols, a phased approach to the interview, hypothesis testing by the forensic interviewing, electronic recording of interviews, and specialized training of forensic interviewers. One recommendation opposes individuals other than the interviewer and child being present during the forensic interview. Another recommendation opposes the use of dolls or props in forensic interviews and opposes using doll play or drawings to make interpretations of possible abusive experiences.

### **Discussion**

The amount of new literature on a variety of aspects of forensic interviewing is encouraging, though much more needs to be learned, as the plethora of recommendations for new research made by Talwar and colleagues (2025) emphasizes. New research that we cite is beginning to address some of the needs that Talwar et al. (2025) identified: the needs for research on investigative interviewing with adolescents, interpreter-mediated interviews, and how training can facilitate best practice interviewing. But even these are initial studies and the gulf between what is known and what we need to know remains great.

We found new literature that examines child forensic interviewing with specific child populations: adolescents, children with disabilities, children of different religious-ethnic backgrounds, and young suspected sexual offenders. Forensic interviewers who interview children and youth in these populations could enhance their skills by studying these texts. The research we reviewed on child psychological factors provides perspective on how children's emotions, memories and goals vary in ways that can affect their experience of the forensic interview and influence their responses. Careful study of these articles can help attune forensic interviewers to children's psychological experience before and during the interview and adapt their interviewing accordingly. Wu's (2022) study illuminates how memories for information reported in the forensic interview often persisted over two decades and reminds us of the long-term

impact of the abuse children endure and the investigations they are involved in.

The literature on professional factors that we reviewed focuses on methods of developing, maintaining, and improving the quality of child forensic interviewing. Several articles contribute to the very sparse literature on training and peer review, areas that need more research. The largest number of articles we found was on the use of computer avatars as a training tool. Given the rapid growth of artificial intelligence and its enormous potential, it seems inevitable to us that this will be developed much further in coming years, and we recommend that forensic interviewers be proactive in forging relationships with developers of this new technology. Deck, Powell and Cordisco-Steele's (2024) work on the professional identity of forensic interviewers could play a valuable role in helping recruit, train, and support child forensic interviewers, by articulating and communicating the mission of child forensic interviewing.

The fact that forensic interviewers perform a specialized task in a special room with a special protocol might encourage the idea that they are separate and distinct, but they are a part of the multidisciplinary team and need its support. The work we reviewed in the forensic interviewing supports section suggests that professionals such as interview monitors, interpreters, and prosecutors can make a big difference in facilitating the forensic interview and enhancing its impact. Forensic interviewers need to build strong relationships with other members of their multidisciplinary team to support the interviewers' work and to maximize the value of forensic interviewing for multiple disciplines. Likewise, multidisciplinary teams need to treat support of forensic interviewers as an important part of their mission and collaborate extensively with their forensic interviewers.

The challenges of interpreter-mediated forensic interviewing are concerning but its use is inevitable in a world with increased migration and linguistically diverse populations. As two of the articles reviewed here and another article in this special issue make clear, the challenges of interviewing a child who



primarily speaks a second language need increased attention. In other articles we reviewed on supports to forensic interviewing, we found useful information on note-taking, research results specifying the impact of ground rules in forensic interviewing, and research findings indicating no effect of facility dogs on forensic interviewing. We think forensic interviewers and the organizations in which they work could use the information we reviewed to help develop better supports for forensic interviewing.

Our review suggests that research can be a sort of laboratory for forensic interviewers, helping to generate enhancements and improvements. Several articles we reviewed illuminate existing practices that have rarely been the subject of inquiry: use of ground rules, note-taking, facility dogs, interpreter-mediated interviews, interview monitors, mock interviews, and peer review. Other articles we reviewed examine innovations: screening for suicidality, a protocol for interviewing young suspected sexual offenders and the use of avatars as a training tool. Testing and elaboration of these practices and innovations in the field could have a broad positive impact.

Dialogue between researchers and practicing forensic interviewers is essential but challenging to develop. Forensic interviewers lack much of the infrastructure that could support this: a national organization, academic programs, and dedicated conferences and journals. The use of webinars, podcasts, and social media focused on child forensic interviewing is underdeveloped. The APSAC Colloquium and APSAC publications are indispensable but insufficient. We urge forensic interviewers, researchers, and leaders in the child abuse professional field to work on developing an infrastructure that would support useful exchanges between forensic interviewers and researchers and experts in fields such as law and medicine that can support forensic interviewing. One avenue for doing so would be to build on established forensic interviewing training programs such as APSAC's Forensic Interviewing Clinics (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2025), the National Children's Advocacy

Center's Forensic Interviewing Training Model (NCAC, 2025), and the Zero Abuse Project's (2024) ChildFirst® Training. Another idea would be for the National Children's Alliance (2025), the membership organization of Children's Advocacy Centers, to undertake an initiative on developing an infrastructure to support child forensic interviewing.

In the meantime, we can appreciate how much research and expert practitioner attention is being devoted to forensic interviewing, much more than in many other important areas in the child abuse professional field and other professional fields such as family advocacy, law enforcement, and child protection investigation. This work contributes to constant improvement in the practice of child forensic interviewing.



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## Child Forensic Interviewing, Other Topics

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