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Interpreter-Mediated Child Interviews: Recommendations for Interviewers Based on Current Research

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As of 2023, 22% of the population of the United States did not speak English as their primary language and 9% of the total US population rated their English-speaking ability as less than “very well” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

This trend is not unique to the United States. For example:

- In Australia, 32% of the population is born abroad (Australian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2025).
- In Canada, 23% of the population is born abroad, and 24% report a non-official language (other than English or French) as their primary language (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Protecting children from abuse and maltreatment is a global issue, as highlighted by the First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children (2024). Although exact statistics on the prevalence of child abuse are not reliably available, estimates suggest that approximately 22% of children experience sexual abuse (CSA; Finkelhor et al., 2024), and around 17%

experience domestic physical abuse during their childhood (Whitten et al., 2023).

The child’s statement is often crucial for investigation and successful prosecution, and considerable research efforts have yielded evidence-based recommendations for eliciting information from children (Korkman et al., 2024). Today, various evidence-based protocols, such as the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol, are widely used in the Western world (Cyr, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2023). These methods emphasize the importance of setting the scene for the interview by explaining the ground rules and eliciting a free narrative from the child by using open-ended questions, while avoiding leading or suggestive elements that can have a negative impact on the quality of the child’s statement (Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018).

However, a situation that has only recently begun to attract the attention of child interviewing researchers is when children do not speak the country’s native language as their primary language and require an interpreter during interviews (Korkman et al., 2024). The growing body of research on these interpreter-mediated interviews with children constitutes an important step in enhancing the protection of vulnerable children, as estimates suggest that children

from migrant backgrounds may be at heightened risk of experiencing various forms of maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse (Aho et al., 2016; Jud et al., 2020). In this article, we will provide a brief overview of the challenges associated with interpreter-mediated interviews with children and offer recommendations for mitigating some of these challenges.

Being interviewed about abuse allegations can be daunting for children, especially if it takes place in a second language (Powell et al., 2017). Even if the child is viewed as fluent in the residential country’s primary language, navigating an everyday setting is profoundly different from being interviewed about a sensitive topic in an unfamiliar environment (Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Powell et al., 2017). Furthermore, being interviewed in a language that is not one’s primary language is more cognitively demanding, can be highly stressful, and often results in shorter, less detailed statements (Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Powell et al., 2017). While using an interpreter can help facilitate communication, it can also be demanding if not executed under the right conditions. Additionally, it is not always possible to interpret all linguistic and cultural nuances verbatim; even minor

changes in the wording of a question or shifts in intonation can result in **the collection of faulty information** (Powell et al., 2017).

So far, research suggests that the use of interpreters presents a challenge when conducting forensic interviews with children. Forensic investigators from the United States, Australia, and Sweden report several challenges, such as the interviews being time-consuming, difficulties establishing rapport with the child, and concerns about the quality of the interpretation (Ernberg et al., 2022; Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Powell et al., 2017). Interpreters have also expressed concerns about not being sufficiently prepared by the interviewer prior to child interviews and about the emotional demands of these interviews (Koponen et al., 2024). Clearly, there is a need for evidence-based guidelines to improve the quality of interpreter-mediated child interviews. While further studies are needed, the current body of research can still serve as a basis for some recommendations for improving these interviews (see Table 1). Importantly, the recommendations below should be viewed as an extension to current best-practice guidelines available for child interviews in general and not a substitute (e.g. Cyr, 2022; Lamb et al., 2018).

Table 1: Current recommendation for interpreter-mediated child interviews.

Current recommendations	
1. Interview the child in their preferred language	
2. Before the interview	
a. Prepare	Prepare the interpreter, e.g., if the interview concerns a sensitive topic.
b. Inform	Inform the interpreter, e.g., about the child’s age and language proficiency and how to handle potential misunderstandings during the interview.
c. Plan	Plan for breaks as the interview may be time-consuming. Also, it is preferable to book an interpreter who can be present on-site rather than using a telephone interpreter.
3. During the interview	
a. Placement	If possible, seat everyone in a triangle formation (see Figure 1).
b. Explain	Explain the interpreter’s role to the child, including the interpreter’s professional confidentiality.
c. Monitor	Make sure that the child, interviewer and the interpreter understand each other properly before initiating the substantive phase of the interview.

Interview the Child in Their Preferred Language

Preferably, children should be interviewed in the language of their choice, whether it is the residential or primary language. As noted by a Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) professional interviewed by Fontes and Tishelman (2016), “I think a child needs to communicate in the language where the child feels more comfortable” (p. 54). If the child prefers to be interviewed in the residential language, it can be helpful to still have an interpreter closely available, for example, in the observation room; this way, if the child needs language assistance during the interview, support can be readily provided.

Before the Child Interview

Prepare – The child forensic interviewer should contact the interpreter in advance. It is essential to establish that the interpreter feels comfortable and has sufficient psychological support when interpreting a child interview that may involve sensitive topics (Koponen et al., 2024; Powell et al., 2017). Failing to do so may lead to disruptions during the interview. In a qualitative study by Powell and colleagues (2017), a forensic child interviewer expressed, “I remember a case where the interpreter hung up the phone and left because they couldn’t cope any longer. What was happening in the meeting became too distressing for her to listen to” (p. 95). Furthermore, an uncomfortable interpreter can make the child reluctant to talk about abuse (Ernberg et al., 2022). In countries where child interviews are video recorded (see, for example, Johansson et al., 2017), the interviewer should ensure that the interpreter is comfortable with being recorded. It is also advised to confirm that the child and the interpreter are not related or otherwise connected before the interview takes place (Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Powell et al., 2017).

Inform – The interviewer should provide the interpreter with relevant information about the child, including their age, maturity, language proficiency, dialect, and cognitive abilities (Koponen et al., 2024). The interviewer should also guide the interpreter on how to respond if they do not understand the child or

the interviewer. Additionally, the interpreter should be advised on how to handle situations where a question is challenging to interpret verbatim or if certain words related to the topic are ambiguous in the target language (Powell et al., 2017). Further, it is essential to explain the process of child interviewing, what the interpreter can expect, the types of questions that will be used, and the importance of maintaining the integrity of the questions – specifically, not changing open-ended questions into closed or leading questions (Ernberg et al., 2022; Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Lamb et al., 2018). The importance of interpreters having a firm grasp of what questions are appropriate is highlighted by the following experience of an open-ended question turned option-posing by the interpreter from a child interviewer in a study by Ernberg and colleagues (2022):

I asked the question, “How did he hit?” and when the interpreter translated, I saw that he demonstrated an open hand and a clenched fist, and I understood that the question was not asked the way I asked it. This could risk the entire future of the preliminary investigation. (p. 5)

Importantly, the interviewer needs to inform the interpreter that the interviewer will pose their questions directly to the child, and that the interpreter should use first person. For example, the interpreter should say “I rode a bike” – not “she said that she rode a bike” (Böser & La Rooy, 2018). As expressed by a CAC professional in Fontes and Tishelman’s study (2016): “You have to make sure to train your interpreters before they ever set foot in that room, or else you’re kind of setting your interview up to fail...” (p. 60).

Plan – All interviews, especially with children, should be carefully planned (Lamb et al., 2018). For interpreter-mediated interviews, it is important to consider additional factors. Firstly, interpreting is time-consuming, as all communication must pass through a third party (Fontes & Tishelman, 2016). Therefore, enough time should be allocated to accommodate the interview. Since interpreter-mediated child interviews typically are longer and more cognitively demanding than regular interviews, planning for breaks is essential if the child or any other party requires them (Fontes & Tishelman, 2016;

Powell et al., 2017). Secondly, current research discourages the use of telephone interpreters, as it has been connected to both technical errors and an increased number of misunderstandings (Ernberg et al., 2023; Wang, 2018a, b). Interpreters have also expressed a preference for being present on-site during child interviews (Koponen et al., 2024). In Koponen and colleagues (2024), an interpreter even called the use of telephone interpreting in child interviews “extremely unacceptable and obscene in the legal sense” (p. 9). Hence, it is recommended that the interpreter be physically present in the room. In cases where an on-site interpreter cannot be obtained, the use of technology becomes necessary. For example, in the case where the child speaks a rare dialect or the interview takes place in a location where interpreters are not readily available, interpreting using video-conference technology seems to mitigate the quality issues associated with remote interpreting using only audio (Hale et al., 2022).

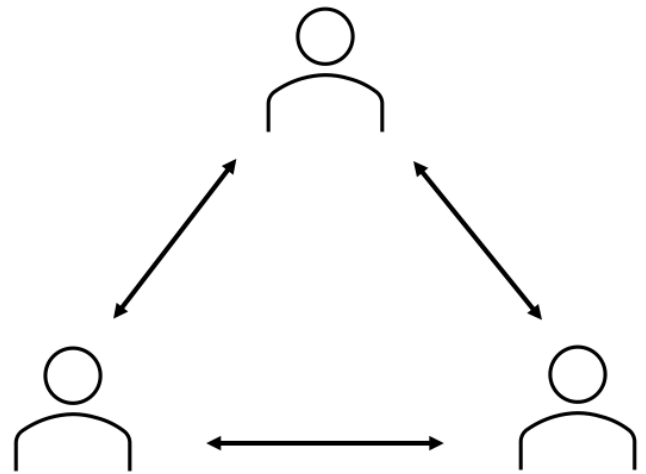
During the Child Interview

Placement – The forensic interviewer should carefully consider the arrangement of the parties involved. Current recommendations suggest that the child, interviewer, and interpreter should be positioned in an “interpreter triangle” (see Figure 1). This triangular formation has been found to be the most natural and comfortable for the interviewee (Amato & Mack, 2021). Additionally, if the interview is video-recorded, the interviewer should ensure that all participants are visible within the video frame. Previous research has found that other camera angles, such as focusing solely on either the child or the interviewer, can affect how viewers assess credibility (Landström & Granhag, 2008).



Figure 1

Recommended placement during interpreter-mediated child interviews.



Explain – It is essential to inform the child about the interpreter and explain their role in an age-appropriate manner (Ernberg et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2017). The interviewer should inform the child about the name and role of the interpreter, as well as the interpreter’s professional confidentiality. Böser and LaRooy (2018) exemplify how the information may be structured:

This is X. S/he is an interpreter. An interpreter is a person who helps people understand each other when they do not speak the same language. You speak Y, I speak Z. The interpreter can speak Y and Z, so s/he can help us understand what we say to each other. S/he will say everything that you and I say, and she will say exactly what we have said. The interpreter will not tell anybody about any of the things we will be talking about. (...) When you speak, please look directly at me and I will do the same, because this is a conversation between the two of us. When the interpreter says “I” she repeats what you have said and I have said. (p. 16)

To ensure a successful interview, it is essential that the child feels comfortable with both the interviewer and the interpreter present in the room (Böser & LaRooy, 2018).

Monitor – Before initiating the substantive phase of the interview, the interviewer should ensure that all parties understand each other properly. For instance, Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages worldwide; however, it is considered a macro language that includes at least 28 individual languages and numerous dialects (Ethnologue, 2025a, b). Therefore, simply confirming that the interpreter and the child both speak “Arabic” is not sufficient. Additionally, children who are still developing their language skills can be challenging to understand (Koponen et al., 2024). If there are any difficulties in communication between the child and the interpreter, it is better to identify these issues early in the interview, before transitioning to the substantive phase and talking about the allegations. It is also important for the interpreter to be sufficiently fluent in both languages, as concerns have been raised about interpreters not having adequate fluency in the residential language (Ernberg et al., 2022).

Future Development of Interpreter-Mediated Forensic Interviewing

First and foremost, professionals call for better training for interpreters, both in terms of the interpretation process and in terms of child development and child abuse (Powell et al., 2017). Legal professionals also advocate for an increase in the number of interpreters, particularly in minority languages, and improved accessibility to them (Ernberg et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2017). Interpreter-mediated child interviewing is an area in urgent need of more research (Korkman et al., 2024). This is a need that both legal professionals Ernberg et al., 2022; Fontes & Tishelman, 2016; Powell et al., 2017) and experienced interpreters (Koponen et al., 2024) have clearly articulated. For instance, research has not yet investigated how the presence of an interpreter impacts the child’s statements in terms of the amount of detail and accuracy. Additionally, a broader and more abstract issue related to interpreter-mediated child interviews is cultural context and how various cultures remember and convey information during a forensic interview (Korkman et al., 2024). Current literature indicates that we still have a long way to go with improving interpreter-mediated child interviews and that continued collaboration

between practitioners and researchers is needed. However, recent increased attention to the area and growing knowledge provide a helpful baseline towards conducting legally secure interviews with all children, regardless of their language.

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