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

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 paralanguage 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."

- "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

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

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.

About the Author

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