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, Rioplantese, 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.

Spanish-Speaking and Bilingual Children

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 *heroina* 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 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-

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 emotional 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 is 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

Dulce Solis *is a bilingual forensic interviewer in the state of Colorado, currently working at SungateKids Child Advocacy Center. She has been in the field of child abuse and neglect for over15 years. While at the Denver Children's Advocacy Center (2011 - 2022), Dulce worked in various roles, including as coordinator of the forensic interview program. She provides consultation, training and expert testimony related to child forensic interviewing. Dulce was instrumental in the development of direct Spanish forensic interviewing in the state of Colorado and was the first forensic interviewer in the state to conduct direct Spanish interviews. She has focused on identifying, creating and delivering effective bilingual and bicultural training to multi-disciplinary team partners to best serve Spanish speaking families. Dulce has presented locally and nationally on topics related to forensic interviewing, child abuse, human trafficking and language access. Dulce is a Practicum Leader for the APSAC forensic interviewing clinic, she helps develop foundational interviewing skills and professionals working with children.*

Contact: dulce.solis@sungatekids.org

References

Appel, R, & Muysken, P. (2006) Language contact and bilingualism. *Modern Language Journal* 72(3). doi: 10.2307/327522

Chen, Y., & Guzman, L. (2021). *Latino children represent a quarter of the child population nationwide and make up at least 40 percent in 5 southwestern states.* National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families. https://www.hispanicresearchcenter.org/research-resources/latino-children-represent-over-a-quarter-of-the-child-population-nationwide-and-make-up-at-least-40-percent-in-5-southwestern-states/

Language testing International Exclusive license of ACTFL 2024. https://www.languagetesting.com/blog/how-many-spanish-dialects-are-there/

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2020 (https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/)

United States Census Bureau (2025). *Colombian and Honduran populations surpassed a million for first time; Venezuelan population grew the fastest of all Hispanic groups since 2010.* Retrieved February 22, 2025 from https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-hispanic-population.html#:~:text=The%20Hispanic%20or%20Latino%20population%20(referred%20to,over%2011.6%20million%20since%20the%202010%20Census