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

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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 interview 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. Interviewers 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). Szoyka 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

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, Lundon 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, Lundon 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."

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.

Author Bio

Theodore Cross, PhD, FAPSAC *has been conducting research on the system response to child abuse and neglect for more than thirty-five years. He was the principal investigator of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers and has numerous publications on such topics as investigation and prosecution of child abuse, the use of DNA evidence in sexual assault cases, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners, polygraph testing in child abuse cases, simulation training in child welfare, well-being and permanency outcomes for children in foster care, and Child Advocacy Studies for undergraduates and graduate students. He served on the APSAC Board Directors and is currently the editor of the APSAC Advisor and APSAC Alert. He was the 2018 recipient of the Mark Chaffin Outstanding Research Career Achievement Award from APSAC.*

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