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# APSAC PRACTICE GUIDELINES

# Forensic Interviewing of Children

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# Introduction

A forensic interview is an investigative interview conducted by a specially trained objective professional, for the purpose of gathering reliable information from children and youth regarding allegations of maltreatment, exploitation or exposure to violence. A forensic interview aims to minimize trauma to the child or youth, is developmentally sensitive, and utilizes research and practice-informed techniques. Forensic interviewing is a specialized skill. It is part of a larger investigation and used to gather evidence about what a child or youth may have experienced or witnessed in cases involving allegations of abuse, exploitation, neglect, psychological maltreatment, or other crimes.

Forensic interviews should be conducted by specially trained child forensic interviewers, law enforcement investigators, and child protective service workers. This evolving skill requires on-going training and peer review. These interviews are evidence. This evidence can be utilized in criminal child abuse proceedings, civil child protection proceedings, domestic proceedings, and other court settings. Information from the interviews may help identify other victims, assist professionals responsible for assessing risk and safety needs of children and families, and facilitate case management decisions. Forensic interviews should inform follow-up investigative activities.

These Guidelines are an update of the 2012 **APSAC Practice Guidelines** on “Interviewing in Cases of suspected Child Abuse.” They reflect current knowledge about best practices related to forensic interviews and should be considered in conjunction with the 2018 **APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment – 4th Edition** (see especially Chapter 19, “When Interviewing Children: A Review and Update” by Saywitz, Lyon & Goodman). They are aspirational and intended to encourage the highest level of interview proficiency and to offer direction for training child forensic interviewers. These Guidelines are not intended to establish a legal standard of care or a rigid standard of practice to which professionals are expected to adhere in all cases. They provide a framework for professionals who conduct forensic interviews and are not an all-inclusive guide. For example, these Guidelines, while informative, are not meant to provide specific guidance for medical providers, who may follow different standards when they obtain medical incident history as part of a medical examination. Nor are they meant to provide specific guidance for forensic mental health evaluations (see 2021 APSAC Practice Guidelines on “Forensic Mental Health Evaluations”).

Based on practical experience and empirical research that began in the late 1980s, these Guidelines are offered with the understanding that there is no single correct way to conduct a forensic interview. Best practices will continue to evolve and change as new research becomes available. There are some aspects of interviewing for which there is limited or no empirical research. Interviewers should utilize ethical standards, critical thinking, consultation and professional judgment in individual cases and stay informed about the latest research and developments. As experience and scientific knowledge expand, further revision of these Guidelines is expected.

While many forensic interviews involve children who have previously disclosed, the recommendations contained in these guidelines can be utilized in exploratory (e.g. at-risk, precautionary, screening) situations where there has not been a previous disclosure. The skill presented in these guidelines is transferable in other contexts such as interviewing vulnerable adults. These guidelines are not designed for first responders conducting preliminary questioning

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(sometimes referred to as minimal facts). Those contacts should be open-ended, non-suggestive, non-shaming, non-blaming and limited to the information necessary to generate a referral for a forensic interview.

Legislation, court decisions, and local practices, as well as case characteristics may require interviewers to adjust interview practices. Interviewers should remain flexible in applying these Guidelines and continuously seek new knowledge. Interviewers should adhere to the **APSAC Code of Ethics** and be prepared to justify their decisions about particular practices in specific cases.

A child who does not disclose abuse in an interview may not have been victimized. On the other hand, a child's lack of disclosure in an interview or a subsequent recantation cannot be considered as definitive proof that abuse did not occur. A lack of civil or criminal action does not mean there was no abuse. Additionally, just because a disclosure does not rise to the state definition for substantiation does not mean there was no abuse. Research and practice experience indicate that there are multiple reasons abused children may not disclose abuse they have experienced. The field has increased its focus on effectively recognizing and motivating reluctant children (e.g., by providing non-suggestive support, assessing barriers, and giving children more than one opportunity to be interviewed). However, there is no definitive strategy that will guarantee/result in disclosure from all abused children or witnesses of crime. Despite best efforts or attempts, some children may not disclose.

## Purpose of a Child Forensic Interview

The purpose of a forensic interview is to elicit as much reliable information as possible from the child to inform the investigation and case planning. Interviewers attempt to collect facts in a neutral, supportive, and objective way. In keeping with the APSAC Code of Ethics, the interview should be conducted "in a manner consistent with the best interests of the child." The goal is to provide a trauma-informed opportunity for a child to talk about their experiences while minimizing negative impact. At the core, forensic interviews are non-leading, non-suggestive, non-blaming and non-shaming.

A forensic interview is intended for victims and witnesses and not for suspect interrogation, although the skills are transferable. The forensic interviewer should focus on victimization not suspect interrogation. Protocols or policy should be in place to assure that the child's interview or disclosure cannot be used against them in any other proceeding.

No interview is perfect. No matter how good an interview is, the child interview is only a part of a complete child protection or criminal investigation. Further investigation and collection of evidence should be conducted to confirm or refute the allegations, and to see if details supplied by the child can be corroborated. Interviewers should always attempt to elicit information about specific facts that can be verified later such as, during a search of the scene or during interviews with other witnesses and the suspect. Additional investigation may corroborate facts elicited during the interview and thus prove the reliability of those facts, even at times when the interview was not conducted in a manner consistent with these Guidelines.

## **Interviewer Attributes**

Forensic interviewers come from a variety of disciplines, agency affiliations and educational backgrounds. Even though interdisciplinary goals may differ, effective forensic interviewers utilize similar skills and techniques. Specialized knowledge is necessary. This knowledge can be acquired through a combination of training, experience, peer review, supervision, and independent learning. Gender of the interviewer is less important than skill. However, if the child demonstrates a strong preference, then the child's preference should be accommodated when possible.

The following are recommended interviewer attributes, competencies and practice behaviors:

### **1. Engage in Practice that is Research-Informed**

Interviewers should have a mechanism to remain up to date on new and existing research relevant to forensic interviewing, and use this knowledge to improve practice.

### **2. Participate in Ongoing Training and Peer Review**

- A. Complete specialized child forensic interview training and supervision prior to assuming primary responsibility for conducting forensic interviews.
- B. Take advantage of opportunities to reinforce best practice interviewing skills and participate in continuing education on a regular basis.
- C. Seek periodic review, evaluation and consultation from peers and more experienced colleagues to enhance skills.

### **3. Exhibit an Interviewer Stance Aimed at Eliciting Accurate and Reliable Information**

- A. Convey a warm, friendly and respectful manner.
- B. Be open-minded and consider alternative explanations.
- C. Attempt to equalize power and de-emphasize authority.
- D. Provide non-contingent supportive comments and behaviors.
- E. Avoid stereotype induction (negative or positive characterizations of suspected abusers or the events disclosed).
- F. Be patient and comfortable with silence.
- G. Consider plausible explanations for unusual or seemingly inexplicable elements in the child's account; do not automatically dismiss the child's report when these are present.

### **4. Use Language that is Developmentally Appropriate**

- A. Tailor vocabulary, sentence structure, and complexity of prompts to the child's developmental level.
- B. Continue to assess and clarify the child's understanding and use of language throughout the interview.

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### 5. Adapt to the Individual Child

- A. If possible, find out what the child was told and how the child is reacting prior to the interview.
- B. Let the child set the pace for the interview and adjust accordingly.
- C. Listen to the child; allow the child's responses to guide the questioning process and use the child's words whenever possible in follow-up questioning.

### 6. Demonstrate Respect for Cultural Diversity and Strive for Cultural Humility

- A. Racial similarities do not necessarily mean two people share cultural norms; whereas racial differences between an interviewer and a child might be a source of initial mistrust.
  - 1) Be aware of cultural biases on your own interviewing habits.
  - 2) Develop the ability to accommodate the needs of diverse children.
  - 3) Do not rely on stereotypical notions about members of any cultural group; rather, expect that members of groups manifest their culture in a wide variety of ways.
  - 4) Remember cultures are in flux; how individuals and groups live their culture regularly changes in the larger context of societal change.
  - 5) Engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection regarding personal responses and possible biases in order to cultivate greater cultural awareness and avoid stereotyping.
  - 6) Remember that interviewers, children and their families are all cultural beings who bring their own definitions, nonverbal behavior, preferred phrasing, and habits of formality/informality to the interview process.
- 1. Learn as much as possible about the child's cultural background, practices and language proficiency prior to the interview, and adapt the interview accordingly.
  - 1) If the child's family has recently immigrated, try to ascertain the degree to which the child and family have assimilated into the dominant culture.
  - 2) Find out as much as possible about relevant cultural values such as parenting practices related to child discipline, hygiene, and sleeping and bathing arrangements; cultural definitions and expectations regarding child abuse, violence and sexual assault; and actions that might be expected when abuse, violence or sexual assault is suspected.
  - 3) Determine the child's native language and level of English proficiency and provide an interviewer who can conduct the interview in the child's native language whenever possible.
  - 4) Note any cultural or family norms that may inhibit abuse reporting or impede the interviewer's ability to develop rapport with the child.
  - 5) Cultural practices related to eye contact and pacing (e.g., longer pauses and more silences, or rapid overlapping speech) may vary and be apparent during the interview.
- 2. Be aware of potential barriers when there are religious, ethnic, social class, and/or linguistic differences between the child and interviewer.
  - 1) Establishing rapport and trust may require more time and effort.

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- 2) Kinship terms may not have the same meaning to the child as they do for the interviewer.
  - 3) The child's culture may strongly discourage disagreement with or correction of adults; thus the child may agree more readily with suggestive questioning. Giving permission to correct interviewer mistakes and testing the child's willingness to do so, as well as asking open-ended questions and encouraging narrative responses becomes even more crucial in such circumstances.
  - 4) The child's cultural norms may prohibit revealing sensitive, family-related information to a stranger.
  - 5) Prior to an interview, it may be helpful to request that a respected elder or the child's non-offending caregiver give the child permission to talk with and correct the interviewer and answer questions truthfully.
3. The use of qualified bilingual interviewers who are able to accommodate the child's native language and/or the child's language preference is best practice. If a bilingual interviewer is unavailable, use qualified interpreters whenever the child is deaf/hard of hearing, when the child's native language is not English or when not proficient in English.
- 1) An experienced professional interpreter should interpret interview questions and responses as close to verbatim as possible for the interviewer and child, recognizing that some things can't be interpreted exactly in different languages.
  - 2) The interpreter should be prepared for the sensitive and sometimes triggering nature of the information that might be disclosed.
  - 3) The interpreter should be instructed to interpret exactly everything said by the interviewer and child, to not add or change anything, and to not dialogue with either party during an interview.
  - 4) As much as possible, the child's attention should be focused on communication with the interviewer. A sign language interpreter should sit next to the interviewer. It may be helpful to have a spoken language interpreter sit behind or beside the child with the interviewer facing the child. The interviewer should speak directly with the child and not direct questions to the interpreter.
  - 5) Family and friends should not be used as interpreters.

### 7. Accommodate Any Unique Needs the Child May Have, Including Physical and Developmental Disabilities

- A. Find out whether the child has any unique needs that should be taken into account before an interview begins.
- B. Ascertain if any medications the child may be taking are likely to affect the child's behavior, communication, and/or ability to relate, perhaps in consultation with medical personnel and schedule an interview accordingly.
- C. Because adaptive equipment (e.g., wheelchair, helmet, hearing aid, computer) is typically regarded as an extension of the child's body, ask permission before attempting to touch or adjust the equipment. Evaluate how, if at all, this may affect an interview; ideally in consultation with others who know the child (e.g., medical and school personnel, case managers, non-offending caregivers).

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- D. If a child has developmental delays or disabilities, consult with teachers, parents, physicians or others familiar with the child whenever possible to determine the child's unique needs. During the initial stages of an interview, carefully assess whether the interviewer and child are communicating effectively.
- E. Be aware that some children with developmental delays may aim to please and reply to questions in a manner they believe the interviewer desires.

### **8. Actively Participate as Part of a Multidisciplinary Team, If Available**

Whenever possible, the interviewer should consult with other professionals involved with the child, the child's family, or the investigation before, during (if they are observing), and after an interview.

## Interview Context

The circumstances surrounding a forensic interview can influence its outcome and should be carefully considered.

### **1. Preparation**

It is helpful to know as much as possible beforehand about the child (e.g., cultural, developmental, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive abilities and the reason for an interview. This can include reviewing the specifics of the referral as well as communicating with the child's non-offending caregiver and other professionals involved in the case. Such information will assist the interviewer to better meet individualized needs, and to understand the child's reactions and statements. It will orient the interviewer and direct possible avenues of inquiry. The interviewer should keep in mind that the background information may be incomplete and/or inaccurate. Rather than being used to confirm a particular hypothesis, the information should be used to encourage the child to provide as many details as possible in their own words. It should also be used to facilitate the development and exploration of alternative explanations for the allegation as well as for pre-planning specific transition prompts and additional questions.

### **2. Timing and Duration**

The initial child interview should occur as close in time to the event in question, disclosure or reason for referral as feasible. Whenever possible, the child interview should also be timed to maximize the child's capacity to provide accurate and complete information. This often involves consideration of the child's physical and mental state (e.g., alert, rested) as well as immediate safety.

As a general rule, it is preferable to make the length of an interview match the child's abilities and stamina and not make assumptions about the child's attention span based on age. The interviewer should listen to the child's cues and be mindful of signals indicating fatigue, loss of concentration, or need to use the bathroom. When breaks are taken, what occurs during break time should be documented. Multiple or extended interviews are an option when children are unable to engage in longer interviews.



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### **3. Parent/Guardian Notification**

Interviewers should consult local procedures and legal requirements to determine if and how notice should be given to parents prior to and after the forensic interview. Parental notification may be inadvisable when parents or other family members are suspects, and/or when notification may result in attempts to influence the child's report, prevent an interview, or cause destruction of evidence.

### **4. Location/Setting**

It is recommended that an interview occur in a neutral environment whenever possible. The setting should be private, informal, and free from distractions. Children's Advocacy Centers and other specialized interview rooms are advantageous because they are generally child-friendly and allow for observers as well as audio and video recording. If the child is to be interviewed at school, prior arrangements should be made with school officials regarding an appropriate interview room, the child's availability, and who else will be present during the interview. If at all possible, law enforcement officers should arrive at the school, and for an interview, in unmarked cars and wear plain clothes whenever possible. In the rare case that it is necessary to conduct an interview where abuse may have occurred, the interviewer should confirm the suspected offender is not in the vicinity and that the child's psychological, physical and confidential safety has been accommodated.

### **5. Documentation**

Video recording is recommended to document the forensic interview whenever possible. Care should be taken in setting up the video recording equipment to insure everything is accurately documented, including what both the interviewer and child say, as well as their facial expressions, movements and positions. If video recording is not possible for logistical or local policy reasons, audio recording is recommended. It is important to carefully follow local policy and requirements for keeping interview recordings secure and confidential. Protective orders can be used, state laws and/or local protocols developed to prevent copying and/or inappropriate use or distribution of recordings.

If neither video nor audio recording is available, written notes should be as close to verbatim as possible for both interviewer prompts and the child's responses. If another professional is assisting or observing an interview, that person may be a good choice for note taking.

### **6. Number**

A policy that limits the investigative or fact-finding process to a single interview is not recommended. Professionals should attempt to share information so as to minimize unnecessary multiple interviews. The number of interviews should be governed by the number necessary to elicit complete and accurate information from the child. One interview is sometimes sufficient, but multiple interviews may produce additional relevant information, as long as they are open-ended and non-leading. When further investigation or subsequent disclosures indicate there may be additional abusive incidents or offenders, additional interviews are usually appropriate. In order to minimize the child's distress as well as the risk of acquiescence to presumed interviewer expectations, careful consideration should be given

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to who should conduct subsequent interviews. A referral for an extended forensic assessment may be appropriate in situations where the child has not disclosed during a routine forensic interview but there is significant reason to suspect abuse.

### 7. Participants

#### A. Number of Interviewers

A single interviewer is the standard best practice. Audio-visual equipment can be used to enable other members of the multidisciplinary child abuse investigative team to observe an interview, help guide and request additional investigative information. The interviewer should have a means of receiving feedback and questions from observers, and can take a break to consult with them prior to concluding an interview. The interviewer is ultimately responsible for choices made regarding whether, how and when specific questions are asked during the interview. The interviewer should consider suggestions from MDT members and determine the most appropriate way to seek the information requested, and may decide to pose suggested questions after open-ended techniques have been exhausted.

#### B. Advocates or Support Persons

Some jurisdictions have policies or statutes that grant children the right to have an advocate or support person present during interviews, providing the presence of the person does not interfere with the course of the investigation. Interviewers should meet with the support person ahead of time to establish clear rules of conduct and the importance of refraining from direct involvement in an interview. It is best to have the support person sit behind the child and instruct the support person not to say anything and not to assist the child in responding.

#### C. Parents

In general, parents (or other relatives and caregivers) should not be present during an interview. If a child refuses to separate, it may be appropriate to allow the caregiver to be present during the initial stages of an interview. The caregiver should be instructed not to influence the child in any way. If possible, the caregiver should leave the room prior to issues of abuse being raised. The interviewer or another member of the multidisciplinary team may debrief the parent or caregiver following an interview.

#### D. Suspected Offender

No one suspected of committing child sexual abuse should be present or in the vicinity during an interview. This recommendation would also preclude a suspected sex offender from accompanying the child to or from an interview site. Ideally the same should benefit children being interviewed for physical abuse, neglect or psychological maltreatment, however when such is not possible it should not preclude a child from being interviewed.

#### E. Other Children

Except in rare circumstances, siblings and other suspected victims and child witnesses should be interviewed separately. Additionally, information obtained from another alleged victim or witness should generally not be shared with the child.

### 8. Structure

Both structured and semi-structured interview formats can be effective and increase adherence to best practice recommendations. While it is important for the interviewer to be flexible and adapt an interview to the individual child, completely unstructured interviews are not advised. A phased approach is recommended, with an introductory component (e.g., introductions, explanation of documentation and observers, interview instructions, narrative event practice), an information gathering component (e.g., transition to topic of concern followed by prompts aimed at gathering details about the suspected abuse), and a closure component (e.g., final clarification questions, opportunity for child to ask questions, assessment of safety, re-establishing child's equilibrium). Interviewers should pay careful attention to the child and adapt accordingly.

### 9. Importance of Establishing/Maintaining Rapport

Rather than being a discrete stage of an interview, rapport should be established before transitioning to the topic of concern and maintained throughout the entire interview. The pace of an interview is primarily established by the child. The interviewer must be sensitive to the child's needs and appreciate how difficult it may be for the child to talk to a stranger. The child should not be pressured to respond to questions.

### 10. Linguistic and Developmental Considerations

Interviewers should be trained and knowledgeable about basic concepts of child development and linguistics. Although age-related developmental norms exist, there are variations among children and within age groups. Each child should be approached as an individual. The best way to gauge the developmental and linguistic capacity of the child being interviewed is to pay close attention to the child's use and understanding of language. Consequently, it is essential to encourage narrative responses from the beginning of an interview and assess the child's ability to respond to open-ended questions. It is also important to remember that a child who stumbles in English might be very competent and able to provide a full disclosure in his or her first language. The child's linguistic and developmental abilities should be assessed in the language in which he or she prefers.

Memory source monitoring is the ability to recognize the source of a memory for an event. It is an important developmental consideration during a forensic interview. School-age children are better able to differentiate between events they have personally experienced and events heard about or been told about. If there is a concern about the source of a memory, interviewers should consider asking the child to clarify and expand on where the memory comes from (but remember preschoolers may not be able to do so):

“How do you know that?”

“Tell me everything you heard when \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Tell me everything you saw when \_\_\_\_\_.”

Table A contains additional information related to Basic Developmental and Linguistic Concepts.

**TABLE A: Developmental and Linguistic Concepts**

The following points are important to keep in mind with regard to linguistics and the developmental capacity of children.

- Young children are concrete, egocentric, and make idiosyncratic use of language. Simply because a child uses a word (or fails to express lack of understanding) does not mean that he or she knows what the word means. Language is acquired gradually and unevenly, therefore interviewers need to listen, and to clarify the child's meaning and understanding of words throughout an interview. The interviewer's language should fit the child's. Interviewers should not make assumptions about a child's potential attention span based on age alone.
- In general, children as young as preschoolers can accurately recall core aspects of significant, emotionally salient, participatory events. At the same time, young children, especially preschoolers, tend to be the most susceptible to suggestion. They also need more focus and cues in order to access their memories.
- In general, the younger the child, the shorter his/her attention span and the more quickly he or she may drift from one topic to another completely unrelated topic.
- Interviewers should tolerate silences and be prepared to wait after a question has been asked, giving the child time to respond.
- Interviewers should use simple words and keep questions and probes short.
- Concepts of number and time develop gradually and are difficult for young children to understand and use accurately. Interviewers should use caution in asking children "when" or "how many times?" something happened. Furthermore, questions asking younger children about what happened "before" another event should be used with care.
- It is important to avoid pronouns and other "pointing" or "shifting" words that have no meaning without referring to another part of the conversation, (e.g., words like "he," "she," "him," "her," "it," "there," "that, "). Instead, whenever possible, interviewers should try to use people's names, place names, and specific nouns to avoid confusion, and clarify who or what the child means when such words are used.
- Negation takes longer to process and a child may not yet understand that a simple negative, such as "no" or "not," does not always imply a negative. Therefore, negatives should be avoided (not just double negatives) or used very carefully to be sure the child and interviewer have the same understanding.
- Be aware of the implications of using "Something/Someone" versus "Anything/Anyone." "Some" usually implies a neutral or positive and "any" usually implies a negative.
- When ready to change the subject or move on to another issue, it is recommended the interviewer signal the child by "framing" or "scaffolding." Examples include:
  - "Now that I know you better, I want to talk about why you're here today."
  - "Now I want to talk to you about \_\_\_\_\_."
  - "All right, we just talked about \_\_\_\_\_. Now I want to ask you about something different."

### 11. Questioning Techniques and Question Types

#### General Considerations

Interviewers should always think about the best way to phrase questions and prompts, “frame” prompts to clearly indicate what they relate to, listen carefully to the child’s responses, and whenever possible, “anchor” subsequent inquiries with the child’s words. Interviewers should take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about a child’s experiences and request additional information (e.g., by using “*What happened next?*” and “*Tell me more*” prompts) before moving on to other aspects of events.

#### Avoid Inappropriate Suggestion

Interviewers should utilize questioning techniques most likely to enhance the production of reliable information from children. It is widely recommended that interviewers avoid inappropriately suggestive techniques including questions in which the interviewer introduces key allegation-related information and details that are not externally verifiable and have not yet been mentioned by the child (e.g., “*Did it hurt when [name] touched you?*” when the child hasn’t mentioned being touched). Coercive or tag questions (e.g., “*He touched your privates, didn’t he?*”) and questions that invite children to pretend or to speculate about matters they do not have direct knowledge about (e.g., “*What was your coach thinking when she messed with you?*”) are examples of additional questions that are discouraged.

#### Script and Episodic Memory

When phrasing questions, interviewers should be deliberate and pay careful attention to the tense they use. If seeking details about what happened during a specific instance or episode (episodic memory), past tense should be used, e.g., “*Tell me everything that **happened** when... .*” If seeking general ‘script’ memory information about common features of a repeated event, present tense is most appropriate, e.g., “*Tell me what usually **happens** when... .*” Likewise, interviewers should listen carefully for clues in the language used by children that may indicate they are providing either script memory for a repeated event (e.g., present tense or words like “[name] **would**...” “**always**” “**usually**” “**most of the time**,” etc.), or episodic memory (e.g., past tense or words like “**one time**” “**the first time**,” etc.). Whenever possible, interviewers should attempt to determine if a child who has experienced multiple incidents can provide descriptions about specific episodes. Some children who have experienced repeated abuse may be unable to provide details regarding distinct events.

#### Question Types

While there are a number of ways to categorize and define question types, the most useful distinctions for interviewers to keep in mind are the differences between open-ended prompts that encourage narrative responses (most preferred), closed-ended WH- questions that can easily be answered with one or two words and/or a guess (less preferred), and option-posing recognition questions (least preferred).

##### **A. Open-ended Narrative-Inviting Techniques**

Broad open-ended prompts should be maximized because they invite more complete narrative responses from recall memory and elicit the most accurate information. These include open-ended invitations and open-ended WH- prompts.

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While the child's age, developmental capabilities, and motivation will affect the length of their answers, open-ended prompts are consistently the most productive, especially when narrative practice about a neutral event is included early in an interview.

### 1. Open-ended Invitations

These broad open-ended invitations are universally recommended. They should be used to invite a child to provide a narrative account and to elaborate with additional details throughout an interview:

- *"Tell me everything that happened when [repeat child's words]."* (TMETH)
- *"Then what happened?/What happened next?"* (TWH/WHN)
- *"What else happened?"* (WEH)
- *"Tell me more about [repeat child's words]."* (TMM)
- *"Tell me all about [repeat child's words]."* (TMAA)

TMETH, TWH/WHN and WEH are action-oriented recall prompts. They contain the word "happen" which generates the longest and most detailed responses from children. They are often referred to as 'breadth' prompts that can be used to obtain an initial chronological narrative from a child. They also can and should be repeated often during an interview.

Prompts that incorporate the action words "do" and "did," or other action words used by the child (e.g., "touched") are also recommended since actions are the aspects of experiences children remember best and also the most important features in suspected abuse situations.

TMM and TMAA are sometimes referred to as 'depth' prompts. Most often used after a child has provided an initial narrative, they are effective in encouraging the production of more details and should be used extensively.

#### **EXAMPLE: Using TMETH & Action Cues to Invite an Initial Narrative**

As soon as a child provides any information related to the topic of concern in response to a 'transition' prompt, an open-ended invitation containing an appropriate action cue should be posed to encourage an initial narrative from the child.

For example, a child who indicates they are there to talk "... about what my coach did," can then be prompted to *"Tell me all about what your coach did,"* using the action word "did."

A child who responds by saying *"About my coach messing with me,"* can be asked to *"Tell me everything that happened (TMETH) when your coach messed with you."*

Children who have difficulty responding to TMETH can be asked *"What was the first thing that happened [when your coach messed with you]?"* followed by TWH and WHN questions to build the narrative.

## 2. Time Segmentation Prompts

A more specific type of open-ended invitation is a 'time-segmentation' prompt. It is a valuable open-ended strategy to request more details by breaking an event into smaller segments of time.

For example:

- *"**TMETH from** [some action already mentioned by the child] **until** [another action mentioned by the child]."*

## 3. Open-ended WH- Prompts

Another recommended strategy is to use open-ended WH- prompts that probe for recall memory, particularly those focused on 'Who,' 'What,' 'Where' or 'How.' WH- prompts are open-ended if they encourage narrative responses and cannot be easily answered with one word or a guess. They are most helpful and recommended to request information not included in response to invitations. For example:

- *"What happened when [repeat child's words]?"*
- *"How did it start/end?"*
- *"**TMAA** the person who did that."*
- *"**TMAA** the place where it happened."*

Within the category of open-ended WH- prompts are prompts aimed at eliciting specific types of information that children might otherwise fail to report when responding to more general open-ended invitations. Although such prompts may be considered suppositional because they are mildly suggestive (as are *"What happened?"* and *"Tell me more"*), they do not suggest specific content and can be easily rejected by the child.

### a. **Sensory Focus Prompts**

Focusing a child on sensory perceptions – what they saw, heard, tasted, smelled or felt (physical sensations) – can be a helpful way to request additional salient details. At a minimum, children who can see and hear should be asked what they perceived with those senses.

For example:

- *"Think about what it looked like – what did you see?/tell me everything you saw."*
- *"Think about the sounds – what did you hear?/tell me everything you heard."*
- If child has described something in their mouth, *"What did you taste?/What did it taste like?"*
- *"How did your body feel when [name] touched you?"*
- *"How did it feel when you went to the bathroom afterwards?"*

### b. **Thoughts and Feelings Prompts**

Open-ended prompts that ask the child to describe emotional feelings, reactions, and thoughts often produce forensically relevant details or shed light on the child's frame of mind, and thus are helpful in assessing allegations of abuse.

For example:

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- *“How did you feel/what did you think when [child’s words describing event]?”*
- *“How did you feel when [name] touched you?”*
- *“What did you think when [name] touched you?”*
- *“How did you feel/what did you think after [name] touched you?”*
- *“How do you feel about everything that has happened?”*

### c. Prompts About Conversations, Disclosures, and Motivations

Another category of recommended open-ended WH- prompts includes questions about conversations between the child and suspect, about motivations for the child to reveal abusive conduct or delay disclosure, and about related statements made by the child to others and their reactions.

For example:

- *“What did you say when [child’s words describing event]?”*
- *“What did [suspect’s name] say when [child’s words describing event]?”*
- *“What did [suspect’s name] say after [child’s words describing event]?”*
- *“Who knows about what happened?” “How do they know?” “How did they find out?”*
- *“What happened the first time you told someone?”*
  - *“What did you do/say?”*
  - *“What did [disclosure recipient’s name] do/say?”*
  - *“What happened after you told?”*
- *“How come you decided to tell?”*
- *“What helped you tell now?” “What made it okay to tell?”*
- *“What kept you from telling other people about what happened?”*
- *“What did you think would happen if you told other people?”*

### d. Prompts about Clothing and What Occurred with Hands and Mouths

Open-ended WH- prompts to explore additional specific topics can be elucidatory. Especially in situations involving suspected sexual and physical abuse, these include questions about conversations between the child and suspect, about motivations for the child to disclose abusive conduct or delay disclosure, about related statements made by the child to others, and about what occurred with hands and mouths.

For example:

- *“**T**METH with your/[suspect’s] clothes.”*
- *“Where were your/[suspect’s] clothes.”*
- *“**T**METH with your hands.”*
- *“**T**METH with [suspect’s name] hands.”*
- *“**T**METH with your mouth.”*
- *“**T**METH with [suspect’s name] mouth.”*
- *“What did [suspect’s name] do with their hands?”*
- *“What did you do with your hands?”*
- *“What did [suspect’s name] do with their mouth?”*
- *“What did you do with your mouth?”*
- *“How did you know what to do?”*



### e. Additional Cued Recall Prompts

All of the previously described open-ended prompts contain various cues, but none suggest specific incriminating content and children can easily answer with innocuous information or with a denial/rejection such as “Nothing” or “I don’t know.” Other open-ended cued invitations specific to the particular interview may be appropriate. When called for, the interviewer should direct the child’s attention to a specific topic (i.e., ‘cue’ the child) and then request further information with an open-ended prompt that encourages a narrative response. The cue can be chosen from a previous statement of the child or may be related to an area not yet discussed, taking care to make it as non-suggestive as possible.

Possible phrasing:

- *“You said [child’s words earlier in interview]. TMEH/Tell me everything about /all about/more about that.”*
- *“I heard something about [non-suggestive cue]. TMEH/Tell me everything about /all about/more about that.”*
- *“Tell me about [non-suggestive cue]. TMEH/Tell me everything about /all about/more about that.”*

### B. Closed-ended Questions

Interviewers should aim to reduce their use of closed-ended questions that can easily be answered with one word or a guess. This includes closed-ended WH- questions, as well as option-posing questions that prompt recognition memory. Typically, when a majority of interview questions are closed-ended or recognition prompts, the interviewer talks more than the child, and the risk of inaccurate, inconsistent, misleading and unconvincing responses is increased.

There are a number of potential problems with closed-ended questions:

- Closed-ended questions encourage a limited response from the child that includes little or no information beyond that provided by the interviewer.
- A child’s brief response may obscure a lack of understanding of the words used by the interviewer.
- A child’s minimal response is unlikely to contain idiosyncratic details (or many details at all) and is therefore unlikely to lead to evidence that may confirm or refute allegations.
- A child’s unelaborated responses can lead to a lack of certainty in cases involving actual abuse.
- Interviewer-supplied information in closed questions may be incorrect or biased.
- Closed questions may be prone to response biases (such as a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ bias, or a first or last item bias).
- Because closed questions are easy to answer even when the child doesn’t know or is unsure, they encourage guessing, which leads to increased inaccuracy.
- A child who is reluctant to talk about what happened can find it easier to avoid talking by providing only brief answers or false denials to closed questions.

For all these reasons, closed-ended questions should be minimized.

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### 1. Closed-ended WH- Questions

Unlike open-ended WH- questions which encourage narrative responses, closed-ended WH- questions can be easy for a child to answer with a word or two even when they don't know the answer. Children may believe an answer is expected simply by virtue of the fact that the question was asked, and in an effort to be cooperative, they will often respond with their best guess. Within this category, some questions are more problematic than others, for instance questions that ask about time (e.g., "When?"), number (e.g., "How many?"), and color. Even very young children are often familiar with these general concepts and have learned related words, making it especially easy for them to come up with a guess.

Furthermore, "when" is an abstract concept, and a young child's temporal response to questions about "when" something happened is much less likely to be reliable than responses to questions that focus on concrete information related to the context of the abuse. Responses to such recommended concrete prompts may generate information that can be used to help narrow the time frame for the event in question.

For example:

- "Tell me everything you remember about the day it happened."/"What else happened that day?"
- "What happened right before...?"
- "What happened right after...?"
- "Tell me everything you remember about where it happened."

For some other WH- questions, such as "Who was the first person who found out about what happened?" or "Where did it happen?" **pairing** with open-ended requests to elaborate (e.g., "How did [person's name] find out?" "Tell me everything that happened when [person's name] found out." "Tell me all about/more about [name of the place]") may generate narrative responses that ameliorate many of the potential problems associated with closed-ended questions.

### 2. Option-Posing Questions

Option-posing questions include yes/no and multiple-choice questions. These questions ask the child to confirm, reject or choose from information presented by the interviewer. They trigger recognition memory and may facilitate recollection since it is easier to recognize than to recall. However, all of the problems associated with closed questions are maximized when they are option-posing. Consequently, interviewers should strive to prioritize more open-ended strategies that encourage narrative replies.

Yes/no questions rarely elicit more than a simple 'yes' or 'no' response and are susceptible to various response biases. They raise the risk of eliciting both false positive and false negative responses. False negatives are even more likely when the yes/no question includes a negative polarity term such as the word "any" (e.g., "Did anything else happen?") and for that reason should be avoided.

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Multiple-choice are similar to yes/no questions in that children seldom elaborate. A child is likely to choose one of the options offered, even if misleading or incorrect. Current research suggests that inclusion of an “open-choice” (e.g., “or something/someone/somewhere else”) does not increase accuracy or elaboration.

Despite these drawbacks, most interviews will likely contain some yes/no or multiple-choice questions. If used, yes/no or multiple-choice questions should be phrased carefully to reduce the amount of information suggested. For example, one possible strategy would be to phrase a yes/no question so that it suggests the opposite of the expected answer (e.g., “Did [name] want other people to find out about what happened?”) and then follow the likely negative answer from the child with, “How do you know?” or “Tell me more about that.” If a multiple-choice question is used, a similar strategy would be to omit the expected answer in the choices offered (e.g., “Did it happen in the kitchen, the living room or somewhere else?” when the event being discussed is believed to most likely have happened in the bedroom.) Whenever a child gives a brief reply to a multiple-choice question, or responds affirmatively to a yes/no question, pairing with an open-ended follow-up request for elaboration is recommended.

### 12. Accommodations for Engagement and Communication

Each youth has a combination of communication style and information-processing abilities. APSAC Guidelines support a narrative approach, recognizing that some individuals might require specific accommodations. A variety of interview aids have been used by interviewers over the years, especially with young children and those with developmental disabilities. Two important goals of forensic interviewing are to maximize information from youth while minimizing negative impact on youth. Each youth enters the forensic interview with their unique set of circumstances and ability to communicate their life experiences. Sometimes youth benefit from having alternative ways to communicate. Formerly called media or interview aids in previous APSAC Guidelines, offering alternative means for communication and engagement will be referred to as accommodations in this guideline.

Use of accommodations should be purpose-driven and not interrupt narratives from children. Accommodations should be used with caution to clarify information obtained and rely heavily on open-ended, free recall prompts. Accommodations are not diagnostic tools. Youth drawings or the youth’s actions with accommodations should not be interpreted by the interviewer, but instead probed through narrative-inviting prompts to allow the youth to explain. A purpose-driven approach can guide an interviewer on when and how to offer an accommodation.

APSAC Guidelines emphasize prompts that elicits free recall. When accommodations for communication are made, the goal is to access reconstructive memory whenever possible. Some accommodations create a supportive environment and can reduce or diffuse stress, while others provide youth an opportunity to explain or clarify something being discussed in a forensic interview. When evaluating whether to incorporate an accommodation, one consideration is whether its use is child-led or interviewer-led. Interviewer-led

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accommodations should remain non-leading and non-suggestive and access free recall as much as possible. Accommodations can be employed throughout all stages of a forensic interview.

In the early stages of an interview, a youth might be afforded an opportunity to draw or color in order to build rapport, increase youth comfort, and engage in conversation with the forensic interviewer. This comfort drawing is voluntary, child-led, and can be started and stopped during an interview. Research indicates that the use of comfort drawing has little impact on children's performance in interviews and did not significantly increase (or decrease) the amount or accuracy of information recalled (Poole, D. A. & Dickinson, J. J., 2014). An interviewer should refrain from interpreting any drawing or writing made by a youth, and can invite narratives about drawings if those narratives are purpose-driven.

Because some accommodations tap less accurate recognition memory rather than free recall, they should be used with caution to clarify information obtained using open-ended prompts. Therefore, interviewers and investigators should have less confidence in the information gathered using only an accommodation. Use of accommodations should be carefully documented (by video-recording if at all possible), and accompanied by requests for verbal elaboration from the youth whenever possible.

In some cases, a youth may find it easier to write their responses as an accommodation. In this situation, an interviewer can offer the writing accommodation and should use the youth's writing in follow up narrative prompts to gain a fuller understanding of what the youth is communicating. The interviewer can ask the youth to read aloud what is written, or the interviewer can read aloud, and additional questions should be asked about the content that was written. This activity is child-led and can be used in conjunction with free recall prompts to minimize interpretation, leading, or suggestion.

The same is true for child-led drawings of an event, a location, a person, or a thing. The youth's drawing is akin to verbally inquiring about a reconstructed memory. This accommodation should be coupled with free recall prompts for explanations from the youth while being devoid of interpretation by the interviewer or investigators. Child-led demonstrations of actions or events should be treated in the same manner: coupled with free recall prompts and not interpreted.

Interviewer-led accommodations should be used only after exhausting attempts to access free recall from youth. If the interviewer-led accommodation taps recognition memory, the interviewer should move to free recall prompts as soon as possible.

As forensic interviews should be conducted "in a manner consistent with the best interests of the child" (APSAC Code of Ethics), accommodations provide youth an opportunity to tell what they know in their own way and in their own words. Interviewers should incorporate accommodations when needed and not merely as a matter of course. Accommodations should be purposeful and rely on free recall prompts whenever possible.

# Interview Components

Experts recognize that a narrative interview approach with an emphasis on research-based free recall techniques aimed at eliciting reliable narratives is best practice. Throughout an interview, interviewers are encouraged to listen more and talk less, and prioritize open-ended prompts over closed questions. The following structure reflects components appropriate for many forensic interviews.

## **1. Introduction of Self, Role, and Purpose of an Interview**

Interviewers should introduce themselves and provide a brief neutral explanation of their role and the purpose of an interview, using simple, non-suggestive, developmentally appropriate language, e.g., *“My name is \_\_\_\_\_. My job today is to ask you some questions and listen to what you say.”* Interviewers should strive to convey a manner which immediately helps the child feel safe, at ease and empowers the child with information about the process.

A brief request for the child to *“Tell me something about you,”* or *“Tell me something you want me to know about you,”* may help to convey interest in the child and facilitate rapport. Depending on the child’s concerns and frame of mind, it may be appropriate to provide reassurance that the child is not in trouble with the interviewer and that an interview is not taking place because the child has done something wrong. Interviewers should be careful, however, not to inadvertently suggest such concerns to the child. Interviewers should be honest.

### **Informing Child about Documentation Method**

Interviewers should inform all children, in a simple and matter-of-fact way, about how and why an interview is being documented as well as about anyone observing an interview. Interviewers should consult their local legal counsel to determine whether explicit consent for audio or video recording of an interview is required and proceed accordingly.

## **2. Interview Instructions**

Interview instructions should occur near the beginning of an interview and be reinforced throughout an interview. Instructions serve to orient the child to the unique expectations of a forensic interview, empower the child, and encourage accurate responses. When properly presented, instructions reduce the inclination to guess, increase willingness to ask for clarification, and increase resistance to suggestion. Instructions also serve to preemptively correct miscommunication. When good interviewing techniques are utilized in the rest of an interview, this can increase the accuracy of information generated from the child.

Interview instructions are most effective when presented one at a time and phrased simply and succinctly. The first three instructions listed should be accompanied by age-appropriate practice examples with feedback that allow and encourage the child to demonstrate understanding and ability to comply. Practice examples may not be necessary for older children. Interviewers should take advantage of opportunities to reinforce the instructions during an interview. Instructions should be efficient, succinct and take no more than a few minutes. Many interviewers are successful using age-appropriate scripted instructions. The

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examples that follow in these Guidelines are ideas for possible phrasing and practice examples to use when informing young children about key interview instructions.

### A. 'Don't Guess' Instruction ('Don't guess, but tell me if you do know')

The interviewer should explain that when the child knows the answer to a question, they should answer, but if the child does not know, not to guess and it is okay to say "I don't know." Age-appropriate practice examples should be used to reinforce both aspects of this instruction.

**Explain:** "[Child's name], I'm going to ask you some questions. If you know the answer, tell me. But if you don't know, please don't guess. You can just say, 'I don't know.'"

**Practice:** "Let's practice. What did I have for breakfast today? [Response: "I don't know."] "Okay, because you don't know what I had for breakfast."

**Feedback/Counter-example:** "What did you have for breakfast today?" [Response: "Cereal."] "Okay, because you **do** know. It's important to tell me when you know the answer."

### B. 'Don't Understand' Instruction ('Tell Me If You Don't Know What I Mean'):

The interviewer should tell the child, in age-appropriate language to let them know when something is said that they don't understand so it can be said in a different way. Keep in mind when explaining the instruction that 'understand' is a big word that may not be understood by young children. Also, practice examples should accompany this instruction, and they should be concrete, easy to explain when the child indicates they don't understand, and easy for the child to answer after explained.

**Explain:** "If I say something & you don't know what I mean or what I'm saying, please tell me & I'll ask it a different way."

**Practice:** "Let's practice. Where's your patella? [Response: "I don't know what that means."]

**Feedback/Explanation:** "Thanks for letting me know. Patella is another word for knee. Let me ask it a different way – where is your knee?"

If the child knows the meaning of your first practice example, be prepared with one or two other options. For example: "How many siblings do you have?"/ "That's a hard word for brothers and sisters. How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

### C. 'Correct Me' Instruction ('Tell me if I make a mistake')

It is critical to encourage the child to correct interviewer mistakes. Many children are raised to think it is unacceptable to correct adults and to believe adults are all-knowing. This instruction empowers the child to correct the interviewer and a practice example allows them to demonstrate their willingness to do so.

**Explain:** *"Sometimes I make mistakes or get something wrong. When I do, you can tell me that I'm wrong."*

**Practice:** *"Let's practice. You're 30 years old. [Response: "I'm not 30.]*

**Feedback/Request Correct Information:** *"Thank you for correcting me. **How old are you?** Please tell me if I make other mistakes."*

### D. Un-informed/Naïve Interviewer Instruction ('You're the expert')

It is important for the interviewer to convey that the interviewer does not know what happened to the child and thus doesn't know the answers to the questions being asked. Practice examples are not necessary, but this is a message that should be reinforced as appropriate during the interview.

- Examples:
  - *"[Child's name], since we just met, I don't know about you or things that have happened to you."*
  - *I'll be asking questions about things you know about, but that I don't know about.*
  - *I'll be asking you some questions and since I wasn't there, I don't know what happened.*
  - *I don't know what's happened in your life. I won't be able to tell you the answers to my questions.*
  - *You're the expert about what's happened in your life, and I don't know about those things.*
- Reinforce during an interview: *"The reason I keep asking you to tell me more is because I wasn't there and I need your help to understand what happened."*

### E. Promise to Tell the Truth

Interviewers should ask the child to promise to tell the truth during an interview since existing research shows when a child does promise to tell the truth, it increases (though does not guarantee) honesty. It is not necessary to include truth/lie comprehension tasks; research demonstrates there is no benefit to doing so during an interview. Refer to the prosecutor in jurisdictions where specific demonstration of truth/lie understanding may be required. The best way to request a promise to tell the truth from a young child is to ask, *"Do you promise you **will** tell the truth?"*

If the child expresses reluctance or seems hesitant to promise to tell the truth, the interviewer should inquire about the reasons why and explore the child's concerns.

### 3. Narrative Event Practice

Narrative event practice (or “episodic memory training”) is a critical component of a forensic interview that should not be skipped. It consists of eliciting episodic memory about a neutral or positive event in a way that maximizes open-ended prompts and encourages narrative responses. Narrative event practice provides an opportunity for child and interviewer to learn how the other communicates. The interviewer identifies a baseline for the child and the child learns that the interviewer uses open-ended prompts and desires detailed narrative responses. At the same time, rapport is enhanced.

Basic testimonial competency of children can be demonstrated during narrative practice, through their ability to accurately perceive, remember, and communicate about an innocuous event.

#### **Table B: Suggestions for Narrative Event Practice**

The interviewer may begin by stating they would like to get to know the child better, followed by a request that the child talk about what happened during a specific event (possibly “*from the beginning to the end*”) such as the following:

- “*What’s your favorite thing to do (outside)? **TMETH** the last time you [activity described by the child].*”
- “*Think about something you did this week that made you happy and **TMETH.***”
- “*Where’s your favorite place to go? **TMETH** the last time you went to [place mentioned by child].*”
- “*Think about your last birthday and **TMETH.***”

Another option would be to ask the child’s caregivers or another adult familiar with the child to identify a recent neutral memorable event (e.g., holiday, school activity, vacation activity, other special occasion) in which the child participated. If the interviewer cannot easily identify a memorable innocuous event, the interviewer can always ask about the child’s day leading up to an interview as an event to explore for narrative practice.

Following initial open-ended invitations to tell everything that happened, the interviewer should spend 3 to 5 minutes using a variety of open-ended prompts to further explore the child’s memory for the event, so the child clearly gets the message they are expected to talk more and elaborate in their own words. In circumstances where a child is reluctant to provide information about a neutral event, the interviewer may want to spend more time with narrative event practice. The child’s responsiveness to the interviewer’s efforts to engage them in discussing neutral or positive events during narrative event practice is often a good indication of how willing and likely the child is to disclose possible abuse later in an interview.



#### 4. Transition to the Topic of Concern

The interviewer should transition to the topic of concern by being as open-ended and non-suggestive as possible. Prior to an interview, plan for potential transition prompts based on the individual child and situation.

When the child is likely to be aware of the reason for an interview, the following are examples of transition prompts that are often productive:

- *“Tell me what you’re here to talk about today.”*
- *“Tell me what you know about being here today.”*
- *“Tell me the reason you are here.”*

Sometimes the child has mentioned something related to the reason for concern earlier in the interview. If so, the interviewer can repeat the child’s words and prompt a narrative. (e.g., *“Earlier you said... - tell me all about that/TMETH.”*)

When the child has made a previous statement about what happened, a prompt referencing that disclosure can be useful (e.g., *“I heard you talked to [name/ “someone”] about something that happened – **TMETH.**”*)

If the child does not respond with information about the topic of concern, the interviewer can use other open-ended non-suggestive prompts, for example:

- *“I heard something might have happened – tell me what happened.”*
- *“What did [name] tell you about coming to talk to me today?”*
- *“It is really important for me to know why you are here to talk to me.”*

Other general prompts or carefully considered questions based on the specific circumstances of the case may be necessary. See Table B for ideas related to additional useful transition prompts.

<b>Table C: Formulating Case-specific “Transition” Prompts</b>
<p>If the general suggestions above do not elicit relevant information from the child, most experts recommend using a series of general prompts and/or formulating additional questions based on the specific circumstances of the case that are as non-suggestive as possible, and that only gradually become more focused.</p> <p>The following examples illustrate some other options for potential ‘transition’ prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When the child has an observable injury – <i>“I see you have [<u>a bruise, a broken arm, etc.</u>]. <b>TMETH.</b>”</i></li><li>• When the child has been seen by another professional prior to the forensic interview – <i>“I heard you saw [<u>the doctor, a police officer, etc.</u>] last week. Tell me <u>how come/tell me what you talked about.</u>”</i></li></ul>

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- When the child has been removed from their home and placed in protective custody – *“Where do you live/stay right now? How come you’re living/staying there?”*
- *“Is [your mom, someone, etc.] worried about something that happened? Tell me what they’re worried about.”*
- Referencing the location of possible abusive conduct may be productive and is not unduly suggestive – *“I heard something happened at [location]. **TMETH.**”*
- If the suspected offender is someone routinely in the child’s life, the interviewer may want to say, *“I heard something happened with [name]. **TMETH.**”* The child can easily respond with innocuous information if there is nothing abusive to report.

If the child still has not disclosed, the interviewer should carefully consider whether to continue an interview and ask more direct questions, whether to stop an interview and perhaps try to talk to the child another time, or whether to spend more time trying to develop rapport through narrative event practice. As a general rule, interviewers should avoid linking a particular suspect with specific abusive conduct.

### 5. Substantive Questions

The goal of this component of an interview is to allow the child to provide as many details as possible about what they witnessed or experienced and the circumstances and dynamics relevant to their experiences. The details elicited often serve as a basis for collection of relevant evidence in the follow-up investigation and to guide case planning. Throughout an interview, but especially in this component, the interviewer should continue to keep an open mind and consider alternative explanations.

As soon as the child indicates something happened, the interviewer should invite the child to provide a narrative about what happened with *“Tell me everything that happened (from beginning to end).” (TMETH)*

The child’s response often makes it clear if they are talking about a single incident or multiple episodes. In the case of multiple episodes, interviewers should be intentional about how they proceed. Allowing the child to provide an initial generic account/script memory about what usually happens may be helpful to provide a broader picture of what the child experienced before moving on to specific episodes. The child’s generic account may provide episodic cues or labels which can then be used to anchor and explore specific events. If the initial narrative is unclear about whether more than one episode has occurred, interviewers should consider open-ended prompts that might clarify if there were multiple incidents, e.g., *“Tell me everywhere it/something happened,”* *“Tell me about another time.”* (Interviewers should **not** ask, *“How many times did it happen?”*) A forced choice question such as *“Did it happen one time or more than one time?”* should be a last resort only after more open-ended prompts are tried and unsuccessful in clarifying whether there were multiple incidents.

When the child has experienced more than one incident, the interviewer should not spend the entire time in script memory unless that’s all the child is able to provide. Using previously provided episodic cues or labels to request descriptions from the child is a good place to start exploring specific events. Whenever possible, allow the child to choose and label episodes. One

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at a time, the interviewer should begin by framing each incident with the child's words and prompting for an initial narrative with a prompt such as, "You said one time it happened [child's words] – **TMETH**.

Interviewers may also want to direct the child's attention to specific episodes by beginning with **TMETH**, followed by:

- "...another time"
- "...the time you remember most"
- "...the last time"
- "...the first time"
- "...a time it was different" (when the child provides only script memory, this prompt might help isolate an event)

After eliciting an initial episodic narrative about a specific event, the interviewer should continue with open-ended prompts to encourage elaboration before moving on to another event. Prompts such as "Then what happened?" "What happened next?" and "What else happened?" can help establish a linear narrative about what happened (breadth). "Tell me more about..." is especially useful to go into more detail about things the child has described (depth).

Additional narrative-inviting prompts, including but not limited to, time segmentation, cued recall, sensory prompts, thoughts/feelings prompts should be used liberally, with the interviewer being careful not to interrupt the child's responses. Sometimes simply repeating what the child has just said (without raising your voice to make it a question), using 'facilitators' as the child is talking (e.g., "okay," "uh-huh," "I see,"), or sitting silently, will be enough to keep the child talking. If more closed questions are used, they should be asked later in the interview and 'paired' with open-ended follow-up invitations to provide more information.

In addition to gathering details about what happened during specific incidents, the interviewer should explore the context of the child's experiences. These include but are not limited to:

- Dynamics
- Conversations
- Who knows and how they know
- Addressing the initial disclosure
- Screening for technology
- Screening for other types of maltreatment

See **Table C** below for additional suggestions for questioning during the substantive component of an interview.

<b>Open-ended 'Breadth' Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Tell me everything that happened when [repeat child's words]." (<b>TMETH</b>)</li><li>• "Then what happened? /What happened next?" (<b>TWH/WHN</b>)</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> from the beginning to the end.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b>, even the little things you don’t think are important.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Tell me how it started.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What was the first thing that happened?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What was the last thing that happened?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did you know when it was over?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What happened right before?” and “What happened right after?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What else happened?” (WEH)</i></li> </ul>
<b><u>Open-ended ‘Depth’ Prompts</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“Tell me more about [repeat child’s words].” / Tell me all about [repeat child’s words].” (TMM/TMAA)</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [name] do?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you do?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“I’m confused, tell me again,” or “I’m trying to understand. Since I wasn’t there, please tell me again about _____.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How do you know that?” or “How did you figure that out?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How come you think that?”</i></li> </ul>
<b><u>Time Segmentation Prompts</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“I’d like to find out more about what happened. Tell me everything that happened from [child’s words describing one portion of the event] until [another portion].”</i></li> </ul>
<b><u>Sensory Focus Prompts</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“Tell me everything you saw.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Tell me what [suspect’s name] looked like, from the top of their head to the bottom of their feet.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Tell me everything about what [name] looked like.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you see when _____?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Tell me everything you heard.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you hear when _____?”</i></li> </ul> <p>Possibly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“Tell me what you smelled.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did it taste?”</i></li> </ul>
<b><u>Thoughts and Feelings Prompts</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tell me everything you felt.”</i></li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“How did you feel when [child’s words describing event]?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did you feel when [name] touched you?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did your body feel when [name] touched you?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you think when [name] touched you?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did you feel after [name] touched you?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did it feel when you went to the bathroom afterwards?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How do you feel about everything that has happened?”</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Prompts About Conversations, Disclosures, and Motivations</u></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“What did you say when [child’s words describing event]?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] say when [child’s words describing event]?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] say after [child’s words describing event]?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Who knows what happened?”/“How do they know?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What happened the first time you told someone?”</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“What did you do/say?”</i></li> <li>○ <i>“What did [disclosure recipient’s name] do/say?”</i></li> <li>○ <i>“What happened after you told?”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• <i>“How come you decided to tell?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What helped you tell now?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What made it okay to tell now?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What kept you from telling other people about what happened?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you think would happen if you told other people?”</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Prompts About Actions with Hands and Mouth</u></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> with your hands.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> with [suspect’s name] hands.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] do with their hands?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you do with your hands?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> with your mouth.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> with [suspect’s name] mouth.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] do with their mouth?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did you do with your mouth?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“How did you know what to do?”</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Prompts About Clothing</u></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“<b>TMETH</b> with your/[suspect’s] clothes.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Where were your/[suspect’s] clothes.”</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Other Cued Recall Prompts</u></b> When further information about key facts is needed, more focused questions may be necessary during the substantive component.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“You said [child’s words earlier in interview]. <b>TMETH/TMAA/TMM</b> about that.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“I heard something about [non-suggestive cue]. <b>TMETH/Tell me everything about /all about/more about that.</b>”</i></li> </ul>

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<p>Information about the context of the abuse (e.g., when and where the abuse occurred, information about any instruments or items present or used in the abuse) can lead to potential corroborative evidence. The nature of the case (e.g., sexual abuse or exploitation, physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence), together with what the child has said so far will point toward additional specific areas an interviewer may want to explore. For instance, in sexual abuse situations, if the child has not already provided this information, interviewers will likely want to inquire about facts such as the type of touching involved, what part of the child's body was touched, observations that may indicate whether the suspect (if male) had an erection or ejaculated, and what implements or other objects or strategies were used to facilitate the abuse. In a physical abuse case, facts related to articles or weapons used to inflict the abuse may be important. It is often relevant and useful to find out if the suspect used technology in any way before, during or following the abuse (e.g., to take pictures, to record or show videos, and/or to communicate with the child via cell phone, computer or otherwise).</p> <p>The interviewer must be careful at this point to phrase additional prompts in the least suggestive way and continue to pose open-ended follow-up requests for the child to provide elaboration from recall memory. The use of option-posing questions, including yes/no and multiple choice should be careful and limited.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“Tell me about [non-suggestive cue]. T<del>METH</del>/Tell me everything about /all about/more about that.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Exactly what part of your body did [suspect’s name] touch? Tell me more about that.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] touch you with? T<del>METH</del>.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What other part of [suspect’s name] body touched your body? T<del>METH</del>.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“T<del>METH</del> with his [child’s name for suspect’s body part].”</i></li> <li>• <i>“What did [suspect’s name] use to [repeat child’s words describing what happened]? T<del>MM</del> about that.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Did [suspect’s name] have a <u>camera/cell phone/computer/tablet</u>? How do you know? What did [suspect’s name] do with the <u>camera/cell phone/computer/tablet</u>?”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Think about the last time you saw/talked to [suspect’s name] &amp; T<del>METH</del>. Tell me everything [suspect’s name] said.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“Did [suspect’s name] want other people to find out what happened? How do you know?” (Though this is fairly direct and focused, it is phrased to suggest the opposite of the expected response.)</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Additional Prompts About Others Who Know or Were Told</u></b> It is advisable for every interview to</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“Tell me all about who else was there..../ Who else was there...?”</i></li> </ul>

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<p>include questions about who else knows about the abuse, who else has been told, the circumstances leading to the others' knowledge, and the child's motivation for disclosing, some of which have already been described. The child may also be asked if anyone else was present before, during, or immediately after the concerning event(s). This can potentially identify other victims or witnesses and thereby lead to valuable corroborative evidence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ "...before it happened."</li> <li>○ "...when it happened."</li> <li>○ "...after it happened."</li> <li>● <i>"Who was the first person who found out about what happened? How did [person's name] find out?" or "Tell me everything about how [person's name] found out."</i></li> <li>● <i>"Do you know if something like that happened to someone else? How do you know? Tell me all about that."</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Dynamics Prompts</u></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"What did [name] tell you about what they were doing?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"What did [name] say when/after they touched you/hit you?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"How did you feel about [name] when you first knew them?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"How did you feel about [name] before they touched you/hit you?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"What were you thinking when it happened?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"What did you think after it happened?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"How do you feel about [suspect] now?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"What has happened with you since you told?"</i></li> <li>● <i>"How do you feel about what happened to you?"</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Other Abuse Incidents or Types</u></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"Tell me the worst thing [suspect] did."</i></li> <li>● <i>"Tell me something different [suspect] did."</i></li> </ul>

### **Presenting a Child with Physical Evidence**

Forensic interviews provide youth with an opportunity to put information and concerns in context. In some cases, whether or not a youth has previously disclosed, there might be evidence of abuse or exploitation that the multidisciplinary team needs to understand. As mentioned in Transition Prompts (page XX/section XX), there are occasions when knowledge of prior activities or situations can be framed as a cued invitation to offer the youth an opportunity to explain. (E.g. *"I heard you talked to a doctor/police officer last week. Tell me what you talked about."* Lamb, et al, 2018.) This verbal presentation of information is stated in a non-leading way and the youth is invited to narrate. The same technique can be offered to a youth when the information to be discussed is in the form of physical evidence (see *Transitioning with Physical Evidence*)

As technology evolves, the types of evidence associated with abuse and exploitation become more prolific. There are occasions where evidence is found prior to a youth making a

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disclosure. Whether a youth has disclosed or not, careful consideration must be given to the impact the presentation of evidence may have on a youth. It is essential to coordinate with the multidisciplinary team in planning exactly how to handle the situation. The decision about whether or not to present evidence during an interview is fluid and based on the best interest of the youth. A youth should never be coerced or forced to look at evidence.

As is the case with interview accommodations, presenting evidence to a youth is in conjunction with free recall prompts. Evidence is not merely presented to identify something with a yes/no inquiry. Interviewers should always know the purpose for presenting any type of evidence. An interviewer can avoid negatively impacting a youth by advising a youth early in the interview that there is evidence that might be discussed. At the beginning of the interview during the introduction, the interviewer should add a statement that notifies the youth of the evidence by using a high-level label of the type of evidence (such as pictures, screen shots, texts, documents, or some other high-level label) and then put the evidence aside so as not to draw continuous attention to it. It should be noted that there is no expectation that evidence be shared once it is briefly mentioned at the beginning. While introducing self, role, purpose and documentation, the interviewer can incorporate a statement about the evidence to empower the youth before brief rapport by saying, *“I have some pictures/screen shots/chat logs that we might talk about later. But first I want to get to know you.”*

The interviewer should continually assess the youth throughout the interview and offer supportive, non-suggestive utterances, as needed. After covering instructions and narrative practice, the interviewer can decide the best transition approach. Interviewers should take great care to minimize denial by transitioning with narrative prompts and not yes/no questions.

Evidence can be presented at any time in the later components of the forensic interview and should be coupled with free recall prompts.

### **Transitioning with Physical Evidence**

In order to use the physical evidence in the same way as a cued recall invitation, a youth can be reminded about the evidence, e.g., *“Earlier, I said there are some pictures/screen shots/chat logs that we might talk about. I would like to talk about them now.”* The interviewer should show only one piece of evidence at a time, cuing the content and inviting a narrative from the youth. There are several approaches to consider when presenting evidence and each is predicated on the needs of the youth. For some youth, it is advisable to explain the concrete details of the evidence before offering the evidence to the youth to give the youth time to process what they are about to see. This is true whether or not there is graphic content. In addition, an interviewer should prompt the youth to let the interviewer know if and when the youth is ready to look at the evidence, thus providing an extra layer of assessment of the youth’s readiness to view the physical evidence. E.g. *“The first screen shot is from a video that was taken outside of the mall. The screen shot shows two people sitting next to each other in the front seat of a car. The person in the driver’s seat has dark hair and a mustache and is wearing glasses. The other person has long, blonde hair and a red top. Tell me when you are ready to see it.”* Once the youth acknowledges being ready, the interviewer hands the screen shot to the youth and asks the youth to narrate about it, *“Tell me everything you know about what is*



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*happening in this picture.*” Other similar prompts can be used, but interviewers should refrain from asking a yes/no question that allows for a simple denial, such as *“Is this you?”* Interviewers should also refrain from suggesting that the image is the youth, but instead allow the youth to put the evidence in context by inviting narrative. Follow-up questioning should draw out as many details as possible about the youth’s knowledge regarding the evidence using the techniques recommended in these Guidelines. Once evidence is presented, it should be put back in the folder and not left in plain view. The same process is followed for each piece of evidence presented.

If a youth denies knowing anything about the evidence, the interviewer can still ask questions related to surrounding details. For example, when a youth denies they are in a picture or screen shot, consider these approaches:

- *“Tell me what you know about this place. Do you recognize this place/room? Where is it? Have you been there before? Tell me all about that.”*
- [Pointing to each person pictured] - *“Tell me about this person. How do you know them? What do you know about them?”*

The interviewer will need to arrange with law enforcement to have temporary access to copies of the evidence during an interview. Law enforcement has the responsibility of preparing copies of the evidence and providing it for the interview. In the case of child sexual abuse material (a visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor or lascivious exhibition of the genitals, anus or pubic area), law enforcement should maintain care, custody, and control over the evidence during the interview process. This means that the law enforcement officer should be actively observing the interview while the forensic interviewer is handling the evidence with the youth. Law enforcement should manage the evidence once the interview is completed. Discuss the presentation of evidence with the local prosecutor’s office.

In the case of video evidence, law enforcement can print representative still images, rather than showing a video to the youth. Part of the evidence may be covered or masked if a youth demonstrates a need to do so. A youth can also be asked what they prefer and an interviewer can cover a portion of the image, as needed. Any covering or masking of an image should be documented for the record so that image modifications are captured for court purposes. The interviewer should continuously assess the youth throughout the process. This can be done through supportive statements and inquiries, such as, *“How are you doing so far? Do you have questions for me? Let me know if you need to take a break.”* Continuous assessment and routine check ins will guide if, when and how evidence is presented. Supportive services should also be available immediately following an interview if the youth requires them.

### 6. Closure

Closure is the final component of a forensic interview and provides an opportunity for the interviewer to review hypotheses and assess the child’s readiness to end, concerns, safety, and level of support. The goal is for the child to transition from an interview in a state of equilibrium.

Before ending an interview, the interviewer should take a break to check with observers and consider additional topics that should be raised with the child. Recording of the child should

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continue during the break. After the break, additional and clarifying questions can be asked before ending an interview.

During this last component of an interview, it is preferable to ask, *“Is there something else you want to tell me?”* It is often possible to get an indication of the level of support for the child and possible recantation risk by asking questions such as:

- *“How do you feel about talking to me?”*
- *“How do you feel about leaving with [name of person who brought child to interview]?”*
- *“What do you think [names of caregivers, and possibly suspect] will say/think about you talking to me today?”*

The interviewer can also invite the child to ask questions (e.g., *“Do you have questions for me about what we talked about?”*). The child may have questions about what is likely to happen next, and the interviewer can briefly describe expected next steps, taking care to do so in a developmentally appropriate way and not to make any promises that are beyond his/her control. The child can also be prepared for any referrals that will be made as a result of an interview. For example, *“Maybe we can get someone for you to talk to about this,”* or *“I’m going to ask another person to try to help you.”*

It may be informative to also ask the child to talk about the last time they saw or communicated with the suspect. If there are still concerns about possible abuse or the child’s safety, especially when the child has not made a disclosure, the interviewer should help the child identify an appropriate adult or adults with whom the child could talk. Some interviewers will provide their contact information to the child, perhaps a business card, and some refer the child and his/her family to other members of the multidisciplinary team for ongoing support or if they need to initiate contact again.

It is important to conclude on a positive note, usually by shifting the discussion to more neutral topics. The child can be thanked for his/her effort. For instance, *“Thank you for talking to me today,”* and the interviewer may then return discussion to another neutral activity. It is important for the child to regain composure and leave feeling as good as possible about his/her participation in an interview.

The interviewer should leave the option open for the child to be seen again and provide information regarding that process. *“If you think of something else, you can let X know and we can set up another time to talk.”*

# Acknowledgements

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