StepWise 360

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Abstract

The StepWise approach to interviewing is an evidence-based, memory-informed, semi-structured model for conducting investigative interviews that has been in use since the 1990s. In Canada, the StepWise approach to interviewing is widely recognized as a leading model for interviewing children and youth in the criminal and child protection context. The StepWise 360, the latest iteration, incorporates new theoretical, empirical, and practical developments in the field. A key feature of the StepWise 360 is that it is adaptable to various types of investigators, such as police, child protection workers, or mental health specialists, to gather reliable information from victims, witnesses, suspects, and clients of all ages. Each step of the StepWise model is discussed within the context of relevant empirical literature. Methods to tailor the interview to each interviewee in a client centered, trauma-informed manner, and deal with present real-world limitations are discussed.

Keywords: *StepWise, StepWise 360, child interview guidelines, forensic interview, types of interview questions, funnel approach to interviewing, interview steps, interview training*

The StepWise Interview, developed by Dr. John Yuille in the 1980s in collaboration with lawyers, clinicians, and law enforcement, was one of the first evidence-based interviewing approaches created for interviewing children (Yuille et al., 2009; Yuille, 1996). The approach continues to follow the best-practice guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA; 2006) (e.g., utilizing open-ended questions, conducting practice narratives, and rapport building) and the National Children's Alliance standards (2023) (e.g., utilizing multidisciplinary teams during investigations, conducting case reviews, and tailoring the interview with cultural context). To uphold these standards, StepWise is continually updated (most recently to StepWise 360) in response to new lab and field research. The StepWise 360 is currently used by many law enforcement and child protection agencies throughout Canada (Brubacher et al., 2018).

The StepWise 360 and its previous iterations have developed over the last three decades in tandem with many similar forensic interviewing guidelines such as the APSAC Practice Guidelines (APSAC Taskforce, 2023), the Enhanced Cognitive Interview (ECI; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Paulo et al., 2013), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol (Ahern et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2007; Karni-Visel et al., 2019), CornerHouse protocol (Anderson et al., 2010), ChildFirst protocol (previously *Finding Words*, developed in collaboration with the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse and Cornerhouse; Farrell & Vieth, 2020), the 10-Step Interview (adapted from the NICHD protocol; Lyon, 2014), the NCAC Child Forensic Interview (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019), and others. Because each approach draws from a shared literature and best-practice guidelines, there is significant overlap among forensic interviewing models. For example, all approaches encourage rapport building, beginning the discussion of the topic of concern with broad, open-ended questions, avoiding leading and suggestive questions, and so on. However, there is some disagreement on the best way to structure a forensic interview. The NICHD takes a more structured approach that provides a script and instructions, while others, such as Cornerhouse, ChildFirst, and the StepWise 360, take a more flexible semi-structured approach.

The Problem of Adherence—Teaching, Resources, and Continuing Education

The structured approach of the NICHD was motivated largely by the lack of adherence of even trained forensic interviewers to best-practice guidelines (see discussion in Lamb et al., 2008). As such, Lamb and colleagues developed a scripted protocol (which includes what to say) to guide interviewers into following best practices (see Orbach et al., 2000). The NICHD protocol has been empirically validated and shown to increase the completeness and accuracy of children's reports (Lamb et al., 2007; Orbach et al., 2000). It has since been modified to enhance emotional support for interviewees (Ahern et al., 2019; Karni-Visel et al., 2019).

The StepWise has always followed a semi-structured (rather than a structured) approach to forensic interviewing. We advocate for a semi-structured approach to ensure that each interview can be catered to different contexts and interviewees. For instance, some interviewees may have a cultural background that requires a culturally-agile approach. Being culturally-agile means recognizing that each person has a unique history influenced by their cultural background, which may impact their behavior, language use, and social norms. We acknowledge, however, that semi-structured approaches, like the StepWise, may require relatively more interviewer training, although protocol adherence is an issue faced by all models irrespective of whether they are structured or semi-structured. Ongoing training is often needed to address this challenge, specifically *interviewer drift*—falling back on bad habits (Lamb et al., 2002a; Mitcheson et al., 2009; Read et al., 2013).

We work to address interviewer drift in two ways. First, we advocate for (and offer) ongoing training, refresher courses, job-relevant resources, and training guides to supplement StepWise 360 training. Indeed, intensive training followed by continued learning have been shown to improve interviewer drift (Lamb et al., 2002b). Second, we use evidence-based learning strategies derived from both basic research on learning and memory and research on education and teaching pedagogy in our training. Next, we discuss three such strategies, content scaffolding, generative learning, and spacing (though further strategies are employed, we constrain the discussion to these points for brevity).

Content scaffolding involves tuning the learning support to the knowledge and skills of the learner and continually monitoring comprehension (Azevedo et al., 2011; Chi et al., 2001; Theelen & van Breukelen, 2022). In StepWise training, we move slowly from the basics of formulating effective questions, to memory-informed interviewing, to transcripts and exercises related to specific steps of the StepWise 360, to videos of multiple steps, ending with a live practice interview. Thus, the material builds on itself from the ground up. Regular question periods and end-of-day comments and feedback allow instructors to continually monitor comprehension and adapt learning strategies to the needs of the learners. Finally, real-world examples of concepts are tailored to the existing knowledge and context that each learner comes with (e.g., a social worker will come in with a different knowledge base, context, and aim than a police officer). Thus, our approach is consistent with a content-scaffolding approach to teaching.

Another learning strategy that is used in StepWise 360 training is *generative learning*. Decades of research has shown that learner-generated content is remembered better than read or provided information, with meta-analysis showing that the fewer constraints that are put on what is generated, the stronger the generation effect (McCurdy et al., 2020). Trainers employ generative learning by querying learners on concepts and providing the opportunity for small-group exercises before explaining and reinforcing the relevant empirical research in a lecture format. Learners thus generate the ideas both in small groups and in self-reflection exercises rather than through passive learning alone.

Consistent with psychological research on distributed practice (i.e., spacing effects) and long-term retention of information, trainers also provide distributed learning by *spacing* out learning both on a daily scale (inserting pop quizzes and various formative assessments) and a weekly scale (revisiting important topics after one or more days from initial learning) that have been shown to improve retention (Cepeda et al., 2006; Son & Simon, 2012).

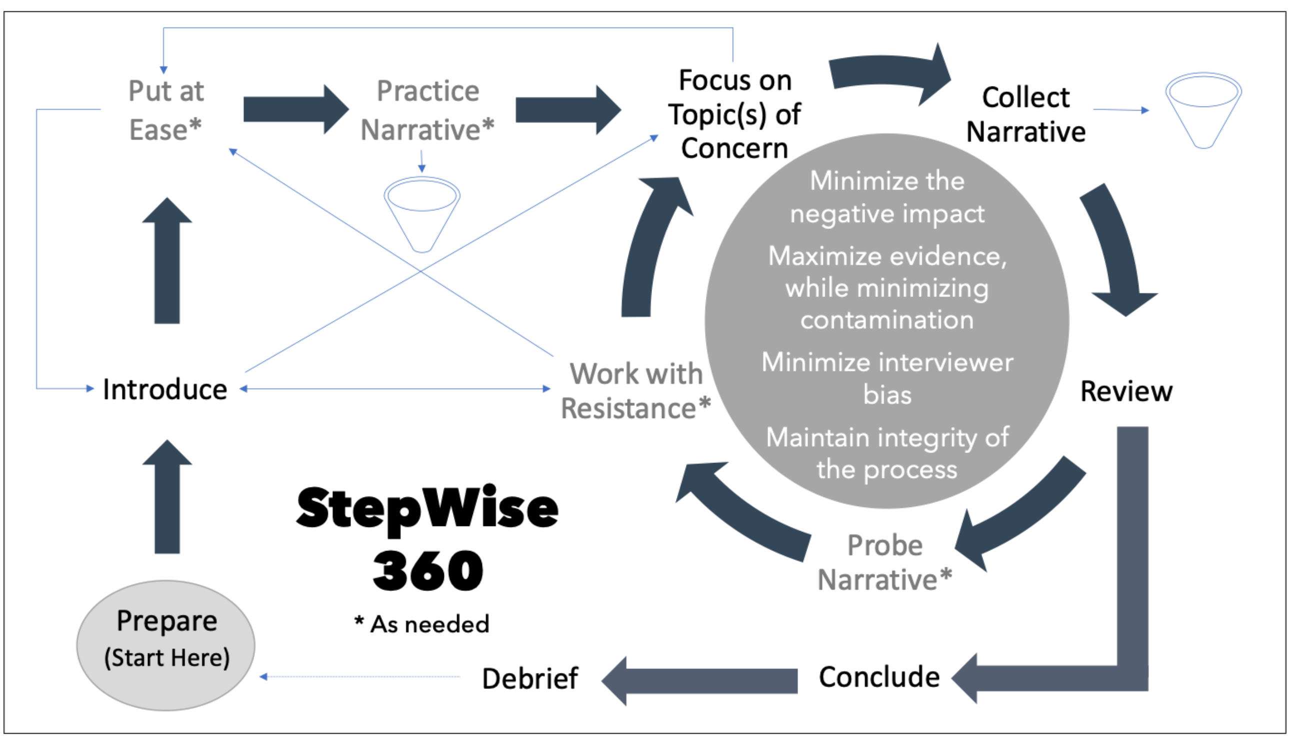
The semi-structured approach demands more interviewer expertise than do fully structured interview formats. Though some amount of interviewer drift will occur, we take a pragmatic approach by employing best practices in teaching and learning and following up with organizations to support continuing education to minimize interviewer drift as much as possible.

Overview of the StepWise 360

The StepWise 360 was designed with four goals in mind: (a) to minimize the negative impact of the interview on the interviewee, (b) to minimize interviewer bias, (c) to maximize evidence while minimizing evidence contamination, and (d) to maintain the integrity of the process (as defined by the workplace context). The StepWise 360 includes 11 steps (see Figure 1) designed to achieve these goals. As we will illustrate, steps are labelled as *mandatory* or *as needed*. The *wise* of StepWise 360 refers to the wisdom to know when and how to modify the structure, steps, and strategies to meet the unique needs of clients, the distinctive features of cases, and the different requirements of our workplace contexts, including those caused by often-limited resources (i.e., time and workload constraints). The goal is to provide interviewers with a flexible approach so that they can conduct the best interview possible within the contexts of the real world while acknowledging that there is no such thing as a perfect interview. Believing that interviewer development is an ongoing process, rather than an end goal, learners are encouraged (and provided the resources) to continue their training on the job, conduct self-evaluations, and participate in formalized peer review.

In the remainder of this paper, we provide a description of each of the *steps* of the StepWise 360, discuss the empirical literature that supports the steps, and provide examples of how to tailor various steps. A detailed instruction of how to carry out each step is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we aim to provide enough detail to describe the structure and value of each step while illustrating the evidence base for the StepWise 360.

Figure 1: The Progression of a StepWise 360 Interview



Note. An asterisk indicates that the step is completed on an "as-needed" basis.

Describing the Steps of the StepWise 360

Prepare Step (Mandatory)

Objectives and Strategies

The first step to any interview is to prepare. The objective of the Prepare step is to gather information about the client, case, and context, develop a semi-structured interview plan, and set up the place and time of the interview. Some research about the interviewee (from primary caregivers or other sources) will be required to anticipate cultural, developmental, physical, and/or emotional needs prior to the interview. Accommodating these needs starts with selecting the best available location and time to conduct the interview. Preparing also means reviewing relevant policies and procedures as well as learning and developing hypotheses about the case to ensure that workplace requirements are being met. Rohrabaugh and colleagues (2015) offer a useful review of considerations during the preparation phase of an interview.

Rationale for a Mandatory Prepare Step

The Prepare step is necessary and mandatory first to uphold the American Psychological Association's (2003) guidelines for maintaining cultural competence. Specifically, background research is necessary to uncover culturally unique language, symptoms, norms, gender roles, and social class structures (see Rioja & Resenfeld, 2018, for a review). Learning about an interviewee's culture, developmental level, mental health, and physical needs respects their individual differences and can aid in understanding their interviewing behaviors (APSAC Taskforce, 2023; National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Russell, 2004; Walker et al., 2013).

The Prepare step is also useful for rapport building. A common rapport building strategy in many forensic interviewing protocols is to ask open-ended questions about a neutral topic to assess the needs and verbal competence of the interviewee (Anderson et al., 2010; Hershkowitz, 2011; Price et al., 2016). Researching the cultural background, needs, and hobbies of the interviewee can help with a baseline assessment of verbal competence as well as to plan an appropriate topic for rapport-building discussions (neutral topics are useful for both the Put at Ease step and the Practice Collecting the Narrative step, both discussed shortly).

Finally, the Prepare step is useful for bias mitigation. A growing number of studies have shown that confirmation bias—the propensity to confirm one's pre-existing belief—can impact both the search for and the interpretation of information and is a significant issue for forensic investigators (Kassin et al., 2013; Nickerson, 1998; Rassin et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2022). Hindsight bias —the propensity to overestimate the likelihood of an event once outcome information is known— has also been identified as an issue in forensic psychology and law (see Giroux et al., 2016, for a review). The literature on bias mitigation suggests that considering multiple hypotheses is a useful strategy for reducing hindsight bias and confirmation bias (Anderson, 1982; Arkes et al., 1988; Carli & Leonard, 1989; Hirt & Markman, 1995; Lord et al., 1984; van Brussel et al., 2020; see Larrick 2004 and Neal et al., 2022, for reviews). The Prepare step provides this opportunity, as investigators can (and should) generate multiple hypotheses about the case prior to meeting with the interviewee. This practice is encouraged by academics, existing forensic interviewing protocols, and policymakers (Anderson et al., 2010; APSAC Taskforce, 2023; Kassin et al., 2013; Rahrabaugh et al., 2015). This is a mandatory part of the StepWise 360 Prepare step given research showing that professionals often have poor insight into their biases and how to manage them (Zappala, et al., 2018).

Tailoring the Prepare Step

As we will illustrate, preparation can lead to information about your interviewee that is useful for tailoring other steps (e.g., Introduce step; Work with Resistance step, etc.). Although available information about interviewees will vary across contexts, the more complex a case is, the more time should be spent preparing (Yarbrough et al., 2013). For example, when interviewing a child, contacting a parent or guardian before the interview is recommended to ensure that the interview is tailored to the developmental and emotional needs of the child being interviewed. Although preparation is important, we acknowledge that there are situations in which interviewers will have very little time to prepare. However, we argue that there is always time for *some* preparation (e.g., setting up the room, generating hypotheses).

Introduce Step (Mandatory)

Objective and Strategies

The Introduce step is an opportunity to explain the purpose of the interview, the process that will be followed, and the policies involved in a trauma-informed manner that respects informed consent. Interviewers should introduce everyone in the room, including their role, and explain the purpose of the interview, note taking and recording, and the rights of the interviewee, all while using language that is appropriate for the developmental level and culture of the interviewee. It is also the first opportunity for the interviewer to check in with the interviewee to ensure that their needs are met.

Rationale for the Introduce Step

One of the main goals of the introduce step is to create a safe, predictable, collaborative environment where the interviewee can make an informed decision to participate and feel comfortable providing a complete and accurate report. Establishing safety, trust, collaboration (where possible), empowerment, and role clarity and managing power imbalances are all consistent with trauma-informed best-practices (see Goldenson et al., 2022, for a review). Providing interviewees with a brief description of how the interview will proceed, an explanation of any recording equipment, and key policy requirements is also a recommended best-practice (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019). Predictability is often reassuring to anxious individuals and those experiencing acute trauma reactions (Haskel & Randall, 2019).

Tailoring the Introduce Step

A semi-structured approach allows interviewers to adapt this step: (a) to their context (e.g., victim vs. suspect interview; workplace policies) to maintain the integrity of the process and (b) to the developmental, cognitive, and/or emotional level of the interviewee in order to conduct a client-centered interview (Ballard & Austin, 1999; National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019; Poole, 2016; Walker et al., 2013).

For example, imagine a police officer is interviewing a youth. The manner in which the roles are explained will vary depending on the youth's age, as well as the youth's personal, familial, or cultural history with law enforcement. Past negative experiences with law enforcement could be addressed by focusing on the officer's role in providing the youth every opportunity to share what happened in their own words rather than focusing on their role in maintaining public safety. If the youth has felt unfairly treated by the police in the past, the latter might produce reluctance. Note how information gathered in the Prepare step can be useful here.

Put at Ease Step (As Needed)

Objectives and Strategies

The main objective of the Put at Ease step is as it sounds—to allow everyone in the room to settle. This step should be employed as needed when interviewing someone displaying stress, anxiety, or reluctance. By reluctance, we mean an interviewee's inability or unwillingness to converse with the interviewer or talk about certain topics. In the StepWise 360, reluctance due to discord and strong emotions are addressed in this step, while ambivalence-related reluctance is tackled in the Work with Resistance step (discussed later). At minimum, the interviewer engages in a conversation or activity to assess the interviewee's baseline level of communication and develop rapport. The interviewer can return to this step at any point in the interview.

Rationale for the Put at Ease Step

The Put at Ease step is placed third in the order of interview steps to highlight the importance of identifying and addressing reluctance early in the interview process (Blasbalg et al., 2019; Lewy et al., 2015). When reluctance is present, the interviewer should try to identify its source, as different types of reluctance should be addressed differently. For example, trauma-related avoidance will need a different approach than reluctance due to a lack of rapport with the interviewer or ambivalence about sharing incriminating or sensitive information (Haskel & Randall, 2019; Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Vrij et al., 2014).

Practice Collecting the Narrative Step (As Needed)

Objectives and Strategies

In the Practice Collecting the Narrative step, the interviewer demonstrates the types of questions they will ask and shows the interviewee the level of detail in the answers that they are seeking. The interviewee is asked to discuss a personally relevant event from their past (often identified during the Prepare step) or a neutral topic such as what they have done prior to the interview. While discussing the event, the interviewer inserts interview instructions (commonly known as "ground rules") that illustrate the differences between the style of questions and expectations in an interview compared with those in a conversation with respect to the depth, breadth, and accuracy of their report, as well as features of an interview that might otherwise be misinterpreted (e.g., "If I ask a question more than once it isn't because I don't believe you, I just want to make sure I get it right.").[1] Ideally, interview instructions are gradually inserted from the start of the interview as relevant examples come up in the discussion, allowing the interviewer to explain the instructions with an example that is personally relevant to the interviewee. However, certain mandatory instructions (such as correcting the interviewer if they make a mistake) may need to be explained by the end of this step if a natural example does not arise (see Anderson et al., 2016).

Rationale for the Practice Collecting the Narrative Step

Experimental and field research with children suggests that practice narratives can lead to more details and higher accuracy during the substantial portion of interviews (Hershkowitz, 2011; Price et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2004; Whiting & Price, 2017). Discussion of neutral episodic events during narrative practice has been shown to be particularly effective. Specifically, Price and colleagues (2016) showed that the NICHD protocol, which includes discussion of hobbies and interests followed by a discussion of a neutral episodic event, was superior to the Memorandum of Good Practice model, which doesn't stipulate that the event should be episodic (e.g., school, television, etc.). Specifically, children interviewed with the NICHD protocol produced more productive responses to open-ended prompts about events during the substantive portion of the interview.

Although they were first a part of child interview guidelines, the benefits of practice and using interview instructions during the interview can be beneficial for adults as well (Ali et al., 2020; Vrij et al., 2014). Specifically, Ali and colleagues (2020) showed that adults and older adults who were provided with interview instructions and practice performed better than those without interview instructions and practice in response to difficult-to-answer questions. Participants also provided subjective reports of their experiences during practice, which included improved emotion management, familiarization with the interview process, less inclination to fill in gaps in memory (i.e., guessing), and greater comfort providing qualifying information about things they were unsure about. That said, Brubacher and colleagues (2015) have cautioned that the efficacy and best approach for implementing specific interview instructions are still in their infancy.

[1] Based on feedback from our Indigenous partners, we have adopted the term "interview instructions" rather than "ground rules" in an effort to decolonize our language.

Practice narratives also increase predictability, which is important for trauma-informed interviewing (Haskel & Randall, 2019) and help the interviewer gauge an interviewee's baseline functioning and response style. Thus, the interviewer can tailor the interview to the strengths and needs of the interviewee (Rohrabaugh et al., 2015). Practice narratives can also reveal hot spots (i.e., a change in response style that might indicate a point of importance or an inconsistency in the statement, or between the statement and evidence) and, consequently, indicate possible topics to follow up on later (Palena et al., 2019; Yarbrough et al., 2013). Finally, practice can help address ambivalence by moving interviewees slowly from less difficult topics (e.g., What was going on in your life around that time?) to the topic of concern (e.g., What happened the night you were arrested?). In the process, the interviewer may be able to test hypotheses about offence dynamics and the interviewee's motivation to disclose (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

The Focus on the Topic of Concern (Mandatory)

Objectives and Strategies

The Focus on the Topic of Concern step prompts the interviewee to talk about the topic(s) under investigation in the least leading way possible. The structure of questions flows from broad, open-ended questions that explore the interviewee's *free narrative* (e.g., "Tell me what you are here to talk about today.") to increasingly focused, open-ended prompts that cue the general context (e.g., tell me what happened last weekend) or the general topic of investigation (e.g., "Tell me what happened with Trent last weekend.").

Rationale for This Step

The approach described above follows evidence-based best-practice guidelines being used by many forensic interviewing models (i.e., moving from broad, non-leading cues to more focused cues as needed; APSAC Taskforce, 2023). To help interviewers prepare and deliver such cues in a logical, predictable, and defensible manner, we also provide them with increasingly focused categories of cues (free narrative to general context to general topic). By teaching interviewers how to narrow in on a topic of concern in this way (as opposed to only providing them with specific prompts), we equip them with a technique that can be adapted to a variety of situations and contexts.

Tailoring This Step

When discussing the topic of concern, broader prompts are typically used with victims (e.g., "Tell me what you came here to talk about.") than with suspects (e.g., "As you know, you've been charged with X. Tell me about that."). If reluctance is anticipated, interviewers can prepare different prompts unique to the case at hand. If these fail to cue the topic, interviewers can move to other steps (e.g., Put at Ease; Work with Resistance) depending on the type of reluctance encountered, or pause the interview and attempt it another day (APSAC Taskforce, 2023). Closed questions are avoided, unless required by policy. For example, a closed question—such as "Did your uncle hit you?"—may be asked in the child protection context when abuse is suspected, and when the child appears reluctant. "Yes" responses are to be followed by broad, open-ended questions (e.g., "Tell me more about 'x.'")

When multiple topics are to be covered, interviewers should give thought to the order of topics. This may be done from a trauma-informed lens by allowing the interviewee to choose the order of topics (e.g., from least to most distressing; Haskell & Randall, 2019), or with the aim of eliciting information (e.g., from topics that the interviewer already knows about to less familiar topics; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2014).

Collect the Narrative and Review Steps (Mandatory)

Objectives and Strategies

The Collect the Narrative step focuses on gathering the memory evidence in a manner that minimizes contamination. Again, the structure of questions flows from broad to increasingly focused, beginning with open-ended questions that elicit the interviewee's free narrative (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened."; "What else happened?"), to slightly more focused questions that elicit missing details (e.g., "Tell me what you were feeling when…"), to more focused, open-ended cued-recall prompts that ask the interviewee to elaborate (e.g., "How did he hit you?"; "Describe where in the house the hitting took place."), or clarify (e.g., "What does "sexing" mean?") their statement. We call this process of moving from broad to focused questions *funneling*.

Interviewers are tasked with exhausting the interviewee's free narrative from beginning to end without interrupting and only moving down the funnel as needed to flesh out—as needed—details about Time, Reaction, Object, People, Intent/Impact, Conversation, Action, and Location (TROPICAL). To help the interviewer and interviewee stay focused, different parts (or scenes) of the free narrative are labelled in the interviewee's own words. Each part is then funneled, preferably in an order chosen by the interviewee. During the Review step, interviewers review their notes to see what is missing and then decide on next steps, either individually or in collaboration with a monitor.

Rationale for These Steps

The structure of questions described above follows evidence-based best-practice guidelines (e.g., start with broad, non-leading open-ended questions to exhaust free recall; cue missing information with non-leading open-ended prompts; flesh out details as needed with cued-recall prompts; review) that are consistent across forensic interviewing models (Ahern et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2010; Farrell & Vieth, 2020; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Karni-Visel et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2007; Lyon, 2014; Newlin et al., 2015; Yarbrough et al., 2013; Yuille et al., 2009). Somewhat unique from other approaches is the specific way in which we (a) funnel, moving from questions that elicit the free narrative, to questions that elicit missing details to questions that ask the interviewee to elaborate and clarify; and (b) focus recall on one labeled part or detail at a time. The former is supported by research on effective and ineffective question prompts (APSAC Taskforce, 2023), including research showing how questions about perceptions and conversations can elicit missing information without compromising the quality of the statement (Henderson et al., 2023), and the latter, by new developments in research using the Enhanced Cognitive Interview (ECI; Geiselman et al., 1986) protocol. For example, recent adaptations of the ECI have tested the Category-Clustering Recall (CCR) mnemonic in which witnesses focus on one category of information at a time (objects that were at the crime scene; the actions that occurred during the crime; the sounds and voices that they remember, etc.) and provide a report of each. Consistently across studies, adding CCR to the protocol increased the number of correct details reported without affecting accuracy (Ma et al., 2021; Paulo et al., 2016; 2017; 2021; Shahvaroughi et al., 2020; Thorley, 2018). Our approach to funneling draws off the same fundamental strategy, though the exact questions and order of questions may differ from CCR.

Tailoring the Collect the Narrative Steps

This step should be tailored to the aim of the interview: It should be shorter when the aim is to gather essential facts during a preliminary interview, and longer when the aim is to exhaust memory as part of a comprehensive interview. Irrespective of the type of interview being conducted, interviewers must listen for the type of memory being discussed (episodic vs. repeated event memory) and adjust their questions accordingly (Brubacher et al., 2014). To minimize interviewer-caused errors, broad and focused questions should be adjusted to the developmental level of the interviewee (APSAC Taskforce, 2023). To build a strong case, hypotheses about the case should be tested with appropriate questions.

Probe the Narrative Step (As Needed)

The Probe the Narrative step is meant to be used in response to issues with memory retrieval or to test hypotheses about incomplete or suspicious disclosures (e.g., the interviewee has reported something that contradicts evidence). The strategies and tools used in this step can assist an interviewee to retrieve additional details from their memory or allow the intentionally deceptive interviewee to provide clearer evidence of lies. This step requires more advanced interviewing skills, such as knowing how to use more focused (and sometimes leading) questions, ask questions about evidence in a strategic manner, ask unanticipated questions, use drawings or floor plans, and cue memory in novel ways (Derksen & Connolly 2023; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Hartwig et al., 2014; Newlin et al., 2015; Vrij et al., 2010). If used improperly, the strategies and tools used in this step can increase the negative impact on the interviewee or contaminate memory evidence. For example, using context re-instatement can be triggering for traumatized victims, and using backwards recall or floor plans can be too difficult for children or adults with specific disabilities (Haskell & Randall, 2019). Hence, the Probe the Narrative step should only be used if necessary. If undertaken, it should be conducted in a mindful and cautious manner that is tailored to each interviewee.

Work with Resistance Step (As Needed)

The Work with Resistance step was added to address the fact that any interviewee might feel ambivalent about, and therefore appear resistant to, talking about the topic(s) of concern, regardless of whether they are a victim, witness, or suspect. Resistance can take various forms such as refusing to talk, being deceptive, being uncooperative or aggressive, and so on. This step is placed toward the end of the interview for a couple of reasons: (1) to give interviewees the opportunity to freely provide their version of events, and (2) to give interviewers the opportunity to gather sufficient evidence of an interviewee's resistance so that they can effectively address it.

The Work with Resistance step requires more advanced interviewing knowledge and skills: (1) how to challenge hot spots in a manner that demonstrates compassion and promotes autonomy (e.g., "I noticed that every time I ask you about what's happening at home, you look sad, turn your body toward the door, and talk less. If you're uncomfortable talking about what's happening at home, you can just tell me you aren't ready to talk about that. That's ok."), (2) an understanding of motivational interviewing and how to apply it to the context at hand (e.g., change the course of the discussion away from the topic of concern and onto identifying and neutralizing the causes of the resistance; highlighting the benefits of disclosing; identify strategies that would facilitate this process; Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Tedeschini & Jung, 2018), (3) how to present evidence strategically (e.g., introduce evidence about a known topic of concerns to start the disclosure process and motivate the client to talk about other suspected concerns; introduce less significant evidence to initiate a disclosure, while preserving more significant evidence for court; Hartwig et al., 2014), and (4) how to conduct the interview in a trauma-informed manner (e.g., make the interview process more predictable by telling the client early on that you have information to discuss with them later, empower the client through choices as to when and how to discuss this information, and tailor the evidence presentation to minimize its negative impact on the client; Haskell & Randall, 2019; Hervé, 2024).

This step needs to be prepared and executed in a deliberate and thoughtful manner. If strategies are not used to minimize negative impact (e.g., traumatic memories are introduced haphazardly), the interviewer runs the risk of psychologically harming the client. Further, if the interviewer executes these strategies in a leading manner, this may contaminate the memory evidence (and degrade the prosecutorial value of evidence in the process). Therefore, training, practice, and peer feedback are necessary to ensure these steps are executed in a non-leading manner that minimizes negative impact.

Conclude and Debrief Steps (Mandatory)

The main objective of the Conclude step is to end the interview in a conscientious manner so that a positive working relationship is maintained with the interviewee. This requires the interviewer to carefully decide when to conclude the interview and how to best conclude it. With regard to the former, the interviewer might conclude the interview because the aims of the interview have been achieved or because the interviewee is becoming fatigued. With regard to the latter, the interviewer should make it clear when the interview has been concluded by, for example, bookending it (e.g., "We are done talking for today."). This is a simple way to help reorient the interviewee to the present, after a period of recalling past events, which are often emotionally charged. The interviewer should thank the interviewee for attending the interview and provide information about next steps, which may be to go and reunite with the parent or support person. Some interviewees may require time to return to baseline functioning. Strategies for accomplishing this are similar to those used to build rapport in the Put at Ease step and may include a discussion of a neutral or positive topic or (when interviewing a child) an activity, such as drawing or puzzles (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019).

Once concluded, the interview should be debriefed, which is to ensure the well-being of all parties involved. This step should start with debriefing the interviewee and anyone else involved in the interview (e.g., support person, interpreter). The reason for this is to connect people with necessary resources. Indeed, CSA survivors in particular are often in need of mental health services (Anderson, 2016; Bonomi et al., 2008; Dube et al., 2005; Walrath et al., 2003). This is also an opportunity to build a communication plan, how the interviewer will follow up with the interviewee to provide investigative updates.

Next, the case should be debriefed with the monitor or supervisors. This is key to identifying issues with the case that require further investigation, time-sensitive evidence that needs collecting, or safety concerns that need to be managed (Anderson, 2016; Newlin et al., 2015; National Children's Advocacy Center, 2019). When the client and case have been debriefed, this step provides the interviewer the opportunity to seek immediate feedback on their interviewing skills. As discussed earlier, peer reviews and feedback can help promote learning and protect against interviewer drift (Lamb et al., 2002b; Mitcheson et al., 2009). Moreover, consulting with peers can provide interviewers with emotional support, as many of the topics discussed in forensic interviews can be distressing for the interviewer (Horvath et al., 2020; Newlin et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Aside from dedicated child forensic interviewers working in child and youth advocacy centers, most forensic interviewers are tasked with interviewing a wide range of clients, from children to adults and victims to suspects. Furthermore, many interview contexts require flexibility and adaptability. Be it workload constraints, public safety concerns, time constraints, or lack of resources (just to name a few), forensic interviewers need to make tough decisions to conduct the best interview possible. Interviews also need to be adapted to the strengths, cultural history, and developmental level of the interviewee and should be trauma informed. This requires interview planning, knowledge, expertise, and experience. Ongoing training is needed to accomplish this.

The StepWise 360 offers this flexibility. The methods of the StepWise 360 are evidence-based and updated to be consistent with the current state of the art in empirical research, while StepWise training programs offer tools for career-long training and development.

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