

Fortin, L. (2014, Summer). The child forensic interview: Interplay between child and interviewer. *Perspectives: California Coalition on Sexual Offending Quarterly Newsletter*, pp. 1, 6. Available: www.ccoso.org.

The Child Forensic Interview: Interplay between Child and Interviewer

Laurie Fortin, LCSW, Clinical Coordinator

Forensic and Medical Program, Chadwick Center

Although best practice interviewing techniques of alleged child abuse victims have not changed greatly since author's article printed in *CCOSO Perspectives* (Spring, 2013), the field continues to work to perfect its approach. Researched based protocols such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol have emphasized a phased approach with an open-ended, narrative elaborative focus because it has shown to increase accuracy, details, and quality information from children (Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb and Horowitz, 2007; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin and Horowitz, 2000).

Such efforts have decreased concerns about false allegations; however, the field remains concerned about false denials and about the reluctance of children to disclose sexual abuse in formalized settings. Although we cannot change factors associated with abuse dynamics and/or abuse insidiousness that contribute to false denials or delays (e.g., close victim/perpetrator relationship, perceived non-supportive caretaker, gender, age, fear, etc), the field has taken a closer look at the reluctance of children within the interview setting and the malleability of that setting.

Factors that affect children's behavior and responsiveness within the interview has shown to be dependent on the quality of the interaction between the child and the interviewer; the strategies employed by the interviewer; and the timing of the introduction of substantive/sensitive topics (Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, and Horowitz, 2006). Most protocols to date, including the NICHD, have emphasized cognitive factors associated with children's memory retrieval and reporting in interview settings and have neglected to address the emotional factors that may affect a child's level of cooperativeness and informativeness.

Lamb, Hershkowitz, and Lyon (2013) compared the rates of disclosure when supportive versus unsupportive techniques were utilized by interviewers when interviewing child victims of intra-familial abuse where independent evidence of abuse existed. They found that interviewer behavior significantly affected the likelihood that children would make valid allegations. Allegation/disclosure rates increased 18.8 % when supportive techniques were utilized rather than nonsupportive.

Many children may exhibit both verbal and nonverbal clues of reluctance during the rapport- building phase of the interview. In this case, interviewers must engage in more meaningful interactions by demonstrating increased supportiveness of children by inviting them to share about recent experiences; showing interest in what it is they are talking about; echoing, acknowledging, and/or exploring a child's feelings; and not introducing sensitive topics prematurely (Lamb et al, 2013). Hershkowitz and colleagues (2006) found that interviewers actually acted to the contrary when faced with reluctant or uncooperative children, by asking more intrusive questions, showing unsupportiveness, and introducing sensitive topics prematurely, all of which proved to be counterproductive because they did not address the child's emotional needs. Researchers concluded that interviewers should be more, not less, supportive of resistant and reluctant children.

Fortin, L. (2014, Summer). The child forensic interview: Interplay between child and interviewer. *Perspectives: California Coalition on Sexual Offending Quarterly Newsletter*, pp. 1, 6. Available: www.ccoso.org.

Attending to a child's emotionality in the interview setting has shown to be an important mechanism for decreasing reluctance and uncooperativeness in alleged victims. Being supportive, without being suggestive, however, is crucial for keeping with the efficacy of Interviewing Protocols and the acquisition of supportive techniques best met through ongoing training, supervision, and monitoring.

References

Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., Lamb, M., Sternberg, K. & Horowitz, D. (2006). Dynamics of forensic interviews with suspected abuse victims who do not disclose abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30, 753-769.

Hershkowitz, I., Fisher, S., Lamb, M., & Horowitz, D. (2007). Improving credibility assessment in child sexual abuse allegations: The role of the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31, 99-110.

Lamb, M., Hershkowitz, I., & Lyon, T. (2013). Interviewing victims and suspected victims who are reluctant to talk. *American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Advisor*, 25 (4), 16-19.

Orbach Y, Hershkowitz I, Lamb M. E., Sternberg K. J., Esplin P. W., Horowitz D. (Eds). (2000). Assessing the value of structured protocols for forensic interviews of alleged abuse victims. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24, 733-752.