



## INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

Children at one time were regarded as unreliable witnesses. However, given correct interviewing techniques they can provide good quality evidence.

Evidence from children can present challenges but it is equally true that interviewers and those handling evidence from children may create many problems themselves. Children have good memories, but due to limited vocabularies, or a lack of motivation, the brevity or lack of detail in their answers may be misconstrued as a poor or unreliable memory.

Frequent issues that present in children's interviews include:

### *Characteristics of the interviewer*

- Some interviewers may be disliked as they make the child feel unimportant
- The interviewer seems bored or disbelieving, or treats the child as if less intelligent or younger than he/she is
- The interviewer may project embarrassment or a lack of confidence in approaching the issue, leaving the child feeling insecure

### *Questioning style*

- Using complex words and phrases
- Suggesting a response by the words of the question or personal manner
- Interviewer being verbose and interrupting the child

### *Personal issues for the child*

- Personal embarrassment around events that happened to the child
- Fear of revenge or punishment for disclosing the abuse

### *Motivational challenges and understanding*

- Often when children don't understand what an adult is saying, children don't know they don't understand. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to ensure that the child understands what is being said
- Children need to feel trusted and safe in the interview
- If a child feels the interviewer is mainly interested in punishment of the abuser he/she may be reluctant to speak freely and fully
- Children often do not want their parents present
- Children often recant a previous statement if they feel laboured with the same question, asked numerous times in different ways, or at different times by different people.

## GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES

The interviewer needs to establish ground rules. Most children incorrectly believe they have to give an answer to every question, and that there is a 'right' and 'wrong' answer. Children generally defer to the interviewer, and assume they can't say they don't know an answer, or ask for clarification of a question.

It's important to establish a rapport with the child to make him/her feel comfortable but the interviewer must avoid talking extensively and using complex words.

Children are very easily led by any answer that may be suggested by the interviewer, who must ensure that questions are open and non-judgemental in the way they are framed. Similarly children take a lead from the manner, tone and body language of the interviewer and any support person involved. This needs to be consciously managed in the interview.

### **Ethics**

### **Standards**

### **Personal Conduct**

### **Investigations**

### **Review**

### **Risk Assessments**

### **Advisory Services**

### **Compliance**

### **Training**

### **Sydney Head Office**

Suite 902

1-9 Chandos Street

St Leonards NSW 2065

PO Box 157

St Leonards NSW 1590

Australia

Tel (61) 02 9966 5920

Fax (61) 02 9966 5110

ABN 86 080 118 029

### **New Zealand**

PO Box 142

Hanmer Springs 7334

Tel (64) 027 315 5209

[admin@espcservices.com](mailto:admin@espcservices.com)

[www.espcservices.com](http://www.espcservices.com)

## INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES AND QUESTIONING STYLES

- *Leading questions:* Put most simply, leading questions are statements of fact that the child believes must be answered in agreement with the interviewer – ‘So he hit her with the racquet, did he?’ Leading questions are the least suitable questions for interviewing children. Interviewers must maintain a conscious discipline to ask open, neutral questions using words that do not suggest a response – especially when opening a new topic or field in the interview.
- *Leading by suggestion:* Consciously or unconsciously children often seek to please adult authority figures. Children readily take a lead from the body language, facial expressions and general manner of the interviewer and any support person present. Interviewers must maintain neutrality in their words and manner throughout their contact with child witnesses – when meeting, preparing, conducting and concluding the interview – and extend this discipline to any adult present.
- *Open questions:* Research has found that open questions give the most accurate answers from children. It is little more than a request for the child to talk – ‘Can you tell me what happened?’
- *Focused question:* This will bring the child’s attention to a particular issue – ‘Shall we talk about your tennis lessons?’
- *Specific question:* Similar to focused questions but requires more detail by the child – ‘What colour was Jenny’s tennis dress?’

## PRACTICAL GUIDELINES WHEN INTERVIEWING CHILDREN:

- Commence with a simple, open question – ‘Can you tell me what happened?’
- Allow the child to talk the subject right through – then ask if there’s anything else he/she wants to say, before proceeding to specific questions on details
- Use short sentences and break down complex questions into several short simple questions
- Avoid ambiguity
- Avoid repeating the same question from a different approach
- Avoid using practical pronouns (him, her, they) - use proper names (John, Robyn)
- Use short words
- Use simple verb construction
- Don’t use slang or legalese
- Don’t use double negatives or other complex grammatical constructions
- Don’t try to adopt the child’s jargon or vernacular – use clear, precise language
- Make clear the time / situation you are referring to – ‘When did you leave for school?’ is better than ‘When did that happen?’
- Use specific terms – ‘house’ or ‘classroom’ rather than ‘building’
- Be aware of the child’s numerical ability – avoid asking questions regarding time, amounts, or measurements if they are beyond the child’s ability or understanding
- Do not give forced-choice alternatives – ‘Did he touch you here or did he touch you there?’
- Avoid reverse negative statements (Is it not true that you saw her take it?)
- Understand passive wording - ‘Was it taken by her?’ is less threatening than ‘Did she take it?’
- Avoid using complex summaries with the child. Let the child’s evidence speak for itself.