American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children

Practice Guidelines

Forensic Interviewing in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse

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Introduction

Forensic interviewing of suspected child abuse victims is a specialized skill. It is investigative in nature and used to obtain information to help determine whether abuse has occurred. Forensic interviews are most often conducted by specially trained child forensic interviewers, law enforcement investigators, and child protective service workers. These interviews can provide critical evidence for both criminal child abuse investigations and civil child protection proceedings. Information from the interviews may also identify other victims, assist professionals responsible for assessing risk and safety needs of children and families, and facilitate case management decisions. Because children are often a key source of information about alleged abuse (especially child sexual abuse), it is critical that these interviews be done competently.

These Guidelines are an update of the 2002 **APSAC Practice Guidelines** on *"Investigative Interviewing in Cases of Alleged Child Abuse."* They reflect current knowledge about best practices related to forensic interviews, and should be considered in conjunction with the 2011 **APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment – Third Edition** (see especially Chapter 20, *"Interviewing Children"* by Saywitz, Lyon & Goodman). They are aspirational and intended to encourage the highest level of interview proficiency and to offer direction in the development of training for 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 interview children to obtain history as part of a medical evaluation.

Based on practical experience and empirical research conducted over the last three decades, these Guidelines are offered with the understanding that there is no single correct way to interview a suspected child abuse victim. Best practices will continue to evolve and change as new evidence becomes available. Currently, there are some aspects of interviewing for which there is limited or no evidence base. Interviewers will need to exercise their best 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.

Forensic interviews of children most often involve allegations of sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence and/or other serious crimes where the child is a victim or witness. The majority of forensic interviews involve children who have previously disclosed, and many of the recommendations herein are directed at such situations. However, many of the recommendations contained in these guidelines are also helpful and can be applied in cases of serious child neglect. For more specific guidance regarding interviewing in neglect cases, refer to the 2008 **APSAC Practice Guidelines** on *"Challenges in the Evaluation of Child Neglect."*

State statutes, court decisions, and local practices, as well as case characteristics may require interviewers to modify 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 fails to 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. Experts agree we do not yet know how to effectively elicit disclosures from child victims who are unwilling or extremely reluctant to disclose. Likewise, a decision not to pursue an abuse case in civil or criminal court does not necessarily mean there was no abuse.

I. Purpose of a Child Forensic Interview

The purpose of a forensic interview in a suspected abuse case is to elicit as much reliable information as possible from the child to help determine whether abuse happened. Interviewers attempt to collect facts in a neutral 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." Trauma to the child should be minimized, while considering all reasonable explanations for the allegations.

No interview is perfect. The child interview is only a part of a complete child protection or criminal investigation. Further investigation 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 – during a search of the scene as well as 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.

II. 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 and especially important when young children are being interviewed. This knowledge can be acquired through a combination of training, experience, supervision, and independent learning. Effective interviewers can be either male or female. Gender of the interviewer is usually less important than skill. However, if the child demonstrates a strong preference for a male or female interviewer, his/her 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 make every effort to be aware of new and existing research relevant to forensic interviewing, and use this knowledge to guide them in improving their practice.

2. **Participate in Ongoing Training and Peer Review Whenever Possible**
   A. Complete specialized child forensic interview training prior to assuming primary responsibility for conducting formal 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 in order to enhance skills.

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

A. Convey a warm, friendly and respectful manner while maintaining objectivity.
B. Be open-minded and consider all possible explanations for the allegation(s).
C. Attempt to equalize power and de-emphasize authority.
D. Provide non-contingent reinforcement.
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.

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 Competence

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 influences 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.

B. 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 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.

C. 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.

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 the 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 the interviewer and answer questions truthfully.

D. If a bilingual interviewer is unavailable, use qualified interpreters whenever the child is deaf/hard of hearing or when not proficient in English.

1) An experienced professional interpreter should interpret interview questions and responses for the interviewer and child.

2) The interpreter should be forewarned about the sensitive nature of the information that might be disclosed and instructed to interpret verbatim everything said by the interviewer and child.

3) 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.

4) As a general rule, family and friends should not be used as interpreters.

7. **Accommodate Any Special Needs the Child May Have, Including Physical and Developmental Disabilities**
   A. Find out whether the child has any special needs that should be taken into account before the 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 the 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 the interview; ideally in consultation with others who know the child (e.g., medical and school personnel, case managers, non-offending caregivers).
   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 level of functioning. During the initial stages of the 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 the interview.

III. 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 functioning) and the reason for the 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 suggest 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 his/her 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 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. The possible impact of delays on the child's ability to recall and willingness to report an experience should also be taken into account.

As a general rule, it is preferable to aim for shorter rather than longer interviews, especially with younger children. 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.

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 the interview, or cause destruction of evidence.

4. **Location/Setting**
It is recommended the 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 in unmarked cars and wear plain clothes. If 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 there is a reasonable degree of privacy.

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 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 the 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 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 generally preferred. Depending on jurisdictional protocols and individual circumstances, joint interviews involving more than one professional (e.g., child protection worker, law enforcement investigator) may be appropriate. If more than one person is present, a lead interviewer should be designated; usually the most experienced and qualified interviewer, or the person preferred by the child. Audio-visual equipment or one-way mirrors can be used to enable other members of the multidisciplinary child abuse investigative team to observe the interview. 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 the interview.

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 rules of conduct and the importance of refraining from direct involvement in the interview. It is best to have the support person sit behind the child and instruct him/her not to say anything or otherwise assist the child in responding.

C. **Parents**

In general, parents (or other relatives and caregivers) should not be present during the interview. If a child refuses to separate, it may be appropriate to allow the caregiver to be present during the initial stages of the interview. The caregiver should be instructed not to influence the child in any way. If possible, he or she 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 the interview.

D. **Suspected Offender**
No one suspected of committing abuse should be present or in the vicinity during an interview. This recommendation would also preclude a suspected offender from accompanying the child to or from the interview site.

E. **Other Children**
Except in rare circumstances, siblings and other suspected victims 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 the interview to the individual child, completely unstructured interviews are not advised. A phased approach is recommended, with an introductory stage (e.g., introductions, explanation of documentation and observers, interview instructions, narrative practice), an information gathering stage (e.g., transition to topic of concern followed by prompts aimed at gathering details about the suspected abuse), and a closure stage (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. For example, if a child begins talking about abuse very early in the interview, covering all components of the introductory stage may be unnecessary and could be counter-productive.

9. **Importance of Establishing/Maintaining Rapport**
Rather than being a discrete stage of the interview, rapport should be established and maintained throughout the entire interview. The pace of the 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 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 important to encourage narrative responses from the beginning of the 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 is most competent.

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 they have only imagined, 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 _____."*

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

11. Question Types

Interviewers should utilize questioning techniques most likely to enhance the production of reliable information from children. It is widely agreed interviewers should avoid inappropriately suggestive techniques (e.g., questions that reflect interviewer biases or reinforce interviewer expectations, that invite children to pretend or speculate, or that are coercive). While there are a number of ways to categorize and define question types, the most useful distinction for interviewers to keep in mind is the difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questioning techniques should be maximized because they invite more complete narrative responses from recall memory and elicit the most accurate information. The use of closed-ended questions (or "recognition" prompts) that encourage guesses and short answers should be minimized.

A. Open-ended questions/techniques

Interviewers should always think about the best way to phrase questions, listen carefully to the child's responses, and whenever possible, incorporate the child's answer into subsequent inquiries. While the child's age, developmental capabilities, and motivation will affect the length of their answers, open-ended narrative invitations consistently produce longer and more informative answers, especially when narrative practice about a neutral event is included early in the interview.

The concept of a funnel can be a useful way to think about how to formulate questions. One should begin with a prompt that is as broad and open-ended as possible (top of the funnel), but if not productive, the interviewer should only gradually narrow his/her focus. Follow-up questions should not quickly become narrow nor stay extremely direct and focused. Once the child responds with some information, questioning should once again "recycle" to the broad end of the funnel, sometimes referred to as the "hourglass approach." A related concept is "pairing" focused or direct questions with open-ended follow-up prompts (i.e., routinely following short answers given by a child with open-ended requests to elaborate).

The following are some additional techniques an interviewer can use to encourage narrative responses in the child's own words.

1) ***"Tell Me"* Prompts**:
   "Tell me" can be incorporated in numerous ways in interviewer prompts and is one of the most useful ways to invite narratives. Some helpful examples include, *"Tell me everything that happened,"* and *"You said_____. Tell me everything/all about/more about that."*

2) ***"Then what happened?"* and *"What happened next?"* Questions**:
   These types of questions are another excellent way to encourage elaboration during interviews.

3) **Time Segmentation Prompts**:
   Breaking an event into smaller segments of time and requesting more details is an effective open-ended strategy. For example, *"Tell me everything that happened from* [some action already mentioned by the child] *until* [another action mentioned by the child]."

4) **Sensory Focus Questions:**
   As endorsed in cognitive interviewing, it is often advisable to focus the child on sensory perceptions and request additional details. For example, *"Tell me everything you saw,"* and *"Tell me everything you heard."*

5) **Open-ended "WH" Prompts:**
   Another non-suggestive and open-ended strategy is to ask general but concrete "WH" questions that focus on *"Who," "What,"* and *"Where"* and encourage more than one-word answers.
   For example:
   - *"What happened when* [repeat child's words]?"
   - *"What did* [name] *do with his hands?"*
   - *"Tell me all about the person who did that."*
   - *"Tell me all about the place where it happened."*

   The best way to elicit information about *"when"* something happened is to gather concrete information related to the context of the abuse in order to identify factors that can help identify the time frame for the event in question. For example, *"What else was happening that day?"*

6) **"Feeling" Questions:**
   Open-ended prompts that ask the child to describe physical or emotional feelings, reactions, and thoughts may 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:
   - *"How did that make you feel?"*
   - *"How did that make your body feel?"*
   - *"How did you feel when* [name] *touched you?*
   - *"How did your body feel when* [name] *touched you?"*
   - *"What did you think when* [name] *touched you?"*
   - *"How did you feel after* [name] *touched you?"*

- *"How did it feel when you went to the bathroom?"*
- *"How do you feel about everything that has happened?"*

7) **Cued Recall Questions**

Cued invitations and focused recall questions, especially when the cues are action oriented, have been shown to be particularly useful with preschoolers. The interviewer directs the child's attention to a specific topic (i.e., 'cues' the child) and then requests further information by encouraging narrative responses from the child. The cue is 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. Common examples include: *"You said _____. Tell me all about/everything about/more about that,"* and *"I heard something about ______* [non-suggestive cue]. *Tell me about that."*

B. Closed-ended Questions

Closed-ended questions that can easily be answered with one or two words are usually categorized as 'recognition' prompts. "Yes/no" and multiple or forced choice questions are examples of common recognition prompts. Characteristically, when a majority of interview questions are closed or recognition prompts, the interviewer talks more than the child. There are a number of potential problems with closed questions – the child's response is limited and offers no information beyond that provided by the interviewer; closed questions rely on interviewer-supplied information which may be incorrect or biased; closed questions are more prone to response biases (a 'yes' or 'no' bias, or a first or last item bias); it is often unclear whether the child really understands the words used by the interviewer; and such questions encourage guessing, thus leading to increased inaccuracy. For all these reasons, interviewers should strive to decrease the number of closed–ended questions in their interviews.

When necessary to ask recognition questions with young children, they should be phrased carefully to reduce the amount of information suggested in the question. 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."* The negative impacts of closed-ended questions can be reduced if the interviewer follows the child's short answer with an open-ended request to elaborate and provide more information.

12. Use of Interview Aids/Media

Because interview "props," aids, and media tap less accurate recognition memory rather than free recall, they should be used with caution. Therefore, interviewers and investigators should have less confidence in the information gathered using only media. A variety of such "props" have been used by interviewers over the years, especially with young children, in hopes that it will increase the children's comfort and help them provide more details about their experiences.

A. Anatomical Dolls

Anatomically detailed dolls received a great deal of attention from researchers, commentators, and interviewers in the 1980s and 1990s. However, their use has significantly declined, largely due to challenges claiming the dolls were unduly suggestive and/or invited fantasy. Published in 1995, APSAC's Practice Guidelines on *"The Use of Anatomical Dolls in Child Sexual Abuse Assessments"* reflected generally accepted practice and knowledge at that time. (These Guidelines are under review and are subject to revision in the near future.) As APSAC's 1995 Guidelines recognized, it is inappropriate to use the dolls as a diagnostic tool and reach conclusions about whether or not sexual abuse has occurred based solely on a child's behavior with dolls. And though other uses were discussed in APSAC's 1995 Guidelines, employing them as a demonstration aid and clarification tool to assist a child in 'showing' what happened is the most frequently endorsed use of anatomical dolls. There is widespread agreement now that dolls should not be used to elicit disclosures. Whenever dolls are used, careful documentation (by video recording if at all possible) is essential, and the interviewer should use open-ended prompts to ask the child to explain what he or she is demonstrating. See ***Appendix B*** for a summary of generally agreed best practices for using anatomical dolls as a demonstration aid during the forensic interview.

B. Child's Abuse-Related Drawings or Writings

When additional details are desired or if the child is having difficulty providing a verbal account, it may be useful and appropriate to ask if the child would be able or prefer to explain what happened by writing it down or to show what something looked like by drawing a picture. The interviewer should ask open-ended questions that invite the child to explain what he or she has drawn or written. As with anatomical dolls, the interviewer should not make assumptions about what the child means. Any drawings or writings produced by the child to explain or clarify abuse-related information should be described in the interview documentation, labeled appropriately, and preserved/retained as evidence.

C. Anatomically-Detailed Drawings/Body Maps

As the use of anatomical dolls decreased, there was a concomitant increase in the use of anatomically detailed drawings (or "body maps") to have the child label body parts and to facilitate discussion about touching. Despite their popularity, there has been little research regarding the impact these drawings may have on the reliability of information elicited during the interview. Recent research suggests an increased risk of producing erroneous reports of touch when anatomically detailed drawings are introduced early in the interview, especially to elicit initial disclosures of abuse. Although this research has limitations, interviewers would be well-advised to attempt open-ended invitations to elicit disclosures first, and to use anatomically detailed drawings with caution.

As an alternative to having the child provide labels for body parts early in the interview, the child's terms for body parts can be clarified following a disclosure of possible abuse. Being careful not to interrupt a narrative, the interviewer can ask

questions to clarify where the child was touched, the child's word(s) for the part(s) touched, and the location and function of the relevant body part(s). If aspects are unclear or additional details would be beneficial, the interviewer may consider the careful use of drawings for verification and elaboration, while continuing to seek verbal explanations. Some interviewers prefer to use body outlines without anatomical details for this purpose.

When the level of suspicion for abuse is very high and other inquiries have not been productive, some interviewers may choose to use drawings to provide a visual aid that focuses the child on body parts. Interviewers who do so must be prepared to defend their actions against criticism that they were unduly suggestive. It is critical to follow any disclosures elicited in this way with open-ended requests to elaborate in order to encourage the child to provide narrative responses that contain additional relevant details.

As research in this area continues, better guidance is expected to emerge regarding appropriate uses of anatomically detailed drawings and body maps.

D. Other Media

Other media (e.g., hand puppets, doll houses, flash cards, sand trays) are not recommended for use in forensic interviews. Though such items may be useful for treatment, they may encourage fantasy, result in distortions, and/or be distracting or suggestive during a forensic interview.

For all the reasons detailed above, it is recommended interviewers start interviews with an attempt to develop rapport by encouraging the child to talk. Media should be considered only when deemed necessary to gather information, and its use should be carefully documented (by video-recording if at all possible), and always accompanied by requests for verbal elaboration from the child.

IV. Interview Components

APSAC recommends a narrative interview approach with an emphasis on research-based free recall techniques aimed at eliciting reliable verbal narratives whenever possible from children. Throughout the interview, interviewers are encouraged to listen more and talk less, and to ask more open-ended questions and fewer closed questions. The following structure reflects components appropriate for inclusion in many forensic interviews.

1. Introduction of Self, Role, and Purpose of the Interview

Interviewers should introduce themselves and provide a brief neutral explanation of their role and the purpose of the interview, using simple, non-suggestive, developmentally appropriate language. Interviewers should strive to convey a manner which immediately helps the child feel safe and at ease.

Some experts also recommend asking a few questions to assess the level of support for the child, for example:

- *"How do you feel about talking to me today?"*
- *"Are you worried about talking with me today? Tell me how come."*
- *"Is someone else worried about us talking today? How do you know?"*

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 the 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.

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

3. **Interview Instructions/"Ground Rules"**
Interview instructions (or "ground rules") at the beginning of the interview serve to orient the child to the unique expectations of a forensic interview and explain permissible responses. When properly presented, the instructions listed below can reduce the inclination to guess, increase willingness to ask for clarification, and increase resistance to suggestion. When good interviewing techniques are utilized in the rest of the 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. For children 10 years old and younger, and for those who may be extremely shy or deferential, the first three instructions listed should be accompanied by appropriate practice examples that allow the child to demonstrate understanding and ability to comply. Positive acknowledgment whenever a child follows instructions <u>during</u> the interview is also advised. When done well, the following four key instructions should take no more than a few minutes.

   A. **Give permission to say *"I don't know"* – the '*<u>Don't Guess</u>*' instruction:** Explain if the child knows the answer to a question, he or she should answer, but if the child does not know, not to guess and it is okay to say *"I don't know."* Practice examples should be used to reinforce both aspects of this instruction with children who are age 10 or younger and those who are extremely shy or deferential.

   B. **Give permission to correct interviewer mistakes – the '*<u>Correct Me</u>*' instruction:** It is critical to encourage the child to correct interviewer mistakes. Children age 10 and under, and those who are extremely shy or deferential should also be provided with a practice example to reinforce this message.

   C. **Give permission to admit lack of understanding – the '*<u>Tell Me If You Don't Know What I Mean</u>*' instruction:**
   Tell the child to let the interviewer know when something is said that the child does not understand so it can be said in a different way (but avoid using the word *'understand'* with young children since they may not know what it means). Follow

the instruction with a practice example for children age 10 and under, and for any others who seem unlikely to ask for clarification or admit lack of comprehension.

D. The uninformed interviewer – the '*Help Me Understand*' instruction: In order to counter any belief by the child that the interviewer already knows what happened and expects specific information, it is important to convey to the child that the interviewer does not know what happened and cannot help the child answer his/her questions.

See ***Appendix C*** for illustrations of possible phrasing and practice examples for the preceding four instructions.

E. Additional instructions: Depending on the circumstances, the following additional instructions may be appropriate to reinforce *during* an interview.

1) **Give permission to admit lack of memory – the *'I Don't Remember'* instruction**
2) **Give permission not to answer,** for example, *"Tell me if I ask a question that you don't want to answer right now."*
3) **Explain repeated questions,** for example, *"If I ask the same question more than once, it doesn't mean your first answer was wrong. Maybe I forgot or got confused. If your first answer was right, just tell me again."*

4. Truth/Lie Discussion

There are two separate and distinct aspects to a discussion of the concepts of truth and lie during a child forensic interview – eliciting a commitment to tell the truth from the child, and assessing the child's testimonial competency with regard to understanding of the concepts of 'truth' and 'lie.'

A. Eliciting a promise to tell the truth

It is recommended that interviewers ask the child tell to the truth (or to talk only about things that really happened) during the interview since existing research shows when a child does promise to tell the truth, it increases (though does not guarantee) honesty. Research demonstrates increased honesty, even with children who have been coached to make false reports or to keep silent about an adult's wrong-doing, and even with children who did not perform well on 'truth/lie' comprehension tasks.

B. Assessing truth/lie competency

Interviewers who routinely inquire into a young child's understanding of the concepts of 'truth' and 'lie' and of the immorality of telling lies (i.e., assess truth/lie competency), normally do so at the request of legal professionals. However, this is unnecessary unless legally required, since such assessments do not increase the reliability of information elicited during the interview and may not accurately indicate a child's actual understanding of these concepts. For interviewers who do assess truth/lie competency during the interview, this inquiry should not be extensive and can take place at the end of the interview. The use of a simple and efficient third party example provided by the interviewer is recommended.

5. Narrative Event Practice

Narrative event practice (or "training in episodic memory") is a critical component of the forensic interview. It consists of asking the child to tell about a neutral or positive event in a way that maximizes open-ended questioning and encourages narrative responses. Narrative practice serves several important functions. First, it increases the child's comfort and allows the interviewer to convey genuine interest and develop rapport. Second, it permits assessment of the child's developmental level, cognitive functioning, and ability to use and understand language. Third, effective narrative practice lets the child know that narratives are what the interviewer wants to hear, and will (hopefully) establish a pattern of open-ended questions and narrative responses during the rest of the interview. Finally, the basic testimonial competency of children can be demonstrated during narrative practice, through their ability to accurately perceive, remember, and communicate about an innocuous event.

The interviewer may begin by stating he or she would like to get to know the child better and ask what kinds of things the child likes to do. Based on the child's answer, the interviewer may be able to identify an event connected to an activity the child enjoys and ask the child to tell him/her all about that event. Alternatively, the child's caregivers or another adult familiar with the child may be able to identify a recent enjoyable event (e.g., holiday, school activity, birthday, other special occasion) in which the child participated. If the interviewer cannot easily identify a memorable innocuous event, he or she can always ask about the child's day leading up to the interview as an event for narrative practice.

Following initial open-ended invitations to tell everything that happened, the interviewer can use a variety of open-ended questioning techniques to try to exhaust the child's memory for the event, so the child clearly gets the message that he or she is expected to talk more and elaborate in his/her own words. The child's response to the interviewer's efforts to engage him/her in discussing neutral or positive events during narrative practice is often a good indication of how willing and likely the child is to disclose possible abuse later in the interview.

6. Introducing the Topic of Concern/Transition

The interviewer should introduce the topic of suspected abuse by being as open-ended and non-suggestive as possible. Beginning with a prompt such as *"Tell me why you're here today,"* or *"Tell me the reason you are here,"* is recommended and often productive, especially when the child is aware of the reason for the interview or has made a previous disclosure. When the child has previously told about the suspected abuse, a prompt referencing the person to whom the disclosure was made (assuming the interviewer is allowed to reveal referral sources) can be useful (e.g., *"I heard you talked to* [name] *about something that happened – tell me what happened."*).

The prompts above have proven effective in a large number of real-life cases, and thus should be considered in most interviews. When a child fails to respond, saying *"It's really important for me to know why you are here to talk to me,"* may be enough to encourage the child to answer.

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 to you – tell me what happened."*
- *"What did* [name] *tell you about coming to talk to me today?"*
- *"Why do you think* [name] *brought you here to talk to me today?"*

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

7. **Substantive Questions**

The goal of this phase of the interview is to gather as many reliable details as possible, in order to generate a clear and convincing description of what happened, to evaluate whether something other than abuse may have occurred, and to serve as a basis for successfully collecting corroborative evidence in the follow-up investigation.

As soon as a child indicates abuse may have occurred, a general open-ended invitation is appropriate (e.g., *"Tell me everything that happened."*). In sexual abuse cases and many physical abuse cases, the interviewer should attempt to clarify whether the abuse occurred once or on multiple occasions.

If the child indicates the abuse happened more than once, it is usually helpful to begin further questioning by focusing on the most recent incident ("*the last time*") and continuing with open-ended questions to encourage the child to elaborate and clarify. Prompts such as *"Tell me more about ____,"* and *"Then what happened?"* are especially useful. Limited use of more direct and focused prompts that generate short answers may be necessary, but these should take place later in the interview and be 'paired' with open-ended follow-up invitations to provide more information. When the child's memory for the most recent time has been exhausted, other incidents can be explored in the same fashion by focusing the child on another specific event. For example, *"the first time," "another time,"* and/or *"the time you remember the most."*

Narrative 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, 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. See ***Appendix E*** for additional suggestions for questioning during the substantive phase of the interview.

8. **Presenting a Child With Pictures, Videos or Other Physical Evidence**

It may be necessary to refer to or show the child physical evidence such as pictures, videos, or chat logs, especially if the child has not yet disclosed abuse prior to the interview. Before proceeding, careful consideration must be given to the impact this may have on the child and what is in the child's best interest. It is essential to coordinate with the multidisciplinary team in planning exactly how to handle the situation. The interviewer will need to arrange with law enforcement to have temporary access to the evidence during the interview and, if there are many items, will need to select a few to show the child. Some representative still images can be printed from video evidence,

rather than showing a video to the child. No part of the evidence should be covered or modified. And since this may be embarrassing or difficult for the child, supportive services need to be available immediately following the interview.

Experts recommend a straightforward approach, perhaps starting the interview by saying, *"I have some pictures/videos/chat logs to talk to you about. But first I want to get to know you."* After covering instructions and narrative practice, the child can be reminded about the reason for the interview (e.g., *"Remember at the beginning I said I had some pictures/videos/chat logs, I have them right here."*). The interviewer then shows the child the picture or other evidence, starting with the least egregious items and stating *"Tell me about this picture,"* or *"Do you recognize this thing? What is it? When have you seen it before? What else do you know about it?"* With photos, the interviewer should then attempt to confirm the identity of everyone pictured, as well as the location, and whether any other witnesses were present at the time but not in the pictures. Follow-up questioning should draw out as many details as possible about the child's knowledge regarding the evidence using the techniques recommended in these Guidelines.

If child denies knowing anything about the evidence, the interviewer should still ask questions related to surrounding details. For example, when a child denies he/she is in a picture or video:

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

9. Closure

Before ending the interview, and especially if there is someone observing the interview, it is a good idea to take a break to think about and discuss whether there are any other topics that should be raised with the child. Video and/or audio recording of the child should continue during the break. After the break, additional and clarifying questions can be asked before ending the interview.

Rather than asking *"Did anything else happen?"* during this last phase of the 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 the 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 the interview.

Acknowledgements

These Guidelines were prepared by the APSAC Forensic Interviewing Practice Guidelines Committee chaired by Viola Vaughan-Eden, PhD and Patti Toth, JD, and are an update to the 2002 *APSAC Practice Guidelines on Investigative Interviewing in Cases of Alleged Child Abuse.* Similar to previous editions, this version is based on the knowledge and experiences of a large number of colleagues throughout the child forensic interviewing field. Additionally, it reflects advances in research-informed best practices over the last 10 years. We would like to express special thanks to our colleagues listed below who generously shared their time and expertise to produce these revised Guidelines. We also appreciate the entire APSAC Board of Directors and the many APSAC members who contributed their feedback on drafts during this process.

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Appendix A

Basic 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 the interview. The interviewer's language should fit the child's.
- 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 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."*

Appendix B

Using Anatomical Dolls as a Demonstration Aid

The following are generally agreed best practices in using anatomical dolls as a demonstration aid during a forensic interview.

- Interviewers should have specific training in the use of anatomical dolls and be aware of what is legally acceptable in their own jurisdictions.
- Introduce the dolls only after the child has verbally indicated abuse happened.
- Introduce the dolls as something to help *"show"* what happened, not toys to be played with.
- Use dolls **only if needed** to assist the child in communicating details of what happened. Interviewers should emphasize narrative event practice in the introductory stages of the interview and continue to use recommended questioning techniques to elicit verbal descriptions from the child whenever possible. Introduce dolls later in the interview, only when the child is unable or unwilling to communicate verbally (or in writing), and/or when the child's verbal description is limited or unclear.
- Use the dolls only if developmentally appropriate. Be extremely cautious using the dolls with preschoolers. An accurate portrayal of what happened using the assistance of dolls requires the child to have both understanding of the symbolic nature of the dolls (i.e., the developmental capability to understand the abstract notion that the dolls represent him/herself and/or the suspect), as well as the ability for dual representation (i.e., the ability to use them symbolically to communicate events).
- Present the dolls fully clothed.
- Ask open-ended questions that invite the child to explain what he or she is demonstrating with the dolls to get verbal clarification and do not make assumptions about what happened.
- Do not use dolls together with direct, leading or suggestive questions.
- When the child has finished demonstrating with the dolls, they should be put away.
- Use reputable professionally produced dolls.
- Use dolls with culturally appropriate features such as similar skin-tones and hair color, as well as developmentally appropriate physical characteristics.

Appendix C

Possible Phrasing and Practice Examples for Interview Instructions

By way of illustration, the following are some ideas for possible phrasing and practice examples to use when informing young children about key interview instructions. These are only examples and interviewers are encouraged to develop their own explanations and examples that work for them and the children they interview.

The 'Don't Guess' Instruction

- "[Child's name], *when we talk today, it's important to tell me when you* ***do*** *know the answer to a question. But if I ask a question and you* ***don't*** *know the answer, don't guess."*

- *"So if I ask you, 'What did* ***I*** *have for breakfast?' what do you say?"* [Answer: "I don't know."] *"Okay, good, because you don't know."*

- *"But what if I ask, 'What did* ***you*** *have for breakfast?'"* [Answer: "Cereal."] *"Okay, because you* ***do*** *know. It's important to tell me when you know the answer."*

The 'Correct Me' Instruction

- "[Child's name], *sometimes I make mistakes or say the wrong thing. When I do, you can tell me I'm wrong."*

- *"So if I say, 'You're 30 years old' what do you say?"* [Answer: "I'm not 30."] *"Okay, so how old are you?"* [Answer: "6 years old."] *"Thanks for correcting me. Please tell me if I make any other mistakes."*

The 'Tell Me If You Don't Know What I Mean' Instruction

- "[Child's name], *if I ask a question and you don't know what I mean or what I'm saying, you can say 'I don't know what you mean' or 'I don't get it,' and I'll ask it in a different way."*

- *"So if I ask, 'How many* ***siblings*** *do you have?' what do you say?"* [Answer: "I don't know what siblings means."] *"Good, because 'siblings' is a hard word. What I mean is 'How many brothers and sisters do you have?'"*

- If the child knows the meaning of your first practice example, be prepared with at least one or two other possible options. For example:
    - *"Do you have a* ***canine****?"/"What I mean is do you have a dog?"*
    - *"What is your* ***ocular hue****?"/"What I mean is what color are your eyes?"*

The 'Help Me Understand' Instruction

- "[Child's name], *because I wasn't there, I don't know what happened and I need your help to figure it out."*

Appendix D

Formulating "Transition" Prompts to Shift Focus to Suspected Abuse

If the general suggestions contained earlier in these Guidelines do not produce a disclosure by 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.

The following examples illustrate some other options for potential 'transition' prompts:

- When the child has an observable injury – *"I see you have a bruise, a broken arm. Tell me what happened."*
- When the child has been seen by another professional prior to the forensic interview – *"I heard you saw the doctor, a policeman last week. Tell me how come/what you talked about."*
- When the child has been removed from his/her home and placed in protective custody – *"Where do you live right now? How come you're living there?"*
- *"Is your mom, another person worried about something that happened to you? Tell me what she's worried about."*
- *"I heard someone might have bothered you. Tell me what happened."*
- *"I heard someone may have done something that wasn't right. Tell me what happened."*
- Referencing the location of possible abusive conduct may be productive and is not unduly suggestive – *"I understand something happened at* [location]. *Tell me what happened."*

If the suspected offender is someone routinely in the child's life, the interviewer may want to ask the child to talk about things he or she likes and does not like doing with that person, balanced with similar questions about other people in the child's life.

If the child still has not disclosed, the interviewer should carefully consider whether to continue the interview and ask more direct questions, whether to stop the interview and perhaps try to talk to the child again another time, or whether to spend more time trying to develop rapport through narrative practice. As a general rule, interviewers should avoid directly suggesting that a particular suspect performed a specific act.

Appendix E

Suggestions for Prompts During Substantive Phase

The following examples illustrate some of the ways open-ended questioning techniques can be used to gather additional details during the substantive phase of the interview.

Narrative Prompts

- *"Tell me everything from the beginning to the end."*
- *"Tell me everything, even the little things you don't think are important."*
- *"Tell me how it started."*
- *"What's the first thing that happened?"*
- *"Tell me more,"* or *"Tell me more about_____."*
- *"Then what happened?"* or *"What happened next?"*
- *"I'm confused, tell me again,"* or *"I'm trying to understand. Since I wasn't there, please tell me again about_____."*
- *"How do you know that?"* or *"How did you figure that out?"*
- *"How come you think that?"*
- *"What happened right before?"* and *"What happened right after?"*

Time Segmentation Prompts

- *"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]."

Sensory Focus Prompts

- *"Tell me everything you saw."*
- *"Tell me what* [suspect's name] *looked like, from the top of his/her head, to the bottom of his/her feet."*
- *"Tell me everything about what _____ looked like."*
- *"What did you see when_____?"*
- *"Tell me everything you heard."*
- *"What did you hear when_____?"*
- *"Did* [suspect's name] *say something? Tell me everything* [suspect's name] *said."*
- *"How did that make your body feel?"*

Cued Invitations/Focused Recall

- *"You said _____. Tell me all about/everything about/more about that."*
- *"I heard something about ______* [use least suggestive cue possible]. *Tell me about that."*
- *"Tell me all about who did that/what else was happening/where it happened."*
- *"What else do you remember that happened that same day?"*
- *"What were you thinking when* [repeat child's words describing what happened]?"
- *"Tell me something different that* [suspect's name] *did to you."*
- *"What was the worst thing* [suspect's name] *did?"*
- *"What was the last thing* [suspect's name] *did?"*

- *"How did you know when it was over?"* or *"What did* [suspect's name] *do/say when it was over?"*
- *"What did you do when it was over?"*
- *"How did it feel when you went to the bathroom?"*

Focused Questions Paired With Open-Ended Requests to Elaborate

When further information about key facts is needed, more focused questions may be necessary during the substantive phase. 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, domestic violence), together with what the child has said so far will point toward additional specific areas the 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, whether the suspect (if male) had an erection or ejaculated, what happened with both the child's and suspect's clothing, 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).

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. Some yes/no and other closed-ended questions may be needed, but their use should be careful and minimized.

Examples of this kind of focused questioning include the following:

- *"Exactly what part of your body did* [suspect's name] *touch? Tell me more about that."*
- *"What did* [suspect's name] *touch you with? Tell me everything about that."*
- *"Did any other part of* [suspect's name] *body touch your body? What part? Tell me about that."*
- *"Tell me everything that happened with his* [child's name for suspect's body part]" and/or *"Tell me everything you saw/Tell me everything you felt."*
- *"Where were your clothes?"* and *"Tell me everything that happened with your clothes while* [suspect's name] *was* [repeat child's words describing what happened]."
- *"What did* [suspect's name] *use to* [repeat child's words describing what happened]? *Tell me more about that."*
- *"Did* [suspect's name] *have a camera/computer/web cam/cell phone? How do you know? What did* [suspect's name] *do with the camera/computer/web cam/cell phone?"*
- *"Think about the last time you saw/talked to* [suspect's name]*? Tell me everything* [suspect's name] *said,"* or *"...everything that happened."*
- *"Did* [suspect's name] *want other people to find out what happened? How do you know?"* (Note that although this is fairly direct and focused, it is phrased to suggest the opposite of the expected response.)

Questions About Others Who Know or Were Told

It is advisable for every interview to 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. 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. The following are examples of some ways an interviewer might go about asking such questions:

- *"Was someone else there? Tell me all about who else was there."*
- *"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."*
- *"Who else knows about what happened? How did* [person's name] *find out?"*
- *"What did you say to* [person's name]*?"*
- *"What were you thinking when you told?"*
- *"What did* [person's name] *say/do when you told?"*
- *"What did you think after you told?"*
- *"What made you decide to tell now?"* or *"What made you not tell right away?"*
- *"Do you know if something like that happened to other children? How do you know? Tell me all about that."*