

Guide to questioning children during the free-narrative phase of an investigative interview

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Abstract

The inability of professionals to maintain the use of open-ended questions in the free-narrative phase of investigative interviews with children has been a major problem around the globe. The current paper addresses this concern by describing the key principles underlying the elicitation of free-narrative accounts and practical suggestions for formulating questions. The paper focuses on interviewing children in the early- and middle-childhood years and commences with a definition of the term “free-narrative account” and a description of how such accounts typically develop in children. A description is then provided of the four key characteristics of a good question in the free-narrative interview phase. These include (a) simple language, (b) absence of specific details or coercive techniques, (c) flexibility on the part of the interviewee to choose what details will be reported, and (d) encouragement of an elaborate response. Finally, the process of eliciting a narrative account is briefly described, including examples of questions that adhere to the four characteristics listed above.

The act of eliciting reliable and detailed information from a child about an event or situation, such as abuse, is a complex process that requires specialised skills in forensic interviewing. While children as young as 3 years of age are capable of providing detailed and accurate disclosures of events, the outcome of any investigative interview is determined by a wide range of factors (Ceci, Powell, & Principe, 2002). These factors include the child’s developmental level, the timing and nature of the to-be-recalled event and contextual factors related to the interview setting. The most important factor, however, is the questioning techniques. Irrespective of the child’s developmental level, an investigative interview that adheres to best-practice interview guidelines minimises the likelihood of errors and misunderstandings between the interviewer and the child (Agnew & Powell, 2004).

Currently there is clear international consensus regarding what constitutes best practice in an investigative interview with a child. The central aim of all prominent interview protocols is to obtain an account of the event or situation in the child’s own words, with as little specific prompting as possible from the interviewer (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell,

2001). Research has consistently shown that such an account, referred to as a free-narrative account, is elicited with the use of non-leading open-ended questions and other prompts that encourage elaborate responses, but allow the interviewee flexibility to report what information they remember. Unfortunately, however, research indicates that most professionals do not obtain free-narrative accounts from children. Evaluation studies, including a variety of professional groups across the globe have converged on the conclusion that interviews containing predominantly short-answer questions with few pauses and an excessive number of closed and leading questions is the norm (Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005).

The difficulty professionals experience in eliciting free-narrative accounts from children reflects a broad array of issues. One difficulty, identified in recent research (Wright & Powell, 2005) relates to confusion regarding the type of questions that are most effective in eliciting free-narrative accounts. This confusion is possibly due (albeit in part) to the paucity of discussion in the literature regarding the particular characteristics of questions that are most effective in the free-narrative phase. The current paper addresses

this limitation by describing the key principles underlying the elicitation of free-narrative accounts and providing suggestions for formulating questions.

This paper is structured as follows. It commences with a definition of the term “free-narrative account” and a description of how such accounts typically develop in children. A description is then provided of the four main characteristics of a good question in the free-narrative interview phase. The paper concludes with a brief transcript demonstrating how the example questions have been applied in a mock interview about alleged child abuse. The focus of this paper is on interviewing children in the early and middle years of childhood (i.e., 3–10 years of age) because this is the age bracket where there is greatest potential for miscommunication. However, the general principles outlined apply to any interviews in which the purpose is to elicit an accurate and detailed account of a situation or event. Indeed, the free-narrative phase is the central component of all prominent investigative interview protocols, even those involving adult respondents (Powell et al., 2005). Further, these principles are not unique in the broader realm of clinical and counselling, as well as qualitative interviewing.

What is a free-narrative account and how does it develop in children?

A free-narrative account is a story that organises one’s experiences about a situation or event into a linked series of activities so that a person who is ignorant about the activities (or part thereof) can understand precisely what happened. Most child eyewitness memory research has been concerned with the quantity and accuracy of free-narrative accounts. In other words, the dependent measures adopted by eyewitness memory researchers tend to be the number of event details reported by the child and the proportion of these details that are accurate. For a free-narrative account to be effective, however, it also needs to be constructed in a way that is easy for the listener to follow. Comprehension on the part of the listener is usually facilitated when the event details are relayed in their correct temporal sequence, the relationships between events (e.g., causality) are clearly labelled, and the account contains all the standard story elements. These story elements include (a) the setting, which refers to the physical location where events took place and the players; (b) the initiating action; (c) the central action(s); (d) the motivations and goals; (e) the internal responses (attitudes and emotions) of the people involved; and (f) the consequences or conclusion (Paul, 2001). As a whole, these story elements provide a framework to facilitate the encoding or remembering of the event and they also

provide a structure for recounting the event at a later stage (Walker, 1999).

The development of narrative language is mediated by many individual and social/environmental factors such as the nature of the parent–child conversation in the home (Reese & Fivush, 1993) and the child’s intellectual functioning (Agnew & Powell, 2004; Roth & Spekman, 1994). Typically, however, narrative language emerges in early childhood as children initially learn to relate isolated and salient incidents. Very young children’s (e.g., preschoolers’) narratives typically contain only key words or actors with few story grammar elements. For example, many 3-year-olds are normally able to produce chains of events, connected by “and” (e.g., “We went to the park and Jason fell over and we fed the ducks”). However, such early narratives do not contain cues regarding cause and effect and the consequences of actions. Further, they do not typically reflect correct temporal ordering of the events. The activity/event that was most salient to the child is often mentioned first at the expense of other activities/events that will be mentioned later, or not at all. At this early stage in narrative language development, the child’s caregivers usually play an integral role by assuming a large proportion of the responsibility for the success of the communicative flow (Bochner, Price, & Jones, 1997). The adult does this by carefully phrasing the child’s questions and by providing scaffolding to maximise the child’s communicative success and to minimise the risk of miscommunication, embarrassment and/or loss of face (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996).

As greater cognitive and linguistic flexibility develops, children become less dependent on caregivers for building a narrative account. By 5 years, children can usually provide well-sequenced, chronologically ordered accounts of their past experiences, and they can link story grammar elements using cohesive devices (such as “so”, “then”, “because”) that act as markers for cause–effect relationships in the story (Paul, 2001). At the ages of 6 and 7 years, children’s vocabulary is more comprehensive, and their narratives are often judged as complete in terms of story–grammar content (Liles & Duffy, 1995). At this stage, however, the skill of effectively transferring knowledge is being refined. In other words, effective narrative communication requires consideration of what the listener does not know, so that detail can be adjusted accordingly. While very young children tend to talk about their friends and family as if the listener knows who the characters in the story are, and how they are related to each other, children in the middle school years start to adjust the nature and amount of information they provide to suit the listener’s perceived background knowledge. For example, at 6 or 7 years, contextual information is often placed at the beginning of the narrative, as the

child learns that this is where it is of greatest value to the listener.

Perspective taking is an important ability in narrative language, not only for structuring an account, but for recognising when miscommunication has occurred and for taking steps to rectify it. It is important to note, however, that it is relatively easy to repair a miscommunication with a partner of equal social status, but much harder if the communication partner is an authority figure. For a child taking part in an investigative interview, it may be awkward to correct an interviewer's misunderstanding, even if the child does become aware of it. Fears of embarrassment and of being reprimanded are two common reasons why children do not correct interviewers. The provision of clear ground rules at the outset of the interview may not be effective in overcoming this social inhibition, especially for young children (Ellis, Powell, Thomson, & Jones, 2003).

In summary, narrative language is a skill that commences in the early years and develops throughout childhood. From a linguistic perspective, an effective narrative account is both structurally adequate in terms of the story-grammar elements and sufficient for genuine information transfer to take place between the speaker and the listener. From an eyewitness memory perspective, an ideal narrative is an accurate and comprehensive representation of what occurred. From a forensic perspective, both the quality (linguistic) and the accuracy (memory) of the account are important. The more complete and accurate the initial account, the more complete and accurate the child's story in the courtroom and the less susceptible the child's account is to distortion. Narrative accounts that are structurally adequate and complete are easier to judge for believability (Walker, 1999).

Characteristics of a good question in the free-narrative interview phase

When interviewees have a good memory of the event, understand the information required, and have good language skills, no questions may be needed to elicit a narrative account. Nevertheless, some questions are usually required to make case-related decisions that are dependent on certain details that may not be spontaneously provided.

So what type of questions elicit free-narrative accounts from children? Little literature has specifically addressed this question other than to say that open-ended questions, which are usually defined as those questions that elicit an elaborate response, are crucial (Powell et al., 2005). However, the term "open-ended question" includes a broad range of questions, some of which are not necessarily effective in eliciting elaborate responses from child witnesses

whose language and memory ability is more limited than that of adults. For example, the question "Tell me everything about his eyes", would usually elicit a brief response from a young child (e.g., "They're blue") because the topic is relatively narrow in its focus. In fact, questions that focus on highly specific details are problematic with young children who sometimes make up responses to please the interviewer rather than say "I don't know". For this reason, some researchers who specialise in the investigative interviewing of children (e.g., Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001) have narrowed the definition of the term "open-ended" to include questions that encourage an elaborate response as well as being fairly broad in their focus (i.e., do not dictate what specific information is required).

Despite the lack of detailed discussion in the literature regarding the types of open-ended questions that are useful in the free-narrative phase of an interview, the existing research offers a useful framework for making practical recommendations for phrasing questions. Overall, the literature suggests a few broad principles that need to be considered. These principles, which form the acronym SAFE include (a) simple language; (b) absence of specific details (not previously raised) or coercive techniques; (c) flexibility on the part of the interviewee to choose what details will be reported; and (d) encouragement of an elaborate response. A brief description of the four principles is now provided in turn.

(S) Simple language

Children as young as 3 years can usually provide accurate descriptions of experiences provided that they encoded the event details, they understand the questions, and the concepts being requested can be reliably portrayed by a child of their age. Phrasing questions in an age-appropriate way, however, is not easy when professionals have not had extensive training in child development or do not speak with young children on a daily basis. While it is beyond the bounds of this paper to provide a detailed guide to phrasing questions (see Walker, 1999, for an excellent review), four key strategies are briefly described below. These recommendations should apply to questioning throughout the entire interview, but they are particularly important in the free-narrative phase where it is essential for the interviewee to maintain a deep level of memory processing and a steady flow of information transfer. Given that witnesses have only limited mental resources to process information, any distraction or deflection of these mental resources may impair the witness's ability to engage in elaborate memory retrieval (Broadbent, 1958; Kahneman, 1973).

Excessive and inappropriate questioning (as opposed to asking fewer, simple questions) is therefore distracting for witnesses because the questions redirect the witness's attention from searching internally through memory to focusing externally on the interviewer's questions.

Keep the questions short. Many children have limited attention spans and linguistic processing capacity. Long questions (i.e., those with many details to absorb) are harder for children to process. Further, long questions are often more grammatically complex. Long questions often combine multiple ideas through the use of embedded clauses (e.g., "What did the man who was in the car at the park with your uncle look like?"). Further, they often include unwieldy sentence structure, (e.g., "Out of all your family, tell me about the one you like the most"), and ambiguities. For example, with the question "When you told Bob that Jamie hurt you, what did he do?", it is not clear who "he" refers to. The onus should not be placed on children to correct or compensate for misunderstandings in the interview. Often children are not aware when they have misheard a question, and even when they do, they sometimes feel it is appropriate to answer the questions the best way they can rather than say "I don't know" (Moston, 1987).

Allow the child to respond to one question at a time. Multifaceted or embedded questions are obviously problematic because when many subpropositions or qualifying clauses are contained in the one question, it is not clear to the child what components of the question (s)he should respond to. However, a more common problem that we observe in investigative interviews is when interviewers tag an unnecessary question to the end of an existing question. Consider the following example: "What clothes were you wearing that day? Do you remember?" Here, the interviewer has given the child the opportunity to simply answer the second, and easier question. Consider another example: "Did you go somewhere else on the way home . . . to get some dinner?" In this example, because the question "[Did you] get some dinner?" was more recent, the child may assume that this is the only part of the question (s)he needs to respond to.

Ensure that the requested details are explicit and can be meaningfully relayed by a child of that age. Miscommunication often occurs because the concept being requested is too complex for the child's level of cognitive development. For instance, having children directly focus an account on aspects related to time, distance or frequency may not be fruitful. If a child is able to engage in deep or elaborate memory retrieval,

contextual details may well arise in the narrative account that can subsequently be used to establish the time and place of an offence. Other questions that frequently lead to confusion, error or misunderstanding include questions incorporating pronouns (he, she, they etc), which make it difficult for the child to keep track of who or what is being discussed; questions that include relational terms (e.g., before, after), and questions starting with "why" or "when", which tend to ask for more abstract conceptual information (Walker, 1999).

Be upfront or direct in your request for information. In Western society when a person makes a request for a person to assist them, it is often seen as an act of courtesy to phrase the request in the form of a closed question. For example, when one stops a stranger in the street and says "Excuse me, can you tell me the time?", the expected answer is not yes or no – rather it is assumed that the stranger will respond with the time if (s)he knows it. Young children, however, are not usually good at distinguishing between the surface and the intended meaning of requests (Searle, 1969). Hence, the question "Can you remember . . .?" or "Can you tell me . . .?" is often interpreted as an enquiry regarding their ability to respond. To avoid a yes or no response to these questions, it is better to say "Tell me what you remember".

(A) Absence of specific details (not previously raised) or coercive techniques

Ideally, an investigative interviewer should not refer to, or request responses about, any activities or details about the alleged event that have not already been mentioned by the child, or have not been established to be true. Complete avoidance of such questions may not be feasible, but it needs to be acknowledged that any new detail mentioned by the interviewer could potentially contaminate the child's subsequent report of an event, irrespective of how that detail was introduced (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). Given the potential problems associated with questions that request or refer to specific event details, experts recommend that these questions be delayed until after the child's free-narrative account is exhausted (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Wilson & Powell, 2001).

The risk and type of errors arising from questions that contain false details vary depending on several factors. Two of these factors include (a) whether the interviewer presumes that the false suggested detail is true; and (b) whether a verbal response about the false detail is required from the child (Hughes-Scholes, 2005). Indeed, contrary to the belief of many practitioners, open-ended questions that

contain false presumptive details are more likely to lead to a false account from a child than a closed yes/no question that contains the same details (Greenstock & Pipe, 1996; Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 1999). Consider, for example, a scenario where a child is asked in the form of a closed question about a touching incident that never occurred, for example, "Did Sam touch you on your bottom?". The danger of this question is that the child may incorrectly say yes to please the interviewer. This can happen irrespective of whether the child correctly heard or understood the question, and is particularly likely to be the case if the question suggests in its tone or phrasing that a yes response is correct or desired (e.g., "Sam touched you, didn't he?"). Further, if the detail is salient enough to be remembered, it could be reported by the child spontaneously in a subsequent interview, irrespective of whether the child initially denies that the information occurred (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995).

Now, consider a different scenario where the interviewer assumes that a false detail occurred and asks the child to verbally report about it (e.g., "Tell me what happened when Sam touched you on your bottom"). If the child chooses to respond actively to this question by engaging in speculation about the fictitious event, it heightens the child's difficulty (in a subsequent interview) of distinguishing whether the event actually occurred or was merely imagined. In other words, the ability to distinguish between internally (imagined) and externally derived (experienced) events is more difficult when the child has more qualitative (e.g., perceptual, semantic, affective) information attached to the event, obtained through active participation (either mentally or physically) with that event (Roberts, 2000). Because presumptive open-ended questions can lead to false beliefs, fictitious accounts arising from these questions are not easily detected by experts and are not necessarily retracted if the child is subsequently challenged (Ceci, Crotteau-Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994; Huffman, Crossman, & Ceci, 1997). While adults also have difficulty retrospectively distinguishing between actual events and those that were merely thought about or discussed, preschoolers are especially prone to such errors (Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002; Powell, Jones, & Campbell, 2003).

The likelihood of eliciting a false account from a young child using a misleading cued-recall question that presumes an activity to be true, is heightened when the child is coerced to provide a particular response (Garven, Wood, & Malpass, 2000). Coercive or suggestive techniques that have been shown to shape children's account of events include peer pressure, bribery, selective reinforcement, repeating an initial question, and doubting or disputing a

child's response (see Ceci et al., 2002, for review). Given young children's strong desire to please interviewers (particularly authoritative ones), they can be highly influenced by interviewers' responses, even very subtle ones.

(F) Flexibility in allowing the interviewee to choose what information will be reported

Questions can vary depending on the degree to which the child is permitted to choose what information they will report. For example, the question "Tell me everything that happened when you visited Joe's house" is much broader in its focus (i.e., allows greater flexibility in content) than the question "You mentioned eating at Joe's house. Tell me about what you ate". The benefit of allowing witnesses' flexibility in their response is twofold. First, in situations of free-recall probing, children (like adults) generally report information that they are confident occurred. In contrast, when they are pressured to provide information about a specific content area, they tend to report information that is familiar without a thorough examination of its source (Roberts, 2000). Second, the lower accuracy for specific (especially closed) questions may occur because the interviewer is imposing his/her expectations, language and framework of the event, rather than the child's framework (Powell et al., 2005).

Questions that invite the child to report what happened, usually allow more flexibility in content than questions that focus the child on descriptive detail. Even very slight changes in wording can markedly change the likelihood of eliciting connected narrative rather than isolated descriptive details. For example, the question "Tell me about the part where you were in the special room" encourages a report about the part of the story that describes what happened, as opposed to the question "Tell me everything about the special room", which is often perceived as a request to describe the room. Likewise, the question "Tell me about what happened when you washed the baby" tends to focus on the narrative account, and invites additional details, more than the question "Tell me about washing the baby", which tends to focus on action details. Including the words "tell me about what happened when . . ." tends to keep the child's focus wide, by allowing him/her to introduce other characters and events that may not have been previously mentioned – either because the child does not see their relevance in an evidentiary sense, or because s/he assumes the interviewer is already privy to this information. It is worthwhile remembering that children are not always good at making judgements about what other people know, and they will tend to overestimate what adults in authority know. Hence

interview practices that cast the net wide are most likely to elicit the most comprehensive account that the child can provide.

(E) Encourages an elaborate response

Questions can vary widely depending on the number of words required to provide an adequate response. For example, the question “Tell me everything that happened at Joe’s house starting from the very beginning and going right through to the end” typically elicits a longer and more detailed response than the question “Tell me something you did at Joe’s house” or “Tell me a little bit about what happened at Joe’s house”. All of the above questions would probably elicit lengthier and more detailed responses from children than the questions “Did you do anything at Joe’s house?” or “Is there anything else you can tell me?” (Dent & Stephenson, 1979). Questions that encourage more elaborate responses have generally been found to elicit more accurate and detailed responses (Sternberg et al., 1997). The more elaborate the response, the greater the likelihood that the witness has engaged in a deep level of memory processing (Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2000).

Applying the principles: The process of eliciting a free-narrative account from a child

Applying the four aforementioned principles when questioning children is not as easy as it might seem. In English-speaking countries, a direct and highly specific question-and-answer discourse is typically used in everyday conversation (Powell, 2000). Further, young children do not often provide elaborate information, especially early in the interview process. Unless the interviewer persists with an open-ended interviewing style, and refrains from interrupting the child with excessive questioning, children do not engage in the type of elaborate memory retrieval required to elicit a detailed narrative account. In contrast, until interviewers can master the use of open-ended questions, they are not truly convinced of their benefit – they assume that specific event details can be elicited only via specific questions. This assumption, in turn, reduces the likelihood that trainee interviewers will persist with an open-ended interviewing style (Wright & Powell, 2005).

As a rule of thumb, it is important to commence the narrative using an initial broad open-ended invitation (e.g., “Tell me everything you can remember about . . . Start at the beginning”). The point at which the child’s story begins will be influenced by the way the interviewer asks this initial question, so it is important that it is as neutral and permissive as possible. In response to this question, a

cooperative child witness will probably provide a brief list of events or activities, not necessarily connected in a causal or temporal way. Scant detail is provided partly because the child does not realise that specific detail is important, and partly because it is difficult for the child to access the vocabulary to express the relationship between events (e.g., temporal, causal). It is crucial at this point, however, to encourage the child to keep talking (i.e., to continue the narrative account by relaying other details or activities that have happened in the event). Alternatively, the child could be encouraged to provide further elaboration or detail about aspects that have already been mentioned. The important point is that the interviewer should help maintain the flow of information transfer as much as possible without interrupting the account with a specific closed or “Wh” question.

Overall, there are three types of prompts that could be used during the free-narrative phase to keep the child talking. For ease of presentation, we have provided each prompt with a label. These include the open-ended breadth question, the open-ended depth question, and minimal encouragers.

Open-ended breadth question

This is a prompt that asks the child to expand the list of broad activities, or to report the next act/activity that occurred, but does not dictate what specific information is required (e.g., “What happened then?” to elicit the next activity or detail in the sequence; “What else happened when [event]” to elicit another broad activity that occurred, not necessarily in sequence).

Open-ended depth question

This is a question that encourages the child to provide more elaborate detail about a pre-disclosed detail or part of the event but does not dictate what specific information is required (e.g., “Tell me more about the part where . . . [activity or detail already relayed by the child]?”; “What happened when . . . [activity or detail already relayed by the child]?”).

Minimal encouragers

These are prompts that do not interrupt the flow of recollection but merely indicate that the child’s account is being listened to and understood and encourage the child to continue in narrative form. Examples, include head nodding, “Uh huh”, repeating back the last two words, and silence.

If the child does not provide information, it may be because (s)he does not realise that detail is important, or that it is his or her role to do most of

the talking during the interview. This ground rule could be relayed in several ways throughout the interview. For example, saying “I wasn’t there, so I need to know everything that happened” or “It’s important for me to understand. Try to tell me what happened, in more detail” may assist. Children’s recollections are often broken up with substantial pauses, and it is not uncommon for children to say “That’s all” when they still have more to tell. Often a new open-ended question may help elicit more information. Once a child begins to provide a coherent narrative account, it is vital that the interviewer is disciplined in resisting the urge to disrupt the flow by interjecting with questions, particularly specific questions that narrow the focus of attention. By nodding and providing other minimal encouragers, or non-leading open-ended questions, it is possible that answers to these questions will be provided spontaneously by the child, as part of the ongoing narrative. Constant interruptions with specific questions will signal to the child that (s)he only needs to provide brief responses and will thereby inhibit spontaneity in expansion of the narrative account.

Obviously a wide range of factors determine the outcome of an interview with a child, some of which are outside the interviewers’ control. For example, if the styles of interaction that the child engages in on a daily basis are usually leading, closed or interviewer-centred, then the child may have limited cognitive structures to support the recall of information in response to open-ended questions (Abbeduto, Weissman, & Short-Meyerson, 1999). This is a common problem when interviewing children with intellectual disabilities. These children are often not given sufficient opportunities to speak out in their daily interaction with adults (Marchant & Page, 1992). Further, the likelihood of eliciting an accurate and detailed account is affected by the physical, mental, and emotional state of the child at the time of the event and the interview, and the nature of any previous questioning about the event. Irrespective of these factors, however, the onus always rests on the interviewer to utilise questions that will maximise the amount and accuracy of information obtained.

The following is an abridged interview that demonstrates how different aspects of free-narrative interviewing can come together. The left margin lists the type of prompt or open-ended question used by the interviewer to keep the child talking. This script is based on a mock interview (involving two trained actors) that was included in a training video entitled “Free narrative” (Powell, 2005). The child’s responses are relatively typical of a child in the middle school years. Note that although the mock child has not yet mastered the ability to provide a comprehensive narrative account (including all of the standard

story elements), the interviewer was able to elicit many details in the child’s own words by maintaining the use of open-ended questions.

- Interviewer (I): And if you don’t remember something I ask you, just say “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember”. Okay? So Amy, lets get started. Tell me what you’ve come to talk to me about today.
- Child (C): To tell about what happened with the man at the pool.
- Initial open-ended invitation I: Tell me everything that happened. Start at the beginning.
- C: Well, my brother was being silly and mum got cross – I was doing my swimming - front ways . . . then I got to play in the bubbles, but I didn’t run . . . then I went to get changed.. and that’s when the bad man did the rude thing.. and then we got maccas.
- Breadth I: What happened then?
- C: We went home.
- Breadth I: What happened after that?
- C: That’s when I told my mum.
- Breadth I: What else happened at the pool?
- C: [silence] I jumped in the pool *all by myself*
- Minimal encourager I: Uh huh
- C: That’s it.
- Depth I: Tell me more about the part where you went to get changed
- C: I went by myself cause . . . cause my brother, well..um.. he was being naughty and my mum, she got cross . . . That’s when my mum told me to go and get changed
- Breadth I: What happened then?
- C: I went in . . . (pause) . . . that’s when there was a bad man there.
- Minimal encourager I: Uh huh.
- C: That’s when the man said the rude thing
- Minimal encourager I: Rude thing?
- C: Yeah and he *did* a rude thing? [pause] and then Sally came in . . .
- Depth I: Tell me *everything* about the part where the man did the rude thing
- C: He came in the shower . . . I wasn’t scared but then I got a bit scared

- Breadth I: Then what happened?
C: [pause] I can't remember that bit.
- Depth I: That's OK. So what happened when you were scared?
C: he showed me his... (pause)
- Minimal encourager I: ... showed you his...
C: *Doodle!* [whisper] and then he made me *wash* his doodle
- Minimal encourager I: Uh huh.
C: Child looks away – distracted.
- Depth I: So Amy, tell me all about washing his doodle... I need to know every detail about that.
C: Well... it went big (pause). He rubbed it... and he made me rub it. I said "No"
- Breadth I: And then?
C: Stuff came out... but, it wasn't wee.
- Breadth I: What happened then?
C: That's when Sally came in... and I got dressed and went to find my mum... and then we went to maccas.
- Depth I: So tell me more about the part where Sally came in...

Conclusion

The elicitation of reliable and accurate information from a child is a complex process that depends on many interviewing skills. These skills include (albeit in part) the ability to recognise a free-narrative account, to understand how narrative accounts develop in children, and to phrase questions in a way that maintains the flow of conversation and encourages the child to engage in elaborate memory retrieval. By establishing a greater understanding of the mechanisms contributing to children's deficits in narrative language, and the types of questions that enable children to demonstrate this important skill, practitioners will assist in improving the quality of evidence obtained from child witnesses.

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