

## Interviewing immigrant children for suspected child maltreatment

BY LISA ARONSON FONTES, PH.D.

---

*This article examines challenges posed in forensic interviews of immigrant children when there is a suspicion that these children may be victims of child abuse or neglect. Suggestions are made for interviewers regarding the interview setting, preparations, building rapport, conveying respect, narrative training, pacing the interview, and trauma symptoms that may stem from issues that are unrelated to the abuse.*

KEY WORDS: *Interviewing, child abuse, neglect, immigrants.*

---

Forensic interviews with children concerning child maltreatment may influence a host of important decisions including the child's placement, the caretaker's criminal guilt or innocence, and termination of parental rights. Although the interviewer's goal sounds straightforward—just to get the facts—the process is usually stressful and challenging, particularly when the children are culturally different from the interviewer. Approximately 12.5% of people in the United States are foreign born, and one in five Americans

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *For additional information about this article contact: Lisa A. Fontes, Ph.D., University Without Walls, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 120 Venture Way, Hadley, MA 01035. E-mail: lfontes@rcn.com*

speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-7). As the number of children in the United States who are immigrants or offspring of immigrants increases, it becomes more essential for forensic interviewers to learn how to interview them competently.

Biases, cultural differences, and linguistic misunderstandings have the potential to exert a powerful influence in interviews with immigrant children—even when the interviewers have the best intentions. This article discusses some of the challenges of interviewing children who are immigrants themselves or who are children of immigrants, and suggests practices for making these interviews more effective.

The concerns of young people vary greatly, depending on whether they are the first generation (born outside the country where they currently live), second generation (born in their current country of residence, but with at least one foreign-born parent), or third generation or greater (youngsters and both of their parents born in their current country of residence). For youngsters who have emigrated themselves, the age when they moved, the number of years in the new country, and their ability to speak the new language will partly determine their level of acculturation.

This article focuses on children who are less acculturated and whose native culture is quite different from that of the United States, because these are the children who may require the most alteration of the standard interviewing process. A child from a family that has recently immigrated to the United States from Pakistan or the Sudan and speaks no English would require numerous adjustments to the standard interviewing process, whereas a child whose parents emigrated two decades earlier from England probably can be interviewed similarly to other American children.

Children who are seen as possible victims of maltreatment arouse strong feelings in professionals, family members, and

concerned others. This can make every contact concerning a forensic interview with a child emotionally charged, and can increase the likelihood that differences in perspective and opinion will flare into troublesome conflict. In addition, in forensic interviews concerning child maltreatment, caretakers necessarily feel they are being accused of inadequate or dangerous practices, and know they may face losing custody of their children, criminal prosecution, and perhaps even the risk of deportation. Religious or cultural mandates and habits may make it difficult for an immigrant family to agree to share information with outsiders, including forensic interviewers. Many children grow up hearing versions of “We wash our dirty laundry at home,” and understand they are expected to keep uncomfortable secrets within the family and ethnic community. Professionals need to guard against a possible temptation to “punish” immigrant parents for what is perceived as a lack of cooperation. Rather, professionals should provide as much information as possible about the interview, and make sure that they have created circumstances to facilitate caretakers’ cooperation, such as engaging a bilingual interviewer or a foreign language interpreter.

### **Interviewing children for whom English is not their first language**

The value of allowing children to be interviewed in their preferred language—whether through an interpreter or through a bilingual assessor—cannot be overemphasized. This interview is too important, and its consequences too far-reaching, to push children to respond in an imprecise way because they cannot find the right word in English. In addition, experience shows that memory and presentation are both affected by the language chosen for the interview. Interviewees are apt to provide more details, look less depressed, and demonstrate the full range of their competence when they speak in their preferred language (see Fontes, 2008).

Where needed, qualified foreign language interpreters should be secured in advance of the interview. Caretakers who bring children to interviews, and the children themselves, may have differing levels of English language fluency. Minor children should never be expected to interpret for their parents. Otherwise, they might be blamed if the outcome is not as the parents wish, they might not have the technical vocabulary required to interpret correctly, they might be confused as to whether they should be interpreting accurately or protecting their parents, and/or the interpreting situation might expose them to material they should not hear. In addition, it is exceptionally disempowering for parents to have to speak through their children.

Interpreters make it possible to listen to people who otherwise would be voiceless in our interviews. High quality interpretation allows us to obtain information, gain interviewees' confidence, reduce their isolation, understand their worldview, and convey information as needed. Poor quality interpretation leads to frustration for all involved, and can leave children even more vulnerable than before we interviewed them. Similarly, when interpreters are untrained or used inappropriately, problems often abound.

Interpreters do not simply convey the spoken word from both sides, although this is their primary stated function. They also serve as the agent of exchange and negotiation between the worlds of the interviewer and the interviewee (Davidson, 2000). Unfortunately, it is not possible to receive an absolutely perfect interpretation, since subtleties of meaning and context do differ across cultures. At best, an interpreter can convey what each party says and means in a "good enough" fashion to facilitate mutual understanding. For instance, there is no exact equivalent in Spanish for the concept of "foster parent" or "foster care." To accurately translate such a ubiquitous phrase, interpreters must explain this concept in some detail.

We usually think of interpreters as conduits rather than participants in conversations. However, research shows that

interpreters regularly edit, delete, emphasize, de-emphasize, and embellish statements from both parties. "Interpreters do not merely convey messages; they shape and, in some real sense, create those messages in the name of those for whom they speak" (Davidson, 2000, p. 382). Interpreters not only shape the content that is conveyed; they also make choices about when to speak, whom to interrupt when they speak, and which comments they will "let pass" without interpreting. For these reasons, interviewers are encouraged to read further to learn when and how to use interpreters, and how to make optimum use of interpreting services in child abuse interviews (Fontes, 2005, 2008).

Professionals who speak a bit of a language that a child speaks may be tempted to conduct interviews in that language, thus obviating the need for an interpreter. Although this may save time and money, it is not advisable unless the interviewer is truly proficient in the language and culture of the interviewee. Clearly, conducting a forensic interview without thoroughly understanding the language increases the likelihood of miscommunication. Knowing the basics of a language is not sufficient to conduct an important and sensitive interview in that language. If an interviewer begins using the interviewee's language, but does not speak it adequately, it places the interviewee in the awkward position of not wanting to insult the interviewer by requesting an interpreter. Also, the interviewee may be reluctant to correct the interviewer's faulty understanding.

#### Preparing for the interview

Experienced child forensic interviewers are masterful at helping children sit still and focus on the questions posed. However, interviewers need to keep in mind that some recent immigrant children may have particular difficulty with this process, especially if they have never been in a formal educational or interview setting. It will be hard for children to follow and remember an interviewer's questions if they have to struggle to be understood and to understand the interviewer's verbal and nonverbal communication. If

children do not understand the context of the interview they may not be motivated to “perform well,” or even understand exactly what this concept would mean. Where a child’s abilities to sit still, focus, and communicate with the interviewer are unusually compromised, the child may not be able to answer truthfully or completely; therefore, incorrect conclusions might be drawn about the child’s risk.

Some preparation can be helpful before an interview with an immigrant child. First, interviewers should make sure they have on hand all the appropriate forms in the child’s and caretaker’s preferred language. If the interviewer is using any special equipment for the interview, such as one-way mirrors, video cameras, or microphones, the interviewer should give some thought as to how to inform the interviewees about these items and obtain their permission to use them. Whatever their age, interviewees have a right to know that the interview is being recorded and why. Some will refuse. If the interviewee is a minor, the adult responsible for the child may have to give consent for the recording of the interview; the child should still be informed about the recording and asked to give assent to being recorded (Fontes, 2004; King & Churchill, 2000).

Children are especially affected by their physical states. Interviewers should try to keep healthy snacks available for children whose caretakers may not have provided them with a meal or a snack shortly before the interview. Hunger, thirst, fatigue, and a need to use the bathroom will affect a child’s memory and ability to participate in an interview or perform on tests. Children who have been raised to limit their demands on others are unlikely to tell interviewers when they are hungry or thirsty or need to use a bathroom. Clearly, a forensic interviewer cannot provide snacks as a “reward” for particular responses to questions. These snacks should be offered routinely and consumed before an interview begins.

We should help people from diverse groups feel welcomed

### Setting for the interview

and at home as they walk into our agencies and offices. This will facilitate rapport. Although hanging an "ethnic" tapestry in the waiting room is not entirely sufficient to make an immigrant child feel welcome, it is one small step that might help. Books, magazines, artwork, signs, photographs, and posters in the rooms and hallways should reflect the variety of cultures served. People from minority ethnic and racial groups will frequently scan their environment for visible signs that an agency recognizes their existence and needs. For instance, are the signs printed in Spanish as well as English? Are a variety of holidays represented in the decorations, or only Christian holidays such as Christmas? Is there a copy of *Essence* magazine next to the copy of the *Ladies Home Journal*? If in a hospital setting, are there foods in the cafeteria that will appeal to people from a variety of ethnic groups? Are foods available for people who do not eat pork or shellfish for religious reasons, such as observant Muslims and Jews? Does the agency provide extended hours for those who cannot afford to take time off from work during the day? Are interpreters readily available? Is there a private area where modest women can nurse?

Flags and patriotic slogans and symbols adorn many waiting rooms and buildings in the United States, particularly since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These nationalistic symbols can make people from other countries feel quite uncomfortable. We will never know how many people decline to cooperate fully because they do not feel at ease in our agencies. My recommendation is that we err on the side of being as welcoming and inclusive to as many people as possible in our professional lives; therefore patriotic and political symbols are not appropriate in most workplaces, particularly places that serve immigrant clients.

If police are involved in the interview, they should be dressed in plain clothes. Children should be protected from seeing scenes that may be upsetting, such as armed officers or people in handcuffs or shackles. One study found that when



children were removed from their homes in police cars, on their way to foster care, they thought they were being arrested and were on their way to jail (Folman, 1998).

**Background  
cultural  
information**

Interviewers should gather information about the child's cultural background before the first meeting whenever possible. Helpful facts include the child's age, religion, household composition, country of origin, and—where relevant—date and circumstances of immigration and degree of English fluency. A little background reading on the subject's ethnic, cultural, and religious group can enhance the interviewer's understanding before the first meeting.

Interviewers are encouraged to determine the history of the interviewee's ethnic group in their particular community. When did this group begin to arrive? Where did they come from? Why did they move to the area? How were they first received? Did they suffer from any trauma before, during, or after they emigrated? In general, how are children from this community doing in the schools?

General information about a group's culture can be obtained from the Internet, from reliable books and articles, and from people who come from the same culture, as long as confidentiality is maintained. When I begin to work with people from a given group I also try to immerse myself in the arts of that culture including music, visual arts, movies, poetry, and fiction. Familiarity with a culture can help interviewers guard against misunderstanding in all phases of the interview—such as posing alienating or offensive questions, greeting interviewees improperly, or presenting the results in a harmful way. When we make an effort toward greater cultural understanding we greatly strengthen the foundation for our cross-cultural interview and the subsequent report.

With some people, national origin may be less important to their identity than their ethnicity. That is, people of Hindu



origin could be from India, Africa, or the Caribbean; Chinese people hail from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, and so on. This is complicated, however, because ethnic Chinese from Taiwan may be insulted if you call them "Chinese." Historical events have created in them a pride in their separate identity as Taiwanese. A person of Lebanese descent who has grown up in Trinidad may feel more Lebanese than Trinidadian, or not—we cannot know without asking. For some people, their religion is a crucial part of their identity, particularly in religiously divided nations where there is tension among groups, such as in Bosnia, Nigeria, India, the Sudan, and Ireland. As always, it is best to ask people how they identify themselves, rather than checking a box for what we assume is their identity ourselves.

### Assessing culture and acculturation

The less a child is integrated into the dominant culture, the more interviewers may need to diverge from their usual interview protocol to establish rapport and obtain complete information. An interviewer may be able to gather information about a child's level of acculturation from other providers or from a file folder before the first contact. Interviewers who are meeting with a caretaker prior to interviewing a child may want to ask some of the following questions:

- Where were you (and the child) born?
- When did you first come to live in this country?
- Whom does your child consider family?
- What was the first language you (and the child) learned to speak? What language or languages are spoken in your home?
- What is your religion? How observant are you in regard to practicing that religion?
- How do you identify yourself culturally? What aspects of being \_\_\_\_\_ [use term for culture used by the interviewee] are most important to you?
- What was the immigration process like?
- How has the immigration process affected your family?

- How are you (your family) adjusting to life in this country?
- Are there any problems related to immigration or your status in this country that would be helpful for me to know about?

Interviewers should ask these questions tactfully so they will not sound like an interrogation, sprinkling them naturally throughout a conversation, rather than firing them off one after another.

**Building rapport & conveying respect**

Interviewers set the foundation for a successful conversation at the very beginning by making clear the process and goals of the interview. Remember, children and their caretakers may have little or no idea about the purpose of the interview and may mistakenly think it pertains to healthcare, housing, immigration, or school. The more information that is provided about the context of the communication, the better it will be for the interviewee. In simple terms, children need to know about the role and position of the interviewer and how the information will be used. Interviewers should convey to children as much as they can about the procedures governing the conversation, such as the time frame and expectations. Children need to know if this is a one-time interview or the beginning of a longstanding relationship. Children should be given time to ask questions themselves at various points in an interview.

If the caretaker or child is coming into the interview situation with incorrect assumptions about what is going to take place, this could distort the interview or make it difficult to complete. Often children are uncooperative or overly frightened because they think the interviewer is trying to discover something crazy or evil within them or their histories, with potentially disastrous consequences if the badness is discovered.

Subtleties in the interviewer's tone, attitude, and word choice can make the interviewee feel ashamed, victimized, accused, bullied, humiliated, encouraged, empowered, exonerated, confirmed, or supported. Generally, forensic interviewers should minimize any possible aura of invasion or intrusion by

paying special attention to their voice, phrasing, and a host of nonverbal elements (see Fontes, 2008). As much as possible, the inquiry should affirm the child's worth and value as a human being, even as the interviewer is especially careful not to reward specific responses.

Conveying  
respect to  
caretakers

Experiences with discrimination lead many immigrants to be acutely sensitive to possible demonstrations of disrespect. After multiple experiences of being overlooked or discriminated against, some people from minority groups alternate between feeling weary, angry, determined, defensive, and paranoid. They bring these feelings with them to subsequent encounters, including our interviews.

Becoming involved with the child welfare system is often embarrassing and even humiliating for clients. By doing our utmost to convey respect, we can thwart these shameful feelings, and help clients maintain and recover their dignity.

How do we know if we are behaving in a way that is respectful? We pay careful attention to what we say and how we present ourselves, and then try to figure out how the interviewees hear us. To be able to try on the interviewees' shoes, we need to accept the idea of a mismatch between the way we want to be seen and heard and the image we are actually conveying. We must examine our demeanor when we pose questions, explain procedures, observe interactions, examine injuries, review transcripts, and fill out forms—and we should explore how these activities may feel from the perspective of the interviewees. As we catch ourselves conveying any trace of disrespect, we must have the courage to try something new. In our professional roles we may still need to do things that interviewees would rather we did not do; a respectful manner will make these actions easier to accept.

We should also check in regularly with the people we are interviewing, asking versions of, "How are you doing?" "How is it going?" "Are you okay?"

**Demeanor** The set of nonverbal behaviors that communicates an interviewer's interest in the interviewee has been termed "attending behaviors." These behaviors include making appropriate eye contact, nodding, and leaning forward. But if these actions are imposed too mechanically from the outside without inner feelings, they will be insufficient. I encourage interviewers to do more than simply demonstrate certain actions to look "as if" they care. I encourage them, rather, to try their best to open their hearts and their humanity to the interviewees so they actually *do* care about their wellbeing. Whether the interviewee is someone who attracts or repulses an interviewer, the quantity and quality of the information garnered will be improved if the interviewer can connect on a level of true feeling.

Rapport continues to build throughout an interview as new topics are raised and the relationship deepens. Many professionals become cold and distant when they step into their forensic interviewer roles. In fact, some misguided district attorneys protest when interviewers appear warm and kind. This is a mistake. Research has found that when interviewers are warm and friendly, their interviews will be more likely to produce correct information; the interviewees will be more willing to correct the interviewer's mistakes if necessary (Davis & Bottoms, 2002). I encourage interviewers to appear warm, relaxed, supportive, and nonjudgmental, particularly in cross-cultural interviews where the interviewee may need substantial reassurance. Interviewers will want to communicate that they care, that they are interested in what the interviewee has to say, and that they can be trusted. Interviewers should try to show children a personal and specific caring for them as individuals, not merely a generalized empathy. This can be achieved through asking about personal likes and dislikes, inquiring about hobbies, repeating details provided by children about their specific situation, and truly listening.

The personal relationship is key to interviewing people from most cultures. In Korean the concept *jeong* expresses a

“combination of empathy, sympathy, compassion, emotional attachment, and tenderness, in varying degrees, according to the social context” (Kim & Ryu, 2005, p. 353). A Korean will be observing an interviewer for signs of *jeong*, which may be demonstrated by showing concern for another person’s comfort and by revealing one’s own humanity. English has no word that is the exact equivalent of *jeong*. Regardless, interviewees sense this quality and respond well when it is present.

Giving full attention and taking notes

How rare it is for people to listen to children with full attention! So often, when children speak the adults are doing other tasks as they listen, whether driving, washing dishes, or attending to other children. The formal interview presents the requirement, and opportunity, to pay full attention to the child interviewee. When they have the interviewer’s full attention, children are more likely to speak openly. (The exception to this rule concerns young children, who sometimes prefer if an interviewer draws with a crayon or in some other way helps them feel less “on the spot.”)

Many forensic interviewing rooms are set up to allow the interviewer and child to sit comfortably on the floor, or across the corner of a table. This arrangement permits easy eye contact as well as the option of looking away comfortably. Sitting kitty-corner or side-by-side is less confrontational than facing children directly.

The interviewer’s voice

In people who are right-handed, the left hemisphere of the brain hears words while the right side hears the melody of the words (Givens, 2005). Therefore, when we speak we are literally speaking to two different aspects of the listener’s brain—one that processes our word meanings and the other that processes our voice quality and nonverbal signals. A pleasantly pitched and modulated voice communicates kindness to one side of the interviewee’s brain while our words communicate it to the other side.

Around the world, people tend to use higher pitched voices and speak in a sweet, sing-song manner with children when they are not angry. This language, which has been called "motherese," is considered friendly and would be appropriate with a young child. A sweet voice with a varying tone suggests that the interviewer does not have aggressive intentions. However, interviewers should be careful not to speak in this way to teens and adults—it could be considered condescending.

Interviewers who speak in a dry, steady monotone may be perceived as unfriendly, cold, and intimidating. How interviewers use their voices goes a long way to convey caring in a professional relationship. In most circumstances, interviewers will want to use a gentle but firm voice, responding matter-of-factly to even painful material. If the child is extremely anxious, the interviewer may choose to use a soothing voice.

I encourage interviewers to review video or audiotapes of their work from time to time and pay attention to what they really sound like during the process. Did the child have to strain to hear because the interviewer was speaking so quietly? Was the interviewer speaking so loudly that the child seemed frightened or intimidated? Was it hard to make out the interviewer's words because the interviewer was mumbling or was chewing gum? Was the interviewer's voice kind and sympathetic? Did it convey support? If the child hesitated to talk, did the interviewer respond patiently so as to encourage more responsiveness; or was the interviewer impatient, threatening, pushy, or dismissive? If the child was not a native speaker of English, was an interpreter used? If the child seemed to struggle with English words, did the interviewer use simple language but avoid sounding condescending? Did the interviewer use words that were too advanced for the child's age or level of English comprehension?

A supportive tone of voice will encourage the interviewee to reveal sensitive information and cooperate with official systems. A critical or impatient tone can make an interviewee shut down emotionally, and close the door to further intervention.

**Pace  
and time**

As much as possible, the interviewee should be allowed to set the pace. Often children need more time to answer questions than an interviewer might expect. People who are not native speakers of English but who are being interviewed in English may take longer than usual to respond as they search for the right words. This is likely to be true even if the person has been speaking English for years, especially if they still use their first language more often than English (Heredia & Brown, 2004).

For some people, the quality of an interaction is partly determined by the amount of time spent together. Southern Europeans, Africans, and Latin Americans who are less acculturated may spend quite a while in an interview telling anecdotes and elaborating at length. They are apt to be angered by professionals who show irritation with this conversational style. Although an interviewer may impatiently wish an interviewee would “get to the point,” the child may be heading in just that direction—but in a more roundabout way than is habitual in the dominant American culture.

I know it is difficult for interviewers to avoid rushing or appearing rushed if they are constrained by large caseloads, deadlines, productivity quotas, or busy schedules, or if their supervisor has told them they have one and only one interview to “get all the facts” about alleged abuse. Taking one’s time at the beginning of an interview to establish the relationship may help build the sense of trust that will make a bit of rushing later on seem less problematic. To accommodate the more relaxed sense of time of people from a variety of cultures, many professionals schedule longer sessions with their immigrant clients, particularly early in the course of



their work together. Additionally, research shows that children are more likely to disclose, and to disclose more information, if they are interviewed more than once (Faller, 2007). Developing rapport with an immigrant child may take more time and effort than usual, and might easily require extra interview sessions.

### Narrative training

The literature on child forensic interviewing suggests that if interviewers hope to elicit the interviewee's version of events, they will probably want to begin by asking "general" or "invitational" questions that elicit a "free narrative." When interviewers ask a broad, open-ended question in this way, the information is likely to come from the interviewee's own mind and experience, using their own spontaneous language. The answer has not been suggested by the interviewer (Orbach & Lamb, 2000; Saywitz, Goodman & Lyon, 2002). An example of a general question is, "Why are you here today?" An invitational question is just slightly more specific, in that it assumes that there may be an event or experience. An example of an invitational question is, "I heard something may have happened to you. Please tell me everything you remember about it." By beginning with open ended questions that elicit a longer narrative, interviewers are alerting the interviewee to the preferred pattern of responding for the interview. This is far different from beginning an interview with a series of yes/no and short answer questions about age, name, school, and so on.

We allow the interviewee to speak with as little prompting as possible. Asking broader questions and allowing time for a long answer enables interviewees to speak without having their thoughts interrupted or sidetracked by us. Later, when the general outline has been gathered, we will probably need to fill in the blanks with more focused questions. Encouraging a free narrative may be especially important when working with children who are not accustomed to speaking freely and openly for long periods of time. In many cultures people do less speaking, in general, than in Western

industrialized nations, particularly the United States. Also, in most cultures people in subordinate positions, such as women, children, and people with a low income or social status, do less speaking when meeting with people of a more dominant status. If the forensic interview is contradicting these norms, it is important to set up clear expectations from the start. However, with young children or with older children, if our efforts at eliciting a free narrative seem to be failing we can switch to more focused and direct questions (Faller, 2007).

Assessing  
development  
in immigrant  
children

In forensic contexts, interviewers often want to determine if a child is “developing normally,” to identify special vulnerabilities, or to determine whether the child will be a credible witness. There is enormous potential for unintended bias in conducting developmental assessments with children who belong to a cultural group that is different from the mainstream. This section will orient readers to some of the issues involved, and provide references for further consultation.

We should remember that bilingual children may know differing words in each of their two languages. For instance, children may know “school words” such as ruler, blackboard, cafeteria, and recess in English, while knowing “home words” such as sofa, closet, and the names of family relationships in their first language. For this reason, bilingual children who are assessed in just one language may not be able to express their full vocabulary or full conceptual knowledge. They may, therefore, appear less advanced academically or developmentally than they really are.

Children who are not native speakers of English may have even more difficulty than other children with complex verb forms such as would have, should have, may have, might have once wanted, and so on. And imagine their discomfort with constructions such as: “Where were you when you first told someone that something had happened to you in the alley

behind your aunt's building?" Interviewers should keep their questions short and direct, using no embedded clauses. Every so often, interviewers should ask if the child understands the questions. If the interviewer has the sense that the child does not understand, the interviewer should pause and try to ascertain what is happening. Interviews with young children, and with children who are nonnative speakers of English, can move especially slowly, requiring a great deal of patience.

Interviewers sometimes reach incorrect opinions about the development of children from certain cultures. For instance, Filipino, Lebanese, or Mexican children may achieve certain developmental milestones such as self-feeding, weaning, self-soothing, and sleeping by themselves at a much later age than in Western industrialized nations. These children are more dependent on their caretakers because they are typically held and carried constantly, and consoled immediately if they are distressed. Also, they often sleep with their mothers at night, either in the same bed or in the same room (Santos & Chan, 2004, Sharifzadeh, 2004; Zuniga, 2004). In these cultures, young children are often indulged and may experience little in the way of expectations for discipline or achievement until they enter school. For instance, young children may be allowed to drink from a baby bottle; their caretakers may cut their food and tie their shoes for them until a much later age than would be expected in the United States, Canada, or Northern Europe.

Children whose parents come from many parts of the world such as Somalia, the Sudan, and parts of India will not be comfortable using silverware, since they are used to eating with their hands. Conversely, children from Western industrialized nations often lag behind their peers from developing countries in their ability to use kitchen knives, work with fire, complete household chores, entertain themselves, and care for younger siblings (Rogoff, 2003). These developmental differences are not a question of one culture making its children more advanced than another. Rather, different skills and qualities are emphasized to shape

children to be the kinds of adults who will fit in with the values and gender roles of their cultures. If the methods we use to assess children rely solely on one set of skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking English, they will be inadequate to measure children's development in other areas.

Trauma symptoms in children that may not stem from caretaker abuse

Refugee children commonly face traumas prior to migration, during the migration process, and after migration. These damaging traumas may include the "disappearance" of family members, hunger, thirst, illness, homelessness, sexual assaults, seeing dead bodies, being wounded, physical threats and beatings, confinement, torture, rape, seeing relatives killed, witnessing atrocities, being forced to violate their own moral code, and/or living for prolonged periods in fear for their lives (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005). Also, life in the refugee camps is often tenuous, traumatic, and overcrowded. Immigrants who are not formally refugees but who have come from countries with repressive governments may also have experienced trauma in their countries of origin and/or during an arduous voyage to their new lands. Life in the new country may still not be safe or secure for immigrant children, who may observe that their parents are unable to communicate, uncertain of how to proceed, and subject to the vagaries of bosses, landlords, social service providers, and others. Additionally, it is traumatic for a child to live as an undocumented alien, or to know that his or her loved ones are undocumented and risk deportation on a daily basis.

Sometimes professionals assume that a child who was very young during traumatic experiences was somehow shielded from them. However, Pynoos, Steinberg, and Goenjian (1996) suggest that when children have experienced trauma before they developed language skills, they actually have a more difficult time healing than older children who transformed their experiences into words as they occurred.

Children may demonstrate traumatic symptoms that do not stem from caretaker abuse, but can easily be misinterpreted

as such. For instance, a child who has been traumatized for whatever reason may suffer from any combination of separation anxiety, school phobia, bedwetting, encopresis, depression, anxiety, poor concentration, mood disorders, anger, substance abuse, suicidality, nightmares, and/or compulsive behaviors including masturbation. A child who has been traumatized may be afraid of loud noises, sirens, yelling, airplanes, and fire alarms, and may startle easily. Conversely, another child who was traumatized may seem to seek out frightening situations, appear to be afraid of nothing, and respond violently to minor incidents. A traumatized child may have to be coaxed into eating, or may bolt down food quickly and sloppily, looking as if this is his or her last meal. These symptoms present a confusing picture to professionals.

When possible, professionals should take a full trauma history and inquire about the child's behavioral changes over time (Greenwald, 2005). Sometimes children seem to "fall apart" when they are finally safe from the source of the trauma, whether it is war, a natural disaster, or a violent caretaker. When working with children who were adopted, or who come from extremely chaotic environments, or whose caretakers are themselves traumatized, such a thorough history may not be possible. Parents from some cultures will not want to rehash the past, believing it is unlucky or simply unwise to discuss horrific incidents. Parents may feel shame due to incidents that they and their children have endured. Parents may also fail to see a connection between these past incidents and the child's current behavior, believing instead that the child is willfully misbehaving, is possessed by spirits, or is physically ill. Remember, also, that refugees sometimes take in others' children and claim them as their own so the children can be raised safely. In these situations, the people acting as parents may be hesitant to discuss a child's history because they do not know that early history. Sometimes interviewers can learn through readings or consultations that a child who is being interviewed is a member of a group that is likely to have undergone certain

traumatic experiences, even if there is no specific documentation of these experiences for this particular child.

The process of immigration itself has been found to be traumatizing for many children and families, as are chronic experiences of racism, discrimination, and exclusion (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Consider the ongoing trauma of a child who is thrust into an unfamiliar school filled with people who speak another language, and who have different sets of behavioral norms. The child is apt to feel isolated, confused, and perhaps invisible for hours every day, without end. Children whose caretakers are unable to serve as a bridge to the school system are apt to feel particularly lost without a guide in their new environment.

When forensic interviewers note symptoms that often indicate trauma in children but are unable to determine the source of that trauma, it is important not to assume these traumas are inflicted by caretakers. Immigrant children may be subject to numerous other sources of trauma.

## **Conclusion**

When an interviewer meets with a child only one time and in one location, the interviewer obtains a snapshot of that child at that time and in that place. It is necessarily just one limited picture, and the interviewer's ability to draw inferences about the child and the child's reality is severely limited. When the interviewer is not a member of a child's culture, it can be especially difficult for that interviewer to know how to interpret what he or she is seeing and hearing. When forensic interviewers take positive steps to improve their cultural competence and when they give careful thought to their interviews with children from immigrant groups, they will be able to improve the accuracy and fairness of their interviews. This is especially critical when there is a suspicion of child abuse and neglect.

## References

- Bryant-Davis, T., & Ocampo, C. (2005). The trauma of racism: Implications for counseling, research, and education. *Counseling Psychologist, 33*, 574-578.
- Davidson, B. (2000). The interpreter as institutional gatekeeper: The social-linguistic role of interpreters in Spanish-English medical discourse. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 4*(3), 379-405.
- Davis, S. L., & Bottoms, B. L. (2002). Effects of social support on children's eyewitness reports: A test of the underlying mechanism. *Law and Human Behavior, 26*, 185-215.
- Delgado, M., Jones, K., & Rohani, M. (2005). *Social work practice with refugee and immigrant youth in the United States*. New York: Pearson.
- Faller, K. (ed.). (2007). *Interviewing children about sexual abuse: Controversies and best practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Folman, R. D. (1998). "I was taken": How children experience removal from their parents preliminary to placement into foster care. *Adoption Quarterly, 2*, 7-35.
- Fontes, L. A. (2004). Ethics in violence against women research: The sensitive, the dangerous, and the overlooked. *Ethics and Behavior, 14*, 141-174.
- Fontes, L. A. (2005). *Child abuse and culture: Working with diverse families*. New York: Guilford.
- Fontes, L. A. (2008). *Interviewing clients across cultures: A practitioner's guide*. New York: Guilford.
- Givens, D. (2005). *Love signals*. New York: St. Martins Press.
- Greenwald, R. (2005). *Children & trauma*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth.
- Heredia, R. R., & Brown, J. M. (2004). Bilingual memory. In T. Bhatia & W. C. Ritchie (Eds.), *The bilingual handbook* (pp. 225-248). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.



- Kim, B. L. C., & Ryu, E. (2005). Korean families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & N. Garcia-Preto (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (3rd ed.) (pp. 349-362). New York: Guilford.
- King, N. M., & Churchill, L. R. (2000). Ethical principles guiding research on child and adolescent subjects. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15*, 710-720.
- Orbach, Y., & Lamb, M.E. (2000). Enhancing children's narratives in investigative interviews. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 24*, 1631-1648.
- Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., & Goenjian, A. (1996). Traumatic stress in childhood and adolescence: Recent developments and current controversies. In B. Van der Kolk, A. C. McFarlane, & L. Weisrath (Eds.), *Traumatic Stress* (pp. 331-358). New York: Guilford.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Santos, R. M. & Chan, S. (2004). Families with Filipino roots. In E.W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence* (3rd ed.) (pp. 299-344). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Saywitz, K. J., Goodman, G. S., & Lyon, T. D. (2002). Interviewing children in and out of court: Current research and practice implications. In J. E. B. Myers, L. Berliner, J. Briere, C. T. Hendrix, C. Jenny, & T. A. Reid, (Eds.), *The APSAC Handbook* (pp. 349-377). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sharifzadeh, V. S. (2004). Families with Middle Eastern roots. In E. W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence* (3rd ed.) (pp. 473-414). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Zuniga, M. E. (2004). Families with Latino roots. In E. W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence* (3rd ed.) (pp. 179-218). Baltimore: Brookes.
- U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-7, American Community Factfinder. Washington, DC: Author.