

Transitioning to the Substantive Phase of the Interview

Interviewers are trained to ask about abuse initially with a nonleading invitation. These invitations are utilized to move or transition from pre-substantive topics (i.e., rapport development, interview instructions, narrative practice and/or family) to the substantive or allegation phase of the interview.

The transition is a crucial moment in the interview and has the potential to encourage a disclosure from a child. Failing to ask an appropriate transition question could negatively impact both disclosure as well as have downstream affects during the remainder of the interview.

What versus Why Transition Prompts

Recent research examined the effectiveness of two different transition prompts: “Why did you come here to talk to me today” versus “What did you come here to talk about today?” While the questions feel similar, the change from a “why” to a “what” question demonstrates differences in both the immediacy of disclosure and the productiveness of the child’s responses.

The transition questions using “what” question were 60% more likely to obtain informative responses than the transition questions utilizing “why”. In addition, the transition prompts phased with “why” elicited more uninformative responses, leaving the interviewer struggling with how to introduce the topic of concern without being overly suggestive.

A potential reason the “why” prompt resulted in a higher level of noninformative responses may be because a child has greater difficulty mastering an understanding of the abstract concepts needed to respond appropriately. The “what” prompt is concrete and easier for a child to understand.

Due to the sensitive nature of maltreatment discussions, the “why” prompt made also be viewed by the child as more critical and accusatory in nature.

In addition, the research examined transition prompts which began with “do you know” (DYK) and found the use of DYK transition prompts resulted in a 91% decrease in immediate informative responses compared to the “what did you come here to talk about”.

Funneling Transition Prompts

If the child does not respond to the “what” prompt, the interviewer should ask further questions designed to assist the child in moving toward the topic of concern.

- “What did your (mom, dad, caretaker, etc.) say about coming here today?”
- “Are you worried about something?”
- “Have there been some problems?”
- “Is someone worried about you?”
- “Has someone been bothering you?”
- “Has something happened?”

Notice the more focused requests are yes/no questions but do not explicitly ask about individuals or actions. If the child gives an affirmative response, then immediately follow with an open-ended request eliciting further information.

References

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DOI:10.1037/law0000347