



Interviewing the Child In Suspected Sexual Abuse/Exploitation

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Objectives

List reasons why a child may delay disclosing abuse, or recant the allegation

Recall the differences between a first responder interview and a forensic interview

Recall 3 helpful techniques to use when talking to children who are disclosing abuse

Recall common errors in talking to suspected victims of sexual abuse

A word about the photos...



8 year old boy tells his teacher that his 20 year old uncle made him “suck” on his (uncle’s) penis and the uncle told him a hidden camera had videotaped the whole thing.

Myth or Reality?



A child's disclosure of sexual abuse is arguably the most important aspect of the case.

Myth or Reality?

When a child discloses abuse, they almost always give a purposeful and complete disclosure.

The Disclosure

Accidental vs. Intentional

Often incomplete

◦ Why?

Child anxious
about
response

Stress inhibits
memory

Responder
doesn't ask
the question

Fragmented
memories

Too many
experiences
to describe



Myth or Reality?



Children often make up stories about being abused.

For attention, revenge.....

How do false allegations occur?

1. Child intentionally fabricates abuse
2. Adult intentionally manipulates the child
3. Adult misinterprets child's words/actions
4. Adult inadvertently suggests abuse
5. Poor interviewing technique



False Allegations of Abuse

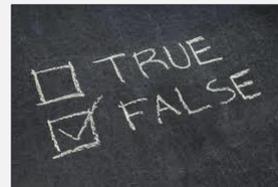
Canadian study found 4% false allegations for all types abuse

- Children and custodial parents least likely to fabricate
- Custody issues associated with increased rate: 12%

Interview technique is critical

- Best done by trained interviewer

Young children can be suggestible



Myth or Reality?



If a child was abused, they would tell someone immediately.

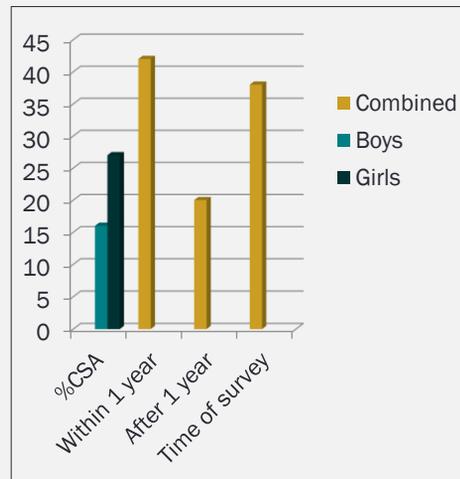
Disclosure Rates

Studies of adults:

- 55-69% did not disclose during childhood
- 5-13% reported to authorities
- 10-46% only disclosed at time of survey

Time to Disclosure

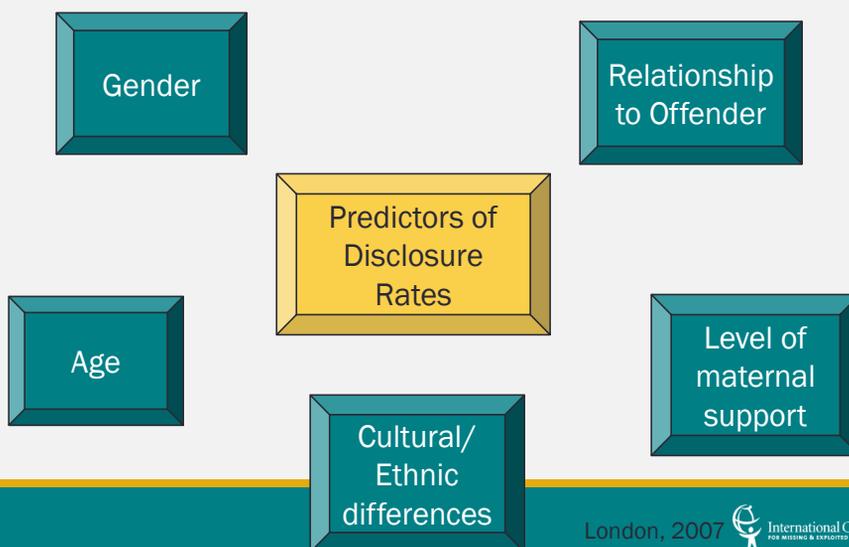
1481 F, 1145 M
 National probability sample
 Phone interview
 CSA before 18 years
 Median age at time of abuse: 9.7 years



Finkelhor, 1990



Predictors of Disclosure Rates



London, 2007



Myth or Reality?

If a child said it didn't happen, it didn't happen.

Even if he made a disclosure last week.

Denial and Recantation



Estimated rates vary with research study

- Difficult to measure
- Denial of abuse 6%-72% (Bradley; Sorenson)
- Recantation 4-23% (Bradley; Malloy)
 - Factors associated with recantation:
 - Younger age of victim
 - Abused by parent figure
 - Had no support by nonoffending caregiver

It does occur. Frequency is controversial.

8 yo girl disclosed graphic details of ongoing severe abuse by her father. In her forensic interview she provided many details, including factors she couldn't have known without having had the experience. Police arrested the father. One week later the mother brought the child back to clinic: "She's got something to tell you." Child recanted her statement and said she'd lied because she was angry at the father.

Police discovered the mother had taken the child to visit the father in jail the day prior.

Why do you think the mother acted this way? Why did the child recant?

Police locate a collection of pornographic pictures and eventually identify the 10 yo male victim. Eventually they identify the offender, who is arrested. The offender confesses to the allegations and verifies that the 10 yo boy is the child in the pictures.

Child repeatedly denies any sexual victimization when interviewed.

Why do you think the child denied the allegations?

Myth or Reality?

Children as young as 3 or 4 years can tell us about their abuse.

Memory

We reconstruct our memories

Parts of memories may be inaccurate

Misinformation can lead to inaccurate, false memories

Memories start very young



Childhood Memories

Young children:

- Remember less
- Lack ability to construct coherent narratives
- May recall different things on different occasions
- Lack detail



Memories for stressful events may be stronger

Suggestibility

Young children most vulnerable

What factors increase the risk?

- Peripheral, irrelevant details of event
- Leading or suggestive questions
- Use of props and cues in very young children
- Bystander status
- Original memory is weak
- Interviewer authoritarian, intimidating
- Repeated questions
- Asking child to imagine an event



Language & Development: 3-5 years

May be able to provide information on:

- Who
- What (where on body touched, etc)
- Where it occurred
- If event happened one time or >1 time

Usually cannot:

- Tell how many times event occurred
- Provide reliable sequence of events
- Tell when something happened



Kellogg, in Jenny, 2011



Language & Development: 6-11 years

May be able to provide information on:

- More details about abuse event
- Idiosyncratic details (smell, taste)
- Relative frequency of events (daily, weekly, etc)
- Age abuse started/stopped
- Physical and behavioral symptoms
- Can correct mistakes introduced by misleading questions

May not be able to:

- Provide exact dates of events or correct sequence
- Precise timeframes for symptoms
- Understand abstract concepts



Kellogg, in Jenny, 2011



Language & Development: 12-17 years

May be able to provide information on:

- More idiosyncratic details (smell, taste)
- Better info on times, duration of events

May not be able to:

- Understand abstract concepts consistently
- Understand adverse consequences of abuse (ex. STI)
- May sensationalize
- May feel embarrassed, reluctant to talk



Kellogg, in Jenny, 2011  International Centre
FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

The Forensic Interview

Not the same as the first responder 'interview'.

First Responder 'Interview'

Usually child makes disclosure

Your goals:

- Provide reassurance and support
- Obtain enough information to decide if abuse/exploitation **may** have occurred.
 - Don't need to be *certain* of abuse.
 - Don't need to know specific details.
 - Ask as few questions as possible.

Make necessary report



First Responder Needs to Know...

Is there a reasonable suspicion that abuse/exploitation occurred?

Is the child safe right now?

Will the child be safe if he/she goes home today?

Does the child need immediate medical/mental health evaluation?



Forensic Interview

Designed to obtain information relevant for investigation

- Determine *if* abuse occurred
- Who, what, where of events
- Is a structured interview
- Developmentally-appropriate
- Legally defensible

Part of a multidisciplinary process



Ideal conditions

Trained interviewer

Child-friendly environment

Minimal number of interviews

Privacy

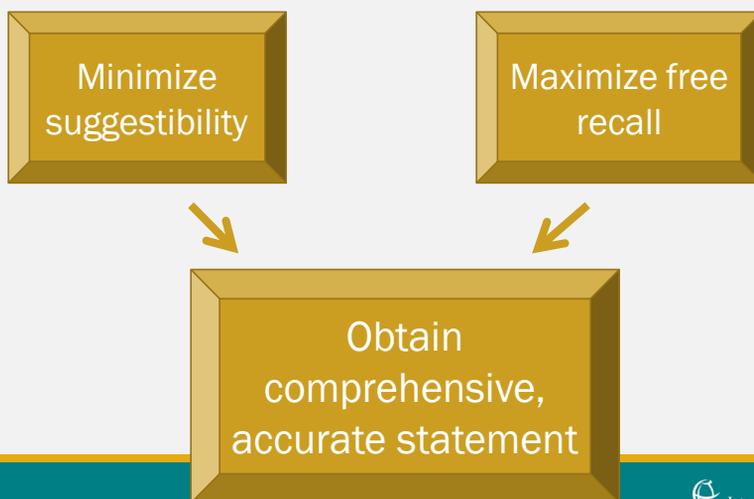
Multidisciplinary participation



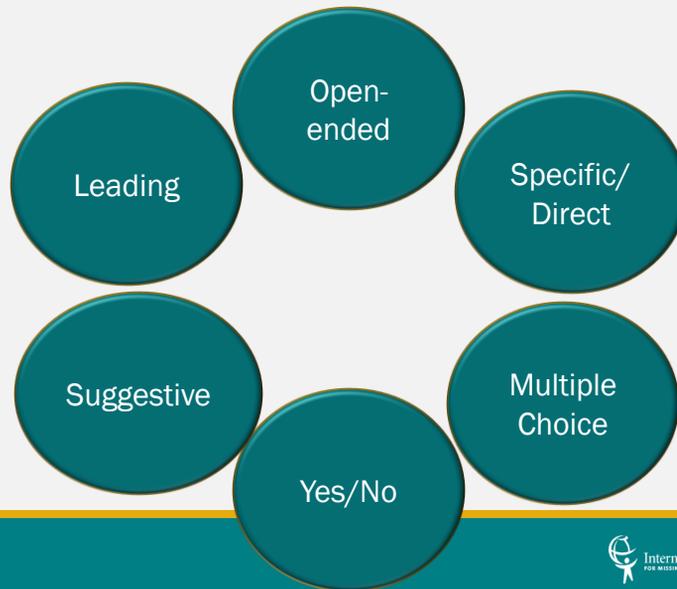
Typical Structure of Interview

- I. Introductory phase
Ground rules, expectations
- II. Rapport-building phase
- III. Substantive phase (questions about possible abuse)
- IV. Conclusion of interview

Goals



Types of Questions



Open-Ended Questions

Invites free narrative
Most reliable form of questioning
Samples:

“Tell me
some more
about...”

“Can you tell
me about
that?”

“What
happened
next?”

Specific/Direct Questions

- Provide more direction than asking for free narrative
- Easier for younger children

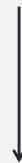
“You said you heard something. Do you remember what it was?”

“What did it feel like?”

“You mentioned you were sleeping. Where were you?”



Open-ended questions



Specific/Direct



Hai!

The “Yes/No” Questions

Ne!

Invites single word answer, not narrative

May try to please by saying, “Yes”

Ken!

La!

May be biased to one answer (always says, “No”)

Child may guess when doesn't know

Nee!

Si!

Nahi!

Shi!

Leading and Suggestive Questions

“When did Mr.
___ touch you?”

May lead to misinformation

Child's desire to please

Try to avoid these, even when talking to adults

“I'll bet that
hurt, didn't it?”

“What did he say
he'd do to you if
you told?”

What type of question is this?

“How many times did it happen?”

“Were you in the bedroom, the living room or somewhere else?”

Child complains of genital pain. Mother says, “Who touched you?”

“Did it hurt?”

“Didn’t you tell him to stop?”

“Tell me all about”

“What did he say after he was done?”

“So, then what happened?”



Interview Techniques

Short sentences with easy words

Don't correct or interrupt

Clarify terms

No jargon or legal terms

Story may be incomplete



Tips for Talking to the Young Child

Use Age-Appropriate Language

Simple questions
(1 idea per question)

Use their words

Young children are very concrete.

If you get a strange answer,
think about how you asked the question



Trauma-Informed Approach

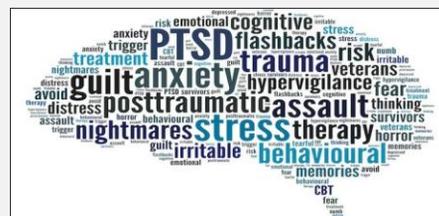
Sexual abuse/exploitation causes traumatic stress

Trauma can lead to variety of behaviors, reactions

Talking can trigger memories, stress

Need to take steps to

- Ensure child feels safe
- Minimize re-trauma



Trauma-Informed Approach

- Assure child:
 - you are glad they told you.
 - they are not in trouble.
 - abuse is not their fault.
- Avoid making promises you can't keep.
- Explain confidentiality issues and reporting process.
- Keep child involved.
- Provide support.



Common Interview Errors



Failure to build adequate rapport with child

Failing to assess developmental abilities

Assuming child interprets sexual experiences in same way as adult

Focusing only on behavior of alleged offender

Repeating questions when don't get expected answer

Reinforcing child for giving expected answers

What Happens After the Interview?

Child needs support from others

Offer medical exam

Assess for traumatic stress, may need therapy

Need to ensure child is safe

Ensure any other at-risk children are safe

Need to gather evidence

- Corroborate details of interview
- Interview alleged offender
- Interview other potential victims, witnesses

Build case for prosecution if feasible

Case 1:

13 year old male molested by school coach over span of 6 months. When police raided coach's home and seized computer, they found images of the boy and evidence that alleged offender had sold images online.

You are interviewing the child.

- How can you build rapport with child?
- What questions would you ask about images?

Case 2:

8 year old boy tells you that his 20 year old uncle made him “suck” on his (uncle’s) penis and the uncle told him a hidden camera had videotaped the whole thing.

You are a ‘first responder’ and are NOT conducting the formal interview. What questions would you ask?

47

Case 3:

15 year old female discloses that she met a 35 year old man online, they corresponded for 3 days and she decided to run away with him. She slipped out of the house, and he took her to a hotel; they had sex. Two days later she decides she wants to go home, he tells her he will post naked pictures of her online if she tries to leave (she had sent these over the internet during initial conversations.) Police find child in hotel after mother called to report her missing.

You are investigating the case.

- What are 3 open-ended questions you can ask?
- What are 3 direct questions you can ask?
- What are 2 questions you would NOT want to ask?

48

Case 4:

Police follow a cyber-tip and discover 50 child sexual exploitation images of a young girl. Their investigation eventually leads them to the alleged offender. He admits to the crime and gives name of the 6 year old child. You are the prosecutor interviewing the child.

- How do you think the child is feeling while you are asking questions?
- What can you do to make her feel more at ease?
- What are some questions you can ask?
- What other sources can you use to obtain information?

49

Conclusions

In cases of suspected sexual abuse/exploitation:

- Child's statement is critical
- Even young children can provide information
- Care needs to be taken when asking questions
- Need victim-centered approach



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THANK YOU.

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