INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

The Science of Conversation in Forensic Contexts

DEBRA ANN POOLE

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THE FORENSIC PERSPECTIVE

Every day, adults around the world are trying to learn about children's lives through conversations such as this one:[1]

Father: So what did you do at the sleepover?

Son: Jake's mom took us bowling and I spilled a pop.

Father: You spilled a pop? Was Adam trying to wrestle with you again?

Son: No, I just spilled it. It took me a while to find Mrs. Linton, but she bought me another one.

Father: Did you have a good time?

Son: Yeah.

[1]Many parents share stories with me about times when a lack of skepticism led them to feel mortified. In a typical story, they confronted a teacher or neighbor about a situation involving their children only to learn that their assumptions about the event were wildly wrong. I penned this fictitious dialogue to illustrate how jumping to conclusions can lead to two types of errors: Adults can falsely accuse someone, but they can also miss real risks and harm.

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This style of inquiry is what I call a *story interview* (Poole & Dickinson, 2013): Adults prompt children to tell the story of an event, and often the inquisitors are mostly interested in particular subplots. This father had recently caught his son and an older boy roughhousing, which is why he asked about wrestling.

To appreciate why asking children to describe an event is not, by itself, a forensic interview, consider the fact that the son in this opening story was the wrestling instigator who had (once again) grabbed onto Adam just before the pop spilled. The father did not realize what triggered these events because he never generated alternative hypotheses about who started the wrestling. He also never encouraged his son to elaborate and did not ask whether anyone else saw the drink spill (which might have revealed witnesses). Most important, he was not at all curious about why Mrs. Linton was hard to find. Consequently, he never discovered that the boys were at risk because she spends most of these evenings with friends at the bar. Like many adults, this father is unlikely to discover unexpected truths because he has not adopted a forensic perspective. In the following discussion, I review this perspective by describing the characteristics that distinguish child forensic interviews from natural conversations, how the forensic perspective separates forensic and clinical roles ("play-your-position" recommendations), and how different procedures for briefing interviewers prior to forensic conversations serve different goals.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHILD FORENSIC INTERVIEW

Some professionals erroneously believe that interviews are competently conducted as long as interviewers avoid suggestive questions and progress through the series of phases dictated by a protocol. In fact, an adult can neutrally converse with children yet still conduct conversations that do not serve the needs of investigations. Interviewers shift from conducting story interviews to conducting forensic interviews when they build four characteristics into conversations: hypothesis testing, a child-centered approach, exploration that supports the broader investigation, and an eye on commander's intent.

Hypothesis Testing

The hallmark of the forensic perspective is *skepticism*, which is a questioning attitude in which professionals maintain doubt about evidence and witnesses' declarations. A critical skill in the skeptic's toolbox is the ability to generate and test alternative hypotheses. Forensic interviewers engage in *hypothesis testing* when they list plausible possibilities regarding the meaning of evidence and then look for information that will increase or decrease the likelihood of each possibility. Two types of hypothesis testing occur during child forensic interviews: (a) testing alternative hypotheses regarding the matters under investigation (primary-issues hypothesis testing) and (b) testing alternative interpretations of children's utterances during interviews (disambiguation).

The nature of *primary-issues hypothesis testing* is dictated by the type of case and individual case features. In arson investigations, for instance, primary-issues hypotheses are plausible accounts of how fires might have started. For sexual abuse investigations, alternative hypotheses for allegations might be that adults misinterpreted children's reports, that children were lying, and so forth. Knowledge of the dynamics of particular types of cases helps professionals generate alternative hypotheses. For example, one hypothesis about a distinctive pattern of bruising might be that parents used a popular folk remedy known to leave similar marks.

After generating alternative hypotheses about the matters under investigation, interviewers plan testing strategies. Some hypothesis-testing strategies are subtle. For example, asking what children were doing when something happened could reveal contextual information that changes the prevailing hypothesis. Similarly, asking children to describe what they saw or heard are hypothesis-testing questions if responses might lead to physical evidence that tests a hypothesis. Because it is often unrealistic to address every possible scenario, the goal of primary-issues hypothesis testing is to cover what can reasonably be covered given the age of the child and the case characteristics.[2] This type of hypothesis testing is a goal of child advocacy center interviews (e.g., Child Advocacy Center, 2014), an expectation of some forensic protocols (e.g., State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Department of Human Services, 2011), and a recurring topic in resources on sexual abuse assessments (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Faller, 2003; Kuehnle & Connell, 2009).

Three barriers hinder primary-issues hypothesis testing. First, some people believe that considering alternatives to a child's account is tantamount to disbelieving the child and, therefore, antiadvocacy. To respond, defenders of a skeptical approach point out that a powerful way to enhance a child's credibility is to rule out alternative explanations. Also, when children are misunderstood or manipulated by adults or peers, advocacy lies in uncovering the misunderstandings or manipulation.

[2]See State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Department of Human Services (2011) for examples of allegations, possible alternative hypotheses, and test questions, along with a hypothesis-testing plan sheet.

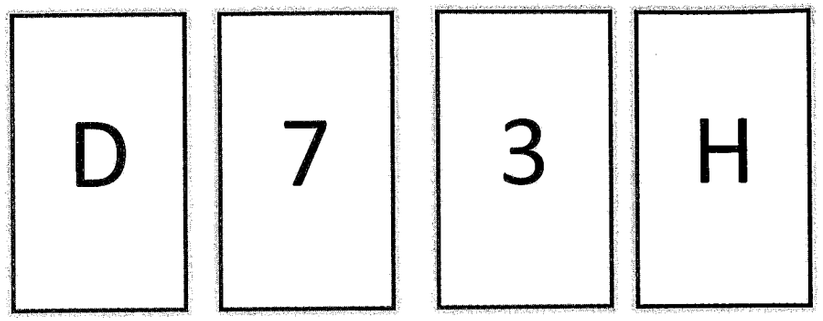

Figure 2.1. One version of the four-card task (Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). Assume there are only four cards. Each card has a number on one side and a letter on the other side. Which card or cards would you have to turn over to determine whether the following statement is true or false? Every card with a *D* on one side has a *3* on the other side.

The second barrier is more difficult to overcome: In most situations, hypothesis testing does not come naturally to adults. The classic demonstration of just how difficult hypothesis testing can be is a four-card task such as the one in Figure 2.1. To try this task for yourself, assume that there are four cards, each with a letter on one side and a number on the other. Now answer this question: Which card or cards in Figure 2.1 would you have to turn over to decide whether the statement (hypothesis) printed below the cards is true or false? ("Every card with a *D* on one side has a *3* on the other side.") The two answers people give most frequently, which are both wrong, appear in the footnote, along with the correct answer (which was achieved by only 4% of people in one set of studies; Wason & Shapiro, 1971, Table 1).[3]

The four-card task illustrates *confirmation bias* (also called the *myside bias*), which is the tendency people have to search for and interpret evidence in ways that confirm their beliefs while ignoring or downplaying evidence that would disconfirm those beliefs. Deciding what to turn over is analogous to deciding which questions to ask children, and neglect of the card with a *7* on one side illustrates that people often fail to search for critical evidence. Many studies have shown that professionals and laypeople alike find it difficult to maintain the open-minded perspective needed for forensic work. (For a review of reasoning biases, see Kahneman, 2011; for forensic implications of the confirmation bias, see Kassin, Dror, & Kukucka, 2013.)

The third barrier to primary-issues hypothesis testing is a "bottleneck" in the thinking process: the limited capacity of working memory. Working memory can be thought of as a temporary holding bin for the information we are thinking about while we talk, listen, and plan our next questions, and this bin can contain only a handful of items at any given time (Cowan, 2010). As a result, even when interviewers make plans to test alternative hypotheses, the cognitive demands of conversation can cause them to close interviews before they have explored critical issues. During forensic conversations, strategies for overcoming memory limitations include using interview breaks to receive feedback from coworkers (Chapter 5) and consulting checklists (Chapter 6).

In addition to testing alternative hypotheses about primary case issues, forensic interviewers have to continually envision possible interpretations of what children are saying and work to resolve ambiguities. This second type of hypothesis testing, *disambiguation*, occurs frequently during sexual abuse interviews because children use so many names for body parts and sexual acts. For example, when interviewers ask, "What do you use your bird for?" or "Is there another word for your bird? It's OK to say it," they are testing what a child means when he says *bird*. Likewise, after a child reports watching people "have sex," an interviewer might say, "What do people do when they have sex?" to explore whether the child equates sex with kissing. Meaning checks are also needed whenever children appear to no longer be talking about the topic of conversation. For example, a question such as "Was [something the child said] that time with John or another time?" is a type of disambiguation that prevents allegations from mushrooming when young children interject irrelevant people, places, and events into conversation. (See pp. 293–294 in Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008, for examples of how this type of hypothesis-testing is built into the National Institute of Child Health and Development protocol.)

An intriguing set of studies on the dynamics of adult–child conversation illustrates the need for skepticism and hypothesis testing throughout the life of a case. These studies were motivated by sexual abuse cases in which adults alleged that children disclosed, the children participated in one or more interviews, and interviewers took notes and summarized findings. The question researchers asked is how reliably information flows through this process. In one study, mothers had difficulty remembering whether they or their children had spoken specific utterances—even though conversations had occurred only 3 days earlier (Bruck, Ceci, & Francoeur, 1999). Experienced investigators also have difficulty recalling verbatim questions and answers (Warren & Woodall, 1999), and note taking does not fully resolve their

[3] "*D* and *3*" is the most popular answer, followed by "*D*." The correct answer is "*D* and *7*": You should turn over the *D* to see whether there is a *3* on the other side, and you should turn over the *7* because a *D* on the other side of a *7* would prove the rule false. It does not matter what is on the other side of the *3*. For example, suppose there was an *F*: The rule "if *D* then *3*" says nothing about what has to be on the other side of any letter except *D*.

memory limitations. For example, Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Hershkowitz, and Horowitz (2000) found that notes from trained forensic interviewers attributed fewer than half the details children reported to the correct eliciting utterance (even though interviewers were supposedly writing down literal questions and answers). But poor memory for what was said is not the only concern. Recordings have revealed that adults often mishear children and feed back information during interviews that is not what children said; in response, children sometimes go along with interviewers' distortions (e.g., Hunt & Borgida, 2001; Roberts & Lamb, 1999).

Because children's testimony can be misheard, misremembered, and transformed during conversations, it is disconcerting when professionals refer to unrecorded reports as *disclosures* (revealing a lack of skepticism) rather than *alleged disclosures*. Individuals with a hypothesis-testing mind-set would formulate several possibilities regarding reports of prior disclosures, including the possibility that the child said exactly what was reported, that the report is a distorted version of what the child said (with some accurate and some inaccurate information), and that a disclosure never occurred at all. The latter possibility does not assume that someone is lying, only that the type of cooperative behavior children show in the face of specific questions, as described in Chapter 1, might have combined with other factors to mislead adults. According to the forensic perspective, interviews are not simply opportunities for children to repeat something they might have discussed with others; instead, these conversations are opportunities to explore the origins of allegations.

As beneficial as hypothesis testing sounds in principle, there are good reasons for why the extent of hypothesis testing will vary across cases. For example, young preschoolers do not reliably answer questions about where or how they learned something, and many will have little to say about topics that might get at this information indirectly. Therefore, an interviewer's first priority when working with a young child is to elicit a sufficiently detailed narrative to allow the investigative team to evaluate the plausibility and coherence of information across reported disclosures. Hypothesis testing in such interviews might involve questions to assess whether children understand the forensically meaningful words they are using (which explores whether they are merely parroting words from television or some other source) and to determine that there have been no misunderstandings due to idiosyncratic uses or pronunciations of words.

A Child-Centered Approach

Another striking difference between adult–child conversations in everyday life (Chapter 1) and conversations in forensic contexts are the strategies forensic interviewers use to privilege children's participation. As one protocol explained (State of Maine Child and Family Services, 2010),

> Interviewers use open-ended questions to "transfer control" of conversations so children—not interviewers—are the information providers. Although interviewers direct the flow of conversation through a series of phases (steps), children determine the vocabulary and specific content of conversations as much as possible. Fact-finding interviewers are mindful to frame questions in ways that are developmentally and culturally sensitive. They choose techniques that empower children to be comfortable talking about potentially sensitive information. (p. 2)

A child-centered approach is often mentioned as the defining feature of professional child interviewing. As one training organization explained,

> The rationale for a child centered approach to forensic interviewing is anchored on the premise that a child's ability, willingness and competency to participate in the interview is greatly enhanced when the interview strategy is structured based on the child's emotional, cognitive, and developmental abilities. (National Association of Certified Child Forensic Interviewers, 2014, p. 1)

Unpacking these definitions reveals a daunting array of knowledge underlying skilled interviewing, including awareness of the emotional barriers that can inhibit children from talking, the cognitive strengths and limitations of different age groups, and how individual differences associated with victimization, disabilities, and cultural contexts affect interviewing choices. There are two approaches for taking these factors into account during interviews. In one, interviewers conduct developmental assessments to gauge children's language development, knowledge of concepts that will likely be part of the interview (e.g., numbers, the prepositions *in* vs. *on*), and ability to answer various types of questions. The goal of this approach is to use information about children's strengths and weaknesses to adjust interview plans (Morgan, 1995).

Today, developmental assessments make the most sense when professionals with specialized training in child assessment have multiple sessions to interact with children and their families, when concerns about children's developmental levels might affect case analyses, and when the content of assessments might inform these analyses. But these circumstances do not describe the majority of forensic interviews because the information obtained by assessments often is not useful. For example, children can recite numbers by rote and count small quantities yet still have trouble answering questions about the frequency of recurring events in their lives (Connolly, Hockley, & Pratt, 1996). For this reason, simple concept checks (e.g., "How many blocks do I have?" "Is this a weekday or the weekend?") only test foundational knowledge, not the ability to apply that knowledge in eyewitness situations.

As Michael Lamb and I pointed out, "At best, the presence of lengthy assessments only imparts specious authenticity to the interview process" (Poole & Lamb, 1998, p. 132).

An alternative to developmental assessments is to build child-centered strategies into the fabric of interviews. For instance, the conversational conventions of forensic interviewing help interviewers speak in ways that most children understand (Chapter 3), early interview phases encourage children to talk (thereby providing opportunities to observe their speech and narrative skills; Chapter 4), and case-specific decisions help ensure that children's individual needs are met (Chapter 6). A child-centered approach does not preclude delivering assessment questions when the information obtained might be useful, but it eliminates the need to do so for the majority of cases.

Exploration That Supports the Broader Investigation

In addition to testing hypotheses and taking a child-centered approach, forensic interviewers move beyond story interviews by delivering questions that might lead children to mention physical evidence, additional witnesses, and other information that could be explored outside the interview. In the words of one protocol, "Fact-finding interviews are part of broader assessments that sometimes involve retrieval of physical evidence, conversations with collateral contacts, and additional fact-finding efforts. Therefore, interviewers should explore topics that might lead to corroborative evidence" (State of Maine Child and Family Services, 2010, p. 2). After collecting such leads, interviewers should assist the investigative team by including this information in their interview summaries, even when interviews were recorded (Ministry of Justice, 2011).

The importance of supporting the broader investigation cannot be overstated. In child sexual abuse cases, for example, detailed narratives are important tools for eliciting confessions (Staller & Faller, 2010), and a confession or other corroborative evidence increases decisions to prosecute (e.g., Moore, 1998; Walsh, Jones, Cross, & Lippert, 2010). In five field studies, most evaluators judged allegations corroborated by evidence (e.g., medical findings, photographs or videos, other physical evidence, and suspects' confessions) "likely to be true" even when children did not disclose abuse, which reveals how much weight this evidence carries in the decision-making process (Herman, 2010). Corroborative evidence also reduces the stress felt by victimized children and directly benefits them by minimizing the duration of their involvement in the child protection and criminal justice systems (Goodman et al., 1992).

Because of the need to support broader investigative efforts, forensic interviewers do not give children full control over the pacing and direction of interviews. Instead, interviewers determine which topics should be covered, with topics determined by the age of the child, the type of case, and case-specific information. For example, if two teenagers made sexual abuse accusations against a teacher, interviewers would probably inquire about the history of each child's relationship with the alleged offender. Taking conversation in this direction probes for whether the children describe a consistent pattern of grooming behavior and whether there are details about specific places, persons, and physical objects that could be verified by other means.

There are challenges to moving interviews beyond the story model to one that fully supports investigations. Some interviewers have backgrounds that do not prepare them to immediately adopt a law enforcement perspective on evidence collection, and there is a persistent stereotype that corroborative evidence is rare in some types of investigations. In sexual abuse cases, the widespread belief that virtually all cases hinge solely on children's testimonies can discourage interviewers from looking for corroborative leads—even though some cases contain such evidence (Cross, Whitcomb, & De Vos, 1995; Herman, 2010). Thus, interviewers support investigative efforts when they repeatedly consider how converging evidence might corroborate children's testimonies, by delivering questions that explore possibilities, and by documenting findings in summary reports.

An Eye on Commander's Intent

The take-home message thus far is that forensic interviewing is problem solving embedded in a conversation. But problem-solving tasks are not all the same. Some, such as converting quantities in a recipe from U.S. units to metric, are well structured: These problems have clear initial states, defined end goals, and fixed strategies for getting from point A to point B. In contrast, most tasks in medicine, law, and child protection are ill structured, which means that "individual cases of knowledge application are typically multidimensional and there is considerable variability in the structure and content across cases of the same nominal type" (Spiro, Feltovich, & Coulson, 1996, p. 51). When problem-solving tasks are ill structured, initial states may not be completely spelled out, constraints on what problem-solvers can do are unclear, and end states are uncertain.

Because of the ill-structured nature of forensic work, interviewers are not always cognizant of the higher order goals of those who will use the information collected during interviews. This problem rears its head when interviewers ignore unexpected comments from children that do not relate to primary case issues, even though these comments strongly relate to the overarching goals of the interviewers' jobs. For example, I have listened to interviews in which child protection workers who were investigating physical

abuse allegations ignored statements suggesting that a parent was leaving children unattended or failing to provide schooling. Listening to these interviews, I sensed that the mental resources needed to listen, plan questions, and keep precipitating issues in mind made it difficult for interviewers to think about and respond to unexpected comments. Ultimately, these interviewers ended conversations with sufficient information about the precipitating allegations but with serious questions about whether children were generally safe and receiving adequate care.

Whether children are safe and receiving adequate care is arguably the "commander's intent" of child protective services interviews. The concept of commander's intent was developed by the military to address the fact that plans for operations, even when enviably thorough, "often turn out to be useless" (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 25). In their book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath (2007) shared how one colonel described this problem:

> "The trite expression we always use is *No plan survives contact with the enemy*," says Colonel Tom Kolditz, the head of the behavioral sciences division at West Point. "You may start off trying to fight your plan, but the enemy gets a vote. Unpredictable things happen—the weather changes, a key asset is destroyed, the enemy responds in a way you don't expect. Many armies fail because they put all their emphasis into creating a plan that becomes useless ten minutes into the battle." . . . Colonel Kolditz says, "Over time we've come to understand more and more about what makes people successful in complex operations." He believes that plans are useful, in the sense that they are proof that *planning* has taken place. The planning process forces people to think through the right issues. But as for the plans themselves, Kolditz says, "They just don't work on the battlefield." So, in the 1980s the Army adapted its planning process, inventing a concept called Commander's Intent (CI).
>
> CI is a crisp, plain-talk statement that appears at the top of every order, specifying the plan's goal, the desired end-state of an operation. At high levels of the Army, the CI may be relatively abstract: "Break the will of the enemy in the Southeast region." At the tactical level, for colonels and captains, it is much more concrete: "My intent is to have Third Battalion on Hill 4305, to have the hill cleared of enemy, with only ineffective remnants remaining, so we can protect the flank of Third Brigade as they pass through the lines."
>
> The CI never specifies so much detail that it risks being rendered obsolete by unpredictable events. "You can lose the ability to execute the original plan, but you never lose the responsibility of executing the intent," says Kolditz. (pp. 25–26)

The need for commander's intent statements strikes a chord with interviewing experts because children are masters at sabotaging interview plans.

When investigative teams agree on the commander's intent for an interview, they activate goals that help interviewers maintain the flexibility needed to establish new threads of conversation in response to unexpected information.

If the concept of commander's intent seems abstract, consider the goals of a sexual abuse interview conducted as part of a criminal investigation. A narrow goal would be to collect evidence pertinent to the hypothesis that Mr. Jones, the elderly neighbor of a 12-year-old boy, sexually abused the child. With this goal in mind, an interviewer could easily forget to ask whether the boy was victimized by other perpetrators or has knowledge of other children's abuse by the suspect. A broader goal would be to explore whether the boy has knowledge of sexual abuse against children (i.e., himself or others). An interviewer with this goal in mind would likely probe for knowledge about other possible victims but might not explore comments suggesting reckless endangerment or other criminal activity. Still another goal could be to determine the boy's knowledge of criminal activity against himself and others. This goal seems overly broad, however, because it encompasses such things as physical assaults and drug crimes over an unrestricted time period, thereby stretching conversation well beyond purposes of the investigation. A compromise might be to explore whether this boy has been the victim of sexual abuse and, following mention of any criminal activity, to fully explore those statements (including whether the boy has knowledge of other perpetrators and victims).

This list of possibilities illustrates why the goal of an interview is not always obvious. In practice, the type of case and local requirements will determine what the commander's intent is for a given interview. What does not change across contexts, however, is need to remain cognizant of the higher order goal. Collectively, hypothesis testing, a child-centered perspective, exploration that supports a broader investigation, and the specification of commander's intent distinguish story interviews (e.g., the conversation at the beginning of this chapter) from professional interviews in forensic contexts.

PLAY-YOUR-POSITION RECOMMENDATIONS

With relevant training and experience, mental health professionals can ethically work on cases involving known victims, alleged victims, and bystander witnesses in a number of capacities, including performing clinical evaluations to assess symptoms and to formulate treatment plans, providing therapy to children or parents, conducting forensic evaluations, consulting with attorneys, and serving as expert witnesses. There is a caveat, however: Because clinical and forensic roles have goals and practice standards that can conflict, there is consensus that professionals inappropriately engage in dual

roles when they provide both therapeutic and forensic services within the context of a single case. As one protocol explained,

> Although information obtained from an investigative interview might be useful for making treatment decisions, the interview is not part of a treatment process. Forensic interviews should not be conducted by professionals who have an on-going or a planned therapeutic relationship with the child. (State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 1)

No description of clinical goals and practices fits all situations, but clinical activities often have the following characteristics: the goal is to assess symptoms and/or provide treatment, the child or parent is the client, expressions of empathy and establishment of a therapeutic alliance are important, the client's perceptions of events may be given greater focus than factual accuracy, the clinician does not have authority to seek information from other sources without client consent, the information shared is private and subject to confidentiality restrictions, and clinicians have considerable leeway regarding their selection of therapeutic techniques. In a treatment relationship, the clinician's responsibility is to "promote the client's best interests," which is at odds with the objectivity required for a forensic analysis (Clark, 2009, p. 73).

In contrast, forensic interviews have a fact-finding purpose that supports a legal process: A representative of that process is the client, neutrality and an unbiased perspective are essential, the goal is to collect the most reliable evidence possible and support broader fact-finding efforts, there are limits to the confidentiality of findings, and the techniques used to elicit and document information should be scientifically justifiable and consistent with local (e.g., agency) practice. When clinicians provide forensic services, multiple relationships (assuming more than one role for a single case) are a threat to professional effectiveness. Other threats are personal histories or emotional issues that compromise objectivity, lack of appropriate training and skills, and the use of nonvalidated or unreliable methods (Clark, 2009; Koocher, 2009). Some threats, such as role conflicts and practicing outside one's scope of knowledge and experience, are discussed in the ethics codes of professional organizations for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors.

Clinicians providing treatment can inadvertently harm the credibility of children's allegations when they cross over into a forensic role by mining for disclosures or assuming an investigative role following disclosures. As Kathryn Kuehnle and Mary Connell (2010) explained,

> When therapists directly take on an investigative role, asking questions to "facilitate disclosure," they may interfere in the forensic investigation. Under such circumstances, the risk is that the child's memories and statement become so tainted or inaccurate that a miscarriage of justice results. Abused children's statements may come to appear unreliable or the therapist may unwittingly shape and reinforce the erroneous statements of nonabused children. . . . Furthermore, children who are exposed to ongoing questioning and probing are effectively denied the needed therapeutic support that occurs within a relationship premised on neutrality regarding an unconfirmed allegation of sexual abuse. For example, when parents report to a therapist that their child made a specific comment about having been touched inappropriately, the therapist should follow mandated reporting laws and make an immediate report to CPS but should not conduct an interview of the child regarding the comment. However, if a child makes a spontaneous, suspicious but ambiguous statement during a therapy session (e.g., "Daddy touched my pee pee"), the therapist may need to respond with one or two open-ended questions (e.g., "Tell me about that") to determine if what is being described crosses the line from innocuous touch (e.g., wiping the child after toileting) and enters the range of reasonable suspicion (e.g., rubbing the child's genitals). (p. 557)

Activities during therapy that can compromise cases include repeated presentation of sexual abuse prevention books and detailed exploration following reports of abuse. Abuse prevention books can establish a strong atmosphere of concern about abuse while also imparting knowledge to the child that can lead to sexual acting out and verbal mimicry, thereby making it difficult to determine the source of the child's information. In turn, exploration of a potential disclosure that exceeds what is necessary to make a reporting decision (Kalichman, 1999) raises questions about the clinician's objectivity and influence on the report.

Forensic interviewers must also guard against the tendency to stray into another type of relationship. Emotional reactions to children's statements (e.g., "That's so horrible . . . I'm sorry that happened to you") and comments that label children's feelings (e.g., "You must have been scared") can become the focus of a defense team's strategy (especially when there is little else to attack). Therefore, interviewers protect cases by avoiding emotional comments that could be viewed as reinforcing children for one type of testimony over another. (See Chapter 3 for ways to express interest and support without making these errors.)

BRIEFING THE INTERVIEWER

Two models of interviewing, *blind* and *informed*, place different emphases on the need to remain unbiased versus the need to test alternative hypotheses. In blind interviews, interviewers know nothing about the situations triggering investigations. This approach prevents interviewers from acting in

ways that might reinforce their own assumptions about the case while blocking future criticism about interviewer bias (Morgan, 1995). However, lack of knowledge makes it difficult to test alternative hypotheses. In practice, the approach interviewers use is usually dictated by local practices and requirements, with hybrid models incorporating features of both approaches.

Rationale for Blind Interviewing

In the 1980s and early 1990s, transcripts of interviews from highly publicized day care abuse cases revealed the danger of arming unskilled interviewers with details of allegations, as illustrated by this interview segment from the Kelly Michaels case (Ceci & Bruck, 1995):

Treacy: I see and did the kids want Kelly to do that peanut butter stuff?

Child A: I didn't even think that there was a peanut butter. . . .

Treacy: Well, what about licking the peanut butter?

Child A: There wasn't anything about peanut butter. . . .

Treacy: Some of the kids told me that things happened with knives. Do you remember anything like that?

Child A: No. [Although the child professes no knowledge of utensil abuse, at trial this child testified to numerous abuse allegations.]

Treacy: . . . Well, what about that cat game?

Child A: Cat game?

Treacy: Where everybody went like this, "Meow, Meow."

Child A: I don't think that I was there that day. [Although the child professes no knowledge of the cat game, at trial she described a cat game in which all the children were naked and licking each other.] (pp. 116–117)

In this biased style of interviewing, which is often called *confirmatory interviewing*, adults select questions and feed children information to confirm suspicions of abuse rather than exploring alternative explanations for those suspicions. Studies of adults who were not trained to follow current interview guidelines have found that preconceived notions alter the way people speak to children and how they report the content of interviews (Dent, 1982). For example, Gail Goodman and her colleagues showed adults a video containing misinformation about a target event and then asked this group and a group of uninformed adults to interview unfamiliar children (Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995). Compared with the adults who had not been misinformed, biased interviewers asked more questions about the misinformation, and their subsequent descriptions of what had happened to the children contained more errors.[4]

More recently, Heather Price and her colleagues conducted a study to connect the dots between interviewers' misconceptions, the types of questions they ask, and children's subsequent responses (H. L. Price, Ornstein, & Poole, 2015). In this study, one group of adults received only general information about the goal of the interview:

> Imagine that you are the director of [child care program name]. Recently, two parents expressed concern that their child may have participated in some activities that they did not give permission for with a male visitor who was doing some fitness activities with the kids. Your task is to find out if this child experienced something with this man and, if so, what took place.

A second group received longer instructions containing false information about the physical environment and what the man did with the children. In subsequent interviews of children ranging from 6 to 10 years of age, many prompts delivered by biased interviewers were suggestive, and some children acquiesced to this false information.

Yet despite the negative consequences of biasing information, the interviewing community rarely recommends keeping interviewers completely uninformed about the purpose of interviews. For example, Kevin Smith and Rebecca Milne (2011) advocated "minimal alleged offence information," an approach in which interviewers are informed about the following information but not the contextual details children should provide:

- The nature of the alleged offence;
- The time, frequency and location of the alleged offence;
- How the alleged offence came to the notice of the police;
- The nature of any threats or intimidation alleged to have been used by the suspect or their family or associates. (p. 92)

K. Smith and Milne said this approach is ideal but also acknowledged that in the jurisdictions where they consult (England and Wales), "minimal knowledge of the offence on the part of the interviewer is usually unachievable" due to interviewers' extensive involvement in investigations (p. 93).

Rationale for Informed Interviewing

There are drawbacks to keeping interviewers completely or minimally informed throughout the duration of interviews. One is that uninformed

[4]Misconceptions held by parents who converse with children can also lead children to report information consistent with those misconceptions and even prompt children to generate additional false information on their own (see Principe & Schindewolf, 2012, and White, Leichtman, & Ceci, 1997).

interviewers have few tools for introducing the target topic with general probes (e.g., "Tell me what you have come to talk to me about today"; Powell, 2003, p. 260). For this reason, Morgan (1995) suggested that blind interviews require highly trained interviewers and may not be maximally effective for young children.

Another concern is that uninformed interviewers lack the information needed for effective hypothesis testing. That is, uninformed interviewers cannot generate and plan tests of alternative hypotheses in advance of the interview and cannot detect discrepancies between information in prior reports and children's responses during interviews. As a result, it is unlikely that they will deliver the clarification questions needed to resolve contradictions across different sources of evidence. In a previous book, Michael Lamb and I used an example of an abuse report filed by day care workers who observed sexualized play and then conducted initial conversations with the children (Poole & Lamb, 1998). In this type of case, it is helpful to know what children's initial comments were when the play was discovered, which children are frequent playmates, and whether any surface features of the concerning play map onto recent events in the children's lives (in or out of school). Because it is difficult to figure out the source of a young child's behavior without such information, early recommendations from the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse (1993) asked interviewers to

> resist pressure for a "blind" interview. Interviewing a child without knowing any of the details revealed to others is analogous to performing a medical examination without knowing the patient's history or looking for an unfamiliar destination without a road map. (p. 59)

Later recommendations acknowledged that allegation-blind interviewing may have promise but that "measures other than allegation-blind interviews can be taken to assure reliable interview results" (National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, 2004, p. 39).

Why are there such discrepant opinions about how much information interviewers should have? One reason is that interviewers' skill levels influence the risks and benefits of prior knowledge, as a study by Martine Powell and her colleagues illustrated (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, & Sharman, 2012). In this research, police officers interviewed 5- to 8-year-olds about a staged event. Before the interviews, officers participated in mock interviews that assessed whether they were generally good (i.e., used many open-ended prompts) or poor interviewers and then were assigned to receive only general information about the target event or information containing numerous false details. Biasing information led poor interviewers to deliver a greater number of leading yes/no questions, but preinterview knowledge did not have a negative influence on skilled officers' techniques. This finding suggests that in situations where training and ongoing supervision are insufficient and staff turnover is high, blind interviewing might produce better results; with highly trained interviewers, however, the risks of prior knowledge may not override the benefits of having more information about children and allegation histories.

Hybrid Models

A compromise between blind and informed interviewing is a *hybrid model* in which interviewers (a) begin a conversation with only some background information about a child (e.g., the names of family members and the child's names for body parts), (b) take a break during the interview to review allegations and receive additional topics or questions from the investigative team, and (c) complete the interview. This approach reduces leading questioning early in interviews, thereby preserving the credibility of children's initial disclosures, while still providing opportunities to fully explore cases.

An evaluation of this model involved a child sexual abuse assessment center in Idaho, where a court decision prompted interviewing centers to switch from informed to initially blind interviewing (Cantlon, Payne, & Erbaugh, 1996). Results were optimistic, with a higher disclosure rate after the change to initially blind interviewing. The researchers suggested that lack of knowledge might have encouraged interviewers to take more time to develop rapport, although it is possible that changes over time in the strength of cases referred to the center contributed to the improved disclosure rate.

Also unknown is whether the encouraging results from this study generalize to other types of investigations. The success of initially blind interviewing at a sexual abuse assessment center could reflect the fact that the children interviewed at such centers typically know why they are being interviewed and interviews are scheduled shortly after referral, thereby making it less likely that giving interviewers additional case information would significantly increase disclosure rates. What this study does show is that an initially blind strategy does not leave interviewers completely unequipped to elicit abuse disclosures. (Turn to this chapter's Principles to Practice to read my answer to attorneys' questions about informed interviewing.)

RECAP

In everyday life, adults interview children to hear stories about their lives, including what happened and how children reacted to those events. Unlike these story interviews, forensic interviews are part of a problem-solving

process that will decide which of several alternatives is most consistent with evidence. To collect sufficient evidence from children to assist this process, forensic interviews have four characteristics:

- *A hypothesis-testing approach*. Forensic interviewers maintain skepticism by testing competing hypotheses about the events in question (primary-issues hypothesis testing) and by clarifying the meaning of children's utterances during interviews (disambiguation).
- *A child-centered perspective*. Forensic interviewers use techniques that empower children to talk, always mindful that their techniques are compatible with witnesses' developmental levels and cultural norms.
- *Exploration that supports the broader investigation*. Forensic interviewers support broader investigative efforts by delivering questions that could lead to physical evidence, additional witnesses, and other important findings.
- *An eye on commander's intent*. Forensic interviewers keep the intended scope of interviews in mind. They adjust questioning plans to explore unexpected comments from children that are relevant to interview goals.

Because clinical and forensic roles have goals and standards of practice that can conflict, professionals should not provide both therapeutic and forensic services for an individual case or stray into the alternative role while providing those services. The nature of preinterview preparation will vary depending on the type of case and local practice.

PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE: IS THIS BIASED INTERVIEWING?

Attorneys often contact eyewitness researchers to ask about the significance of a case feature. This is a composite of questions I have received about nonblind interviewing, along with my response.

Question From Defense Attorneys

I have a sexual abuse case involving a child who lives in ___ County, ___. The interviewer reviewed the police report before the interview, spoke with the officer, and had a conversation with the child's mother. Isn't this inappropriate? Doesn't that information seriously bias the interview?

My Response

In the United States, there is no national consensus that interviews have to be conducted blind, and this investigative team did not violate their county's protocol. That said, prior knowledge (bias) is an issue whenever (a) the interviewer mentioned case details before the child did and those details became an integral part of the child's testimony or (b) prior knowledge led the interviewer to omit needed hypothesis-testing questions.

The strongest interview analyses focus on what interviewers actually did and the possible impact of that behavior on children's reports. Experts question the reliability of children's testimonies when the case timeline, which is a document tracking the history of every alleged or recorded disclosure, contains concerning patterns. For example, it is troubling when most of the critical information in children's reports originated from adults and when details morphed over time in ways that exceed what is typical of children's eyewitness reports. When there is concern about interviewer influence, evidence of influence is more important than what knowledge an interviewer had going into an interview.