

## Forensic Interviewing and Age: Is it Time for a Change?

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**Introduction:** Forensic interviewing protocol is constantly being updated and changed. New research has begun to identify the glaring blind spots in forensic interviewing protocol, particularly concerning the age of the child being interviewed. While interviewing protocol is modified every year, it is time to reevaluate forensic interviewing protocol and its effectiveness. Can forensic interviewing protocol be improved when focusing on younger aged children versus adolescents?

**Methods:** Through the analysis of interviews graduate student Emily Lux conducted with forensic interviewers, a pattern of disregard for age within forensic interviewing protocol was found. Lux's research is based in grounded theory, a method of research where theory development occurs after one analyzes his or her data. The first step of the process included transcribing, or writing out the interviews after they were completed. Next was coding the transcriptions. This method included examining the content and looking for patterns relevant toward the research. This also involved identifying any questions that arose while coding. Once the pattern of age in protocol was discovered, it became a process of searching specifically for instances where age and disclosure rates were mentioned.

**Results:** After the analyzation of eight interviews, a pattern found was how forensic interviewers ignored protocol with adolescents, or children 13 years or older. Ignoring protocol was often times observed as asking more direct questions instead of the open-ended questions that forensic interviewing protocol calls for. Forensic interviewers asked more direct questions which lead to higher disclosure rates. One possible explanation for this is adolescents want to be treated less like children. Often times when interviewers tried the standard protocol with adolescents, the adolescents were aggressive and uncooperative. It is believed adolescents were uncooperative because they would much rather be asked directly than to have the interviewer tip toe around them while questioning, (Lippman). Once interviewers were direct, disclosure came much easier. It was also found many forensic interviewers were female, and that male and female interviewers ask questions differently. For example, a male forensic interviewer may ask, "Were you assaulted in your house?" and a female forensic interviewer may say, "Tell me more about the place where the bad things happened." Both male and female forensic interviewers said they would use direct language when interviewing to obtain a disclosure. While it was more common to find female forensic interviewers, male interviewers were also interviewed. However, the male forensic interviewers often had a background in law enforcement. It is believed this could contribute to how male forensic interviewers ask questions as well. Most training that law enforcement goes through is to interview convicts, which could also lead them to ask more direct questions. When interviewing, forensic interviewers are told to ask open-ended questions. This is to give the child free range to answer the question, as well as to avoid problems of suggestibility

if the case goes to court. Forensic Interviewers who used direct language would ask questions like, “Did this happen to you?” This was often used as a last resort for forensic interviewers.

**Implications:** While current interviewing protocol is a solid foundation of rules and suggestions, it is not perfect. Many children still struggle to disclose about instances of sexual assault because protocol is not tailored to them. If protocol were changed to accommodate age, or even gender, forensic interviewing could be a less traumatizing process for the child. Accommodating for age in protocol could greatly improve disclosure rates to ensure the child’s welfare. Although the research suggests these conclusions, it is vital to note the limitations of this study. The research conducted was limited to forensic interviewers and advocacy centers in the Illinois area; therefore, these findings may not be generalizable in all states. It is also relevant to note the sample size utilized was relatively small due to time constraint. The hope is this study will push places like Child Advocacy Centers to reevaluate protocol and meet the needs of children of different ages.

# FORENSIC INTERVIEWING AND AGE: IS IT TIME FOR A CHANGE?

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## INTRODUCTION

Forensic interviewing protocol is always being improved and changed, but never to accommodate a child's age. Forensic interviewing is a carefully constructed interviewing process used to obtain information about suspected abuse from a child. By analyzing data collected from interviews of forensic interviewers a trend of protocol disregard was observed when interviewers worked with adolescents (Children 13 years and up). The pattern of protocol differences among age groups then became inspiration of this research.

## QUESTION

Can forensic interviewing protocol be improved when focusing on young aged children versus adolescents?

## PRESENT-DAY PROTOCOL

- ✓ State interview instructions to the child
- ✓ Build rapport
- ✓ Select a topic
- ✓ Practice eliciting narrative
- ✓ Explore details
- ✓ Episodic Memory
- ✓ Question on sensory details
- ✓ Ask open ended questions



**Age Specific Rapport 11 and older**  
 Introduction of self and setting  
 Include camera and observers  
 Interview Instructions  
 Conversational Instructions  
 Intentional discussion instructions – no practice accord  
 TLD / Promise as needed  
 Getting to know child  
 No face drawing  
 Family drawings – interviewer preference  
 Obtain family information  
 Narrative Practice – Elicit narrative responses

**Age Specific Rapport 5 and under**  
 Introduction of self and setting  
 Interview Instructions  
 Conversational Instructions  
 Intentional discussion of instructions – must include practice  
 TLD / Promise as needed  
 Getting to know child  
 Ask child about him/herself  
 Draw face  
 Family drawings  
 Obtain family information  
 Narrative Practice – Elicit narrative responses

## OUR METHODS: WHAT GROUNDED THEORY IS



Grounded Theory

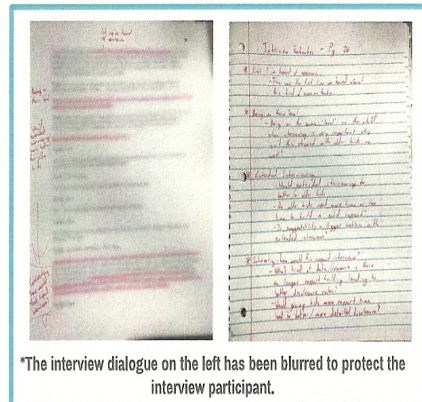
Method of hypothesis development occurring after collection and analysis of interview data based around transcribing and coding.

Transcribing

The first part of data analysis. It is the process of creating written copies of the audio from participant interviews

Coding

The second part of data analysis. It is the process of analyzing transcripts to find specific patterns, concepts, and questions.



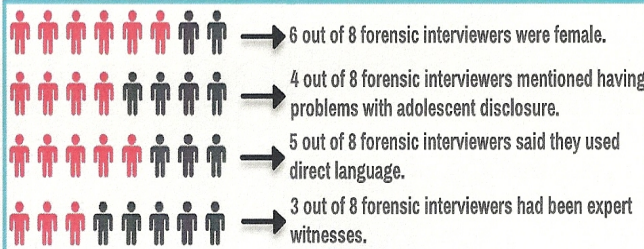
\*The interview dialogue on the left has been blurred to protect the interview participant.

“...don't use “yes” or “no” questions. Try your best to open endedly get them to tell you about themselves.”

-Anonymous Participant

## RESULTS

- o When interviewing adolescents, interviewers deviated from protocol due to difficult disclosure.
- o The leading causes of delayed disclosure among children include fear of or threats from the abuser, embarrassment, or the relationship the child has with the abuser. <sup>2</sup>
- o The leading causes of delayed disclosure among adolescents include fear of punishment, guilt, or not identifying as a victim. <sup>2</sup>



- o Men interview with direct questions and women interview with subjective questions. <sup>1</sup>
- o Even when interviewers worked with young children, they would use direct questioning as a last resort
- o When interviewers use direct questioning, the disclosure is not always discredited in court due to suggestibility.
  - Much of the protocol argues against close ended questioning due to possible suggestibility from the interviewer. However, children 12 years or older are no more suggestible than the average adult. In court cases, children aged 13 years or older are also the primary testifier in their court case.

**PROTOCOL, LANGUAGE, AND AGE ALL MATTER!**

## CONCLUSION

It's time for a protocol that accommodates to the findings established through this research. One suggestion may be a more direct form of questioning when interviewing adolescents. This would create a space where the adolescent feels they are being recognized as an equal which may lead to a successful disclosure.

To bring about most the effective disclosure rates, men and women can specialize in certain age groups. Men, who use direct questioning, can work with adolescents. Women, who are inclined to subjective questioning, can work with young children.

Through training, interviewers should be specialized by age. The implications of language within protocol and how different language and conversational cues can be utilized depending on age should also be studied.

By implementing these changes to forensic interviewing protocol, disclosure rates could improve and children can experience a less emotionally and psychologically taxing interview.



## POSTER REFERENCES

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Interview data provided by ongoing dissertation research by Emily Lux.