

# Recommendations for Eliciting a Disclosure of Abuse from a Young Child

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## Introduction

The act of eliciting reliable and detailed information from a young child about abuse is a complex process. While children as young as four years of age are able to give detailed and accurate disclosures of offences, a wide range of factors determines the outcome of any investigative interview. Some of these factors include: the physical, mental and emotional state of the child at the time of the abuse and the interview; the nature of the event being recalled and contextual factors related to the interview setting. In particular, children's social skills and linguistic and cognitive capacity have a large impact on their ability to understand questions, to remember details and to provide reliable answers. However, regardless of the child's age or developmental level, the onus always rests on the interviewer to acknowledge the child's abilities and limitations and to use appropriate questions to elicit the most accurate and reliable account.

In our experience, one of the most challenging tasks when interviewing a child about abuse is the elicitation of a disclosure of an abusive offence. This is difficult when the child has limited communication ability, is confused about the purpose of the interview and whether abuse has taken place, or is embarrassed or fearful about the consequences of reporting abuse. Many investigative interviewers express considerable anxiety and uncertainty around this aspect of the interview process, which may be due (albeit in part) to a lack of research directly examining techniques for eliciting disclosures of traumatic or sensitive events from children. For practical and ethical reasons, most of the research that has guided the development of interview protocols has involved interviews about innocuous events or activities (e.g. a magic show) that were staged in children's classrooms. For such events, the child clearly knows what (s)he is being interviewed about, there are no major motivational factors to withhold information and the child's construction of the event is likely to be similar to that of the adults. Thus, it has not been possible for researchers to systematically evaluate the benefits or pitfalls of certain techniques in eliciting sensitive information when a child is not forthcoming. Despite this limitation in the research, however, the existing research on children's memory and suggestibility offers a useful framework for making tentative conclusions about the risk or benefits of certain questioning techniques.

Thus, the aim of this article is to offer some practical, evidence-based strategies that may assist investigative interviewers in eliciting disclosures of abuse from young children (i.e. four to 12-year-olds), while minimising the risk of either eliciting a false

account or failing to elicit a disclosure at all. Specifically, this article outlines five broad recommendations, which reflect both current research and our practical experience critiquing field and mock interviews with children and analysing the problems that frequently arise in these interviews. While this article focuses specifically on techniques for interviewing children about abuse, the recommendations also apply to other vulnerable witness groups (e.g. persons from cultural minority groups, persons with an intellectual disability).

## Recommendation 1

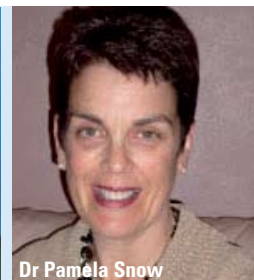
Commence the substantive component of the interview by inviting the child to say what (s)he has come 'to talk about'.

When introducing the topic of concern with a child, we recommend that the interviewer start with a non-leading, open-ended invitation, such as, "Tell me what you've come here to talk to me about today" or "I've been called to your school so that you can talk with me. Tell me what we're here to talk about today." In our experience, children often respond to this question

### About the Authors



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Professor Martine Powell is one of the leading Australian authorities on the topic of forensic interviewing of children. Over the past 13-years she has been an active researcher and trainer in this area, delivering regular Australia-wide workshops on interviewing children and other vulnerable witness groups (e.g. people from different cultural backgrounds) to a wide range of professionals. She has assisted in the review and/or development of nine formal training courses for investigative interviewers of children.

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by disclosing information related to the interviewer's initial concern. This is especially the case when the child has already made an informal disclosure to another adult such as a caregiver or teacher, as opposed to children who are referred on the basis of emotional/behavioural problems or signs that are 'suggestive' of abuse. If the child makes a disclosure at this point, then the interviewer merely needs to state that his or her job is to find out what happened. While this question will not be effective in all circumstances (no question is), it is unlikely that it would be detrimental in any way to the process or to the interviewer-child rapport if the child could not provide a response. Non-leading open-ended questions are unlikely to contaminate the child's subsequent account, and the question gives the clear message that the interview is child-centred (i.e. the child is expected to do the talking). Further, even if the child had a clear misconception about the purpose of the interview, it may be useful for the interviewer to know this at the outset.

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*“eliciting reliable and detailed information from a young child about abuse is a complex process”*

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In our experience, there are two problems that sometimes arise when interviewers are trying to establish the child's understanding of the purpose of the interview. One problem is that interviewers sometimes phrase the question in the following way: “Do you know why you're here today?” Experts generally agree that it is better to avoid 'why' questions with children because they usually require abstract concepts and complex reasoning skills. Further, closed questions should be avoided (where possible) during the early stages of the interview. While adults often hear ‘Can you tell me...?’ and ‘Do you know...?’ questions as open-ended invitations, children commonly respond to these questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ even when they can provide an elaborate and relevant answer. While interviewers should not presume prior information, there is unlikely to be any detriment in assuming that the child knows what (s)he's there to talk about. This is provided that the interviewer does not mention a particular individual or action, or imply harm or wrongdoing to the child.

Another problem that sometimes arises when interviewers try to establish the child's understanding of the purpose of the interview is to ignore a disclosure made by the child because it is ambiguous or non-specific. For example, in response to the prompt “Tell me what you've come here to talk about today?” a young child may respond “To tell you about Nana's” because the abusive act occurred at Nana's house. There are several possible reasons why interviewers ignore such disclosures:

1. Interviewers may not realise that the child's response could be a reference to abuse. Thus they may not see the value in asking for further elaboration.
2. The child's response may not fit with the interviewer's preconceptions about what occurred (i.e. the interviewer is adopting a confirmation-bias approach).
3. Interviewers may not know how to follow-up the disclosure because of its ambiguity. We argue that irrespective of the clarity of the child's response, it is important to following up with a broad open-ended (e.g. “Tell me everything you can

remember about that?”) or clarification question (e.g. “What do you mean when you say...?”). The value of inviting further elaboration is that reference to an abusive act may be provided without the need for specific or leading questions.

## Recommendation 2

When raising prior case-related information, avoid potential issues of contention and do not presume that the prior information is true.

If the child does not disclose the alleged offence spontaneously in response to non-leading open-ended questions, it may be appropriate (e.g. when there is supportive evidence that abuse occurred) for an interviewer to raise prior information that led to the concern. When raising prior information, the interviewer needs to be clear about what (s)he is referring to, so as to avoid confusing the child. However, considerable caution needs to be exercised to phrase questions or statements in a way that will minimise the risk of a false account. The risk of eliciting a false account is heightened if the interviewer:

- presumes that a detail or activity occurred (without seeking an acknowledgement from the child regarding whether this is correct);
- raises details about a particular individual or abusive act that had not been mentioned by the child but could be used by the child to construct a false account of the abuse; and
- uses coercive techniques (e.g. appeal, selective reinforcement, guided imagery) that encourage the child to report information about an alleged offence.

Further, the potential risk that a false account will arise is heightened when the child is young (i.e. three to six-years of age). While the use of the leading and suggestive techniques listed above varies among interviewers, and their overall incidence in field interviews does appear to be low, we have seen them used, even by officers who have been instructed regarding the dangers of using leading and suggestive questions.

In an earlier article, Powell (2003) recommended a multi-phase process in raising prior information during an interview with a child about abuse.

1. Interviewers should utilise non-leading, open-ended questioning techniques in an attempt to elicit a spontaneous disclosure in the child's own words (see recommendation 1. above).
2. If a spontaneous disclosure has not occurred, the interviewer raises prior information that led to the concern while avoiding issues of contention where possible (i.e. the alleged offender/act). For example, the interviewer may raise the context or the consequence of an alleged prior disclosure to another adult (e.g. the alleged offender has moved out of the child's house) without mentioning the content of the child's initial disclosure.
3. After raising prior information, the interviewer seeks an acknowledgement from the child as to whether the prior information stated by the interviewer is actually true. This is best done in the form of a yes/no question (e.g. “I was told you played a game with John. Did you play a game with John?”)
4. If the child acknowledges that the prior information is true, the interviewer elicits a detailed free narrative account from the child of what happened (not necessarily what the child

told another person as this might be distinct from what actually happened and should be postponed until later in the interview).

5. If the child provides an elaborate account but the interviewer is not sure whether the account relates to the issue or event initially raised by the interviewer, the interviewer can check this (e.g. "Are you still talking about the game you played with John?")

In some cases, despite a thorough review of the case material, the interviewer may have no prior information to raise other than the identity of the alleged offender or the nature of the alleged abusive act. The decision to raise one of these aspects must be made carefully, after consideration of the strength of any supportive evidence and the risk (to the child's safety) of not providing the child adequate encouragement to disclose. If an event is identified, it is important to utilise the child's terminology and to refrain from providing specific detail. If an offender's name is raised, it is important that the interviewer does not imply any wrongdoing. The interviewer should always portray an open-minded demeanour (i.e. that it is possible that no offence happened and that prior information about the case may be inaccurate).

### Recommendation 3

Use questions that allow the child to provide a narrative account of his/her experiences.

There are a variety of potential strategies for raising the topic of abuse with a child. One common technique is to ask specific questions related to likes/dislikes, persons, or routines. For example, let's suppose that the initial concern that led to the interview is an allegation of serious drug use and neglect of a five-year-old girl by her mother. Specific questions could include; "Who helps you get ready for school in the morning?", "What are some things you like and don't like about living with mum?" The benefit of these sorts of questions is that they avoid raising prior information about the alleged abuse (i.e. they are non-leading). The disadvantage of these questions is that they may be rather unclear to a young child, especially if the child was not particularly distressed by the events in question. As has been highlighted, 'many of these techniques will elicit discussions of non-abusive experiences that could mushroom into abuse allegations'. Even when abuse has occurred, children do not always recognise that the behaviours of the adult were actually inappropriate in some way. Conversely, some innocuous behaviours of an adult may be viewed by children as 'naughty' when they are not.

It is well established that event-related information disclosed by a child is more likely to be accurate if it is obtained via free narrative, rather than in response to specific questions. How then could a child be encouraged to disclose abuse in a narrative format if (s)he did not know the purpose of the interview? In the scenario outlined above, one possible approach might be to confirm that the child lives with her mother (using the procedure outlined in Recommendation 1) and then elicit a free narrative account of a particular day the child spent with the mother. In other words, the interviewer chooses a relatively broad event or time frame for the child to recount (i.e. one that may provide a useful insight into the child's relationship with the alleged offender). The challenge with this approach is to:

- choose an event or time-frame that is likely to include an account of abusive experiences (if these occurred);
- allow the child adequate time to recount his/her experiences and actively listen to this account (this is more difficult than it sounds);
- mentally review the information provided; and
- follow-up potentially fruitful leads by seeking further elaboration in relation to activities or details that could be suggestive of wrongdoing.

The following transcript provides one example of how a disclosure of abuse was elicited using this procedure. Note that in this case (the details have been changed), the interview was conducted with a six-year-old girl (Amy) whose eight-year-old friend disclosed to the police that she and Amy play 'sex' games at Big John's house. Amy had not made a prior disclosure and the interviewer decided that the risk to these children's safety warranted raising the name of an alleged offender. A particularly positive feature of the approach is that the child is doing most of the talking. Specific or closed questions are merely used to establish, or direct the child to, possible areas that can be elaborated further. The interviewer refrained from raising issues of contention and attempts to use the least leading techniques or strategies first.

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*"Use questions that allow the child to provide a narrative account of their experiences"*  
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Adhering to 'best-practice' guidelines (e.g. a non-leading approach that encourages the child to do most of the talking) obviously requires considerable practice and careful planning and consideration of the prior case-related information. It also requires the ability of the interviewer to step back from the role of 'communication helper' and adopt a more neutral, yet still facilitative stance. Thus it requires the effective use of minimal encouragers (e.g. head nodding, 'uh huh', pauses) and open-ended questions, which invite the child to elaborate on aspects of the account that may produce forensically relevant information. A child's detailed recount of an event (the very substance of the interview) depends largely on skills that are still being developed in young children. Keeping interruptions from questions to a minimum will strengthen the child's ability to provide detailed accounts of their experiences.

Despite the benefit of open-ended questions in investigative interviews, most trained professionals have considerable difficulty adhering to these questions when interviewing children. Although interviewers can usually generate examples of open-ended questions, they tend to use a highly specific form of questioning during the disclosure phase as well as when eliciting a free narrative account of an offence that has been acknowledged by the child. Research suggests that one of the main reasons that interviewers do not use open-ended questions effectively is that they have not received enough practice and critical feedback in their use and subsequently do not truly understand their value in eliciting disclosures of abuse. This is obviously an aspect that needs to be addressed in training programs.

	Question	Rationale
Interviewer:	Amy, tell me what you've come to talk to me about today? (NB: This question commenced after the greeting and rapport-building phase of the interview)	Interviewer asks a non-leading open-ended question first (Recommendation 1).
Child:	I don't know.	
Interviewer:	I heard that you know a man called Big John? Do you know a man called Big John?	Interviewer raises prior information without specific details about an act (i.e. whether a relationship between the child and Big John exists) and then seeks an acknowledgement from the child as to whether prior information is correct.
Child:	Yes.	
Interviewer:	Have you ever met Big John yourself, or have you just heard about him?	The child's response does not indicate whether she has actually met Big John in person. The child's knowledge of Big John may be indirect (i.e. she could have heard about him from Sally).
Child:	I met Big John at his house last week.	
Interviewer:	I've never been to Big John's house. So I don't know what happened there. Tell me what happened when you went to Big John's house last week? Start at the beginning.	Interviewer attempts to elicit a spontaneous disclosure of abuse by seeking a detailed free-narrative account of the broader event visiting Big John's house last week. Note that the interviewer makes it clear that she does not know what happened and does not imply any wrongdoing.
Child:	(Child provides lengthy narrative account of the visit to Big John's house. No reference is made during the narrative account to any games or acts of a sexual nature)	
Interviewer:	Sometimes children play games when they visit people's houses. Did you play any games at Big John's house?	Interviewer raises prior information (playing games) and seeks an acknowledgement from the child as to whether the prior information relates to this particular event. (Recommendation 2)
Child:	Yes	
Interviewer:	Tell me about the games in your own words?	Interviewer attempts to elicit a disclosure of abuse by seeking a detailed free-narrative account of this particular aspect of her visit to his house.
Child:	(Child discloses details of two games. Interviewer is not clear from the response that the child is referring to games played at Big John's house. It is possible that the prompt. Sometimes children play games when they visit people's houses' cued the child to report an unrelated event)	
Interviewer:	Are you still talking about what happened when you were at Big John's house or are you talking about something else?	Checks whether the child's account is related to the topic of concern (i.e. Big John) or some other incident.
Child:	I'm talking about what happened at Big John's house.	
Interviewer:	Sorry for interrupting. What else can you tell me about the games you played at Big John's house? (Narrative account continues, leading to a disclosure of a game involving sexual acts.)	

### Recommendation 4

Emphasise the importance throughout the interview of the need for specific details.

Children often withhold specific details about an offence, not because they do not remember the details but because they are not aware that such details are important. This was well illustrated in one case where an annoyed nine-year-old boy said to the interviewer; “He messed with my bum. That’s it. What more would you need to know?” An additional problem with young children, in particular, is that they are not very good at differentiating what they know, from what others know – they often assume that ‘grown ups’ are privy to more details than they actually are. In fact, this is one important way in which investigative interviews differ from other conversations that children have with adults. For example, in most interviews that children have with professionals (e.g. doctors, teachers, health professionals), the interviewer usually knows more about the topic than does the interviewee and the interviewer directs the content of the interview in order to elicit information required for a specific outcome, e.g. a diagnosis. In contrast, the role of the child in forensic interviews is to do most of the talking. The main implication is that interviewers need to convey their investigative needs clearly. If the child is required to provide detailed descriptions of events, then (s)he may benefit from being instructed to volunteer all information and not to edit or withhold information even if it is perceived to be unimportant or because it contradicts an earlier response. At the same time, interviewers need to caution child witnesses about the dangers of guessing or fabricating. The interviewer could say: “I wasn’t there when [event or act disclosed by child], so I need to know everything that happened, even the little things that you might not think are important”.

Using an open-ended style of questioning in the rapport-building phase can also convey the importance of providing specific details. It tells the child at the outset that the style of interaction is interviewee-focused. This, in turn, promotes a more elaborate response to subsequent questions during the substantive phase of an interview (i.e. when attempting to elicit a disclosure of an offence).

### Recommendation 5

The interviewer should avoid any open display of attitudes or beliefs about the child and the event in question.

In investigative interviews with children, a relationship between the child and interviewer needs to be established where the interviewer is accepting and encouraging of the child’s responses but is non-coercive and non-judgmental. Due to the heightened social status and power of adults, many children have a strong desire to please interviewers and will respond or behave in a way that (they perceive) will be viewed positively by the interviewer. For this reason, emotional reactions and/or a display of attitudes or beliefs about the interviewee should be avoided.

In relation to this issue, we have occasionally observed comments from interviewers such as ‘you are not in any trouble’, or ‘it must be hard to talk about this’. Such comments may be attempts to ease a child’s apparent anxiety and thereby encourage the child to engage in the interview process. The problem with such comments, however, is that are based on assumptions about:

(a) how the child is feeling,

(b) why the child is feeling this way, and

(c) the likelihood that a comment such as this will be effective in making the process easier for the child.

If any of these assumptions are incorrect (there are always numerous possible explanations for a child’s behaviour), the interviewer’s reassurances could actually have the opposite effect. For example, the comment “You are not in any trouble” could actually heighten a child’s anxiety if the child had not previously considered that someone could be in trouble as a result of the interview. The comment “I know it’s hard to talk about this” could inhibit a disclosure if the child had not previously considered the interview process difficult.

*“emphasise the importance throughout the interview of the need for specific details”*

Interviewers also need to be aware of how their own expectations about the child’s emotional responses and cognitive abilities may influence the likelihood of a detailed disclosure. Research suggests that many professionals overemphasise children’s fears and underestimate their ability and willingness to discuss abusive events in detail. Such perceptions, if observed in the interviewer’s demeanour, may be self-fulfilling in that when children are not perceived to be competent conversational partners they are discouraged from speaking out. The message is that interviewers need to portray in their demeanour a sense of confidence in the child’s willingness and ability to talk openly about their experiences. When the child does talk, the interviewer should reflect a genuine interest in what the child has to say, without any elements of shock, upset or surprise.

### Conclusion

Eliciting a clear and accurate disclosure of abuse from a child witness is a complex and highly specialised interaction. It requires the adoption (where possible) of a child-centred approach where the interviewer:

- (a) encourages the child to do most of the talking,
- (b) is aware of the child’s limitations and the potential detrimental effects of raising prior information, and
- (c) accepts the child’s responses without being coercive and judgmental.

By adhering to these recommendations, we believe that interviewers will be better able to assist children to actively engage in the interview and to relay what they know.

### *Children Learn What They Live*

<i>If children live with criticism They learn to condemn</i>	<i>If children live with tolerance They learn to be patient</i>	<i>If children live with security They learn to have faith</i>
<i>If children live with hostility They learn to fight</i>	<i>If children live with encouragement They learn confidence</i>	<i>If children live with approval They learn to like themselves</i>
<i>If children live with ridicule They learn to be shy</i>	<i>If children live with fairness They learn justice</i>	<i>If children live with acceptance and friendship They learn to find love in the world.</i>