

Establishing Safety:

Interviewing Survivors of Child Sexual Assault



"A person's a person, no matter how small."

Dr. Seuss, Author

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Today's Seminar is predicated on five principle truths:

1. Establishing safety is essential to interviewing.
2. Flexibility is critical.
3. Active listening is the key to success.
4. There is no such thing as a perfect interview.
5. Trauma impacts how memory is stored and retrieved.



Learning Objectives

1. Participants will be able to name the three types of survivor trauma responses from memory as presented in the session materials.
2. Participants will be able to name a minimum of four key steps to establishing safety during the interview for survivors of child sexual assault from memory as presented in the session materials.
3. Participants will be able to name a minimum of three steps in the practice of active listening from memory as presented in the session materials.
4. Participants will be able to explain the importance of flexibility on the part of the interviewer from memory as presented in the session materials.

"Courage is being scared to death - and saddling up anyway!" -John Wayne

Introduction

It cannot be stressed enough that this session is not a substitute for additional training in the area of Forensic Interviewing of Children. The intent of this session is to provide the participant with an overview of key strategies and techniques that will assist you in establishing a safe environment where a child can be interviewed with the goal of obtaining accurate and complete narratives.

The material provided in this overview session is set up as a guide that follows stages, but the participant must recognize that they can be flexible in following the order demonstrated. Generally speaking you begin to establish safety for the child by beginning the interview with a series of simple “get to know each other” types of questions. The general introductions, explanations of documentation, ground rules and rapport building should be addressed prior to moving into questions regarding the area of concern. The importance of flexibility on the part of the interviewer comes into play should the child begin to disclose or discuss the abuse early in the interview. In these situations the child has likely already established their own sense of safety and should be allowed to talk without interruption. Once the child is done talking the interviewer should indicate that is important for you to get everything correct and then simply ask if everything reported really happened, and then use open-ended questions and techniques to gather additional details.

Being patient is of the utmost importance. Listen to what the child says and take your time to think and develop your next question. Whenever the opportunity is available, use what the child has just said in your next question. An important element of this technique is to use the child’s words. This will help establish a trusting relationship with the child and improve the likelihood of your accurate understanding of what was said.

It is important to understand that there is no such thing as a perfect interview, and there is no single correct way to interview children. Flexibility and understanding are essential in ensuring the unique needs of each child and the differences of each case are acknowledged and addressed.

During this session participants will be exposed to an overview of the basics of understanding trauma and the impact trauma may have on memory. This information is provided to help the participant understand and be better prepared to address the issues of how to establish safety when interviewing children.

The keys to becoming a skilled Forensic Interviewer of Children is to obtain quality training, study, practice, practice, practice and participate in the peer review process.

The information provided in this session is a culmination of my personal experience and training as well as the concepts and recommendations presented in the Washington State Child Interview Guide which was developed in cooperation with the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, The Washington State Department of Social & Health Services and the Harborview Medical Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress.

Trauma Basics

Understanding responses and how they impact memory are an important element being a successful investigator and interviewer. The survivor's response to the trauma event impacts how memory is stored and how that memory is recovered.

The three responses to trauma are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

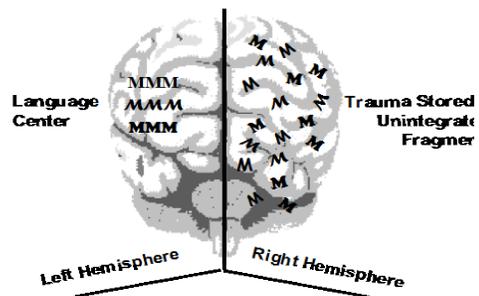


During traumatic events memory storage includes:

- The brain stores the traumatic memory differently than ordinary memory.
- Memory may become lodged in the right hemisphere, separate from the brain's language center in the left hemisphere.
- Memory may be stored in randomized fragments, making it more difficult to access.
- The brain can store the memory out of time.
- Memory may be triggered by sounds, smells, images, sensations, and other non-logical experiences

Notes: _____

Where the Brain Stores Memory



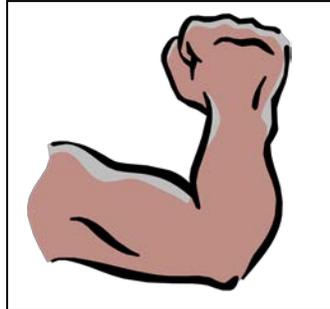
“Only those who dare to fail greatly, can ever achieve greatly” -Robert F. Kennedy

Trauma Exercise



Now that you know what trauma is, let's experience trauma together.

- Pick a hand and make a fist
- Hold your hand up
- Squeeze your fist tight
- Focus on what your feeling



List what you felt or where thinking about during the exercise:

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How does this relate to what a survivor of sexual assault may experience?

“Problems are not stop signs, they're guidelines”-Robert Schuler.

Introduction to Interviewing

What is the primary **purpose** of interviewing a child who is reportedly the victim of sexual assault?

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____



Brain Storm Exercise:

List the challenges Rural Agencies face when interviewing survivors of child sexual assault.

Rules:

- 3 minutes
- Assign Roles (Timer, Facilitator, Recorder, Reporter)
- Everyone participates
- All ideas are included.

What role do these challenges play in establishing safety for survivors of child sexual assault?

Notes: _____

"To succeed you must first improve, to improve you must first practice, to practice you must first learn, and to learn you must first fail." - Wesley Woo

Preparing for the Interview

When planning an investigative (forensic) interview of a child the suggested strategies include coordinating your efforts with _____ and _____ to minimize the number of unnecessary interviews of individual children.

- Adjust your vocabulary and approach according to the child’s age and level of development.
- Prepare for any special needs the child may have. Consult with a specialist if necessary.
- Prepare for cultural or ethnic background different from your own.
- If an interpreter is required, use a qualified interpreter and meet with them ahead of time to ensure they understand your expectations. DO NOT use another child or family member to interpret.
- Location should be neutral, child friendly, private, informal, comfortable, and free from distractions.

Notes: _____

Presence of Others

- Other involved professionals may observe behind a one-way mirror or via a closed circuit monitor.
- Know your State laws relevant to the child’s rights and having a third party present. **(This is as long as the third party will not jeopardize the investigation).**
- Prior to the interview instruct support personnel they must refrain from being involved in the interview. **(This includes making comments and emotional responses).**
- Recommend parents and other caretakers not be present. The child may be reluctant or refuse to separate and if that happens instruct the parent not to talk or try and assist the child.
- Suspects should not be allowed to observe or be anywhere near an interview.

Documentation

- Video is the preferred method of documentation.
- Audio only recording is an alternative to when video is not available.
- Keep notes that are almost verbatim if unable to record.
- Note taking is recommended even when recording to help formulate follow up questions.
- Tell the Child the type of documentation you will be using and explain the reasons.

Notes: _____

Active Listening

The way to become a better listener is to practice "active listening." This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that the Survivor is saying but, more importantly, try to understand what is being said.

In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully. Regardless of your plan and no matter where you are at in the interview do not interrupt the Survivor if they begin to tell you what happened. Let them talk and do not interrupt.

You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by whatever else may be going on around you, or by forming follow up questions that you'll ask when the other Survivor stops speaking. You can you allow yourself to get bored, lose focus or show a lack of interest on what is being said. All of these contribute to a lack of listening and understanding and may result in feelings of mistrust.

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear and that the Survivor knows you are hearing what they say.

1. Pay Attention

Give the Survivor your undivided attention, and acknowledge what is being said. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. It is your job to obtain an accurate statement.

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. Information will be lost and a Survivor may stop participating if interrupted. It sends the message very loudly that what you have to say is more important than what they have to say and it diminishes what happened to them.

5. Respond Appropriately

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective as the Survivor provides you with their story. You add nothing by attacking or challenging what is being said. You are simply putting him or her down.

Key Points

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Old habits are hard to break, and if your listening habits are as bad, then there's a lot of habit-breaking to do!

Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself frequently that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Set aside all other thoughts and behaviors and concentrate on what is being told to you. Ask questions, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand what the Survivor is telling you.

"To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world." - Heather Cortez

Establishing Safety

An important and often overlooked component in being able to create a safe environment for a survivor of child sexual assault is your own confidence. A child and others may quickly detect your lack of confidence and they may misinterpret your actions and assume they are creating doubt in some way. Through training, practice, observation, and peer review you can become a confident and effective interviewer.



Additional steps to build confidence that should become part of your pre-interview routine are:

- Know the available details of the case (Dates, times, names, etc.)
- If possible find out about a neutral event (e.g., a birthday, trip, activity, etc.) in the child's life that may help you in building rapport, practicing narratives, and assessing the child's memory ability and developmental level.
- Keep an open mind. Take time to explore alternative explanations for statements or behavior that have resulted in the allegations or concern. Abuse may or may not have occurred and this will practice will better enable you to more fully and objectively explore what may or may not have occurred.
- Prior to the interview formulate specific questions based upon the information you have available. **It is critical to include transition questions in this step.**
- Steer clear of using introductions that may produce a positive or negative characterization of the people or events involved. Be prepared to use objective language.

Keys to Establishing Safety

- Initial Contact: Physically get onto their level. When you walk into the room or greet them for the first time bend or squat so you are at eye level with them. When you are doing the interview make sure to be at the same level with them. If they feel more comfortable sitting on a bean bag on the floor that is where you should be as well.

Notes: _____

“What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” — Jane Goodall

Keys to Establishing Safety

- Begin with a simple introduction and neutral explanation of your job and role.
 - ❖ *“Hello, my name is [name]. My job is to talk with [children/kids/teens] about things that have happened.”*
 - ❖ *“I’m [a police officer/a social worker]. What do you think my job is?”/“What do you think I do?”*
 - ❖ *“It’s my job to get everything right.”*
- Engage in warm friendly “get acquainted” types of questions. Take time to get to know them a little bit. Taking five minutes to ask about their day, friends, hobbies, favorite toys, etc. will work wonders on their likelihood of opening up.
- Provide a sense of power and control. A Survivors’ sense of power is taken away with sexual assault so giving that back is very important. Let them choose which seat they want to sit in, if you are offering a drink, which cup they drink out of etc. Let them know that they have some control in a situation where they have very little.
- Compliment or comment on something they are wearing or something that they have. For example if they have a green back pack make a big deal about the item and ask them questions about it.
- Keep the space between you and the survivor free of any barriers. This includes items such as desks, tables, clipboards and items as small as a pen.
- Monitor your body language and facial expressions
- Give the child permission to correct you.



Notes: _____

“For a gallant spirit there can never be defeat.”-Wallis Simpson

Addressing Concerns and Empowering

A component of establishing safety is to address concerns the survivor may have and empower them by establishing ground rules. Children as with adults in new situations are comforted in knowing what is expected. Providing the ground rules can be done in a way that also helps the survivor understand they have regained control and they have no need to worry because you have established a clear sense of trust. It is important to follow the ground rules you establish. You may quickly lose trust and never regain it if you set a rule and then break it.



Ground rule examples:

- You Lack of Knowledge – Inform the survivor that you were not there and you don't know what happened.
- Permission to Correct You -- It is important to evaluate the survivor's ability or willingness to correct you especially in children who are under 11 years of age.

Examples:

“So if I said that your hair is [use the incorrect color], what would you say?” (Give time for a response.) “Oh that’s right. Thanks for correcting me and if I make any other mistakes please tell me just like you did.”

If the survivor does not correct you say: *“I think I got your name wrong and it is really okay to tell me if I make a mistake. So what would you say if I said you were 30 years old?”* (Give time for a response) Thank them for correcting you.

Notes: _____

“Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”- Albert Einstein

Ground Rules Continued

- Okay to Say I Don't Know -- Be supportive of the Survivor admitting any lack of knowledge. Tell them there is no guessing and that it is okay for them to say they do not know. Example: ***“If I ask you a question and you do not know the answer just say, ‘I don’t know’ and please don’t guess. But if you do know the answer, please tell me.”*** For Survivors 11 and younger and for those who seem reluctant to admit that they do not know something you can use a question similar to the following example: “If I ask you, ‘What is the name of my cat?’ what would you say?” If the Survivor says they do not know you can respond by reassuring them that is the correct way to answer a question they do not know the answer too and thank them.

If the Survivor guesses at the name then use this as an opportunity to point out their answer was a guess by stating something similar to: ***“Since I have not told you the name of my cat that was a guess and when you don’t know an answer don’t guess, just tell me you do not know the answer.”***

Use the same type of general question examples that have been provided when establishing the following ground rules.

- Okay to Say I Don't Understand
- Okay to Say I Don't Remember
- Permission Not to Answer

Provide an example of how you would test or evaluate a Survivors' willingness or ability to say they do not remember:

Additional Tips

- Explain Repeated Questions. Provide an explanation as to why you may repeat a question or ask the same question more than once.
- Motivating Instructions. These statements help to establish the importance of the job being done by the interviewer and may encourage participation.
- Promise of Truthfulness. While it is no guarantee research does show that having a child promise to tell the truth reduces the incidence of lying.

Additional Resources

1. The Washington State Child Interview Guide. You can download a complete copy at:

http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/pro_guidelines.html#guidelines

2. Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress Website:

<http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/>

References

Washington State Child Interview Guide 2009 - 2010. Produced by the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress in cooperation with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services and the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission.