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ASSESSING THE VALUE OF STRUCTURED PROTOCOLS FOR FORENSIC INTERVIEWS OF ALLEGED CHILD ABUSE VICTIMS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a structured interview protocol (NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol) operationalizing universally recommended guidelines for forensic interviews.

Method: The NICHD Investigative Protocol was designed to maximize the amount of information obtained using recall memory probes, which are likely to elicit more accurate information than recognition memory probes. Forensic investigators were trained to use the NICHD protocol while conducting feedback-monitored simulation interviews. The utility of the protocol was then evaluated by comparing 55 protocol interviews with 50 prior interviews by the same investigators, matched with respect to characteristics likely to affect the richness of the children's accounts. The comparison was based on an analysis of the investigators' utterance types, distribution, and timing, as well as quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the information produced.

Results: As predicted, protocol interviews contained more open-ended prompts overall as well as before the first option-posing utterance than non-protocol interviews did. More details were obtained using open-ended invitations and fewer were obtained using focused questions in protocol interviews than in non-protocol interviews, although the total number of details elicited did not differ significantly. In both conditions, older children provided more details than younger children did.

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Conclusion: The findings confirmed that implementation of professionally recommended practices affected the behavior of interviewers in both the pre-substantive and substantive phases of their interviews and enhanced the quality (i.e., likely accuracy) of information elicited from alleged victims. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Forensic interviews, Open-ended questions, Child witnesses, Interview processes.

IN THE LAST decade, many researchers have systematically explored the associations between interviewing conditions and the quantity and quality of information retrieved by child-witnesses in both laboratory (e.g., Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Cassel & Bjorklund, 1995; Cassel, Roebbers, & Bjorklund, 1996; Memon, Cronin, Eaves, & Bull, 1993) and forensic (field) settings (Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1997; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996). Informed by empirical findings and professional consensus, many experts and professional groups have formulated recommendations regarding interview practices believed to enhance the informativeness of children's accounts (e.g., American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1990; Bull, 1992, 1995; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Jones, 1992; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, & Esplin, 1999; Memorandum of Good Practice, 1992; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz & Goodman, 1996; Walker & Warren, 1995; Yuille, Hunter, Joffe, & Zaparniuk, 1993). Despite differences in emphasis, there is consensus that as much information as possible should be elicited using open-ended questions (recall memory probes) rather than focused questions (recognition memory probes) because the former are more likely than the latter to elicit accurate information (Dale, Loftus, & Rathbun, 1978; Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Hutcheson, Baxter, Telfer, & Warden, 1995; Oates & Shrimpton, 1991). Contrary to expert recommendations, however, many investigators frequently pose focused—even leading—questions and seldom employ open-ended questions in the course of their forensic interviews (Hershkowitz et al., 1997; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996, 1997). Furthermore, even when investigators have been trained intensively, understand the relevant conceptual issues, and can articulate what they should do, they do not interview accordingly (Aldridge & Cameron, 1999; Craig, Scheibe, Kircher, Raskin, & Dodd, 1999; Davies & Wilson, 1997; Memon, Bull, & Smith, 1995; Stevenson, Leung, & Cheung, 1992; Warren et al., 1999).

For this reason, Sternberg and her colleagues (Sternberg et al. 1997) developed a partially scripted protocol that provided forensic interviewers and children, respectively, with practice posing and responding to open-ended prompts during the pre-substantive phase of investigative interviews. Following the training, the children's first substantive narratives were significantly longer and more informative than the narratives provided by children "trained" using direct questions. However, the investigators thereafter reverted to focused questioning, using few open-ended questions and prompts during the rest of the interview.

These findings prompted the development of a fully structured investigative protocol by researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The NICHD investigative protocol (see Appendix A) is a flexibly structured protocol incorporating a wide range of strategies believed to enhance retrieval. In the next few paragraphs, we describe the strategies included in the protocol, citing the research reports that document the utility of each.

To promote a relaxed and supportive environment, first of all, interviewers are asked to ensure that the room is free of distractions such as other people, noise, toys, and incoming phone calls and to build rapport with the child early in the interview. A supportive and distraction-free environment is believed to make child-witnesses feel more comfortable and thus more willing to disclose information while also enhancing their retrieval capabilities and accuracy (Cheung, 1997; Geiselman, Saywitz, & Bornstein, 1993; Powell & Thomson, 1994; Sternberg et al., 1997).

Second, a number of steps are taken to maximize the children's competence and informativeness (Lyon & Saywitz, 1999; Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 1998; Snyder & Lindstedt, 1995; Saywitz, Snyder,

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