



Exploratory assessments of child abuse: Children's responses to interviewer's questions across multiple interview sessions[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study extends field research on interviews with young children suspected of having been abused by examining multiple assessment interviews designed to be inquisitory and exploratory, rather than formal evidential or forensic interviews.

Methods: Sixty-six interviews with 24 children between the ages of 3 and 6 years who were undergoing an assessment for suspected child abuse were examined. Each child was interviewed 2, 3, or 4 times. The interviewer's questions were categorized in terms of openness (open, closed or choice), in terms of the degree of interviewer input (free recall, direct, leading, suggestive), and for topic (whether the question was abuse-specific or nonabuse-related). Children's on-task responses were coded for amount of information (number of clauses) reported in relation to each question type and topic, and off-task responses were categorized as either ignoring the question or a diverted response.

Results: Children provided a response to most questions, independent of question type or topic and typically responded with one or two simple clauses. Some children disclosed abuse in response to open-ended questions; generally, however, failure to respond to a question was more likely for abuse-specific than for nonabuse-related questions.

Conclusion: The findings are discussed in terms of the growing literature on interviewing children about suspected abuse, particularly in interviews conducted over multiple sessions.

Practice implications: Assessment of suspected child abuse may involve more than a single investigative interview. Research examining children's responses to questioning over multiple interviews (or single interviews conducted over multiple sessions) is necessary for the development of best practise guidelines for the assessment of abuse.

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Introduction

Over the past 2 decades there has been considerable interest in the best ways to interview children suspected of having been abused (for reviews see Ceci & Bruck, 1998; Cronch, Viljoen, & Hansen, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Optimal interview protocols take into consideration practice guidelines as to how to elicit the most accurate information from the child while at the same time limiting the potential contamination of the child's evidence by the interviewer. Interviewer input may not only distort the child's memory (or report) regarding the alleged abuse, but may also affect the perceived reliability of the child's testimony (see Bruck, 1999). A number of questioning techniques have been identified as potential sources of contamination (Ceci & Bruck, 1998). Of greatest concern is the use of overly suggestive, leading, or coercive questioning styles

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(Poole & Lamb, 1998). Researchers worldwide have recommended that interviewers use open-ended questions, particularly those that elicit a free narrative response, with direct or specific questions used only to follow-up free narratives to obtain the necessary detail (Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001a).

Free recall and open questions are typically considered to be the best way to question children because laboratory-based and analogue studies indicate that they lead to the most accurate accounts (e.g., Dent, 1991; Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Goodman & Aman, 1990; Hutcheson, Baxter, Telfer, & Warden, 1995; Oates & Shrimpton, 1991). There are, however, a number of distinctive characteristics of abuse experiences that cannot be simulated in laboratory-based research, for example, feelings of shame, embarrassment, betrayal of loved ones, feeling personal responsibility for the abuse, fears of the consequences of disclosure, and threats or inducements made by the perpetrator (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). Thus, it is important that field studies also examine the use of different types of questions for gathering information about suspected abuse (e.g., DeVoe & Faller, 2002; Lamb et al., 2003; Sternberg, Lamb, Esplin, Orbach, & Hershkowitz, 2002). Researchers examining the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) interview protocol, in particular, have found that the recommended open-ended, free narrative questioning techniques are effective in eliciting information about abuse in forensic settings, at least with children who are forthcoming in disclosing the abuse (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lamb et al., 2003; Sternberg et al., 2002, 1996, 1997). Further, these field studies have shown that the most open-ended prompts ('invitations') elicit more information from children per question than do specific questions, irrespective of the child's age (Sternberg et al., 1996, 1997). Lamb et al. (2003) also showed that open-ended invitations are just as effective with the younger as with the older children, although younger children report overall less information than older children.

Not all researchers agree that open-ended invitations are always effective in eliciting information about suspected abuse, however, and concerns have been raised that free recall and open-ended questions may not elicit sufficient information when children are interviewed about abuse in the context of pressures to remain silent (*cf* Cederborg, Lamb, & Laurell, 2007; DeVoe & Faller, 2002; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). DeVoe and Faller (2002), for example, argue that it is unrealistic to expect children to be able to discuss abuse without the use of a direct, focused inquiry. Consistent with this, they examined the number and type of questions children were asked during clinical computer-assisted interviews before children discussed sexual abuse. They found that children did not respond to open-ended inquiries about abuse but required many questions (on average, 92 questions), and various types of questions, before disclosing abuse. Further, Mordock (1996) examined the case notes of 50 children undergoing treatment for substantiated sexual abuse and examined how much structure the therapist provided to assist children to discuss abuse. Of the 29 children who discussed the abuse in therapy, only 1 adolescent child disclosed abuse spontaneously, 10 did so under minimal structure conditions (e.g., the therapist generally introduced the abuse topic area and related it to the child), while the remaining children discussed it when highly structured questions were provided by the therapist (e.g., asking the child directly about the alleged abuse). Mordock (1996) concluded that without direct questioning from the therapist, many children would not have discussed details of the abuse.

Across-study differences in the usefulness of open-ended approaches to interviewing may depend on a number of factors relating to the children being interviewed, as well as differences relating to the interview, including the setting, style and purpose. For example, characteristics of the child such as age (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005), whether or not they have made a verbal allegation prior to interview (Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; see also London et al., 2005 for a review) and/or how willing the child is to discuss the abuse or abuse-related information, may be important (DeVoe & Faller, 2002). Because prior disclosures are strongly associated with disclosure in interview (see London et al., 2005; Pipe et al., 2007, for reviews), studies involving a large number of children who have already made a verbal disclosure may over-estimate the effectiveness of open-ended questions in *eliciting* disclosures, compared to studies in which children have not made clear disclosures or are unwilling to discuss the issue (e.g., DeVoe & Faller, 2002; see Lyon, 2007, for discussion of sampling biases). However, it must also be noted that while highly structured questions may elicit disclosures, we can only conclude that high levels of structure were *necessary* if interviewers first attempted to elicit disclosures using open-ended methods.

The interview context and structure may also contribute to across study differences. In DeVoe and Faller's (2002) study, for example, the computer-assisted interviews were typically longer than traditional interviews, with a longer time period and more questions asked prior to children's disclosure (DeVoe & Faller, 2002). It is possible that the computer-assisted technique may account for some of the differences found in the number and types of questions asked prior to disclosure when compared to the NICHD studies. Moreover, the children in Mordock's study were undergoing therapeutic interviews whereas in the NICHD studies, children were undergoing formal police or child protection interviews. It may be that children undergoing formal police or child protection interviews are more likely to understand what they are there to discuss (i.e., the alleged abuse) and are more prepared to discuss it. Indeed, one of the initial prompts in the most recent version of the NICHD interview protocol is "Tell me the reason you came to talk with me today" (Lamb et al., 2003, p. 928), and such general open-ended invitations are effective in eliciting the abuse disclosure in approximately 83% of cases.

What the different findings across studies highlight is the need to examine children's responsiveness to questioning in different settings, such as when the child is being assessed prior to the formal investigative interview, and in different samples of children, including children who have not previously disclosed. Moreover, increasingly, professionals in the field are considering protocols for interviewing some children on more than one occasion, for example, when there are signs of reluctance to disclose abuse early in an interview, when children are very young, or when they have not made a prior verbal disclosure, but there is reason to suspect abuse (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001; Carnes, Wilson, &

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