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?

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 or child abuse. By analyzing data collected from interviews of rape victims, the effects of preinterview exposure on interviewers' attitudes were observed. When interviewers worked with adolescents (13 years and up), the patient of protocol differences among ages groups then became insatiable for the research.

QUESTION

Can forensic interviewing protocols be improved when focusing on young ages children versus adolescents?

PRESENT-DAY PROTOCOL

- State interview instructions to the child
- Build rapport
- Select a topic
- Practice detailing narrative
- Explore details
- Episode timeline
- Question on memory details
- Ask open-ended questions

RESULTS

- When interviewing adolescents, interviewer asked if they have had previous abuse or trauma.
- The leading cause of delayed disclosure among adolescents include fear of punishment, guilt, or not identifying as a victim.

CONCLUSION

It is time for a protocol to accommodate the findings established through the research. The major findings suggest that, when interviewing adolescents, they experience the same or similar distress as children. This would create a space where adults feel their needs are being recognized as equal to their needs, may feel better if they are interviewed by a trained interviewer. It is important to note that, adolescents may not respond well to direct questioning, can work with interviewing, but are limited in their ability to express themselves. Through training, interviewers should be specifically trained in techniques such as active listening and empathy. The interviewing of language by protocol can be utilized depending on the age of the interviewee.
POSTER REFERENCES


Interview data provided by ongoing dissertation research by Emily Lux.