Forensic Interview Room Set-up

by Amy Russell, MSEd, NCC, Dip CFC

Multidisciplinary teams and children’s advocacy centers throughout the country have been working diligently for the past twenty years to establish “child-friendly” settings in which to interview children and developmentally disabled adults about witnessing and experiencing abuse and violence. But what does this mean? What does a “child-friendly” setting look like? This article examines the potential components of a child-friendly setting, and considers the underlying principles for each element.

To consider the appropriate elements for the setting of an interview room, this article will address three components: Before the interview, during the interview, and after the interview.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW –
In preparing for the interview, multidisciplinary teams should consider what the surroundings look like to the children and families that will be served. When children come for their interviews, they should perceive an environment that is “child-friendly” and respectful of them and their needs. Child-sized seating, a play area, decorations designed for children, and friendly staff all contribute to a welcoming atmosphere. Children should have access to materials and toys that reflect the needs and interests of the diverse populations served in the setting. The facility should be accessible for people with disabilities, in addition to being physically safe and “child proof” for children of all ages. Alleged offenders should be denied access to the facility where children are interviewed. Children and families should be observed and supervised by staff, volunteers or team members at all times. Consider the possibility of having one entrance and waiting area for the children and families, and a separate entrance for staff, visitors, and deliveries in order to protect the confidentiality of the children and families receiving forensic interview services.

Materials – Toys, games, books, and coloring pages should represent the cultures and ethnicities of the children and families we serve. Allegations of sexual abuse and violence are stigmatizing enough; interview settings can help reduce this isolation by acknowledging and depicting the magnitude of people affected by violence. Similarly, resources, forms, and brochures should be available in multiple languages to facilitate communication.
Physical Setting – Child-sized furniture, mixed in with furniture for adults, is a welcome change for children in an authoritarian world. Furniture and paraphernalia arranged for children to play and relax help engage them in the interview process from the moment they enter the building.

Strive to create a waiting room environment that is calm and serene. Over-stimulating games and activities, including video games, television, and/or movies can result in excessive attachment of the child to those activities. This may cause difficulty transitioning the child to the interview itself. Avoid providing toys and activities in the waiting room that employ techniques similar to those that may be utilized in the interview process, including dolls for play or staff engaging the child in face drawings or conversations about the child’s family.

Finally, consider the waiting room interactions when interviewing siblings or other children related to one case. Attempts to minimize cross-contamination within the case are imperative. It may be more appropriate to bring children in on different days, or seat them in separate waiting areas, when the case involves multiple victims. If this is not possible, increase staff interaction with children in order to minimize opportunities for cross-contamination.

Facility – Consider the physical setting and location of the interview facility. Does your multidisciplinary team conduct your interviews in a freestanding building, separate from a doctor’s office, school, police station or courthouse? Cultural or religious beliefs may impact the experiences of children and families, and subsequently affect their comfort level in various locations. While for some children and families a doctor is someone who helps people stay healthy, other children and families may be frightened of the clinical setting of a doctor’s office or hospital where they may have received a shot, undergone a painful procedure, or visited sick or dying family members. Similarly, while some people regard police officers as men and women who help people stay safe, others may consider police stations as locations where people go when they are in trouble. Further, for people who may be newly integrated into American culture from a country where conflict and warfare are the norm, police stations may be one step removed from the execution of a family member or loved one.

School settings are not the ideal location for interviewing children about abuse or violence. There is often difficulty in securing a private location in a school, resulting in the utilization of the principal’s office for the interview. However, children often consider the principal’s office as the place to go when they are in trouble. Children may have additional concerns about the confidentiality of the information they disclose in a school setting.

Staff – The waiting or lobby area of the interview setting should be staffed in order to adequately provide supervision and information to the clients served. Consider having staff members available to review and explain authorization and release forms to the child’s parents or caregivers. A staff or team member, such as an advocate, family liaison, or support worker, may be available for the parent to share resources and referral information. This eliminates duplication of services, and provides necessary support and information to parents who may be reeling from the distressing report that their child may have been directly or indirectly victimized.

Prior to the interview, it may be helpful for the interviewer to briefly meet with the non-offending parents or caregivers in a private room, separate from the child being interviewed. Regardless of whether your team’s interviewers conduct a “blind” interview – not knowing anything about the allegations of abuse or violence prior to the interview – or whether the interviewer has some minimal information regarding the reports, caregivers may benefit from knowing what they can expect from the interview process.

DURING THE INTERVIEW – Interview rooms should be comfortably furnished, and equipped with technology that allows for memorializing the interview, as determined by the needs of the
multidisciplinary investigative team members of the community.8

Physical Setting – The furniture in the interview room should be comfortable and accessible for children. Large, welcoming couches or chairs arranged in a manner that allows for direct and relaxed communication is ideal. Hard benches or steps may enable a distractible child to lose focus on the topic more quickly. An interrogation-style arrangement with the interviewer sitting across the table from the child may be intimidating, and the bulk of the table may impede the ability to effectively communicate with the child. In an interview, children communicate in three ways: through their language, their behaviors, and their emotions.9 It is imperative that interviewers pay attention to all three of these forms of communication in order to fully understand what a child may be saying in the interview. For example, a child may be verbally reporting that he didn’t experience abuse, while compulsively manipulating an object or tearing apart a Kleenex, which may belie his statements. If the interviewer is not able to see these actions, she may not have a full understanding of what the child may be communicating, and may miss exploring important issues or topics with the child in the interview.

It is also tempting to make a setting so child-friendly that it is no longer appropriate for the forensic setting. In order for the interviewer to effectively build rapport with the child and to make the child feel comfortable in the interview room, the interviewer herself must be comfortable.

For example, while beanbag chairs may be appealing for children, the noise of the child’s– and the interviewer’s – movements on the beanbag chair may impede the ability of the interviewer or the multidisciplinary team members to hear and understand the child’s statements.

In addition, if interviews are video recorded, bear in mind that the recording must be appropriate for court, as needed. It is essential that judges and juries are also able to hear and understand what is said during the interview. Noises from the movements on the beanbag chair may be enhanced onto the video recording, and make it difficult to listen to. Further, in order to maintain interviewer professionalism and decorum in the interview, and credibility in court, it is not recommended that judges and juries see adult interviewers struggling to get out of a beanbag chair at the conclusion of the interview.

Finally, minimal distractions in the interview room allow the child to maintain focus on the interview process. Interview tools utilized during the course of the interview, such as anatomical diagrams or dolls, should be chosen by the interviewer, with some input from the child, to represent the age, gender and ethnicity of the child and the alleged offender.10,11 This reduces issues of suggestibility and confusion for the child during the interview and potential subsequent court hearings. Store interview tools out of sight until determined necessary by the interviewer. Reserve pictures or wall murals that may encourage play or invite fantasy for rooms where children are not being interviewed about factual events.

 Videotape equipment – Ideally, the multidisciplinary team members will observe the interview from another room, either via closed circuit television or from beyond a two-way mirror.12 State-of-the-art technology allowing for memorializing the interview using VHS or DVD recorders might include video cameras with picture in picture technology and time and date stamp video recording features. The picture in picture equipment allows for one camera to focus on the big picture of the interview room activities, capturing the interviewer, the child, any interview aids utilized, and an interpreter, when appropriate. The second camera can focus on the child being interviewed, recording the child’s movements and activities around the interview room. Emotions or behaviors displayed by a child may contribute to the child’s report, and can be captured close-up. Time and date stamping allow for accurate representation of the timing of the interview, and may allay any concerns that the record was edited.

People in the room – Generally, only the child and the interviewer need to be in the interview room. Incorporating other people in the
interview room is not recommended, unless it is critical to the effective communication with a child. In order to establish a comfortable setting for a child, it is important to remove intimidating elements, and minimize multiple authority figures in the room.

As professionals, we should strive to reduce any factors of coercion we may convey to the child. Encourage law enforcement professionals to interview children in plain clothes, removing their gun belts and badges. Reducing intimidation and interviewing children in a friendly, encouraging manner enhances children’s abilities to resist possible suggestion from adults, and allows for more accurate and complete reports of abuse or violence. 13,14,15

Team members should incorporate an effective means of communicating with each other towards the end of the interview to ensure all areas of inquiry are being explored. This ideally would be achieved without leaving the child alone in the interview room, and may include the use of a telephone connected between the interview room and the team observation room, or may include the use of a “bug in the ear” system. The bug in the ear system includes a cordless hearing device in the ear of the interviewer, with information or questions being fed to the interviewer through a microphone from the team observation room.

**AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

In order to provide the most supportive and accommodating services to children and families, we must attend to their needs after the interview as resolutely as we do before and during the interview.

**Staff** - Allow time for children to play and decompress after discussing the difficult subjects of abuse and victimization. A brief period to expend energy with toys or games, or simply sitting quietly in a comfortable, peaceful setting may help the child transition for the remainder of her day. Having staff or team members available to provide this transition, or to simply supervise the child during this time, goes a long way toward normalizing the child’s experience at the interview site.

**Service Recommendations**

Following the interview, allow time for the multidisciplinary team members, including the forensic interviewer, to evaluate each child interviewed to determine if he or she requires subsequent referrals. Therapy, a medical evaluation, or other services may help ameliorate the effects of abuse or violence the child may have experienced. Communicate recommendations to this effect to the parents or caregivers of the child in a private room, out of the presence of the child. A resource list with several options may be provided to the parents or caregivers, and if available, a team member may facilitate contact with appropriate providers.

**Gifts** - Individually packaged snacks may be routinely provided to children immediately following their interview, but should consist of healthy choices such as juice boxes, crackers and cheese, or fruit. Inappropriate introduction of this practice, or supplying the children with candy bars, soda, and sugar-laden “treats” may be regarded as incentives, and may challenge the credibility and impartiality of the interview.

Providing the child with substantive toys, teddy bears, or clothing as part of the interview process is also generally not recommended. While toys and playthings might be comforting for a child following a distressing event, presenting these items to children immediately following a forensic or investigative interview may be perceived as an inducement or reward for a child’s report of abuse. Children who are in need of clothing, other personal effects, or basic needs may be provided these items on a different visit to the facility, separating the interview from the experience of receiving these items.

**Conclusion**

During the course of forensic interviews with children, we are asking very vulnerable and inexperienced individuals to report very personal and intimate information to veritable strangers. It is in our best interest – not to mention that of the children – to do so in a way that considers how this experience may impact them. It is the very least we can do as professionals to provide a setting that enables the child to be as stress-free and as comfortable as possible during this process.

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1. Amy Russell is the Executive Director at Corner House Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center, a children’s advocacy center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
8. Pence & Wilson, supra note 7.
12. APSAC, supra note 4.
Half-a-Nation State Updates

2001 STATES:

SOUTH CAROLINA

Prior to March 2001, only a handful of professionals in South Carolina had received training in how to conduct forensic interviews of children. Within the past three years, this situation has changed dramatically. From March 2001 to March 2004, 220 professionals attended Finding Words South Carolina. All of the agencies charged with investigating and prosecuting child abuse have been well represented. In an attempt to evaluate the degree to which Finding Words South Carolina has affected the actual interviews subsequently conducted by participants, the Children’s Law Office sent a follow-up survey to participants in September 2002. The results are both discouraging and encouraging. A discouraging feature is demonstrated in the response rate. While 63% of prosecutors, 58% of law enforcement officers and 45% of advocacy center or mental health interviewers returned the survey, only 25% of DSS personnel responded. Of the 29 participants who returned surveys, the feedback was extremely positive. All respondents indicated the course resulted in an improved quality of their forensic interview, with 80% indicating the quality had “greatly improved” as a result of attending the course. One participant commented: “There has been a positive impact on the interviews done in our community. The [local children’s advocacy center] has decided to use the RATAc protocol in all interviews. . . . We are also going to videotape and attempt to have law enforcement there to watch the interview.”

2002 STATES:

INDIANA

The week of March 8-12, 2004 Finding Words Indiana completed the first course of its second year of certification. After receiving the “stamp of approval” by CornerHouse and APRI in the fall of 2002, four courses were conducted in 2003. Two more courses are scheduled for 2004: July 26-30 in Evansville and October 18-22 in Indianapolis. The Evansville training will be our first opportunity to “RATAc” in southern Indiana.

Over 240 law enforcement officers, child protection workers, prosecutors and forensic interviewers have been trained in Indiana since APRI and CornerHouse arrived in the Hoosier State two years ago. With each course the demand increases, as does the interest. We are particularly proud that one of our own, Angela Scott, accepted the Forensic Interview Specialist position with APRI and has been able to share her expertise with the entire Half a Nation community.

The Indiana Child Advocacy Centers Coalition, which puts on the training, is eager to work with the growing number of Finding Words states. We tell each of our students, “You are now more than just a member of a local multidisciplinary team or a statewide project; you are part of a national family.”

We look forward to seeing our Half a Nation “cousins” in Charleston!

For course registration information, Rita Johnson, Director of Chaucie’s Place, Hamilton County CAC can be reached at 317.844.5220 or rita@chauciesplace.org.

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi was honored as one of the first states chosen to participate in the Half a Nation project. It’s hard to believe that our journey to secure such a monumental program began three years ago. The financial support of many state and local organizations along with private donors made the whole project a reality. Because of this, the children of Mississippi have a brighter future.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services has taken a leadership role in promoting the multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach to handling child maltreatment cases. Finding Words Mississippi is one of many initiatives in our state promoting the MDT development and implementation of services. A special thank you is due to Gloria Salters and Teresa Jackson at the Mississippi Department of Human Services for ensuring that continued funding has been available.

In addition to the financial support given, the faculty and staff of Finding Words has also made many sacrifices and donations of time and talent. We are honored to have such a prestigious group of faculty and staff. They are as follows: Denease Bishop, Dr. Catherine Dixon, Bente’ J. Hess, Carol Langendom, Tomiko Mackey, Dr. Rita Porter, Jerry Rushing, Keith Stovall, Pat May and Dr. Lisa Yazdani. We conduct three trainings a year. To date, we have trained over 120 front-line workers. In addition, we are adding a yearly conference to keep all graduates updated on the latest research and literature. This conference will be held in November 2004.

NEW JERSEY

Since April 2002, 182 child maltreatment professionals from 16 counties have completed Finding Words New Jersey. This number includes several detectives and troopers from the New Jersey State Police and Human Services Police.

Finding Words New Jersey is fully supported by the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect (NJTFCAN). As a result, tuition is free to participants. Due to the continued growth of the program, funding was received from NJTFCAN to hire a full time Project Coordinator/Forensic Interview Specialist to coordinate the training program and provide consultation services to participants following the completion of the program.

The word is spreading quickly throughout the state regarding the opportunity for teams to participate in Finding Words New Jersey. Faculty
county prosecutors and the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services, and the information has been well received.

Finding Words New Jersey has planned training in each of the three regions of the state for 2004. There are 40 slots available in each training session, and we hope to have 120 additional professionals trained by the end of 2004. Our faculty is growing as we recruit respected professionals from each respective region to conduct training. New Jersey is honored to be a part of Half a Nation and looks forward to the future of the program.

2003 STATES:

GEORGIA

Georgia is proud to announce the addition of two attorneys to their faculty pool. Alan A. Cook, JD, is the director of the University of Georgia School of Law’s Prosecutorial Clinic. He served as the elected district attorney in the Alcovy Judicial Circuit for 10 years. He has tried over 100 jury trials including 19 homicide cases (including six capital cases) and 36 child sexual abuse cases. He continues to serve his former circuit as a special assistant district attorney handling select appellate cases. Bates Lovett, JD is an assistant district attorney in Cobb County specializing in child sexual abuse cases.

The Georgia Finding Words program continues to thrive with the support of the Georgia Chiefs of Police, Georgia Sheriff’s Association, Children’s Advocacy Centers of Georgia, Georgia Public Safety Training Center and Prosecuting Attorneys’ Council. These agencies have all assisted in spreading the word about the Finding Words training, but nothing compares to the power of the personal endorsements of former trainees. Finding Words is praised as the best training some have ever had. Word is out in the community that this is the training to get. As a result, Georgia currently has a waiting list of over 100 applications and more applications are on the way.

MISSOURI

Finding Words Missouri just finished our first session in 2004 (March 22-26). The session was full and included four multidisciplinary teams, five individuals from counties with teams already trained and a pediatrician from Cardinal Glennon Children’s Hospital. Our next two sessions are already over half full, and we have had a continuous waiting list since the training was made available statewide last year.

To date, our course has been funded by the Missouri Task Force on Children’s Justice. Last month, the Missouri Network of Child Advocacy Centers was awarded a grant through the Missouri Foundation for Health for 1.4 million dollars to be dispersed over a three-year period. Included within this grant will be the entire Finding Words Missouri budget plus the salary for a full-time training coordinator. We will be able to provide honoraria for Missouri faculty (everyone has donated their time to this point), and scholarships for student tuition and lodging. The training is currently coordinated by Jerri Sites, Executive Director of the Children’s Advocacy Center of East Central Missouri. She will maintain her role as the program director and continue to oversee the coordination of the project.

2004 STATES:

WEST VIRGINIA

The first Finding Words WV seminar was held January 12-16, 2004, in Charleston. This seminar was well attended by prosecutors, law enforcement officers and child protective service workers. Twenty-three received their certification from this course. Two additional Finding Words WV courses will be conducted this year, one on May 17-21 in Beckley and the second on September 13-17 at Camp Dawson (Kingwood).

One prosecutor, with over 20 years experience, who attended the January training stated that this was the “best continuing legal educational course” he had ever attended.

MARYLAND

Maryland’s first training was held at the prestigious Maritime Institute of Technology the week of February 9, 2004. Many of the 70 participants – students, faculty, observers, actors and Maryland’s Core Training Team had the added convenience of lodging at the training site. Many students who participated were part of their jurisdiction’s multidisciplinary team consisting of prosecutors, forensic interviewers and investigators/child protective services workers.

Maryland’s partnership with the State Head Start Director – the first of its kind – enabled local Head Start children to participate in the interviewing process of the training.

ILLINOIS

The first week of Finding Words Illinois was held March 1-5 in Springfield. Forty participants and five observers attended the training. The participants came from throughout Illinois representing both city and rural jurisdictions. It was good to have such a wide range of perspectives. We have received very positive feedback. However, we couldn’t have done this without the expertise and support provided by CornerHouse and APRI. They were such valuable resources every step of the way.

The second week of Finding Words Illinois will be held July 19-23 in Springfield. Even before the mailing to our Child Advocacy Centers, we received 18 applications to fill the 40 available slots.

The seven people on the Finding Words Illinois faculty bring to the training a wealth of knowledge and extensive experience in forensic interviewing. We are very fortunate they have joined our team. Everyone is looking forward to week two of Finding Words Illinois.

2005 STATES:
2005 STATES:

KANSAS

During the first quarter of 2004 Kansas was able to start organizing for the Finding Words, Half a Nation by 2010 program that will start in 2005. First steps were incorporating and finding a sponsor in the Kansas County and District Attorney’s Association. An outstanding facility was found with Friends University, Wichita, KS and dates have been set for the three training weeks in 2005. We are now concentrating on finding funding for the program. So far we have enough to sign the contract with APRI and are working on other sources. The entire faculty that has been identified to perform training in the program was able to attend Finding Words.

OHIO

Ohio will offer Finding Words beginning in early 2005, and will initially offer the course three times throughout the first year. We anticipate increasing this to four times a year in 2006. We hope to begin to “take the show on the road” in 2007, serving the four corners of Ohio.

The Ohio Attorney General’s Office supports the multidisciplinary approach to the investigation of child abuse advocated and utilized by Finding Words. Registration will likely be confined to those who attend the training as a functioning multidisciplinary investigative team. Attorney General Petro feels that Finding Words is the ideal course for investigators and prosecutors seeking to enhance their ability to speak to and for abused children.

Attorney General Petro has allowed his office to reach out into the statewide community to form a working committee to assist in the planning of this large undertaking. This committee is seeking nominations from agencies throughout Ohio to identify the most qualified trainers.

By bringing APRI’s program to Ohio, the Ohio Attorney General’s Office feels it is providing an important resource to the Ohio legal community and to the youngest victims of these horrible crimes.

Subpoenaed Training Manuals

With ever-increasing frequency, CornerHouse receives subpoenas to turn over its training manuals to the defense in court cases. In order to maintain the integrity of the CornerHouse Training Program, CornerHouse materials and information, including but not limited to manuals, folders, handouts, lecture notes, slide shows and forms, are viewed as protected data.

As more states are trained through the Half a Nation program, we anticipate training manuals will be subpoenaed to court as a way to challenge whether the forensic interviewer followed the protocol. In these instances, we would like to offer two suggestions. An initial response from the interviewer's attorney of record to quash the subpoena may be the only action necessary. If this motion is not successful, the training manual may be turned over with an Order of Protection that may include the following language:

The parties to the above-referenced action stipulate to the following:

1. That a copy of the Finding Words Training Manual shall be made available to the defense;
2. That no additional copy of the manual nor any portion of the manual shall be made by the defendant, the defendant’s attorney, investigator, expert, or any other representative or agent of the defendant;
3. That said copy shall not be used for any purpose other than to prepare for the defense in the above-referenced action;
4. That said copy shall not be publicly reviewed, shown, displayed, used for educational, research or demonstrative purposes, or used in any other fashion, except in judicial proceedings in the above-referenced action;
5. That said copy may be reviewed only by parties, their counsel and their counsel’s employees, investigators, and experts;
6. That no person shall be granted access to said copy, or the substance of any portion thereof unless that person has first signed an agreement in writing that he or she has received a copy of this stipulation, that he or she submits to the Court’s Jurisdiction with respect to it and that he or she will be subject to the Court’s contempt powers for any violation of it;
7. That upon final disposition of this case, any and all copies of this manual shall be returned to the Court/interviewer.
### Half-a-Nation State Training Calendar – 2004

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
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| SEPTEMBER | | | | | 13-17 | Kingwood, West Virginia | 13-17 | Clinton, Mississippi | 20-24 | Forsyth, Georgia | 20-24 | Hagerstown, Maryland |
| OCTOBER | 4-8 | Sayreville, New Jersey | 4-8 | Union, Missouri | 18-22 | Indianapolis, Indiana | 25-29 | Columbia, South Carolina |
| NOVEMBER | 1-5 | Springfield, Illinois |
| DECEMBER | 6-10 | Forsyth, Georgia |

### National Training Calendar – 2004

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
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| SEPTEMBER | | | | | 27-October 1 | CornerHouse: Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| OCTOBER | 11-14 | *Beyond Finding Words: Charleston, South Carolina | 25-29 | CornerHouse: Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| NOVEMBER | 8-12 | CornerHouse: Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| DECEMBER | 6-10 | CornerHouse: Minneapolis, Minnesota |

*Beyond Finding Words is a three-and-a-half-day course designed to address emerging issues in the field of forensic interviewing. Although open to all interested parties, it is ideally suited to graduates of national or state Finding Words courses or graduates of the five day CornerHouse forensic interview training program. For more information, contact the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse at 703-549-4255.*

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