EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS IN A FORENSIC INTERVIEW TO THE TOPIC OF CONCERN

Questions used to transition a child from the pre-substantive (beginning) phase of an interview to the substantive phase have the potential to either move the interview forward or derail the discussion. The pre-substantive phases generally include rapport development, interview instructions, narrative practice, and family. The substantive phase explores any allegations of abuse the child may report.

**What Versus Why Transition Prompts**

Recent research examined the effectiveness of two different transition prompts: “Why did you come here to talk to me today?” versus “What did you come here to talk to me about today?” The questions may feel similar; however, the *what* prompt provided more informative responses, especially nouns related to an activity or person (e.g., the camping trip/my uncle) or verbs (e.g., the touching).

The *why* prompt elicited more uninformative responses, leaving the interviewer struggling with how to introduce the topic of concern without being overly suggestive. A potential reason the *why* prompt resulted in a higher level of noninformative responses may be because a child has greater difficulty mastering an understanding of the abstract concepts needed to respond appropriately. The *what* prompt is concrete and easier for a child to understand.

Due to the sensitive nature of maltreatment discussions, the *why* prompt may also be viewed by the child as more critical and accusatory in nature.

**Other Transition Prompts**

If the child does not respond to the *what* prompt, the interviewer can ask other questions designed to assist the child in moving toward the topic of concern, such as:

- What did your (mom, dad, caretaker, etc.) say about coming here today?
- Are you worried about something?
- Have there been some problems?
- Is someone worried about you?
- Has someone been bothering you?
- Has something happened?
If the interviewer uses any of the more focused prompts and receives an affirmative response, he/she should then immediately follow with an open-ended request (e.g. “Tell me about your uncle bothering you.”) eliciting a narrative response and explore any allegations fully.

References


