

THE BENEFITS OF DELIBERATE PAUSING IN THE FORENSIC INTERVIEW

Rezmer, B. E., Trager, L. A., Catlin, M., & Poole, D. A. (2020). Pause for effect: A 10-s interviewer wait time gives children time to respond to open-ended prompts. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 194*, 104824.

Essential skills necessary to conduct an appropriate forensic interview are knowledge of an interviewing protocol, the ability to establish and maintain rapport throughout the interview, the ability to provide forensically appropriate social support, and the use of research-supported questioning techniques.

Open-ended questions can elicit 3-5 times more information, and children's responses are considered more reliable, than responses to specific wh-questions (i.e., "What did your mom say?" or "Who was at the house when the shooting happened?") or yes/no questions. Asking open-ended, narrative-encouraging prompts which solicit multiple-word responses is a fundamental tenant of an effective forensic interview. In addition to the use of appropriate questioning strategies, the effective use of silence within a conversation is important.

Effective Communicative Skills Between Adults May Not Translate to Children

According to Rezmer, Trager, Catlin, & Poole (2020), there is a natural rhythm or back-and-forth flow between two individuals in a conversation. Children, generally by the age of 3, begin to instinctively understand this flow. One challenge of this flow lies with the wait time between when one person completes a statement or response to a question and the other person begins speaking. Dependent on culture, wait times between conversational partners can range from 7 milliseconds to longer than 400 milliseconds. In some countries or cultures, there can be little to no wait time between conversational utterances.



Many individuals, even children, may feel discomfort during long pauses in conversations. Prolonged wait times could even derail some conversation due to this feeling of uneasiness. Discomfort felt during pauses in a conversation may be a consequence of the *meaning* attached with long pauses or silence. People may feel that a long pause indicates the thought or response is less than positive or is opposed to the listener's prior statements. Another reason for long pauses is that a person may not readily know the correct response or may have difficulty expressing thoughts or emotions.

Children's response time to questions is approximately twice that of pauses between adult conversational partners. Children need additional time to process a question, conduct an effective memory retrieval search, and formulate a response. Interviewers should allow children the opportunity to finish speaking and **then** formulate their next question. Interviewers who immediately begin the next question as soon as children finish speaking or before enough wait time has lapsed, indicates two unfortunate facts: 1) They were formulating the question before the child finished speaking and 2) They were not practicing active listening, which means they were more focused on their question, not the child's

response. Another challenge with rushing the wait time is the risk of terminating children's response before they have time to finish speaking.

The current research examines the benefits of a 10-second wait time after children finish responding to an open-ended prompt. Results indicate that a minimum 10-second wait time after children finish responding and before interviewers ask the next question may be beneficial in forensic interviews. Children often took advantage of the wait time by reporting additional information.

The recommendation from the researchers for an approximate 10-second wait time is for disclosing children who are responding to narrative-encouraging questions. Reluctant children, who are not yet ready to disclose, may not respond to longer wait times.

In this research study, children are reporting information regarding an innocuous event but still added information, even after being unresponsive for more than 5 seconds. For children reporting incidences of maltreatment or witnessing, there is anecdotal evidence that suggests longer than average wait times can be a beneficial tool to aid productivity.

More direct wh-questions or yes/no questions cue different memory retrieval processes. It is important not to generalize the results of the study to the more direct question types. Children may need longer to respond to these specific questions or less time because the interviewers are prompting for a specific piece of information.

What Does This Mean for the Forensic Interview?

- Practice active listening: Allow children to finish speaking before formulating your next question.
- Utilize an approximate 10 second wait time after children finish responding to open-ended, narrative-encouraging questions.



The researchers concluded the study with the following quote: "The potential benefit is great because understanding children takes more than a set of good questions-it takes time." (p. 8)

Additional References

Corps, R., Gambi, C., & Pickering, M. J. (2020). How do listeners time response articulation when answering questions. The role of speech rate. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 46(4), 781-802.

Gratier, M., Devouche, E., Guellai, B., Infanti, R., Yilmaz, E., & Parlato-Oliveira, E. (2015). Early development of turn-taking in vocal interaction between mothers and infants. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6(1167), 236-245.

Heldner, M. (2011). Detection thresholds for gaps, overlaps, and no-gap-no-overlaps. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 130(1), 508-513.

Heldner, M., & Edlund, J. (2010). Pauses, gaps and overlaps in conversations. *Journal of Phonetics*, 38(4), 555-568.

Luz, S., & Su, J. (2010). The relevance of timing, pauses and overlaps in dialogues: Detecting topic changes in scenario-based meetings. In Eleventh Annual Conference of the International Speech Communication Association.