



## Guidelines for teachers to elicit detailed and accurate narrative accounts from children<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides interview strategies for teachers who talk to children about serious events, including bullying, truancy, and suspected maltreatment. With regard to the latter, teachers are among the largest group of professionals reporting child abuse, but also tend to evince low substantiation rates. We review research on *best practice* interviewing, with a focus on its application in school settings. Interview phases are described chronologically, with interview excerpts included for illustrative purposes. Gaps in knowledge about the appropriateness of techniques are highlighted, and recommendations for future research specifically within the school setting are made. It is proposed that teachers receive basic training in best practice interviewing so that, when required, they can confidently ask about difficulties in children's lives while minimizing the potential for contamination of children's responses.

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Maximizing children's informativeness and accuracy when describing their experiences has been the focus of much research in cognitive, developmental, and forensic psychology (e.g., Fivush, 2014; Goodman, Ogle, McWilliams, Narr, & Paz-Alonso, 2014; Lamb, Malloy, Hershkowitz, & La Rooy, 2015; Peterson, 2012). This body of work has yielded valuable knowledge about the importance of open-ended questions to facilitate and augment narrative responses. Open-ended questions are those that do not dictate what information should be provided, and encourage elaborate answers in the respondent's own words (Powell & Snow, 2007a). Guidelines regarding interviewing techniques have arisen from this body of knowledge, and have primarily appeared in the *forensic* rather than education literature (e.g. Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lyon, 2014; Saywitz & Camparo, 2013; Wilson & Powell, 2001; Yuille, Cooper, & Hervé, 2009). Yet, school personnel often need to elicit narrative accounts from children too; about events such as bullying, victimization, property damage, substance use, complaints against staff, uncovering reasons for truancy or other significant behavioral changes, or possible evidence of maltreatment.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of school personnel such as teachers and guidance counselors in understanding the forensic

implications of children's narrative accounts of events (e.g. Snow, Powell, & Sanger, 2012). The extant literature, however, does not provide evidence-based guidance to such professionals as to how to go about eliciting a narrative account from a child in the school setting. This paper aims to be a first step in redressing that gap by presenting best-practice interviewing guidelines from the perspective of their use by teachers and other education professionals.

### 1. The importance of interview guidelines for teachers

Teachers are in a particularly advantageous position to identify difficulties in the lives of children they instruct (Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 2004; Schols, de Ruiter, & Öry, 2013), including criminal activities covered under mandated reporting laws, such as child abuse. In countries where school personnel are mandated reporters, they tend to be among the largest groups of professionals to make reports to police and child protective services (Sedlak et al., 2010), but their reports are also associated with low substantiation rates (King & Scott, 2014). There is evidence that they miss identifying some cases as well; for example, Goebels, Nicholson, Walsh, and De Vries (2008) found that 18% of teachers explicitly indicated that, on at least one occasion, they did not make a report in an ambiguous situation (see also Beck, Ogloff, & Corbishley, 1994; Sedlak et al., 2010), and Teasley and Gill (2015) suggested that student-athletes who are victims of abuse by coaches are particularly unlikely to disclose at all. Schools have responsibilities to ensure that information that is suggestive of child maltreatment is

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carefully managed with respect to the threshold for making a mandatory report, and that they respond appropriately to reports of critical incidents (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Mathews, 2014; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2015).

There are numerous circumstances that do not require reporting to authorities but nevertheless should be elicited through careful questioning, either because such situations may evolve into more serious ones, or simply to avoid contaminating reports with personal biases (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, & Sharman, 2012). For example, teaching staff may need to elicit a child's account of a witnessed accident or assault in the playground to inform safety regulations or disciplinary action. In many jurisdictions it is strongly suggested, if not required, that schools include anti-bullying strategies in their codes of conduct (e.g., Bernard & Milne, 2008; Cerf, Hespe, Gantwek, Martz, & Vermeire, 2010). Teachers tend to underestimate rates of bullying in their schools; overt signs can be absent or hard to detect and children often do not report their victimization (see Sullivan, 2011, for review). Thus, questioning in cases of student behavioral changes may be necessary for detection. It has also been suggested that schools be required to act to identify problems faced by the bully, the victim, or both, and not doing so could leave them criminally liable (e.g., Farbish, 2011).

Unfortunately, teachers, principals, support staff, and administrators are not routinely trained in best-practice approaches for eliciting narrative accounts from children. Until recently, it was not known how teachers approach the questioning of children in response to a known or suspected incident. Brubacher, Powell, Skouteris, and Guadagno (2014) assessed the questions teachers used in a mock interview situation and found that the majority were specific or leading, with only 13% of prompts characterized as open-ended (see Warren & Peterson, 2014, for similar findings when children were questioned by parents).

## 2. The need to develop training programs for teachers

Everyday narratives tend to be co-constructed as part of a conversation (Kelly & Bailey, 2013; Principe, DiPuppo, & Gammel, 2013). For example, when a past event is recounted, the listener typically asks about aspects that he or she finds most interesting (e.g., upon hearing about a recent wedding you attended, one of your friends wants to know everything that was served for dinner, but another is more interested in what everyone wore). Listeners also interject with their own subjective comments. Particularly in conversations with children, parents and teachers often scaffold children's discourse by providing known information to keep children's accounts flowing e.g., "and then what did we do – we visited the tiger next... what happened with the tiger?" (Nelson & Fivush, 2000; Wang, 2013). Notably, however, the precise accuracy of the information children share about innocuous events is usually not critical, and small errors do not lead to adverse consequences. In fact, children are encouraged to engage in rich fantasy in school activities such as creative writing and drama (Wyse, Jones, Bradford, & Wolpert, 2013).

Everyday conversational discourse is not characterized by communication behaviors that optimize success during an investigative interview (Saywitz & Camparo, 2013; Steele, 2012). Further, children are accustomed to being asked questions by adults who already know the answers (Nelson & Fivush, 2000; Poole & Lamb, 1998), such as teachers, who are also authority figures to children (Tisak, Crane-Ross, Tisak, & Maynard, 2000). Children are most suggestible and most likely to guess when being questioned by people they perceive to be authorities and/or knowledgeable (Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2004).

Currently, some teacher education programs include training regarding mandatory reporting laws, identifying behavioral indicators of abuse and victimization, and abuse prevention (Farrell & Walsh, 2010; Goldman & Grimbeek, 2014; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Liam, 2007; Mathews, 2011; Rheingold et al., 2015). Given the role of teachers in the lives of children, and the special characteristics of the interview conversation, we propose that teachers should also receive information and

training during pre-service or continuing education regarding appropriate questioning procedures, and the underlying empirical research. It may be possible to deliver this training in an online format. Rheingold, Zajac, and Patton (2012) compared web-based versus face-to-face training for a group of child-care professionals (including teachers) in child abuse prevention. On the whole, participants perceived both formats to be effective. Recently, Brubacher, Powell, Skouteris, and Guadagno (2015) demonstrated that just two to three interactions with an online simulated interview program greatly increased the proportion of open-ended questions used by teachers in a live interview.

## 3. Guidelines for interviews by teachers and other mandated reporting professionals

We begin by describing the phases of an interview in chronological order and the associated recommendations (see Appendix A for a summary). These guidelines are important for ensuring that the interview format and question types used are selected to maximize the likelihood that the child will disclose quality information about the event in question. While the greatest concerns surrounding inappropriate interviewing techniques pertain to the fragility of preschoolers' reports (Bruck & Ceci, 1999), elementary students, adolescents, and adults are also affected by poor questioning, as are interviewees with cognitive and/or communication impairments (Murfett, Powell, & Snow, 2008). Experts recommend using predominantly open-ended questions regardless of interviewee age or the topic of interviews (Snook, Luther, Quinlan, & Milne, 2012; Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014). As such, guidelines concerning questioning techniques are appropriate for teachers and other professionals who work with verbal children at all educational levels, and who may not know where questions about ambiguous circumstances will lead.

In addition to interview phases, we discuss contextual factors such as the timing and location of the interview, and choice of interviewer (i.e., who among the staff should conduct it). These factors may not be under the interviewer's full control and have received less empirical attention, especially with respect to conducting interviews in schools. We also discuss the applicability of our proposed model and the practical challenges faced by school administrators with regard to implementation and training.

As we describe each phase, we provide examples through the use of excerpts from a fictional interview with nine-year-old Brayden. Brayden has been marked absent on the classroom morning attendance roll for four Wednesdays in a row. His parents have not provided a note explaining the absences, and Brayden insisted to Mr. Lopez, his classroom teacher, that he was at school on these days. The Student Welfare Coordinator, Ms. Smith, is interviewing Brayden regarding the absences.

### 3.1. Commencing the interview and building rapport

Many interviewing protocols include a phase in which interviewers spend a few minutes building rapport. Rapport is achieved when an interviewee feels comfortable, relaxed, and experiences a kind of connection with the interviewer (Collins, Lincoln, & Frank, 2002). Interviewer behaviors such as an open seating position (i.e., arms open instead of crossed), occasional eye contact, a warm tone of voice, using the interviewee's name, and providing encouraging feedback for effort (e.g., "I can see you're thinking hard") can promote rapport-building (e.g. Collins et al., 2002; Quas, Wallin, Papini, Lench, & Scullin, 2005). It is very important that feedback is provided *only* for effort and not for the content of what children say (Hershkowitz, 2011). Teachers should not convey urgency or impatience (e.g., by looking at the clock) during rapport building or at any point during the interview.

Rapport-building behaviors extend throughout the interview, but the rapport-building phase includes specific verbal techniques for enhancing children's ability and willingness to report narrative detail. Many forensic interview protocols include a Narrative Practice phase.

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