

## QUICK REFERENCES GUIDELINES

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### INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

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The following is a “Child Interview / Program Protocol” to aid and assist you in consultation(s) with children. The lack of standardized protocols for child interviews, along with the absence of accountability for investigators, has resulted in the frequent contamination of child witnesses. This format is an amalgamation of techniques which recognize the compelling issues and conflicts associated with interviewing children. Its use and incorporation into your repertoire may minimize some of these problems while increasing the value of the information you generate and as a bonus it could possibly enhance the quality of the relationship between you and your young client.

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#### The Five Phases of an Interview

##### 1) The Introduction

Meet the child and accompany them to the quiet area in which you are going to speak. Address them “first” then the adult. Attention should be paid to the child. Say something positive about them such as “How nice you look today”. Be open, enthusiastic, and friendly. During these first few minutes ask them questions involving historical memory, specific events (such as birthdays), and dealings that will spark conversation. It is through this foundation you will be able to build the relationship. Use language appropriate to the child’s age and promote a relaxed atmosphere.

##### 2) Introducing the Purpose of the Interview.

Ask questions about “why” the child thinks they are meeting with you. It is here that you begin to note for signs of “coaching”. Stress to your client the importance of telling the “truth”. Do not assume that because a child may use certain words that they understand what they mean. If there is any question in your mind, ask the child “what” they mean to see if they “understand” what they are actually saying.

##### 3) The “Free Narrative” Phase.

This is the central core of your interview. It is now when you ask them to tell you their “story” in their own way. Look interested and take notes. Show them that you are captivated by what they have to share with you. Do not correct, interrupt, or challenge the child during this phase. This stage may pass quickly, (as older children tend to sometimes say little at first contact) or it may last almost the entire time you spend together but this is clearly the moment when you can document information that is freely offered which may later corroborate or refute collateral information.

##### 4) The Open Questioning Phase.

The purpose of this phase is to allow the child to elaborate about details described during the “Free Narrative Phase”. You may use Open Ended Questions to

encourage the child to provide more information. An “Open Ended Question” is one that cannot be answered with a simple (yes) or (no).

#### 5) The Specific Question Phase.

This is the time when you may ask explicit questions about detail or facets of some aspect of the “fact pattern” that needs clarification. These are the kinds of questions we are most conditioned to and typically ask someone during a routine appointment but it is now when you also compare specific data statements to commentary made earlier during the “Free Narrative Phase” for veracity.

Note: It can be helpful to compare your notes of interviews over a period of time utilizing this format as it allows for a method of categorizing sometimes vague and subtle observations as well as the verbal data you obtain.

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### **What To Do In Difficult Situations?**

When a child will not talk or they are providing you with certain critical information but absolutely no details you may:

- Take a short Break      - Discuss Something Else of Their Interest
- Rephrase / Refocus Questions      - Take a Walk Together
- Go Back to the 6 W's / Who, What, Where, When, Why and How
- Add details to a story that you know are wrong and ask the child if they agree. If they do, then share with them the inconsistency, and discuss “why” this happened.
- Confrontation is a last resort / you risk destroying any rapport you've developed

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Every interview will begin and end differently. Keep good notes and contact with your client. If they call you, get back to them. It means so much and can go a long way to preserving a professional relationship. You are in a unique position and sometimes the only voice of sanity in a chaotic environment.

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This information is provided for you by Santo W. Bentivegna, Ph. D., a Licensed Psychologist in Rochester, NY. Dr. Bentivegna has maintained a private practice for nearly 30 years. Dr. Bentivegna is a member of the American Psychological Association, the American Board of Forensic Examiners, and the American Professional Society for the Abuse of Children. He is also a certified forensic consultant that is trained in counseling and interviewing children embroiled in sexual abuse investigations. Dr. Bentivegna has appeared numerous times in Supreme, Family and Surrogates Court. Dr. Bentivegna has served as an adjunct faculty member with many colleges in Pennsylvania and New York. He has taught in the areas of Abnormal and Forensic Psychology, and Counseling Techniques, and has served as a guest lecturer at numerous seminars, training attorneys for children about issues related to Child Development, Interviewing Techniques, Cross Examination of Experts as well as on topics involving family dysfunction. Dr. Bentivegna may be reached at (585) 288-2420 or by e-mail at [drbentivegna@gmail.com](mailto:drbentivegna@gmail.com).