





January 1994  
Volume 63  
Number 1

United States  
Department of Justice  
Federal Bureau of  
Investigation  
Washington, DC 20535

Louis J. Freeh,  
Director

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The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law. Use of funds for printing this periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (ISSN-0014-5688) is published monthly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 10th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20535. Second-Class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C. 20535.

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# Child Abuse Interviewing Possible Victims

By  
DAVID GULLO



**L**aw enforcement officers often respond to incidents that involve children, including calls that require emergency placement, social service referrals, and criminal investigations. However, with increasing regularity, officers must also respond to calls that involve child sexual abuse.

This raises the question of whether law enforcement officers understand how to interview children effectively when faced with cases of this nature. Clearly, investigators who conduct such interviews must possess special skills. At a minimum, they should know

how to ask questions that are not leading, and they should have a good working knowledge of how to structure an interview.

Most important, however, officers who deal with child abuse cases should have a fundamental understanding of child development. Adults may remember what it was like to be a child, but childhood memories are not enough to understand child behavior. A nationwide child-care facility believes that it takes a well-trained mind to think like a child—interviewers need to learn as much as possible about how children think and develop.

Basic knowledge in the area of child development helps to build a foundation for successful interviews of children. Without this foundation, interviews involving children are likely to be unsuccessful, perhaps even disastrous.

### Child Development

Investigators who understand how children develop can more readily choose appropriate methods to gain information and assess the child's response during the interview process. There are five stages of child development—infancy, early childhood, preschool age, school age, and adolescence.<sup>1</sup>

Interviewers familiar with the various developmental stages can better judge whether the child is likely—at a particular age—to comprehend the questions, as well as whether the child can successfully communicate thoughts and feelings.

For example, investigators who know that children between the ages of 4 and 6 do not generally comprehend such major concepts as time, space, and distance avoid asking such questions as “What time did your daddy touch you?” Instead, they frame their questions around times familiar to children, such as dinner, bedtime, or playtime.

At the same time, while understanding the development of young children is important, investigators should not neglect to educate themselves on the developmental stages of adolescents as well. Interviewers armed with the information that teenagers frequently mask their true feelings with humor or denial can approach the interview by first developing a rapport with them in

order to put them at ease. Teenagers at ease with their interviewers are much more likely to share their experiences and feelings.

### **Child Sexual Behavior**

Obtaining some background information about a child’s sexual behavior is also critical. This type of information helps interviewers to understand why children may respond the way they do.

Generally, questions about sex start as early as 2 years of age. Between the ages of 6 months and 2 years, children handle their genitals as they would their noses or toes. They are exploring and discovering their bodies. From 2 to 5 years of age, normal curiosity prompts children to look at and touch others. Playing “doctor” is not uncommon, and children may masturbate.<sup>2</sup>

After age 6, children seem to know that they should keep sexual activity and curiosity private. Children who continue to touch their genitals or masturbate exces-

sively, ask a lot of sexual questions, are occupied with the bodies of others, or show overt sexual aggression are usually disturbed about something.<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember, however, that while sexual abuse is a possibility in these cases, other problems that cause fear or anxiety may also provoke this type of behavior.

When parents find their children masturbating, they sometimes report this behavior to law enforcement officers. The parents, believing that this behavior is abnormal, suspect that the child has been molested. It is up to police interviewers to rule out the possibility of sexual abuse.

Officers who have some knowledge of child sexual behavior can ask the children appropriate questions that are understandable and nonthreatening, but are not accusatory. They can also help parents to understand the behavior of their children.

### **Emotional Style**

Another factor that impacts the manner in which officers approach an interview is the emotional style exhibited by the child. Some children are outgoing and verbal (expressive), while others are timid and nonverbal (controlled).<sup>4</sup> Expressive children usually speak with ease on a range of topics. At times, they may even be too talkative. Controlled children, on the other hand, are quiet and usually do not show their feelings. In addition, they often avoid eye contact and keep their heads or bodies turned away from interviewers.

Investigators should attempt to identify the child’s emotional style prior to the interview. Parents and



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## Child Development Stages

### Infancy (Birth to 2 years old)

Children in this age group are unable to form concepts, are self-centered, and just learning to trust others.

### Early Childhood (2 to 4 years old)

During this timespan, children develop basic language skills. They engage in imaginative behavior, gather information from sense and environment, and are learning independence.

### Preschool Age (4 to 6 years old)

During the preschool years, language becomes the primary mode of communication for children. During this time, however, they still do not understand abstract concepts; therefore, their verbal skills may imply more comprehension than they actually possess. They memorize without comprehension, and their memories are spotty. They can distinguish some fact from fantasy and are capable of lying to get out of a problem situation.

### School Age (6 to 11 years old)

During this timespan, children continue to master the language. They develop group loyalty, usually with members of their own gender, and they seldom lie about major issues.

### Adolescence (12 to 18 years old)

Adolescents undergo profound physical and emotional changes during this time period. They may have minimal rapport with adults, at least outwardly, and they often question the values and beliefs they have been taught.

They may be extremely shy in some settings, while very responsive and outgoing in others. They are capable of deception and manipulation, and an outward show of bravado or hostility often covers feelings of shyness and inferiority.

Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, *Interviewing Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation*, 1987.

teachers often make good sources for this type of information. However, if children exhibit uncharacteristic emotional styles, interviewers should not assume that they have been abused. Instead, they should attempt to determine why their emotional style has changed and then include this information in a written interview report.

### Questioning Victims

In addition to understanding child development, child sexuality, and the different emotional styles of

children, investigators who interview children regarding abuse also need to know the various types of questions they can ask. They should be aware that this important factor can impact on the final result of the interview.

Questioning victims is an integral part of child abuse investigations. Proper techniques facilitate the child's response, but do not suggest a particular one. This, in turn, leads to disclosure of the facts. The primary goal of the questioning is to obtain untainted information from

the child that prosecutors can use in court proceedings.

Five common types of questions exist—general, focused, multiple choice, yes or no, and leading.<sup>5</sup> Investigators who interview children regarding abuse should be aware of what types of questions gain information from children most effectively. They should attempt to stay within the framework of open-ended, general, or focused questions.

If interviewers try several of these types of questions without

obtaining results, they should stop the interview and schedule a second meeting with the child. A change in emotional circumstances may make the child feel more comfortable speaking about the incident.<sup>6</sup>

### General Questions

General questions inquire in a nonspecific manner about the child's state of mind or specific circumstances. Examples might include how the child has been feeling lately or why the child is seeing the interviewer. While these questions may be appropriate for adults, they are less likely to evoke effective responses from children, who generally require more specific information. When asked why they are meeting with the interviewer, children often respond "I do not know" or "I forgot."

### Focused Questions

Focused questions require that children offer more information as a response. An example of a focused question would be, "What secrets do you have with your dad?" This type of question identifies a specific person, and therefore, limits the discussion.

### Multiple-Choice Questions

Investigators should use multiple choice questions with children who have difficulty describing their abuse. However, interviewers should first test the child's response pattern to multiple-choice questions with nonessential questions. Some children respond to only the last choice they hear. By asking a short series of multiple-choice questions, the interviewer can establish wheth-

er the child responds honestly or to the same choice each time.

Another good indicator of whether children are being open and honest is when they use their own words to respond to a multiple-choice question. For example, when asked whether they were wearing day clothes or night clothes, they may describe their attire in detail, including color, style, etc.

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### Yes or No Questions

Yes or no questions are generally ineffective when used in interviews with children. An exception to this would be to ask a general question requiring a yes or no answer, followed by a question that requires more specific information. An example would be to ask about whether a specific act of abuse occurred. If the answer is yes, the interviewer should ask the child who committed the abuse.

### Leading Questions

Leading questions are inappropriate for interviews of children. Children are easily led, and in the majority of circumstances, their answers will reflect the way the inter-

viewer slants the question. For instance, if interviewers indicate who they believe committed the abuse, the children will usually sustain this belief.

### Conclusion

It is critical that investigators who must interview children learn as much as possible about child behavior. Most law enforcement regional training centers offer classes in how to interview children to officers who obtain positions that require this skill. Those who have a basic foundation in this area can interview children more effectively because they are better equipped to choose appropriate methods for gaining information.

The number of reported child abuse cases in the United States continues to grow. Members of the law enforcement community must prepare to meet this growing challenge. They can do this by developing a basic knowledge of child development and behavior. Armed with this valuable knowledge, officers can gain critical information from children and contribute to the successful prosecution of these serious cases. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Interviewing Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation*, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Arlington, Virginia, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Loraine Stern, M.D., "Your Child's Health, Children and Sex," *Woman's Day*, August 1990.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ann Wolbert Burgess, R.N., D.N.Sc., "Counseling Young Victims," *Sexual Assault of Children and Adolescents* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath Co., 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Coulborn Faller, M.S., Ph.D., *Child Sexual Abuse: An Interdisciplinary Manual for the Diagnosis, Case Management, and Treatment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*