

## INTERVIEWS II: THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

### 7. INTERVIEWING CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

**Note: Many of the techniques listed in this research can be used by child welfare workers to interview children to assess the child's safety and well-being. This should not be confused with an ability to use these as therapy or to diagnosis a child.**

#### 7.1. Issues

A number of issues arise when evaluators interview children. This section focuses on the uniqueness of interviewing children for these evaluations, emphasizing the important developmental considerations in planning the child interview, and delineating some age appropriate interviewing techniques. When working with children, most clinicians use a play setting because it is recognized that play allows children to more clearly express what they know and feel. Most children are not able to use language to communicate their feelings as effectively as adults. The first step in interviewing children is getting clarity about your purpose. It is recommended that you make a list of any possible biases that you may have regarding the issues involved in the child's life. By being aware of what you know and feel about the situation prior to starting interviews, you can make an effort to keep the biases from tainting your judgment. Then determine what you need to learn from individuals so that you can begin a framework for your questions. Parental interviews should provide information about the child's history as well as clarify each parent's view of the child. It is best to view children within a framework of total life experience. If possible, it helps to know the social, physical, and cultural aspects of the child's life. This information will assist you in planning an interview for this particular child and in setting your goals as an evaluator. It is important to structure the interview to obtain the necessary information and provide a situation in which the child can most comfortably be self-revealing. There can be a feeling of free play, combined with your suggestions for structured play. You can begin the interview by asking specific questions to which the child already knows the answers. This will reduce the child's anxiety level. Beginning questions can be in regards to the child's school, age, etc. As the child begins exploring, you can then begin to ask the child to tell you some things about the child's life.

Some evaluators always conduct children's interviews in their home. A home visit allows you an opportunity to enter that particular child's world and learn about the child's home and play environment. When doing a home visit, you may want to take certain items to use in the interview. The items depend on the age of the child and on the information you are trying to elicit. Try to include drawing paper (large and small), felt pens, crayons, puppets, games, and a deck of cards. After the initial greetings with the family, you may ask the child to show you the child's bedroom and play area and then proceed with the interview in a room that is separate from the rest of the family. Before leaving the home, observe the child with the family and engage them in some interactive family activity. In the interview, it is preferable to have a setting that draws the child's interest. Play materials need to be selected which the child can relate to and bring forth fantasies, dialogues, and material relevant to the evaluation. Too many toys can over stimulate a child or distract the child from engaging in any structured play. Young children are most apt to think logically in situations that contain materials, behaviors, and motivations that are familiar and meaningful to them. It often helps to bring items that are currently popular with kids.

It is difficult to do an entire interview without asking any questions. It is more effective to use open ended, or indirect questions. Research shows that children provide more accurate information when they are freely narrating, rather than when they are being asked direct questions. Open ended questions allow children to expand on their ideas and give us a better sense of their thinking. Asking children to describe their home, their parents, or what they enjoy doing, allows them the freedom to elaborate as they choose. Indirect questions provide a margin of safety for the child. If children are asked questions such as, "Some kids believe all boys should live with their Dads, what do you think?" or "Why would it be a good idea if the judge decided\_," then they have an opportunity to comment, without feeling that they are directly revealing their choice. As evaluators, we have to try to find indirect ways to help the child share important information. If a child avoids an issue, then it may be necessary to try another approach. As an evaluator, you should encourage children to ask questions, and ask them to share whatever they would like about themselves or their family. Children enjoy having a sense of control over what they will be doing and saying.

Another issue to consider in interviewing children for an evaluation is confidentiality. An idea is to ask the children if there is anything they've said during the interview that they do not want their parents to know. Some courts have guidelines which state that children are to be informed that the information they provide will not be confidential. Evaluators need to comply with their court, or if

their court does not offer any guidance, reach a decision of their own. At the end of the interview you may want to ask the child if there is anything they do or do not want you to tell their parents or the judge.

## **7.2. Developmental Stages and Age Appropriate Interviewing Techniques**

At the beginning of the interview, it is important for you to assess the child's developmental level and to frame the interview so that age appropriate interview techniques are used. It is important not to confuse chronological age with normal developmental stages. A child's developmental age may not match what may be expected for the child's chronological age. You need to integrate your knowledge of child development with your knowledge of the child's sense of time, temperament, and language abilities. Some of this information may be obtained through interviews with the parents, either through questionnaires completed by the parents, consultations with school teachers, or your own observations. Once you have a sense of the child, it becomes easier to understand the child's thinking. What the child says and does can best be interpreted by understanding the child's developing cognitive abilities and emotional state of mind. When formulating questions to ask a child, it is important that the questions be appropriate for the developmental level of the child. The following developmental stages address some of the developmental considerations which can be useful in planning an interview with a child.

During the initial part of the interview, you need to focus on helping the child feel comfortable and relaxed, and explain to the child why the interview is taking place. Initially, let the child explore and move towards getting the child to share something about the child's self. Afterwards, share with the child your role in the process using drawings or the dry erase board. Use the strategy to depict your meeting with the child's parents and to explain the importance of getting to know the child since you are trying to help the parents plan for the necessary changes in their lives. You can also encourage the child to ask you any questions.

Use the task of having the child draw themselves to provide an indicator of the child's developmental level and to get a sense of the child's perception of self. After the child completes the drawing, ask the child to give you some words that tell you what this child is like, thinking, or feeling. If this is a young child, write the words on the child's picture or, if the child is older, ask the child to write the words which gives you an idea of writing and spelling skills.

When interviewing children, it is important to remember that what you observe may raise questions about the child and the child's life, but you must be cautious not to misinterpret their play or take their words literally. Do not want reach a conclusion based on any one piece of information; it is best to use play to assist in formulating a hypothesis which can then be further explored. Information that emerges in play needs to be corroborated by other sources, such as further observation of the child during play techniques, teacher consults, or parental, sibling, and other relative interviews. Observe the affective tone of the play and the context in which the affect occurs.

### **Infants**

Since we cannot interview infants, the following process is suggested: directly observe the child. Watch the child while playing, or generally relating to the parent, in order to gain a sense of the child's temperament. Observe the infant's development, and view the infant's reactions to a stranger (the evaluator). Note whether or not the baby makes eye contact as some are gaze avoidant. Ask yourself: What is this baby's affect? Is the baby dour? Does the baby show apathy? Does the baby seem comfortable with the parent? Is this a baby with whom anyone could be happy? Assess the parent child interaction. It is important to note how the parent relates to the child. Note whether the parent appears to be calm, gentle, relaxed, and confident about parenting, or if the parent is anxious, easily frustrated, inattentive, indifferent, or detached. Note what the parent does with the baby and what the parent communicates to the child through looks, touches, and gestures. One diagnostic tool you might use is a colorful object (for example, a red unsharpened pencil) placed between you and the parent holding the child. Observe the child's and parent's responses. Does the baby move towards the object? Does the parent restrain the child, or move the object away or towards the child? After the observation, ask the parent for their view of the observation. Was this typical behavior for the child, or was it atypical. Has the child been sick? Did the child have a difficult night? This interview with the infant and parent will hopefully provide you with a sense of how secure this child feels and whether or not the baby is wary, not very responsive, not very flexible, and, therefore, not very adaptable, to changing situations. You may also get a sense of whether the parent provides the child with appropriate stimuli, enhances the security of the child, and meets the child's needs.

## **2 to 5 Year Olds**

With this age group, it often works best to simply have a table with play figures (small people and animals, with small houses, cars, etc., such as Fisher-Price's, Play Family) and invite the child to play. This can be done with the child alone and then with each parent to see if certain themes emerge in the child's play or if these themes differ in each situation. Dialogue with the child needs to fit the child's developmental level. The following are some suggestions which have been found to be effective:

1. When possible, use short and simple sentences that incorporate the child's terms. If you are unfamiliar with the child's terms, ask the child: "What do you call \_?" or "Tell me about \_."
2. Use names rather than pronouns (for example, "Uncle Sam", rather than "he").
3. Rephrase a question that a child does not understand rather than repeating it (if you repeat the question the child may think they gave the wrong answer the first time and change their answer).
4. Avoid asking questions involving time.

Although some 2 and 3 year olds may not have very good verbal skills, recreating a situation or event often helps to stimulate their memory. The following are examples of structured play which can bring forth important information about who is central to the child's life as well as the child's feelings about a particular person. Young children can often be engaged in doll house play and play with animals (stuffed or puppets) where specific situations can be played out. Even if they are not very verbal, the children can be asked to place the play figures where they think they belong. They may also respond to, "Please show me what happens when Dad comes to pick you up and you leave Mom." Some kids will have the Mom wave good-bye as the child leaves. One child interviewed had the Mom figure grab the child saying, "Mama said, 'Don't go, Emily, don't go stay with Mommy.'" It is difficult to know whether the child was projecting her own feelings of resistance in going with Dad or if she was mimicking her Mom. This, however, provides you with a clue to explore further.

## **6 to 9 Year Olds**

The younger children in this age group respond well to some of these techniques: doll house play, puppet shows, tea parties, car/airplane scenes, telephone game, and reading books. With this age group, it helps when trying to determine if the

child has understood a question, to ask the child to repeat what you have said rather than asking, "Do you understand?" As evaluators, we have a tendency to ask questions repeatedly. Try not to follow every answer with another question. Instead, either comment, ask the child to elaborate, or simply acknowledge the child's response. Learning about a child's routines affords you an opportunity to refer to certain activities that may help a child recall particular events that you may need to learn more about.

### **10 to 13 Year Olds**

Many of the previously mentioned games are suitable for this age group. The most useful games are a variation of hangman. For this, ask the child to think of a word that tells you how they feel about for example, living with Dad, the way their parents get along, the amount of time they spend with Mom/Dad. The logical thinking for this group is advanced, so try to challenge them in some way. After familiarizing yourself with the child, engage them in the following, "I'm going to guess a few things about your life. I hope you'll tell me when I've guessed right or wrong." Then proceed with something such as: "I'm going to guess that you like to go over to your Dad's because you don't get along with your stepbrother. Am I right?" Often try to say something that you know is wrong, so that the child will elaborate and correct me. They love to prove you wrong.

### **Teens**

Many of you have experienced teens who are angry, hostile, and defensive. Teens are not usually very responsive to doing drawings or playing games, so the interview needs to be very carefully framed. Issues of confidentiality may arise, and the teens need to understand that you will be writing a report that only the judge will read. As with younger children, the major focus during the interview needs to be the consideration of the teen's mental health. The needs and conflicts of the teen are very important. Some adolescents withdraw from the family to protect themselves from pain, and may be very resistant to any questioning. In most cases, the first part of the interview should focus on encouraging the teen to talk about issues central to the child's life which are separate from the divorce, such as dating, friends, classes, sports, and extracurricular activities. These are a few other questions which may elicit discussion with a teen:

- Ask them about what they think is going on with their family.

- You might say, "I heard\_ happened. What was that like for you?" "Your Mom/Dad already told me that you want. Will you tell me how he/she knows this?"
- Ask the teen to tell you about their earliest memory.
- Ask them what has changed for them since the parents separated.

Evaluate teens carefully. Try to distinguish between normal adolescent independence and withdrawal, and what may be depression or intense anger related to a separation/divorce. The answers may be evident when there is an absence of empathy or splitting, such as when the teen has a strong alliance with one parent and rejects the other.

### **Overall Guidelines for Interviewing Children**

1. Do no harm to any child; avoid questions, attitudes or comments that are judgmental, insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.
2. Do not discriminate in choosing children to interview because of sex, race, age, religion, status, educational background or physical abilities.
3. No staging: Do not ask children to tell a story or take an action that is not part of their own history.
4. Ensure that the child or guardian knows they are talking with a reporter. Explain the purpose of the interview and its intended use.
5. Obtain permission from the child and his or her guardian for all interviews, videotaping and, when possible, for documentary photographs. When possible and appropriate, this permission should be in writing. Permission must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts.
6. Pay attention to where and how the child is interviewed. Limit the number of interviewers and photographers. Try to make certain that children are comfortable and able to tell their story without outside pressure, including from the interviewer. In film, video and radio interviews, consider what the choice of visual or audio background might imply about the child and her or his life and story. Ensure that the child would not be endangered or

adversely affected by showing their home, community or general whereabouts.

### **7.3. Synthesizing the Information**

After compiling data about the child you are evaluating, the painstaking task of putting together what you've learned about the child from others and your own interviews begins. The more clues you have, the better you will understand the child. It is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have these pieces and you have to put them together to create a picture that is clear enough to allow you to formulate a recommendation. Sometimes, however, there are contradictory clues or pieces that don't fit. It is very important not to reach a conclusion prematurely or to allow any one piece of information to influence your thinking before you corroborate it through other sources. As an evaluator, you need to carefully sift through the information with an awareness of your own biases or counter transference issues. It is possible to have a certain reaction to a parent which could prompt you to interpret the child's play in a way that is favorable or not favorable to one parent or the other. You need to question what you see, hear, and experience in the interviews with the child. For example, the expression of a child's dislike for one parent might represent;

- 1) an accurate reflection of the child's feeling towards a parent that is not likable,
  - 2) a parent who has not developed a close connection with the child,
  - 3) a child who is projecting one parent's feelings towards the other parent,
  - 4) a child who has been brainwashed with negatives about the other parent,
- or,
- 5) a child who feels abandoned by that parent.

Should a child's repeated expression of a parental preference in the interviews be the most important factor to consider? The question needs to be understood in the context of the particular family. It is necessary to understand why it is so important for the child to communicate to you, in a variety of ways, their parental preference. Before summarizing your conclusions, think about the jigsaw puzzle again. Ask yourself if the pieces really fit or if you might be trying to make certain pieces fit. Consider the many possible reasons for the behavior you have observed. Sometimes all the pieces do not fit and you need more information. Our task, as evaluators, is to put together a picture that is as accurate as possible, using the resources which are most helpful to us.