

## FEATURE ARTICLE: INITIAL INTERVIEWS (printed with permission from Greg Moffat)

Excerpt from Gregory K. Moffatt, Ph.D. (2004). **"Wounded Innocents and Fallen Angels: Child Abuse and Child Aggression."** Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 121-124.

Initial interviews with a traumatized child require skill and training. Untrained interviewers can easily re-traumatize children, generating even more mistrust than they already are experiencing, or they can present leading questions or ideas that complicate future prosecution of perpetrators. A child's memory can be distorted by suggestions or ideas that the interviewer presents. Therefore, the therapist, police officer, social worker, or parent must be careful not to put any ideas in the child's head. I once was involved in a case where a father was accused of molesting his daughter. In the initial investigation, the investigating social worker asked the child, "Where did your father touch you?" When a child is asked a leading question like this, she assumes her father did touch her, even if he didn't. Therefore, she will answer the question as if he had touched her. In this interview, the child said, "On my body." Again, the social worker asked an inappropriate and leading question when she probed further. "Where on your body? Did he touch you here or here?" she said, pointing to her buttocks and breasts. Again, children assume adults know that something has happened, even if it did not. Therefore, the child can assume from a question like this that the correct answer is that the father must have touched her one of these two places. In this case, the child answered, "Here," pointing to her buttocks. The social worker continued asking leading questions and mangled the interview so terribly that prosecution of the father was impossible. I believe that the father did, in fact, molest the child, but because the interview was so tainted, the district attorney believed a conviction was impossible. Therefore, no case was

brought against the father. Once a child's idea of what has occurred is skewed by an interview, it is almost impossible to discover what really happened. After an interview like the one conducted by this social worker, a therapist, even using appropriate interview techniques, cannot be 100% confident that any indication of abuse is resultant from actual abuse or from ideas presented to the child during the initial interview. Inappropriate interview techniques can lead to the perpetrator being exonerated in court. Equally troubling is the fact that inappropriate interview techniques can also lead to innocent men and women landing in jail, their careers, reputations, and lives destroyed. The McMartin Preschool in California and the Little Rascals Day Care Center in Edenton, North Carolina are cases where it appears this very thing occurred. In 1983, parents accused Raymond Buckey, his grandmother, and several other family members, of ritualistically abusing their children at the McMartin Preschool even though there was little evidence that anything had occurred. Eventually, panic led to more than 400 interviews with children from the preschool and an alleged 369 cases of satanic ritual abuse. Accusations included children being forced to eat fecal material and human flesh, the dismemberment of corpses, and infant sacrifice. Several defendants were either acquitted, had charges eventually either dropped or reduced, or juries deadlocked on decisions. In the Little Rascals case, seven defendants were accused of conspiring to molest almost 30 children. One child claimed to have been cooked in a microwave oven, another said the day care owner regularly shot babies, and another said a child was fed to a shark. Two defendants were convicted, but an appeals court later overturned those convictions. Charges against other defendants were either reduced or dropped all together. What seems clear in both of these cases

is that the children's testimony was so tainted by well-intentioned parents, prosecutors, and overzealous therapists that what, if anything, happened will probably never be known.

As an interviewer begins his or her first contact with the child, the most important goal is establishing a relationship with the child. If the child does not trust the interviewer, he will not engage in open discussion about the traumatic event. If the child fears the interviewer is mad at him or that the child is in trouble, it will be much more difficult to elicit information from the child. A child who trusts his therapist will be more relaxed and information presented during the interview will be more credible.

In order to protect the possibility of prosecution of a child abuser, initial interviews should involve nondirective techniques. Closed-ended questions, those that can be answered in a single word like "yes" or "no," are problematic for three reasons. When an adult asks a child a closed-ended question, the child assumes he is supposed to know the answer to the question. Therefore, he will select one of the two options. For example, suppose a child has not been inappropriately touched, but the interviewer asks the child, "Did the man touch you here or here?" pointing to the child's groin and bottom. The child may easily believe that the "correct" answer is one of those two choices rather than the correct answer, "neither." A second problem with closed-ended questions is that it gives the child an easy way out of the conversation. Answering with a simple "yes" or "no" is much easier than elaborating, which would provide more information to the interviewer. Finally, closed-ended questions are interrogative and give the child the impression that he is in trouble, making it less likely that the child will feel comfortable opening up to the interviewer.

Using open-ended interview techniques avoids these problems. They are not leading, they foster rapport, and they encourage the child to elaborate on his experience. When interviewing a child for the first time, I might not ask any questions at all. I use pencil, paper, and crayons and ask the child to draw a picture of a person or of the child's family. How a child draws him/her self and other family members, colors the child uses, and the juxtaposition of those members tell me a great deal or I may ask the child to draw a picture of a house and of a tree. This simple "tree/house/person" technique and is widely used in play therapy. I might let the child play with dolls, doll houses, Play Dough, a sand tray and sand toys, or a host of other toys in my therapy room. Even if I wanted to elicit information about something the child was drawing, I still would not have to ask any direct questions. If the child's drawing, for example, showed a child who was crying, a statement like, "This child looks sad. I wonder why she is crying" will elicit elaboration from the child. Unlike the social worker's questions that I described above, this statement is only responding to what the child has already said through the drawing. This comment on the drawing invites the child to elaborate, but does not provide an answer to the question.

Also important in initial interviews is an evaluation of the child's language capacity and memory skills. Memory and language limitations will determine the interview approach as well as interpretation of information gleaned from the interview. Once rapport has been established with the child and an initial assessment has been completed, goals for therapy can then be established. Goals for therapy differ depending on the child's needs, level of and response to trauma, and the role, if any, that the child will play in the prosecution of a perpetrator. A child who will be

testifying in court will have different therapeutic goals than a child who was traumatized and whose perpetrator is unidentified. Armed with this information, the therapist, child, and the parent can begin the process of healing. This approach takes longer than directive interviews, but the information gathered from a child using nondirective techniques is far more reliable than directive interviews.