The National Children's Advocacy Center

Research-to-Practice Summaries

Narrative Practice (What is it and Why is it Important?)

A Research-to-Practice Summary

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by

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Narrative Practice (What is it and Why is it Important?)

A forensic interview is a unique and often taxing conversation for a child, who has little experience in providing detailed information to an uninformed and unknown adult. More often, children have opportunities to talk with familiar adults who have either partial or extensive knowledge of the topic under discussion and who share some contexts of the child's life (family, school, church, ball team, etc.) This informed conversational partner, often unknowingly, fills in (accurately or inaccurately) many of the gaps in the information provided by the child.

Additionally, the child and the adult may have similar conversational styles and share definitions of words or phrases, as well as an unspoken understanding of appropriate topics of conversation between children and adults. The structure of a forensic conversation differs dramatically from everyday conversational norms and social rules of communication. Consequently, children face a double challenge in the forensic interview. They are not only asked to talk about topics that are anxiety-provoking, secret, embarrassing, or poorly understood; but children are required to engage in a conversation whose structure and requirements are demanding, and for which the outcomes are high.

While all interview protocols recommend a rapport-building phase, they do not reflect consensus about the most effective way to develop rapport. A substantial body of research demonstrates that emphasizing a narrative practice approach in the early stage of the interview increased children's informative responses to open-ended prompts in the substantive portion of the interview. Given a more narrative practice approach, the children additionally, provided more details without interviewers having to resort to more direct or leading prompts (Hershkowitz, 2009; Lamb et al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Sternberg et al., 1997).

The benefits from the narrative practice in the rapport-building session are numerous.

1. Rather than the interviewer relating personal information or chatting about topics considered to be child friendly, the child does the talking in the narrative practice

approach. The interviewer demonstrates a sincere interest in the child's day-to-day activities and establishes her/himself as a good listener. Reflection of the child's statements, follow-up prompts, request for clarification, and attentive listening increases rapport with most children.

2. The child is immediately acknowledged as the expert or the "holder of the information." This is an unfamiliar conversation pattern for most child-adult conversations and may be initially puzzling to some children. The interviewer's goal is to establish a new conversational pattern. Informing the child about the rules or guidelines for the interview, along with providing the opportunity to implement those guidelines, further informs the child about the different conversational flow or "how we talk about things in this room."

3. Many children do not understand how to give a narrative description about a well-known recent event. By prompting the child to elaborate or further describe key elements of their initial skeletal description, many children begin to understand what the interviewer means when he/she says, "Start at the beginning and tell me everything." The child's ability and confidence in providing detailed description increase.

4. Even with a structured opportunity to expand their narrative description, children will vary widely in their ability to do so. This variation comes from their developmental stage, the narrative style of the child's home and culture, the child's previous experiences with talking to adult or authority figures, their confidence and temperament, and the child's exposure to traumatic events. Through narrative practice, the interviewer has an opportunity to establish a baseline of linguistic functioning for each individual child and to develop some working hypotheses about how to question this child to obtain the best quality and quantity of information.

5. Developmental screening of the child's cognitive abilities and vocabulary is a goal of the early stage of the forensic interview. In the past, interviewers have often "tested" the child's understanding of words and concepts by employing such tasks as asking the child to count objects or name colors, days of the week, or months of the year. Children might be asked to show their understanding of prepositions through placement of an object, to name the anatomical parts of the body on a drawing or a doll, or demonstrate an understanding of time or sequence.

   Two potential problems arise from this approach. Lengthy assessments can consume time and too much of the child's energy, while also falling into a testing

and "right/wrong answer" style of interaction. Of more importance is the danger that children will be bombarded with a series of disconnected and specific questions about hypothetical situations that either test rote/rehearsed memory or provides contextual clues (pictures, objects, etc.) that influence the child's responses. The narrative practice approach provides opportunity for the child to demonstrate skills (such as sequencing) and incorporate concepts (such as "inside" or "on the top of") into a narrative, giving the interviewer a more accurate picture of the child's true developmental level and abilities (Poole & Lamb, 1998).

6. Finally, the interviewer has the opportunity to learn about the question formats that elicit the most narrative from the child. Some children, particularly older latency age children and adolescents, are able to respond to instructions such as "Start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened and don't leave anything out" and "what happened next?" However, younger children may be overwhelmed by such a broad invitational prompt and may do better when "wh" narrative prompts are used (i.e. "what kind of things did you do at the zoo" and "what did you see at the zoo?") as opposed to "tell me everything about the zoo." The interviewer's goal in the substantive part of the interview is to tap free-recall memory using the most effective prompts for this child, saving more specific or direct questions for later.

Once we accept the rationale for including a narrative practice component, our attention shifts to the "how-to's". Assisting children in providing more narrative description calls for a change in interviewer approach and habits. Many interviewers, unfortunately, ask one or two open prompts and when the child does not answer with fully developed narrative responses, make assumptions about the child's abilities and move on to more direct questions, which leads to a series of short conversations about a wide variety of topics. In the narrative practice approach, the interviewer is directed to request a level of detail and explanation regarding a topic chosen for narrative practice with the same degree of interest they will use when addressing allegation topics. This provides the child an opportunity to practice a forensic conversation about a non-forensic topic.

For the narrative practice approach, the interviewer should select a topic that will be used for practice. An appropriate topic can be solicited from the child's caregiver or might arise as the interviewer is asking the child about favorite activities or in response to a prompt such as "tell me some things about yourself" or "what have you been doing this summer (or other appropriate time segment)." Once a practice topic has been selected, the interviewer asks the child to "tell me all about…." Children from high-narrative families may give elaborate narrative descriptions; but most will supply a relatively skeletal description of the activity or simply reply with a single statement such

as "it was fun." At this point, the interviewer selects a word or phrase (or perhaps a series of words or phrases if the child has been more descriptive) from the child's statements and ask for further elaboration or explanation. The interviewer can focus on an object, a person, the location, details of the activity, or a particular segment of time. The interview can focus on sensorial details, request clarification, or ask for additional explanation much as he/she will do once the child is discussing the substantive topic(s). It is the interviewer's responsibility to tease out details or elements provided by the child and to craft a follow-up open or "wh" question that encourages the child to talk further as the child does not understand what parts of the description are missing.

Children may be requested to describe activities from script memory (when I go swimming) or from episodic memory (the last time that I went swimming). Preschoolers do better with describing events from script memory; but latency age children and adolescents often can focus on a singular episode of a frequent activity. Assessing the child's ability to discriminate between what usually happens and what occurred on a particular occasion may be of forensic significance in understanding abuse focused descriptions. Ideally, the interviewer and child have an opportunity to practice two narratives (one pulling from script memory and one focusing on a recent salient event.)

This is an unusual style of conversation for the interviewer as well as the child; but when carefully implemented can change the conversational pattern and prepare both partners more effectively for discussion of the substantive topic(s).

References

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