

Asking the tough questions: a guide to ethical practices in interviewing young children

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This paper discusses challenging features of interviewing young children for a range of purposes. Research with young children is discussed as well as other forms of interviewing by practitioners in a range of fields. Processes in establishing the interview purpose include defining some ground rules for the young client, managing the physical setting for the interview and examining the complex nature of confidentiality and consent in interviewing young children. In terms of interviewing style, the emphasis is on encouraging the young child's free narrative within an ethical context using a range of empathic response cues to promote this. Age-appropriate projective techniques, including art work and the use of dolls and puppets, are examined for their value in managing interviews and research with young children although cautions are expressed about interpreting findings from these.

Keywords: Interview skills; Young children; Ethical processes; Projective techniques

Introduction

Practitioners working in a variety of settings, as teachers, school guidance officers, social workers and counsellors, might find part of their work entails interviewing children about aspects of their experiences, their relationships with other children and their families. Those conducting research may also find it necessary to interview children. Whatever the understood aim of the interview, it is possible that discussion with a child may uncover information related to the child's safety, requiring particular care and attention as it is in this area that many unethical practices have occurred, especially in interpreting the child's story. Within this article, discussion of child protection matters emerges in reference to various aspects of managing an interview although it is not intended to be a central focus. The article begins with an analysis of basic processes for establishing circumstances to ensure the interview is

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child-focused, including planning the interview structure and managing the physical setting. Secondly, in getting an interview underway, processes related to sharing the purpose, establishing some ground rules and dealing with issues about confidentiality and consent are reviewed. The third area of focus concerns the facilitation of the child's free narrative by employing a range of processes to maximise the child's comfort as well as the veracity of the information elicited. Acknowledgement of the child's development stage and the use of age-appropriate practices also forms part of the article's focus, especially in reference to the use of projective techniques which are described within some cautions about their use and interpretation.

Establishing conditions for a child-focused interview

Whatever the purposes in interviewing a child, it is important that interviewers think about preparatory processes well before encountering the young client. Aspects of this thoughtful approach to an interview hold true for all kinds of clients, but these are especially pertinent for working with children where it is important that the interviewing approach is child-focused. If the child is young, the beginning of the interview is challenging and with very young children the parents may wish to be present, perhaps posing additional problems in settling the child.

Preparing the interview structure

Being well organised is important in working with young children. It might be advisable to have a list of prompts related to points of focus to act as 'possible lines of enquiry' as is suggested by Wilson and Powell (2001, p. 27). Advance preparation is especially important in the difficult area of interviewing a young child about possible sexual abuse. In this area of focus there may be particular legal points with which the interviewer is obliged to deal and which may have relevance later on in a court of law. It might also mean the interview needs to be videotaped and that for this or other reasons, the parent's consent must be sought, as discussed further on.

If it is intended to focus the child on some particular issues, then any prompts employed to do so must be expressed in very plain language—the simpler the better for the younger child. De Jong and Berg (2002, p. 181) advise the use of what they term 'everyday language' and the avoidance of 'large words that seem to talk down to the child'. However, because it is never known just what the child will say or wish to focus on, any list of prompts need to be limited to basic structures to guide the interviewer. Wilson and Powell (2001) caution the interviewer about seeing these as being asked directly of the child. Rather they should be seen as a guide, to assist the interviewer to estimate the progress over intended issues.

Managing the physical setting

Preparing the room in which the interview is to take place is important for all clients but is particularly relevant when the client or subject is a child. Wilson and Powell

(2001) refer to the size difference between young children and adult interviewers and stress that the furniture should minimise this. This does not mean having children sit in adult-proportioned chairs which are too high for them in an effort to bring them up to the interviewer's level, as this usually means they cannot put their feet on the floor. Dangling feet in mid-air is uncomfortable for children—and for short adults too! Obtain or arrange furniture that enables both worker and child to sit on an equal level. This may mean both sitting on the floor, on cushions or on two child-sized chairs if this is feasible. As well, it is advisable to avoid sitting behind a desk as this may remind children of authority figures in their life and discourage their trust and free narrative.

Other objects in the room, such as photographs, toys and books, need to be analysed for their impression on the child. Thompson and Rudolph (2000) warn against having unnecessary clutter and things that are visually or audibly distracting (brightly coloured toys that make noises, a loudly ticking clock and so on) especially for young children who are restless or seem unable to concentrate. Wilson and Powell (2001) suggest the considered use of toys and dolls but note their distracting nature in some situations and recommend their use be carefully matched to the purposes of the interview and the child's age. For example, Wilson and Powell (2001) suggest that the child needs to be six or seven to see dolls as representational of self and for these to facilitate the child's free narrative about life events. The interview room should not be sterile, however, and Thompson and Rudolph (2000) suggest having a soft, comfortable floor covering, pillows and cuddly toys around, especially for younger children. Even live pets such as a gentle, friendly dog, cat or rabbit can be employed to help ease tension at the beginning of the interview but only if it can be established in advance that the child is not allergic to and has no phobias about these pet animals.

Managing other aspects of the initial encounter

To get the interview started, some procedural processes may need attention including gaining a sense of shared purpose, establishing ground rules to help the young client know a little about what to expect, and managing the consent process. In all interviews involving children it is helpful to spend time establishing some basis for the work together. This may provide assurance to the young person about the intentions of the practitioner or researcher and guidance about what is expected of them.

Sharing the purpose of the interview

It is often the case that young children have limited understanding about the reasons for their involvement in the interview process. When there are special constraints, such as the child's very young age, it is important to consider how to describe the interview purpose so as to provide the best understanding for the child. Sometimes this will focus on explaining aspects of the process to a very young child as in, 'We are going to look at this book together and talk about it' or 'We are going to talk about school and I am going to try to listen to you very hard'.

It is important to recognise that some children may feel quite uncertain about being involved in an interview. Most young children lack experience in being interviewed and Thompson and Randolph (2000, pp. 32–35) also note that sometimes ‘parents and teachers may have given [children] misinformation that could result in mistrust’ of the person conducting the interview. Thompson and Randolph (2000) advocate a range of processes to gently overcome the child’s fear about the process, including explaining the interview purpose in child-accessible language. Just what is said will vary according to the age of the child, but in general it is important to have a child-friendly setting for the interview, to spend some time developing rapport and to use simple and clear language in explaining things to the child.

Establishing some ground rules

The interviewer is a stranger and most young children lack any understanding of what to expect or how to behave in the interview setting. A child who feels anxious and unsure of what to expect or how things will happen is unlikely to provide their best account of the issues under discussion. The younger the child, the less background understanding she or he will have as a guide to the purpose, process and rules of the encounter. Ground rules include guidance about a range of structures and processes that many adults take for granted. This may include simple things like what to call the interviewer and much more complex things like how to talk about issues. Wilson and Powell (2001) refer to several helpful ground rules that can be established early in the interview to guide the child in answering the interviewer’s questions. They suggest it is useful to offer the child some ideas about how to deal with the interviewer, such as ‘If I misunderstand something please tell me’; ‘If you don’t understand something please tell me’, or ‘It is OK to say “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember” to questions I ask’ (Wilson & Powell, 2001, p. 35). Other ground rules refer to it being alright if the child cannot remember something, that the child can use any words they wish to explain things and that the practitioner will not get angry or upset at anything the child says. As well, there may be additional things that the interviewer wishes to impress upon the child, especially if child protection becomes the focus, such as to ‘only talk about things that have really happened’ and if they cannot remember something, not to guess or make things up (Wilson & Powell, 2001, pp. 34, 35). The interviewer needs to be mindful that explaining these ground rules provides no guarantee that children will follow them during the interview. For instance, young children are more likely to try to give an answer (perhaps even a made-up one) when they do not understand a question, despite the researcher’s or practitioner’s overt encouragement to say ‘I don’t know’ and the existence of good rapport (Wilson & Powell 2001).

Confidentiality, consent and assent matters

Thompson and Randolph (2000) point out that young children deserve to know what can remain confidential and what may need to be reported. This can be expressed as the difference between what can be ‘just between you and me’ and what may need to

be told to others 'to stop someone from getting hurt' (Thompson & Randolph, 2000, p. 35). This issue may loom in all settings where young children are interviewed, whether it is in research, journalism, teaching, social work, medicine or any other field. In reference to journalism, McCrum and Hughes (1998, p. 18) admit that 'Sometimes you can't offer total confidentiality' as the spectre of abuse, self-harm and other issues may mean the matter needs to be reported and that most people working as professionals are under a mandated obligation to report child neglect and abuse. How much young children understand this obligation is not so much the issue; rather that the interviewer needs to be careful not to make blanket assurances to the child about things being 'just between us'.

Related to the issue of confidentiality is that of consent. Wilson and Powell (2001, p. 28) suggest that 'Legal consent is a complex issue, so local and procedural guidelines should always be consulted' and this may mean respecting different procedures of the agency, state or country in which the interview with the child is conducted. Consent to be interviewed may also be related to the varying benchmarks about 'age of consent' that exist across states, territories and countries. As Ivey and Ivey (2003) suggest, it is often necessary depending on the jurisdiction within which the interview takes place, to gain written permission or consent from the legal caregiver for the child to be interviewed. This is especially important when the information gained from interviewing the child is to be shared in some form or place with other people. In research matters there is also the difference between *active* and *passive* consent. If parents are given a consent form to provide their approval for the child to be interviewed but choose not to return the form to the interviewer, this is considered to be passive consent as the parents were given the chance to refuse. If parents sign and return a form giving permission for their child to be interviewed, this is termed active consent. Berg (2001) is critical of the differentiation between these two forms of consent and sees it as interference if various jurisdictions demand active consent before research can proceed. This means it often comes down to the individual researcher's sense of ethics about this matter.

Issues around consent thus remain less than precise. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the ethical interviewer needs to have considered all the issues relating to confidentiality and consent before conducting the interview. In all this, it remains of value to ask the child for her assent for the interview to take place or to record it, as this may be reassuring to the child, even if it has little legal standing. Of course, for this assent to have valency it should be informed in nature and this means the child needs to have some understanding of the purpose of the interview.

Encouraging the child's free narrative

At the beginning of the interview process, a period of free narrative facilitates both the child's settling-in phase and the interviewer's grasp of this child's communication style and her concerns. Whether the purpose of the interview is research, counselling or assessment, a period of free narrative supports the building of rapport and is most likely to elicit a more complete story. Wilson and Powell (2001) describe the

child-centred process necessary to facilitate a child's free narrative as entailing low-key processes, featuring a gentle approach that demonstrates understanding. Excessive use of questioning should be avoided if the interviewer is hoping to encourage the child's trust. It needs to be realised also that many young children do not relate their stories sequentially (Ivey & Ivey, 2003) and so a patient reflective approach is required to gradually build up the full picture and to avoid premature conclusions. The interviewing skills which support the child's free narrative are both non-verbal and verbal.

Non-verbal presence of the interviewer

When the child is speaking it is essential that the interviewer maintains attentive, gentle but consistent eye gaze and keeps distracting movements or other signs of inattention to a minimum. Wilson and Powell (2001) stress the special sensitivity of young children to apparent non-attention such as when the interviewer's gaze wanders out of the window, and note that children often stop talking when they notice the interviewer's lapse. Ivey and Ivey (2003, pp. 43–48) refer to the non-verbal realm as comprising 'visual/eye contact' 'vocal qualities', 'verbal tracking' and 'authentic body language'. The vocal qualities referred to by Ivey and Ivey (2003) encompass vocal tone, speech rate and verbal tracking—all related to staying focused on the child in an attentive and flexible manner. Egan (2002) uses the acronym SOLER to refer to the qualities of the attending position recommended for the interviewer. The S refers to *squaring off*, the O to using an *open posture*, the L to *leaning* toward the client, the E for *eye contact*, and the R for a *relaxed* or natural use of the preceding behaviours. In addition, the judicious application of *following* skills also supports the child's free narrative. Non-verbal or sub-vocal processes, used appropriately, convey messages that the interviewer is staying with the child and wants to hear his or her story. There is every reason to believe that young children are highly sensitive to such subtle cues.

Use of 'door openers'

'Door openers' are initial prompts and non-verbal behaviours that encourage the child to begin to speak about an issue. These act as invitations to begin the story—signalled though encouraging eye gaze and other warm and friendly aspects of style as well as through verbal prompts that ask the child for free information about an issue. For example, a prompt like 'Tell me more about that' is open and invites the child to respond however she or her wishes.

Occasional nods and sounds like 'uh-huh' or 'mm'

Gentle encouragers such as 'mm', 'oh' or 'really' and head nods help to get the conversation rolling, as do occasional prompts like 'Tell me more about that' or 'What happened next?' (Wilson & Powell, 2001, p. 51). Small sounds and head movements encourage the child's free narrative and are usefully applied, especially when the

interviewer wishes to hear more of the story without interrupting. Note that none of these nods or sounds replaces good reflective responding in demonstrating understanding of the young child's story. It is also important to monitor these behaviours, as constant nodding or repeating a word or sound can be distracting to the child. In addition, it is important to restrict the use of single word exclamations such as 'Great!', 'Wonderful!', 'Wow!', 'Terrific!' or 'Cool!' Using informal terms like these will not encourage trust and paradoxically may discourage the child from telling the whole story which includes the 'non-cool' parts! Generally, it is also a mistake for the interviewer to mimic the child's vernacular.

Appropriate attentive silence

Getting the child's narrative started requires a patient approach and according to Wilson and Powell (2002, p. 51) it requires 'the ability to tolerate silences and to hold one's tongue'. Interviewers often need to sit in silence with a child and to resist the need to fill conversational spaces, particularly by asking questions. The child may be thinking, for example, but the interviewer feels pressured to keep up a dialogue. Keeping quiet is challenging as most interviewers have low tolerance for conversational silence. Note that this is an active sort of silence. It means that whilst remaining silent the researcher or interviewer observes the child, maintains gentle eye contact and keeps distracting body movements under control.

Beginning gently

The major tasks for the interviewer at the beginning of the interview are finding ways to connect with the young client and establishing a context where the child can begin to tell the story. Most children feel anxious and 'all at sea' when they encounter the practitioner or researcher who seems intent on achieving certain purposes in the interview. Most adult clients approach an interview with some sense of what to expect from the process and often have their own agenda, knowing what they want to talk about. As noted by Thompson and Randolph (2000) and De Jong and Berg (2002), however, children are often in a kind of *involuntary* role—being placed in the interview setting by a parent, teacher or other person in some sort of authority over them. Therefore, it is important to attempt to find ways of helping the child to begin to feel comfortable.

This may mean talking first about things the child already knows and sees as relatively unthreatening—such as their name, how old they are, when their birthday occurs, what grade they are in, their favourite subject or activity at school, their teacher's name, the names of best friends, siblings or pets and so on. Focus on these issues may reduce the child's concerns about being able to know the 'right answers' to things—a common form of performance anxiety for children beginning an interview. As the child begins to relax a little, if the interviewer uses non-invasive responses it encourages the child to talk about other things they may not readily 'know' and which are related to the aim of the interview. Ivey and Ivey (2003) caution against

using too many questions and suggest that young children have difficulty coping with the scope of some open probes. This then points to the value of reflective responses in working with children.

Emphasising reflection rather than interrogation

Many authors who discuss interviewing or counselling children emphasise the essential value of empathic reflective responses in helping children to tell their story. Ivey and Ivey (2003), De Jong and Berg (2002), Wilson and Powell (2001) and Thompson and Rudolph (2000) all suggest that the child's free narrative is supported by the interviewer using reflections to show empathy and understanding. This is not to suggest that questions and prompts are never used, but that there needs to be a balance of responses so the interview does not deteriorate into an interrogation. A child-focused approach means listening to the child's story and using reflections to encourage free narrative wherever possible. It also means keeping an open mind, 'despite any background information you have' (Wilson & Powell, 2001, p. 44).

Many interviewers believe managing an interview with a child is just about asking the right questions, according to Wilson and Powell (2001), who also suggest it is a source of panic for many interviewers that they might not be able to think of the 'right', or *any* questions to ask. Being heard and understood is important to children and this means using only the gentlest prompts interspersed with empathic reflections. As young children often lack conversational initiative, some prompts help to establish a focus for beginning a discussion, such as 'Lets' see—I reckon you have a friend at school—tell me about your friend' and if the child then says 'Jenny and Fiona are my best friends—we play at recess' then a reflective response could be something like '*Two* good friends—and it sounds like you play together every day'. If the child then continues on, there is material to form the basis of another reflection. If the conversation falters, as may happen with young children, another prompt like 'What sort of games do you play?' may help to keep the conversational ball rolling. Reflecting the child's feelings in plain language is also important, such as 'I think that makes you happy' or 'That seems a bit scary'. Reflective skills, when established in the behavioural repertoire of the ethical interviewer, provide a solid basis for establishing rapport, getting the interview underway and encouraging the child to tell his or her story.

Age-appropriate perspectives in facilitating child-focused interviews

Depending on the age of children, their cognitive, emotional and social competencies may or may not fit them to be able to explain their experiences (as the interviewer may understand these) or to answer questions posed by the interviewer. It then becomes unethical to assume meaning from a child's answers when these questions or prompts are beyond the child's capacity to understand. Saywitz (2002) notes children's age-based communication competence, cognitive development and memory, along with understanding of the legal system, suggestibility, socio-emotional maturity and

context sensitivity, as features of importance in interviewing children. All of these impact on children's explanation of events, although Baker-Ward and Ornstein (2002) place greater stress on the cognitive capacities of children and pay particular attention to the complex issue of children's memory. Clearly an interview with a five-year-old is a very different proposition to one involving a 10-year-old and understanding cognitive and other developmental feature of the child is essential to the selection of age-appropriate interviewing processes.

Cognition, language and memory in the early years

Piaget, as discussed in Peterson (2004), suggests definite stages of development in the cognition of children. A young child, for example, in the stage of pre-operational or transductional cognition, is tolerant of contradiction. Her thinking is characterised by magical explanations, animism and entertaining explanations about the world that 'deny the rules of formal logic' (Peterson, 2004, p. 240). In interviewing young children in the years between three and five, the interviewer needs to consider that some of the child's narrative may lack logical sequencing. This may be especially important in interviewing young children when legal implications concerning child protection issues are at stake. By around six years of age, greater logical thinking begins to develop, a time usually marking the beginning of formal education and its inherent challenges for the child.

Cognitive abilities are implicated in the development of language, raising further considerations and challenges for those interviewing young children. Most children under three are unlikely to have sufficient language to be interviewed for almost any purpose and the interviewer will experience difficulty in making definable or reliable meaning from their talk. As the child gains in language skill and experience they begin to master the rules of correct speech, but until they do, their meaning may remain a challenge for the interviewer. Thompson and Rudolph (2000) refer to the work of Garbarino and Stott, who suggest that sentences need to be no more than *five* words long in talking with pre-schoolers as well as avoiding time-sequenced questions, as time is fluid for young children. So is memory, according to Baker-Ward and Ornstein (2002, p. 230), who assert that 'memory is not a video recorder' even in much older children. They suggest that the retrieval of young children's memories through the interview process can be particularly troubled with imprecision, deriving from the 'encoded' and contextualised nature of events comprising the memory.

Full communication competence is unlikely to have developed in children until around 10–12 years. Before then common problems in syntax and grammar in the child's language may cause misunderstandings between the child and the interviewer. Saywitz (2002) describes no less than five linguistic difficulties of the young child, with some persisting up to 10 years of age, all of which commonly impact on meaning and on the interviewer's understanding. As well, she defines cognitive expectations that interviewers often impose on children, for example where they ask young children to estimate weight, height, location or time. The interviewer who is 'equipped with knowledge of developmental trends' (Saywitz, 2002, p. 7) is much more likely

to use approaches, in terms of responses, questions and projective activities, that match the child's level of functioning.

Using projective techniques in interviewing

It may be very important to recognise that some children will need processes other than 'talk'—the formal processes of the interview—to be able to describe their experiences. This is especially so for young children and those of any age with language delays, communication difficulties or emotional blocks. The interviewer may need to consider creative ways to engage with the child, as some children benefit from art or dramatic techniques in sharing something of their inside view of the world.

Many projective techniques have been adapted from play therapy which has a wide and long-standing application in child counselling and therapy fields, especially with young clients with blocks to their expression. Machover (1935), Amster (1943), Axline (1947) and Hulse (1951) are early advocates of drawing, drama and other *projective* techniques in exploring the world of the child. From these pioneers have come a range of quite mainstream practices involving these projective techniques as adjuncts to the usual processes of conversation in working with children. The basic principle of any technique that is projective is that it acts to release the child from the usual discussion-based processes and invites involvement in an expressive and imaginative activity. This has traditionally involved painting, drawing and clay modelling as well as the use of toys or other figures sometimes used in dramatic scenarios.

Many of these imaginative (and imagination-based) techniques have application in conducting interviews with children even if not for therapeutic purposes, such as in research. With most children (under nine years, for example) it is advisable to have on hand some appropriate books and pictures, a supply of paper, paste, drawing and painting implements and a range of play figures such as dolls or puppets. Some of these may assist initially in putting the child at ease and, as the interview unfolds, can provide a means to encourage the child in free and directed narratives. Cautions are noted here that very young children may not have sufficient cognitive understanding and language to be able to benefit from the application of some projective techniques.

Children's drawing and painting and modelling as aids to free narrative

Ivey and Ivey (2003, pp. 84, 85) suggest that many children find it comforting to 'do something with their hands while they talk' and that a child's drawings in particular may be a means of gaining better insight into her or his life. Henderson (2000) suggests five benefits of using art in that it can provide 'access to the unconscious', tangible symbols of the child's emotions, better self-awareness, a non-threatening form of expression that is 'open to self-interpretation' and ease of combination with other projective techniques such as the use of figures or dolls. Drawing and other art is often described as a kind of 'window to the unconscious' (Henderson, 2000, p. 388).

Practical considerations surround the use of these art-based techniques in an interview. The researcher or practitioner needs to be willing to supply sufficient choice of media to suit the individual child. Some children feel more comfortable with paint, crayolas or felt tip pens whereas others may prefer pencil or charcoal drawing. Coloured paper shapes, for pasting on to sheets of paper, glitter or leaves and other things from nature may help the child to build up a picture. Allowing free choice of materials means the researcher or practitioner needs to maintain a full range of supplies. As well, some art techniques—like painting—may not be suited to all interview settings. For example, painting with young children can be rather messy, and crayolas or similar might be more manageable. The interviewer may need to supply protective smock or aprons and the use of such techniques needs to be feasible within the time-frame allowed for the interview.

To get the child started, the interviewer might suggest something like ‘How about painting a picture of how you feel at school—what would this look like in a painting?’, or ‘How would your family look if you drew them/used these cut outs?’ The interviewer may need to help the child to get started and it is important that some talk surrounds and follows the creative process, for example where the interviewer asks the child to describe what she means by certain aspects of her picture. Wilson and Powell (2001) suggest asking the child to draw a human figure and then to invite her or him to label the various parts of the body, as this helps establish common language for these—important in interviews concerning child protection issues.

Modelling with play dough or plasticine can also provide an excellent medium for children of all ages. Young children can enjoy modelling material for its tactile qualities and it may also be quite soothing. Play dough can be cheaply made from flour paste, and plasticine is relatively economical as it can be re-used. Clay-like materials may provide more flexibility of use than painting or drawing, as what has been modelled can be easily rolled up and remodelled. Some children may not find modelling with clay helps them to express what is happening as well as painting or drawing however, and this merely underlines the idiosyncratic nature of these art techniques, indicating that the interviewer may need to provide a variety of media.

Using puppets and dolls

The use of puppets and dolls can assist in setting up ‘pretend’ activities and in dramatic representation. For example a tea party with puppets or dolls may demonstrate who the child might invite from their class, initiating conversations about friends. A dinner table set using a make-believe family of dolls may assist in exploring family dynamics. Likewise, pretend school classrooms, dining rooms, bedrooms or other scenarios may enable the acting out of the relationships between the child and other people in their life. This projective technique is most suitable for working with children of middle school age who have good verbal skills but has limited application with very young children. For example, Wilson and Powell (2001) caution against the use of puppets or dolls with very young children. They suggest that children should be around six or seven before they are capable of understanding the idea that a doll is

a symbolic representation of the child or another person in their life. They make the point that 'A five-year-old girl who plays with a Barbie doll will rarely think that the doll represents her—she is more likely to pretend she is Barbie' (Wilson & Powell, 2001, p. 31).

Axline (1947) suggests a wide range of uses for puppets with suitable children and their families, and Henderson (2000) refers to a list of considerations in selecting these puppets for use in working with children. These include ease of manipulation, ability to fit both children's and adult's hands, and they should be easy to clean. Cultural issues are important in selecting the range of puppets. With young children usually soft and cuddly puppets are preferable unless there is a therapeutic need for rigid ones, as in the use of ventriloquist dummies. Generally to use puppets in projective techniques the interviewer needs to supply sufficient number and range of 'characters' so children can choose freely from the range of puppets to represent different people in their life. They are then invited to introduce the characters to the interviewer and to act out the story (Henderson, 2000). Henderson also mentions the value of allowing the child to operate from behind a sheet sometimes, to remove them one step from the story being enacted. As Wilson and Powell (2001) suggest, it is indicated that the interviewer only use dolls with older children of seven or so—especially anatomical ones. This also applies to using puppets with very young children except for purposes of free-form expressive play within the interview.

In general then, with appropriate consideration for the child's age and capabilities, as Pipe, Salmon and Priestley (2002, p. 161) suggest, there is value in allowing children to show and draw as well as tell, as this lessens the 'reliance on language ability'. They also suggest these play-related processes aid memory retrieval to some extent, in that 'young children tend to be reliant on external (*or contextual*) retrieval cues when recalling past events' (Pipe *et al.*, p. 162) and often need help in explaining and describing things. A major ethical issue concerns the interviewer's interpretation of representations of the child's thoughts and memories flowing from these imaginative and creative activities. As Baker-Ward and Ornstein (2001) note, it is important to be cautious about interpreting the child's representations, especially if these rely on memories about past events. So, although projective techniques, used sensitively and applied with age-appropriateness to the individual child, may provide a rich source of additional information, interpreting the meaning of children's verbal and non-verbal expressions requires some caution.

Cautions about interpreting children's art, drama and narratives

It is important that interviewers do not draw firm conclusions from what a child draws, paints, enacts or constructs in any medium nor build adult meaning from what children say as they expand on emerging themes. In reference to this caution, Ceci *et al.* (2002) note the problem of young children's suggestibility especially in the face of persistent adult questioning. Pezdek and Hinz (2002) also identify smaller children (from five to seven years) as being more susceptible to the implanting of false events in their memories through strategic and unethical interview processes. Walker (1999)

expresses concern about the gap between a child's expression and the meaning adults construct from this. From a journalist perspective, McCrum and Hughes (1998) caution against putting words in the mouths of children, and mention that the best information is gained when a child feels in control of the interview process. The concerns of Wilson and Powell (2001) have been noted formerly in reference to using dolls in interviewing very young children. Pipe *et al.* (2002, p. 170) note that 'interpreting what children do (or draw) is considerably more risky than listening to what they say' although it is still possible to misinterpret what the child says, especially given the tendency for young children to present material non-sequentially.

In conclusion then, a range of factors impacts on the clarity and veracity of information gained from interviewing the young child and from using projective techniques. This is not to denigrate the young child's ability to provide an accurate account of their experiences, but rather it underlines the gulf that separates adults and young children in terms of shared language and meaning. Young children are a challenging proposition as clients or subjects for the practitioner or researcher and gaining an accurate understanding of the child's story is an art in itself.

Summary

This article provides an analysis of basic skills and processes in conducting the child-focused interview with ethical principles as a foundation. This includes planning the interview structure and managing the physical setting, as well as getting the interview underway. Processes around sharing the purpose, establishing some ground rules and dealing with issues about confidentiality and consent are also important. The facilitation of the child's free narrative remains a central concern in managing the child-focused interview. The use of gentle beginning processes, acknowledgment of the child's development stage and application of age-appropriate practices are emphasised as features of ethical effectiveness in the interview. A range of media and processes involved in the use of projective techniques have been described along with cautions about over-interpreting the meanings emerging from these. Many interviewers believe the information they seek is firmly lodged in the child's mind and that it is just matter of skill, technique or persistence in extracting it. Young children's minds and bodies are in a state of constant growth, however, and memories and experiences may lay beyond the child's reach also. Finding the narrative and valuing it as an honest approximation of the young child's experience is a matter of gentle cooperation between interviewer and child.

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