Interviewing the Reluctant Child

Rita Farrell, Forensic Interview Specialist
Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center
Goals for Today

• Discuss why reluctance occurs with child victims
• Understanding factors for non-disclosure
• Dynamics
• Importance of Rapport
• Interviewing suggestions
Our Process in the Best Interest of the Child

• Is it our discomfort or simple the child’s unwillingness to disclose?

• The “art” of interviewing

• Who knows someone in the field that should never talk to kids? 😊
Reluctance Definition

• Unwilling; disinclined: a reluctant child

• What does a reluctant child look like?
  – How do children communicate?
Our Cases

• Protocol
  – Are you using a protocol? Are you trained?

• Best interest of the child
  – Setting, timing, and process for interviews

• Generally, our interviews are a result of a prior disclosure
Dynamics involved in our Cases

• Secrecy
• Helplessness
• Entrapment and Accommodation
• Delayed
• Unconvincing disclosure
• Retraction

What do these dynamics look like with a reluctant child?

- Secrecy – “Who’s gonna know about this?”
- Helplessness – “It doesn’t matter”
- Entrapment and Accommodation – “I really love my dad”
- Delayed/unconvincing disclosure – “I keep not remembering”
- Retraction – “I’m done talking about it”
Barriers to Disclose

- Threats made by the perpetrator
- Fears
- Lack of opportunity
- Lack of understanding
- Relationship with the perpetrator

Consider Dynamics and Barriers

• Each interview will present itself differently

• Not all children have struggles with reluctance, but if we are not looking at all the ways children communicate, we could be missing something.
Think about the Reluctant Child

• Generally, child has disclosed prior to interview

• Child in strange place with strange faces

• Challenge for child:
  – Remain within the confines of that which has become normal or breaking the silence and forging ahead to the unknown.
Internal processes at play

- Think about our protocol from a child’s perspective
- Open-ended questions
- Topic of Concern
Cases

- Consider our process
- Casey 13yo—reluctant
- Father attempted suicide and confesses
- Casey to date, still has not disclosed
- Amber 6yo—reluctant
- “I don’t know”, “I don’t want to say”
- Witness
Discussing Disclosure patterns

• When a child has previously disclosed prior to the forensic interview, these children are more likely to disclose during the interview than a child who has never disclosed but is interviewed based on external evidence.
• 42-50% disclosure rate/external corroborating factors
• 50-58% of children who are unable to develop the ability to share their experience

Traumagenic Model

• Children who endure any type of sexual victimization or trauma may experience traumatic sexualization, powerlessness, betrayal and stigmatization that “(alter) children’s cognitive and emotional orientation to the world”.

• When children experience this trauma, these factors will “(distort) children’s self-concept, world view and affective capacities”.

What are the “fears”

Fears:
• What will happen to them
• What will happen to their family
• What will happen to the offender

Disclosure if:
• May only decide to tell if they will safe
• If they will be believed
• Trust whom they are telling
• Nothing will change for them after they tell

Why children don’t disclose

• Not believed, Consequences
• What others will think of them
• Afraid of burdening other with their abuse
• Fear that they will lose control over the situation
• No wanting to get someone in trouble
• Loss of offender may impact his life or lives of those around him/her

Support and Reluctance Research

• 199 Fis 3-13 Y/Os
• RP/SP – NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development)
• FI not necessarily supportive w/reluctance

Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, and Winstanley, 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
Support and Reluctance

Children’s Unwillingness to Disclose

• Motivational Factors – 1/3
  • Adults – embarrassment, shame, expectations of being blamed, disbelieved, failing to elicit help
  • Children – fear of offenders, physical harm, negative emotions, and concern over legal consequences to suspects

Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, and Winstanley, 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
More on research....

• Benefits of rapport
• Interviewer should (but don’t) respond to reluctance with support
• First study to examine patterns of support and reluctance
• Enhance emotional comfort, trust, cooperation

Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, and Winstanley, 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
More....

• Statement of reluctance
  – I don’t know, I don’t remember, no answer, unsure

• Statements of support
  – I see/I understand what you’re saying
  – You say you were sad, tell me more about being sad
  – Thank you for letting me listen
  – Get to know you....
Don’t forget the importance of child-perpetrator relationship
Non supportive caregivers

• Children whose mothers were not supportive had drastically lower rates of disclosure than those whose children were both believed and supported.

ACE Research

• We know statistically, children with adverse childhood experiences are predisposed to a life riddled with addiction, criminal activity, patterns of destructive relationships, health and mental health challenges or self-harm.

Process of Disclosure

• Remember disclosure is a process – not event

• Denial is a very large factor of disclosure process

Lyon found that 25-57% of children in an assortment of studies of which medical evidence of abuse was present failed to disclose the abuse when asked.

Process of Disclosure

• Interviewers must acknowledge statements made by child (forgetting, distancing, minimizing, discounting, disassociating, or even empowering) and explore them.
Multi-Session/Extended Forensic Interviews

• Non-duplicative
• Reluctant, development, trauma, etc...
• Divides process into multiple sessions
• Child requires more rapport
• “extended” rather than “repeated”
• Requires additional training: NCAC
Recent Research

• Interviewing Victims and Suspected Victims Who are Reluctant to Talk. Research found the enhanced rapport-building altered the dynamics of investigative interviews.

• Disclosures increased 60%

Michael E. Lamb, PhD, Irit Hershkowitz, PhD, and Thomas D. Lyon, JD, PhD, APSAC Advisor, Number, 25 (4), 16-19.
Revised NICHD Protocol (Lamb, Hershkowitz, & Lyon, 2013)
Importance of Rapport

• All nationally recognized protocols include Rapport.
• Stay in Rapport until you develop.
• Encourage narrative practice!
Considerations


– Rapid fire questions, direct, short, etc...
Considerations

• Cognizant of their own emotions

• Reassurance
  – “My job is to talk and listen to people, you are not in any trouble with me today. This is a safe room”

• Normalizing
  – “I talk to boys and girls all the time, about all kinds of things”
Considerations

- Refrain from pressuring reluctant children
- Watch non verbal communication
  - Body language, pace, voice tone
- No perfect interview
- Open-ended questions
  - However, some children may need more direct questions and facilitative prompts
Interviewers

- Must build rapport
- Must recognize why a child is reluctant
- Address reluctance within the limitations of their protocol
- Aid child to move forward through narrative prompts
- Meet the child where they are and give an appropriate level of comfort. (reassurance)
- Consider multi-session interview. (non-duplicative)
- Remember the process of disclosure
- MUST LISTEN
Interview Considerations

• “I forget”, “I don’t know”....
  – Some kids that I talk to say, I forget and sometimes that means I don’t want to say. What is it for you today, I forget, I don’t want to say, or something else.
  – 9 times out of 10 – response: I don’t want to say
Interview Techniques

Use of reasoning strategies

• Address child’s concerns about telling

• Avoid “Everything will be okay if you tell”

• Avoid coercive tactics:
  – Make abuse stop
  – Protect other children
  – Hold offender accountable
Interview Techniques

Decrease stress related to disclosure

• Provide reassurance
  – If the child is worried or afraid: “Tell me about being worried /afraid”
  – “What can I do to make this easier for you?”
  – “This is a safe room – it’s OK to talk today
  – Give the child permission not to talk
Interview Techniques

Decrease stress related to disclosure (cont.)

• Let child know s/he has not done anything wrong
  – “You’re not in any trouble (with me...here today).”
• Use of interview aids: drawings, anatomical diagrams and anatomical dolls
• Back off interview topic to neutral subject
• Discuss “where” before “what”
• Use appropriate demeanor (friendly & supportive)
• Child didn’t do anything wrong
Interview Techniques

Normalize disclosure
• “I talk to a lot of kids about a lot of things.”
• Reflection techniques
  – Pay attention to the child
  – Ask about specific behaviors or emotions observed
  – Examples:
    • “Is this hard to talk about?”
    • “Are you worried about something?”
    • “How do you feel talking about this?”
    • “I notice you are crying…”
    • “I see you have your head down. What’s going on?”
Interview Techniques

• Use Silence
  – Culturally appropriate
  – Respectful of child’s emotional needs
  – Allows child to process question / answer

• Ask the child about threats or coaching
  – “Did someone talk to you about coming here today? What did s/he say?”
Interview Techniques

• Consider multi-session interviews
• Extend time spent in rapport-building
• Utilize narrative practice at beginning of interview
• Ask developmentally appropriate questions
Interviewers must remember...

- Interviewers must organize their questions.
- We need to ask about additional details/information after narrative.
- Purpose and legally sound.
- Best interest in child.
- Understand episodic (single event) and script memory (averaging of events over time)
- One role of interviewer is to guide child through the process and allow them to provide the most accurate statement
Questions/Comments?

• Contact me for your training needs!

rafarrel@gundersenhealth.org
rfarrell1@nwacc.edu