

Scottish Child Interview Model for Joint Investigative Interviewing

Evidence Based Interviewer Practice – Research Series

Topic: Pre interview contact

Who is the pre-interview contact for children commonly with and why?

Children are often spoken to informally by others before a formal forensic interview is conducted as initial disclosures are typically made to parents, carers, or various professionals who have a pre-existing relationship with the child. While subsequent conversations in the early stages of an investigation are then usually well intentioned, they can create opportunities for children's source monitoring to become "fused with information gleaned from other sources" (Lamb *et al.*, 2018). Source monitoring is the cognitive process of identifying the origin, context, or source of a memory, thought, or belief. Knowing whether a memory comes from an external source (e.g., something seen or heard), an internal source (e.g., an imagined event or a dream), or from a previous memory is relevant in forensic or legal settings, particularly when errors occur which requires mitigation where possible (Swerdlow-Freed, 2018).

What is the influence of adult questioning and suggestibility?

When recalling events, children can make associations with details that were not their own primary experiences. They may have been exposed to particular words used during attempts to seek clarification, with such interactions highly likely to involve unintentional suggestive content. Studies show that pre-interview verbatim conversations are poorly recalled by those conducting them, including interviewers, with a largely gist account of what the child said being remembered. There is a strong tendency for adults' input, particularly where it is suggestive in nature, to be underestimated. Information provided by children is often attributed to open-ended questioning when research has shown that it is frequently elicited through more focused prompts, which carry a greater risk of influencing a child's account (Korkman *et al.*, 2015).

It has long been recognised that interviewers should have access to only the minimum information necessary about an allegation prior to an interview. This approach is intended to reduce the potential impact of both **unconscious bias** and **confirmation bias**. Unconscious bias refers to the automatic assumptions, expectations, and mental shortcuts that influence an individual's

perceptions and decision-making without their awareness. Confirmation bias is a related but distinct process whereby individuals seek, interpret, or give greater weight to information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or expectations while overlooking or discounting information that challenges them. Prior knowledge of a case may contribute to the development of such expectations and can subsequently influence both the conduct and interpretation of an interview.

Completely eliminating bias is unlikely to be possible, as these cognitive processes are a normal feature of human information processing and play an important role in managing the complexity of everyday decision-making (Da Silva, Gupta, & Monzani, 2023). Nevertheless, within an investigative context, active efforts to minimise their influence are strongly recommended. Restricting pre-interview information to essential details, such as the general nature of the alleged offence, the time elapsed since the initial disclosure, and the circumstances in which the matter came to the attention of the authorities, can help reduce the formation of premature assumptions. Because the effects of unconscious bias may operate outside conscious awareness, limiting an interviewer's exposure to unnecessary case information is particularly important in preserving their ability to explore alternative explanations and test competing hypotheses without undue influence.

What is the purpose of interviewer pre-interview contact?

Consistent with this principle, pre-interview contact should be viewed primarily as an opportunity to establish rapport, assess the child's communication needs, and facilitate familiarisation with the interview process, rather than as a means of obtaining substantive information about the allegation (Smith & Milne, 2011). In addition, interviewers are expected to engage in reflective and self-aware practice, recognising and critically evaluating their own expectations and potential biases before, during, and after the interview process. Such safeguards help to minimise the influence of both unconscious bias and confirmation bias on the collection and interpretation of evidence.

What boundaries are recommended?

Any exploration of the nature of concern required beyond the child's initial disclosure should be limited to minimal follow-up questions (to understand missing significant details) and we would recommend that should this be required, it is best approached by professionals not involved in the subsequent forensic interview.

Any support with interview preparation offered to children by interviewers should not include a discussion about the matter under investigation. If children mention something unprompted during an introductory visit, in the arrival phase or pre meet, advice has remained consistent in this regard;

- Listen to the child and avoid interrupting them abruptly. Acknowledge that you have heard them and will ask them to talk about that once the interview begins e.g. *'What you have told me is very important we will have lots of time for you to tell me about everything that happened when we start the interview'*
- Questions are only necessary if there is information in the disclosure that indicates immediate action is required – another child is at risk, forensic recovery that was not known is brought to interviewers' attention.
- Questions should be limited to open-ended prompts such as invitations and focused recall.
- A written record must be kept of all questions asked and everything said by those present.

The above guidance would be applicable to other professionals in the position of hearing the first disclosure by the child, with direction about clear follow up prompts and questions to obtain clarity about significant required details. This is best directed and executed by those not in the role of the forensic interviewer with said child at a later point.

Transparency is key

Any pre meeting with the child or previous contact in the forensic interview context or off camera for any purpose should always be referred to on camera. This offers clear intention of transparency as the child themselves may, and in fact are often very likely to, acknowledge they have met the interviewer(s) before or refer to pre interview conversations e.g. *'Remember I told you about*' which can be managed well when there has been acknowledgement of prior contact from the outset.

Empirical studies by Lamb and colleagues show that children's willingness to disclose and the level of detail they provide are strongly influenced by rapport, clarity of interviewer expectations, and the effective use of open-ended prompts

Research on child forensic interviewing also demonstrates that it is common for children who have previously spoken about something that has happened to respond in later interactions or interviews with statements such as "I already told you." This reflects the child's likely misunderstanding of the interviewer's role in line with their developmental stage rather than an absence of further information. Children often assume that adults share knowledge, particularly when they have spoken previously to professionals, and may therefore see repetition as unnecessary or confusing. To avoid this, interviewers will need to be clear that any conversation pre interview will need to be explored again and in fact, in more detail on camera. Failure to do so

risks the child feeling like they were not believed the first time and can reduce motivation to engage or elaborate (Hershkowitz, I. et al. 2021)

Summary

Pre-interview contact is often unavoidable and can support rapport building, but it also presents risks to evidential integrity if not carefully managed. Children's accounts may be influenced by repeated conversations, suggestibility, and source monitoring difficulties, while interviewers themselves are vulnerable to confirmation bias, particularly when exposed to excessive prior information.

To minimise these risks, pre-interview interactions should be strictly limited to rapport building and understanding the child's communication needs. Any discussion of the allegation should be minimal, necessary, and, where possible, undertaken by professionals not conducting the forensic interview. Spontaneous disclosures should be acknowledged without detailed exploration, unless immediate safeguarding action is required, and all interactions must be accurately recorded.

Overall, effective practice depends on clear boundaries, transparency about prior contact, careful information management, and reflective self-awareness to preserve the quality and reliability of children's evidence.

Written by Jennifer Morrison, Social Work Team Manager, on behalf of the National JII Team, July 2026

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