

INTRODUCTION

Some of my favorite research in developmental psychology explored children's ability to explain something to another person. In a typical study, children looked at a drawing of four geometric shapes and tried to describe it so a listener could draw it accurately. Because the shapes had different sizes, colors, and locations relative to other shapes, children had to explain many pieces of information to succeed. This usually did not happen. In one sample, third graders mentioned only six features of the drawing, on average, which simply was not enough to cue listeners to the true state of affairs. Transcripts of children explaining a game to a blindfolded listener were charming. For example, one second grader said, "This side is red and you're supposed to put it, um, go on these. This side is blue and you're supposed to go on these. You put these in your hand, um, you choose, um, which pig you want. Told ya!" (Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1975, p. 98).

We would laugh less at children if we contemplated our own inexpert (and sometimes embarrassing) directions and e-mails. The truth is that children

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Interviewing Children: The Science of Conversation in Forensic Contexts, by D. A. Poole
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do not have a monopoly on ambiguous communication. Put children and adults together and you have the question that has fascinated me for decades: Of all the possible things a conversation could have meant, what is the best explanation for what it actually did mean?

This question gripped my heart in the 1980s, when researchers around the globe read about day care abuse cases in which numerous youngsters made inconsistent and sometimes bizarre allegations. At the time, I was a directionless academic—bored with the basic research I had been trained to design and busy watching my babies grow. But after I learned what investigators were asking child witnesses and how the children responded, I found a purpose for my peculiar set of skills: I was not sure why children said what they said during criminal investigations, but I knew how to test some ideas.

That testing took a two-pronged approach. Because a developmental psychologist's home is an impromptu laboratory, for years I frequently squatted down, delivered questions to my son and daughter, and listened to the result. (Later, they trained research assistants and, eventually, produced a new generation of homegrown demonstration children.) My second strategy was to work with talented colleagues who were also interested in bringing legions of children into the laboratory. Those legions usually proved us wrong. Until recently, I never predicted the results of a study and often marveled at what drove other investigators to try their unlikely ideas. These discrepancies between what I thought children would do and what they actually did motivated this book, which is my way of sharing how evidence-based practice can reduce the ambiguities that permeate adult–child conversations in forensic contexts.

Because the science of conversation is broad, the range of topics covered in this book is also broad. Chapter 1 explains how adults usually talk to children, why this style impedes forensic goals, and the types of studies researchers conduct to look for solutions. Chapter 2 introduces the overarching characteristics of the forensic perspective, explains the differences between forensic and clinical roles, and discusses the benefits and limitations of blind versus informed interviewing. Chapters 3 to 6 translate the forensic perspective into three “C” skills: conversational habits (discussed in Chapter 3), conventional content (Chapters 4 and 5), and case-specific decisions and exploration (Chapter 6). *Conversational habits* are general skills, such as the nonverbal behaviors that put children at ease and the crafting of questions that children understand. *Conventional content* refers to the instructions and interview phases in protocols, whereas *case-specific decisions and exploration* involves the moves interviewers make to customize interviews. Dividing skills into these groups establishes general skills before introducing skills that are more difficult to master and more context dependent. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses interview protocols and the characteristics of effective training programs.

These chapters were designed for busy professionals who will put down this book and either do what they just read or analyze what someone else has done. To be useful for forensic interviewers, clinicians, attorneys, and the many other professionals who rely on children's testimony, the narrative is action oriented. Research-based practice recommendations are illustrated with example dialogue, summarized in chapter recaps, and reviewed in periodic Quick Guide sections that synthesize core ideas and skills. Each chapter also contains a Principles to Practice section, which presents a question about child interviewing and my response. Throughout, the goal is to illustrate evidence-based practice, not to imply that a single approach is best for every situation.

This focus on practice dictated a number of difficult decisions. Because some readers would not be interviewers, I violated a well-known tenet of training materials (see Chapter 7) by writing chapter subheadings that function as nouns rather than action statements (e.g., "Introducing the Topic" rather than "Introduce the Topic"). I also limited research reviews to illustrative examples, thereby omitting many classic and recent studies that deserved to be mentioned. I apologize for these omissions and refer readers to cited books and chapters for more in-depth reviews. Although I mentioned technical terms when doing so would help readers find other resources on a topic, I avoided unnecessary jargon.

It is also important to mention what is not in this book. Obviously absent is the enormous body of knowledge that professionals need to fulfill their roles as child protection workers, advocacy center interviewers, arson investigators, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, mental health workers, physicians, or mandated reporters in schools. And although it is true that general principles of talking to children apply across a wide variety of situations, conversational skill is only one component of the training needed for effective practice in these fields.

Also absent are topics that have not attracted enough research to support evidence-based guidelines. For example, interviewers should treat children and adolescents differently, but what this entails is still largely based on common sense rather than systematic research. Similarly, many widely distributed techniques have not been adequately studied and, for that reason, are not discussed in this book. I hope that these gaps will be filled in the years to come, which will give interviewers a wider range of techniques to choose from and a better foundation for tailoring practice to the needs of individual cases.

As guidelines continue to evolve, the primary goal of conversations with child witnesses will remain the same: to help children describe events in their lives as completely, accurately, and unambiguously as they can. The obstacles blocking this goal, and the techniques that overcome those obstacles, make up the science of conversation in forensic contexts.