

Changes in the CornerHouse Interview Protocol

by Judy Weigman, M.A., L.I.C.S.W.

CornerHouse developed a specific protocol for interviewing children about sexual abuse in 1989, and began teaching this protocol to multidisciplinary child abuse teams in 1990. This protocol was and continues to be based on the research and practice of numerous professionals in the field and our staff's interviewing experience. Over time, as new information has become available, we have changed the protocol to reflect new knowledge. This article is intended to share some of the changes we have made over the past six years. The list does not necessarily reflect all of the changes we have made over time, but it does describe the most significant ones.

- **Drawing the Child's Face.** Interviewers often make a brief drawing of the child's face at the beginning of the interview as part of rapport building. When drawing a younger child's face, the interviewer no longer asks the child to "guess" what the interviewer is drawing. Instead, the interviewer may say, "I'm going to draw your face." The interviewer does not want to condition the child to "guess" about anything in the interview. When the child is older than age 8, the interviewer usually gives the child the choice of whether s/he would like the face drawn. For children over 10, the interviewer usually skips this and begins the interview with family drawings.

Previously, after the child's face was drawn, the interviewer told the child s/he could take the drawing home. It was suggested that this offering might be perceived as a bribe or an influence to get the child to disclose something. Now the interviewer gives the face drawing to the child at the end of the interview, along with the interviewer's business card.

- **Drawing the Child's House.** Interviewers no longer routinely draw the child's house as part of rapport-building. Time is of the essence when interviewing children, and additional time may be needed to cover the details of any abuse disclosed by the child. However, the child's house may be drawn if it becomes relevant to disclosure.

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1997 Training Schedule

Child Sexual Abuse Forensic Interview Training for child protection workers, law enforcement investigators, and prosecuting attorneys teaches a reliable, "child friendly" and legally credible method for interviewing children about possible sexual abuse. Our January, March, April and May sessions are full. Sessions for which there are still openings are:

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Five days, Mon-Fri | February 3-7 | September 8-12 | October 6-10 |
| Tuition: \$850 | November 3-7 | December 8-12 | |

Effective Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse: A Pre-Assessment Model, for mandated reporters, teaches a brief, specific process for talking with a child about possible sexual abuse. Offered in a full-day and half-day format. Both formats have similar topics and a participant manual. The full day provides more depth of content and practice opportunities. Call us about bringing this seminar to your organization or group for inservice training!

Orientation for interagency team members in Hennepin County is a three-hour session that includes: a tour of CornerHouse, the interview protocol, videotaped interview, and a team meeting demonstration. Other interested community members are welcome to attend the first half of the orientation session that does not involve confidential information (about 1-1/2 hours). **There is no fee, but pre-registration is required.**

Time: 8:30-11:30 a.m. **Dates:** February 18, April 29, June 3, and September 2

For more information or to register, contact Kristi Thomson at (612) 872-6225.

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- **Telling Children They Are Being Videotaped.** Children who have been sexually abused often feel tricked by the perpetrator. Because CornerHouse doesn't want to add to a child's feeling of being tricked, the interviewer routinely tells children 5 years and older that the interview will be videotaped. For children under 5, the parents or guardians are informed.
 - **Instructing the Child.** CornerHouse now uses a modified approach to the cognitive interview, which was developed by Karen Saywitz. The cognitive interview gives instructions at the beginning of an interview and asks a child to practice responding to various questions. Such instructions might include statements like, "If I ask you a question that you don't understand, I want you to tell me," or, "If I ask you the same question twice, it doesn't mean that you gave the wrong answer the first time." At CornerHouse, instead of giving these instructions at the beginning of the interview, the interviewer responds as the situation presents itself. For example, the first time a child corrects the interviewer, the interviewer may say, "Thank you for correcting me. Whenever I say something that isn't right, I want you to tell me like you did just now."
 - **Introducing Anatomical Drawings.** The anatomy identification stage has been adapted to better address the various ages of the children interviewed. Generally, for children under age 5, the interviewer may say, "I have some pictures to show you. Which picture is the boy? Which picture is the girl? Are you a boy or girl?" In the past, two sheets were shown to the child, one depicting the front and back of a boy and the other the front and back of a girl. Since this appeared to be too abstract and therefore confusing for young children, the interviewer now gently folds the drawings so the child sees only the front of the boy and girl. More explanation regarding the drawings is given to children over 5. The interviewer may
- indicate to the child that, since people have different names for body parts, the interviewer would like to know what the child calls a particular part. Reassurance such as, "Whatever you call it is OK," or, "I just want to be sure I call it the same thing you do," may be included. Only a few body parts other than the private areas are pointed out for the child to name. For children over 10, this stage of the process is generally less useful, and may be skipped altogether depending on the child's needs or developmental level. However, the interviewer may still use the drawings as needed to identify or refer to various places on the body. For older children, the touch inquiry stage may also be skipped. Instead, the interviewer may ask the child, "Do you know why you came here today?"
- **Using Anatomical Dolls.** In order to use the dolls, a child must be able to make a representational shift. This is a level of cognitive development usually reached by age 4-5. The interviewer uses the dolls as a demonstration aid on a case-by-case basis. Dolls are no longer introduced as "special," because perpetrators often tell their victims that they are "special." Instead, the interviewer introduces the dolls as "not to play with," and, "to talk about touches."
 - **Inviting Statement to the Perpetrator.** One of the earliest changes made in the protocol was dropping what was referred to as the "retaliation release." Near the end of the interview, the interviewer would ask the child what s/he would like to say to the person that the child had indicated was the abuser. This scenario may have given the appearance of not being objective on the part of the interviewer, and seemed to be more appropriate in a therapeutic setting.
 - **Inquiring About an Alternative Hypothesis.** Before the closure stage of the interview, the interviewer routinely asks a question such as, "Has anybody else touched the private areas on your body or made you touch their private places?" This provides an opportunity for a child to disclose any other possible perpetrators and indicates that the interview is not biased toward the initial allegation.