

The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol: An Evolution in Practice for Almost 25 Years

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Since 1990, CornerHouse has provided a week-long forensic interview training course for forensic interviewers, child protection professionals, law enforcement, and prosecuting attorneys. To date, staff members have trained professionals from every state in the continental United States, Alaska, and 16 countries around the world. The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol™ is the most widely trained forensic interview protocol in the United States; 52% of all Children's Advocacy Center staff report being trained in the model (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2011).

Since we provided our first week-long forensic interview training in 1990, the field of forensic interviewing has matured from relative infancy to the more established and increasingly cohesive level of practice we see today.

As with every quality interview protocol, the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol has evolved and changed with the field, realizing significant evolution over the past several years. This article seeks to clarify the CornerHouse Protocol as it has evolved, as it exists today, and as it is taught in the CornerHouse Training Program.

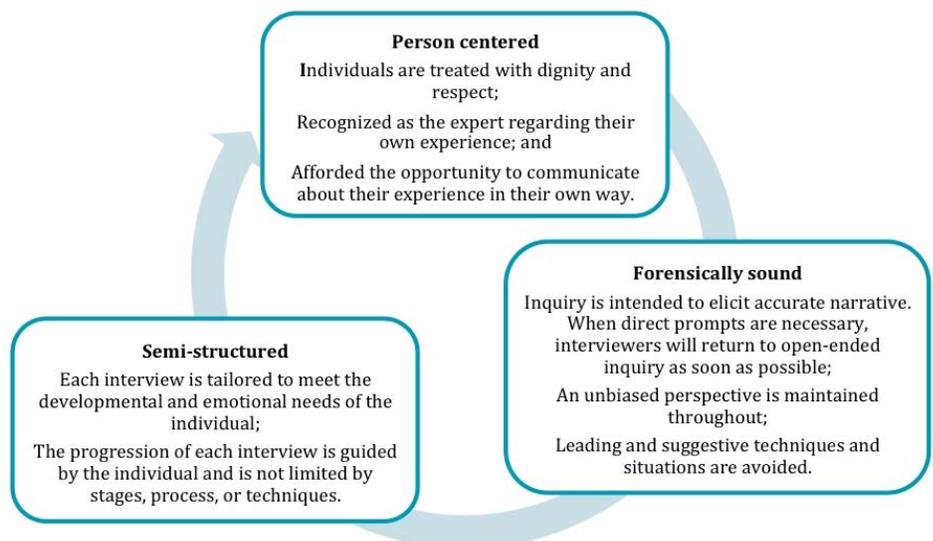
Recent Adaptations

The past three years have brought significant change and innovation to the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol. In 2011, CornerHouse began a program evaluation on the application of narrative practice techniques. In 2012, we began implementation of enhanced orienting messages that also included a program evaluation component. We also increased our use of open invita-

tions early in the interview and redefined our approach to closure. In January of 2013, with consideration given to education, literature review, and interviewing experience, CornerHouse interviewers arrived at a revised description of the CornerHouse Protocol that redefined the stages, purpose, and approaches. These revisions better capture the recent changes and more effectively represent the developmental considerations we have taught and implemented for many years. In February of 2013, we launched a revised training curriculum incorporating these changes.

Guiding the CornerHouse forensic interview are three principles, which are outlined in Figure 1. Above all else, the CornerHouse Protocol is person centered, forensically sound, and semi-structured.

Figure 1. Guiding Principles of the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol™



Source: CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center, 2013.

Table 1. CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol™

BUILD RAPPORT	
Purpose	To establish a foundation for the interview process by <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Orienting the individualb. Learning about the individualc. Facilitating the individual's best possible functioning
Approaches	Utilize orienting messages Engage in narrative practice Conduct a general assessment of functioning Adjust the interview based on the individual's presentation
SEEK INFORMATION	
Purpose	To provide an opportunity for the individual to report his or her experience
Approaches	Choose a forensically sound strategy for approaching the topic of inquiry, fully utilizing indirect prompts Incorporate interview tools in an intentional manner, when appropriate.
EXPLORE STATEMENTS	
Purpose	To allow the individual to share details of his or her experience
Approaches	Listen to the individual <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Utilize Invitation and Inquiry<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Encourage narrative– Ask follow-up and clarifying questions as neededb. Consider the individual's developmental abilitiesc. Maintain an open mind Utilize interview tools as beneficial, to maximize the individual's ability to communicate his or her experience Return to Seek Information as appropriate <ul style="list-style-type: none">d. Explore alternative explanations and/or additional forms of maltreatment
END RESPECTFULLY	
Purpose	To provide a respectful closure to and transition from the interview by attending to the individual's <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Presentationb. Communicated experiencec. Observed needs
Approaches	Explore resources, reinforcing information the individual shared, as appropriate Provide a developmentally sensitive and individual-centered transition

Source: CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center, 2013.

The current CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol includes four distinct stages: Build Rapport, Seek Information, Explore Statements, and End Respectfully. As seen in Table 1, each stage includes its own purpose and approaches.

Narrative Approach

The CornerHouse Protocol advocates for a narrative approach to information seeking and the use of narrative practice techniques in rapport building. One of the primary tenets of the

CornerHouse Protocol is that the process should be child led. That is, the child should be afforded the opportunity to tell in his or her own way, and the information provided in the interview should be from the child. A narrative approach that encourages children to articulate their experience to the best of their developmental ability is integral to this process. Since 2005, CornerHouse has specifically taught interviewers to use opportunities to build narrative during rapport building as a means to understand the child's functioning and increase a child's propensity to give narrative later in the interview (CornerHouse, 2005). Our 2010 publication detailing the CornerHouse Protocol states that the interviewer should make multiple attempts to ask open-ended questions and invite narrative responses during Rapport (Anderson et al., 2010). Additionally, this same article contains numerous references to the use of indirect or open-ended questioning to invite narratives from children throughout the forensic interview. Primarily over the course of four years we have made a series of adaptations to the protocol and its teaching that make the solicitation of narrative information a more distinct task in Rapport; the inclusion of specific episodic memory training occurred in 2011 (CornerHouse, 2008–2011).

The research support for the use of open-ended questions in forensic interviews is evident (Hershkowitz, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lamb, Hershkowitz, & Sternberg, 1996; Lamb et al., 2003; Lyon, 2012; Sternberg et al., 1997). While narrative invitation or practice techniques are now used in many forensic interview protocols (Cordisco Steele, 2010; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011), little research has been conducted on the impact of narrative practice techniques across different protocols. In September 2011, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, CornerHouse began a study to evaluate the use of specific episodic memory training in the CornerHouse Protocol. During and since our program evaluation, we continued to update and hone the techniques used and taught. Comprehensive results of this study have been submitted for publication.

Truth and Lie Discussions and Interview Instructions/Orienting Statements

CornerHouse recognizes the specific implementation of truth/lie assessments and the promise to tell the truth as jurisdictional decisions and areas of jurisdictional variance. In 2001, CornerHouse began teaching students in our training program about the Reality Task developed by Lyon and Saywitz (1999). In 2005, CornerHouse started distributing the Lyon and Saywitz article to our students as recommended reading. In recent years we have focused more discussion in our training program on the promise to tell the truth pursuant to newer research.

CornerHouse practice and training have historically been rooted in the belief that interview instructions are best incorporated as

the situation arises, utilizing developmentally appropriate, concrete statements that are relevant within the context of the interview. For example, when the child corrects the interviewer, this is acknowledged (“thank you for correcting me”) and reinforced with an instruction provided to the child (“if I get something else wrong, let me know, just like you did”). In addition, CornerHouse has always recommended some orienting statements at the interview's outset, although these had historically been limited to providing the child with information regarding other unique elements of the interview setting, such as video recording and observers, as well as messages regarding the interviewer's role.

While many forensic interview protocols focus on establishing *ground rules* early on as a means to reduce suggestibility, some research also questions the efficacy of such approaches for children who do not understand the effects or occurrence of suggestive techniques (London, Bruck, Poole, & Melnyk, 2011). In 2012, CornerHouse began to pilot a modified practice in our interviews. Systematic evaluation of our approach and its impact on child behavior in the interview as well as the impact of development, gender, and other personal factors on outcomes will be completed later this year.

Given the potential value of providing some additional orienting or instructional messages early within the forensic interview, specific orienting messages were added as a planned activity during the introductory portion of forensic interviews conducted at CornerHouse. Recognizing that the forensic interview is a novel experience for most children who are interviewed, these messages have been designed to provide the child with an orientation to the culture of the interview.

Woven into these orienting messages are some statements that may more commonly be viewed as interview instructions. The intent and focus of such messages are for the purpose of communication and providing information, rather than simply a list of rules or expectations. For example: “The video helps me remember and make sure I get it right” (orienting message); if I get something wrong, you can tell me” (commonly viewed as interview instruction). Later in the interview, this orienting message and instruction are reinforced: “Thanks for letting me know I got that wrong. Like I told you before, I want you to tell me when I get something wrong.” The orienting messages are simple, brief, and incorporated into all interviews with some developmental modifications. Messages are reinforced throughout the interview, based upon individual presenting factors and opportunities.

The subtle differences, such as the specific language used, timing of orienting messages given at the beginning of the interview, and joining key orienting messages with examples, are intended to better prepare children to fully engage in the interview process.

The orienting messages are incorporated in a manner consistent with our core values of a forensic interview protocol, that is, they are semi-structured, developmentally and individually flexible, focused on the child as the expert, and prioritize the needs of the child above all else.

Interview Tools

The use of interview tools or media in the CornerHouse Protocol is perhaps its defining characteristic within the current landscape. The use of interview tools in the CornerHouse Protocol serves to enhance fact gathering, allow for visual cues, promote clarity in communication, and provide an alternative to strictly verbal communication when appropriate.

Drawing has not only been shown to enhance a child's event recall but also does so in the context of interactive questioning with an interviewer (Barlow, Jolley, & Hallam, 2011). Research further supports the facilitative effect of drawing on reports of children of all ages (Patterson & Hayne, 2011). CornerHouse uses an easel board in all interviews for shared note taking and free hand drawing. With a child of any developmental level, the use of the easel board can allow both the interviewer and the child a shared space for noting what is heard or expressed (through writing or drawing), therefore inviting clarification when there is a misunderstanding. It also provides a memory cue for further discussion or clarification and allows for a shared focus that may be less intense than direct eye contact when appropriate. With younger children, the use of the easel board includes drawing pictures of themselves and the significant people in their lives. With any child, the use of the easel board may include opportunities for drawing places, objects, or events the child is describing, as well as writing if the child prefers. The use of the easel board within the forensic interview often affords children another medium to communicate their experiences and can provide richer descriptions than a standard verbal format.

CornerHouse does not teach the use of anatomically detailed drawings at the beginning of the interview (Anderson et al., 2010). However, our use of anatomical diagrams with some children for anatomy identification prior to disclosure is a topic of conversation in the field and the source of difference between the CornerHouse Protocol and some other protocols. CornerHouse continues to carefully consider the new research on this topic and the applicability of laboratory research to the practice of forensic interviewing.

Over the past several years, the research community has paid increased attention to the use of anatomical diagrams. Important questions are being asked about their place in the forensic interview process and the potential disadvantages of their use. In a 2011 article by Poole and Dickinson, the authors highlight the potential for false reports when researchers use body diagrams in a laboratory setting. While any interview tool, including anatomical

diagrams, should be used judiciously and only by those trained in their proper use, this study has several significant shortcomings in regard to its applicability to forensic interviews. Specifically, none of the reports determined as false in the study were reports of genital touch; this is a notable limitation of the research findings and reduces the applicability of the study to actual forensic interview settings (Lyon, 2012). Also, the body diagrams utilized in this study omitted genitalia, making them significantly different than the anatomical diagrams used by CornerHouse and of questionable relevance to our Protocol. Finally, child sexual abuse dynamics, which impact abused children's ability to disclose during a forensic interview, are not replicated in the Poole study. As with all laboratory research, the absence of these dynamics limits the applicability of research findings to practice. The incidental touch experienced by these children during an educational activity would not likely result in the shame, guilt, or embarrassment often experienced by abused children. In fact, these touches may not be memorable to the child at all (Lyon, 2012).

Although employed with less regularity than in previous iterations of our Protocol, the use of anatomical diagrams during forensic interviews is still supported by CornerHouse when it is developmentally appropriate to conduct anatomy identification with a child, as a reference when conducting touch inquiry with some children, and as a tool that may be offered for clarification of a verbal description. The use of anatomical diagrams can be a helpful communication tool within the forensic interview process, but like any other interview tool, its efficacy is contingent upon the interviewer's skill and training. The utilization of anatomical diagrams is an important decision that should be based on the interviewer's training as well as the child, her or his development, and case circumstances. Further, their use should not undermine developmentally appropriate questioning that promotes narrative responses. When used appropriately, anatomical diagrams can enhance verbal communication between a child and interviewer and serve as a tool for clarification and reference.

Documentation of the Interview

A respectful introduction of the interview process can build a child's comfort when the child finds herself in what is likely to be a new setting with an unfamiliar professional. The CornerHouse Protocol advocates for interviewers to provide respectful, honest, age-appropriate explanations of audio-video equipment, two-way mirrors, earpieces, or telephones used for communicating with multidisciplinary team members. Interviewers are taught to provide information to the child about video recording of the interview and additional, unseen interview observers, and how to make audio and video equipment unobtrusive to the extent possible. Concerns that a child who is not told about video recording may later feel betrayed by the interviewer, social services, or the legal system are central to this recommendation. In the case that a child refuses to be video recorded, there is no one solution advocated by the CornerHouse Protocol. When this situ-

ation arises, the first step we would recommend to an interviewer is to engage the child or adolescent in a conversation about his or her concern and to attempt to problem solve based on that specific child's articulated worry, concern, or need. For example, if the child has concerns about a parent or guardian watching from the waiting room, more detailed information can be provided regarding who can and cannot see the video recording during the interview. For a child who maintains an objection to being video recorded despite discussion and appropriate, honest reassurance, the individual multidisciplinary team in the case will need to make a decision regarding how to proceed. We would expect that this decision would consider the child's best interests and best practice considerations as well as jurisdiction-specific factors. For example, in the State of Minnesota audio-video recording of interviews regarding allegations of sexual abuse is mandated by law (State of Minnesota, 1995). This mandate is an important, but by no means the only, factor to consider for professionals conducting interviews in this state.

Invitation and Inquiry

CornerHouse's current training curriculum teaches our Invitation and Inquiry approach to understanding the questions asked and

invitations made by interviewers. Invitation and Inquiry (Figure 2) emphasizes the role of the interviewer as *not* one who asks questions, but as a neutral fact finder who invites and allows information. Invitation and Inquiry is designed to increase the quality and quantity of information a child is able to provide. The "invitations" are encouraged and taught as preferable throughout and across interviews. Due to the specific context and focus implicit to "inquiries," interviewers are taught to use these sparingly. As has historically been true, CornerHouse training teaches interviewers to use a developmentally appropriate approach that capitalizes on the competency of each child and is more likely to yield a reliable, credible report. CornerHouse teaches the use of facilitators to invite as much narrative as possible; in particular, facilitators may be helpful with young children in meeting their developmental needs. We acknowledge that narratives may be shorter and, with some questions, beyond the developmental capacity of some young children. However, we do not teach interviewers to favor direct questions with this group or to artificially inhibit the developmental capacity of the child in the interview setting by asking direct questions. Further, any time that more direct questions are necessary, CornerHouse teaches interviewers to follow up with more indirect invitations.

Figure 2. Invitation and Inquiry in the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol



The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol is one avenue by which to explore a child's experience in a way that is both forensically sound and respects the child's individuality. There are many valid ways to approach the forensic interview itself, from structured protocols to flexible guidelines. The CornerHouse Protocol is merely one approach that strives to balance the simple with the complex, the amorphous with the prescriptive, and most of all, that offers interviewers principles from which to learn about children and their experiences. The protocol can accommodate considered adaptation by trained professionals, when desired, to meet a myriad of local community standards. Furthermore, adaptations due to developmental considerations and the spontaneity of a child are implicit to the model. Practice guidelines in the field recommend that interviewers adapt their language, pacing, and other aspects of the interview to the particular child with whom the interview is conducted (APSAC, 2012).

In any field where best practice dictates a tailored approach to meet client needs, best practice will continue to comprise a range of specific behaviors and decisions. The challenges for forensic interview protocols and guidelines are to communicate parameters that can be used to encourage good practice and minimize interviewer errors, while allowing enough flexibility for interviewers to tailor their approach to the individual child and situation. Further, the level of research support for many best practice recommendations is greatly varied (Jones, Cross, Walsh, & Simone, 2005), leaving room for different practice within a research-informed approach in the current landscape. Through continued and coordinated efforts of experts, practitioners, and researchers in the field of forensic interviewing, we continue to strive to improve practice in the best interests of children.

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