

Reflections on Emerging Issues

Orienting Messages

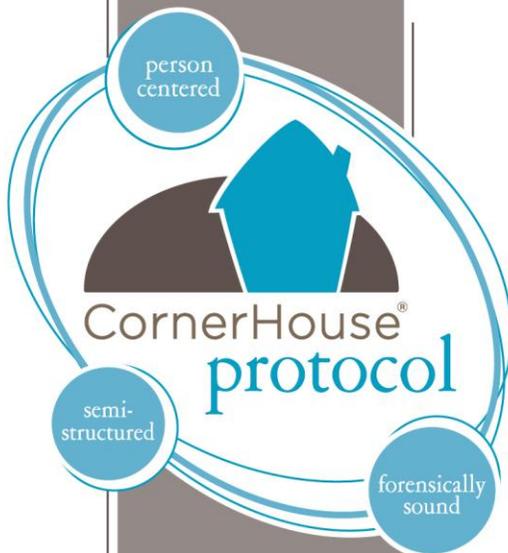
CornerHouse practice and training have historically been rooted in the belief that interview instructions are best incorporated as the situation arises, utilizing developmentally appropriate, concrete statements that are relevant within the context of the interview (Anderson et al., 2010). For example, if the individual corrects the interviewer, this is acknowledged (e.g., “thank you for correcting me”) and reinforced with an instruction provided to the individual (e.g., “if I get something else wrong, let me know, just like you did”). In addition, CornerHouse has always recommended some orienting messages at the interview’s outset, although these have typically been limited to providing the individual with information regarding unique elements of the interview setting, such as video recording and observers, as well as messages regarding the interviewer’s role.

In identifying and forming best practice, CornerHouse values both the findings of research and what has been learned from direct practice of our colleagues in the field (see, for example, APSAC, 2012; Chamberlin, Newlin, & Cordisco Steele, 2011; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lyon, 2010; NCAC, 2011; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011). Through consideration of such information, and based upon what we have learned in our own practice, CornerHouse has incorporated a modified practice into our interviews. In recognition of the potential value of providing some additional orienting or instructional messages early within the forensic interview, specific orienting messages have been added as a planned activity during the introductory portion of all CornerHouse forensic interviews. Recognizing that the forensic interview is a novel experience for most individuals who are interviewed, these statements are designed to provide the individual with an orientation to the culture of the interview.

For example, one such orienting message is intended to inform the individual that the interviewer lacks knowledge regarding the individual’s experiences. In addition to informing the individual of the interviewer’s role (“to listen”), the interviewer may state something similar to, “I ask questions because I don’t know or don’t understand.” Such a message, in combination with other best practice guidelines, may improve an individual’s ability to correctly indicate when they do not know the answer to a question, particularly for younger children (Waterman & Blades, 2011).

Woven into these orienting messages are some statements that may more commonly be viewed as interview instructions. However, the intent and focus of such messages is not to provide a list of rules, but to communicate information that may assist in familiarizing the individual with the interview process. For example, “The video helps me remember and get things right” (orienting message); “If I get something wrong while we’re talking today, you can tell me” (interview instruction). Later in the interview, this message can be reinforced: “Thanks for letting me know I got that wrong. Like I said before, you can tell me if I get something else wrong, because I want to get it right.”

The basic orienting statements provided are simple and brief and, aside from some adjustments based upon individual development and abilities, are incorporated into all interviews. Additional orienting statements and interview instructions are utilized as appropriate within the context of the interview, based upon individual presenting factors.



Pilot implementation of this modified practice began in 2012, and research regarding the use of orienting messages in forensic interviews was subsequently conducted at CornerHouse. Overall, results of that research indicate that the use of orienting messages both at the beginning and as needed throughout the interview lead to significantly more autonomous responses from children (Anderson, 2016). This outcome is consistent with the guiding principles of the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol™ (person-centered, semi-structured and forensically-sound), as well as general best practices in the field. While not dramatically different from previous practice, the subtle differences (specificity in language, intentionality of providing particular messages at various points in the interview, and the joining of some orienting statements with corresponding interview instructions) are intended to better prepare individuals to do their best when participating in the interview process.

References

- American Professional Society on Abuse of Children (APSAC). (2012). Practice Guidelines: Forensic Interviewing in Cases of Suspected Child Abuse. Author.
- Anderson, G. D., Anderson, J. N., & Krippner, M. (2016). "I Only Want to Know What You Know": The Use of Orienting Messages During Forensic Interviews and Their Effects on Child Behavior. *Journal of child sexual abuse*, 25(6), 655-673.
- Anderson, J., Ellefson, J., Lashley, J., Lukas-Miller, A., Olinger, S., Russell, A., Weigman, J. (2010). The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol: RATAC. *The Thomas M. Cooley Journal of Practical & Clinical Law*, 12(2) 193-331.
- National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC). (2011). National Children's Advocacy Center Forensic Interview Structure. Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalcac.org/professionals/images/stories/pdfs/fi%20structure.pdf>
- Chamberlin, A., Newlin, C. & Cordisco Steele, L. (2011). How CACs and Multidisciplinary Team Members Can Better Serve Children and Non-Offending Caretakers: A Research-to-Practice Summary of Atoro, K. E., Cross, T. P., Jones, L. M., Magnuson, S., Shadoin, A. L. & Walsh, W. (2010). Non-offending caregiver and youth experiences with child sexual abuse investigations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(2), 291-314. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.nationalcac.org/professionals/images/narrative%20practice%20sept.pdf>.
- Lamb, M., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P. & Horowitz, D. (2007). A structured forensic interview protocol improves the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31, 1201–1231.
- Lyon, T.D. (2010). Investigative interviewing of the child. In D.N. Duquette & A.M. Haralambie (Eds.), *Child Welfare Law and Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 87-109). Denver, CO: Bradford.
- Saywitz, K.J., Lyon, T. D., & Goodman, G.S. (2011). Interviewing Children. In J.E.B. Myers (Ed.), *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* (3rd ed., pp. 337-360). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Waterman, A., & Blades, M. (2011). Helping children correctly say "I don't know" to unanswerable questions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology, Applied*, 17, 396-405.