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Interviewing young offenders about child-on-child sexual abuse

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Abstract

This study compared two versions of the NICHD Protocol for interviewing young suspected sexual offenders: the Revised Suspect Protocol (RSP) and the Standard Suspect Protocol (SSP). The RSP incorporated relevant evidence-based practices informed by research on the value of (a) effectively explaining the suspects' rights, (b) rapport building and support, and (c) appropriate questioning strategies. Interviewers using the RSP communicated the children's rights more effectively (reading them more often, checking, verifying, and correcting understanding) and provided more support. In the substantive phase, they remained supportive while recall prompts dominated the questioning. Compared to children in the SSP group, children in the RSP condition understood their rights better, were more responsive during rapport-building, and reacted to interviewer support in the substantive phase with increased responsiveness, which in turn, predicted reduced reluctance, increased emotional expression, and greater informativeness. They were also more likely to make full rather than partial confessions than children in the SSP group. Full confessions were positively predicted by the appropriate communication of legal rights, interviewer support, and reliance on open-ended prompts, thereby confirming the superiority of the RSP relative to the SSP.

Keywords: child abuse; forensic interviewing; rapport; sexual behavior problems

When Dante Cicchetti and Michael Lamb began studying psychology in the early 1970s, child abuse had only recently begun to attract public and scholarly attention following publication of Kempe et al. (1962) classic report. As the first Director of the US national Office of Child Development from 1970, Edward Zigler, who later mentored both of them, was instrumental in passage of The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 and establishment of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (later the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect) which raised awareness of abuse and played central roles in shaping both public understanding and policy. From that point on, it was difficult for those striving to understand the factors affecting child adjustment and development to ignore the possible impact of child maltreatment on development; a classic chapter by Parke and Collmer (1975) thoughtfully laid out key issues with respect to its diverse etiology, correlates, and impact. In such a context, it was inevitable that child maltreatment would become a common focus of the careers that have paralleled Cicchetti and Lamb's friendship, with Cicchetti universally recognized for showing how maltreatment affects developmental trajectories through decades of research and countless publications (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 2015). By contrast, Lamb's focus, illustrated in this article, has been on investigation and disclosure can our understanding of developmental processes be used to help children provide detailed accounts of their experiences of abuse and thereby facilitate appropriate therapeutic, child welfare, and criminal justice interventions?

Two observations prompted this research focus. One related to the paucity of scholarly research on the ability and willingness of young alleged victims of abuse to provide reliable information a gap in the literature laid bare in several highly publicized cases in the 1980s and early 1990s. A second related to an apparently excessive reliance on adult informants (predominantly parents) by professionals seeking to describe the psychological adjustment and symptoms of children suspected of being in psychological distress. In both cases, it seemed worthwhile to seek a better understanding of children's capacities and limitations. Our quest was facilitated by a comprehensive wave of research on children's characteristics and abilities on which we were able to capitalize, as explained below. Nearly four decades later, we believe that the research has yielded clear findings that have implications not only for those investigating and adjudicating allegations of abuse but also for many other professionals providing services to children, including those in psychological distress.

Most child abuse occurs in private and so its occurrence is often known only to the participants. When suspicions trigger forensic investigations, perpetrators typically deny what they have done and many suspected victims fail to disclose as well, meaning that interventions do not take place unless there is other compelling evidence of what happened (Lamb et al., 2015). For that reason, we have focused on identifying evidence-based practices that help children to describe their experiences, including experiences of abuse, convincingly and in detail. These techniques were incorporated into a structured interview guide that became known as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Investigative Interview Protocol (Orbach et al., 2000). The guide included instructions on how to introduce the interview and each of the participant's roles, establish rapport, and provide

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an opportunity for the child to practice describing experienced events in detail, before being given the opportunity to introduce the topic of abuse. When children made allegations, interviewers were trained to use open-ended questions exhaustively because there is substantial evidence that such questions elicit richer information that is most likely to be accurate (Lamb et al., 2018). They were also shown how to minimize the use of narrow questions by reverting to open-ended questions after each one and to avoid suggestive questions entirely.

Four quasi-experimental field studies showed that interviewers using the Protocol used more developmentally appropriate questions and elicited more information likely to be accurate than peers conducting interviews not guided by the Protocol. These findings resulted in widespread adoption of the Protocol by agencies around the world, with the Protocol heavily represented in the guidelines taught by the US National Children's Advocacy Centers, and we have since published widely available summaries of research assessing the use, validity, and effectiveness of the NICHD Protocol (Lamb et al., 2007, 2008, 2018).

The original Protocol emphasized cognitive techniques known to facilitate and enhance the retrieval and reporting of information by children but failed to address adequately the motivational factors that prevent many children from disclosing abuse, especially abuse at the hands of family members. Multiple studies showed that many children failed to report abuse, even when given the opportunity, because they were scared, embarassed, or feared that no-one would believe them (Pipe et al., 2007). Research showed that children were especially loath to describe abuse by family members or those on whom they were emotionally, psychologically, and financially dependent. Accordingly, we launched a multi-year research project to develop and implement interview techniques that reduce barriers to disclosure by victims of within-family abuse. The exercise resulted in the Revised NICHD Protocol (RP; Lamb et al., 2018).

Over the course of intensive training, interviewers using the RP became more supportive and less insensitive to children's reluctance (Hershkowitz et al., 2017). Importantly, the interviewers' increasingly skillful use of supportive interventions was not accompanied by any change in their use of the most cognitively appropriate utterance types (i.e., invitations), perhaps because all the interviewers had had extensive experience using the NICHD Protocol. Close examination confirmed that, as expected, RP interviews were characterized by more interviewer support and greater child cooperativeness than interviews conducted using the Standard or original Protocol (SP; Ahern et al., 2019; Blasbalg et al., 2019). An utterance-level analysis showed that support was positively associated with decreased reluctance which in turn predicted increased informativeness, partially mediating the effect of support on informativeness (Blasbalg et al., 2018).

Karni-Visel et al. (2019), meanwhile, drew upon evidence that, in forensic interviews, the expression of emotions can powerfully enhance both the quality of children's statements and perceptions that their statements are coherent and credible. They found that the number of emotions expressed was positively correlated with the number of details reported and mediated the association between support and informativeness, suggesting that use of the RP helped children to overcome emotional barriers that limited their informativeness. Importantly, the expression of negative emotions was more important than the expression of positive emotions in creating a cooperative dynamic (Karni-Visel et al., 2022). Nonverbal expressions were more common than verbal expressions of emotions, another study showed, with sensitivity to

these expressions also important in creating the supportive dynamic which enhanced children's cooperation (Karni-Visel et al., 2023). Overall, supportive techniques throughout the interview were associated with reduced reluctance and richer accounts of abusive experiences. Such findings suggested that the RP is an effective tool with which to elicit forensic information from reluctant suspected victims of abuse and underlined how providing support throughout the interview fostered children's well-being and cognitive competency (Blasbalg et al., under review). Indeed, Hershkowitz et al. (2021) showed that it may sometimes be beneficial to continue relationship building into a second interview before broaching the possibility of abuse.

The effectiveness of the RP has been documented at a systemic level as well. Studying a sample of 426 cases selected because there was clear independent evidence that the children had actually been abused (most were victims of within-family physical abuse), Hershkowitz et al. (2014) showed that the RP was associated with an increase in the likelihood that these abused children would make allegations in the course of formal forensic interviews. Analyzing national data, Hershkowitz and Lamb (2020) later showed that proportionately more children made allegations after the Israeli government mandated use of the RP in investigative interviews nationwide (April 2015) than before, when the SP had been mandated. Using the RP rather than the SP also significantly increased the odds that children's statements would be deemed credible.

Close attention and supportive responses to children's emotional reactions thus create a more cooperative and fruitful dynamic within forensic interviews, especially those involving children who were reluctant to talk about their experiences. However, we have also been interested in another group of children who may be reluctant to participate in investigative interviews – children who are suspected of sexually abusing other children – and they are the focus of this paper.

Young suspected offenders

Historically, young offenders tended to be the focus of research by criminologists interested in understanding the implications of early offending for later criminality and the relative advantages of different kinds of interventions. However, children and early adolescents who engage in sexually intrusive behaviors with other children have attracted considerable attention in the last two decades. Overall, it is estimated that about a third of those suspected of abusing children sexually are children or adolescents themselves (Finkelhor et al., 2009) with sexual behavior problems (SBP), including intrusive and aggressive sexual behaviors involving other children, manifested by boys and girls of all ages (e.g., Allen, 2017).

Research suggests that the risk posed by these children is low provided they are identified early and are treated with evidence-based therapy (Dopp et al., 2017). Further, the "Task force on children with sexual behavior problems" (2009) formed by the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (2006) warned that "Care is needed when interviewing children about the specifics of their SBP. Sensitivity to developmental issues and past trauma history is necessary. The interview atmosphere should be supportive and unpressured. Interviewers should expect that children may be reticent to discuss the subject of inappropriate sexual behavior as children commonly deny past wrongdoing of any sort when questioned by adults" (p. 204). One key focus of our research, building on the findings summarized above, was to determine whether use of a developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed,

socially supportive interview Protocol would allow investigators to obtain richer and accurate information from pre-adolescents suspected of sexual offenses.

Our initial investigative protocol for interviewing young offenders (Hershkowitz et al., 2004) emphasized that young offenders share many of the characteristics and limitations of same-aged victims and witnesses and that investigators should take their youth into account when interviewing them. As with our initial Protocol for interviewing alleged victims, however, this Protocol did not address the interviewees' need for emotional support while they were being questioned, even when they had difficulty talking about their sexualized behavior. Whereas most (but not all) victims are willing to disclose information about their experiences when formally interviewed, we found, as expected, that most young offenders withheld information about their experiences in order to avoid punishment or retribution. Because we had shown that supportive and responsive non-suggestive interviewing helped reluctant young victims provide more information about their experiences to forensic interviewers (see above), we expected that promoting youths' trust in interviewers and helping them take fullest advantage of their own cognitive, linguistic, and memory capacities would be similarly beneficial. Specifically, by ensuring fuller, richer, more complete and earlier understanding of the youngsters' problematic behavior, we expected such interviewing to facilitate both more timely interventions to divert offenders from future criminality and prompt interventions on behalf of their victims.

In Israel, all young sexual offenders (like young victims and witnesses) are interviewed by youth investigators employed by the government agency with which we have been collaborating for more than 30 years. Interviews of young suspected offenders are conducted by the same highly trained interviewers who interview alleged victims but their interactions with suspected perpetrators have to respect the rights accorded by law to all suspected offenders, most importantly the right to remain silent when there is a risk of self-incrimination. The assurance of these rights is often described, even outside the USA, by reference to the US Supreme Court decision mandating that suspects be informed of their rights when arrested (Miranda v. Arizona, 1966). As summarized below, researchers have shown that many suspects, young and old, fail to fully understand the scripted warning or "caution" provided by investigators. As a result, a key concern, in developing our Revised Suspect Protocol (RSP), was to ensure not only that the children were told of but actually understood their rights, even if making these rights clear might well reduce the children's willingness to continue participating in the interview!

Informing young suspects of their rights

Most individuals have only a limited understanding of their rights to remain silent and avoid self-incrimination (for a review see Rendall & MacMahon, 2021). Because of their youth, immaturity, and lack of experience with the law, adolescents seem to struggle more than adults to understand and appreciate the meaning of rights (e.g., Baker et al., 2023) and younger adolescents have a poorer understanding than older adolescents (Freedman et al., 2014). Delinquent boys who are characterized by lower psychosocial maturity showed even poorer comprehension of their rights (Colwell et al., 2005), although errors are common regardless of maturity levels (Hughes et al., 2013, Rogers et al., 2014). Despite poor understanding, suspects (including young suspects; Sim & Lamb, 2018) typically affirm comprehension when asked if they understand their rights (Rock, 2007; Snook et al., 2010), although many young suspects cannot explain them correctly (Sim & Lamb, 2018).

Failure to tell children their rights in a developmentally sensitive way may affect suspects' understanding. The rights are often described (1) in their entirety in a way that exceeds working memory capacity, rather than sentence by sentence as recommended (Fenner et al., 2002), (2) orally, with no use of an alternative (e.g., written) form to facilitate understanding (e.g., Eastwood & Snook, 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2011), (3) at a speech rate not suited for processing complex information (Rock, 2007; Sim & Lamb, 2018; Snook et al., 2010; Walsh & Bull, 2012), (4) by officers hastily asking if the suspects understand their rights without verifying understanding (Walsh & Bull, 2012), (5) without the explanations that are necessary to improve comprehension (Eastwood et al., 2016; Snook et al., 2010, 2014), or even with partial and incorrect explanations (Clare et al., 1998; Sim & Lamb, 2018). To remedy those common failures, the RSP included clear developmentally adapted instructions for communicating the rights appropriately, checking and verifying understanding, and providing accurate and full explanations before verifying comprehension again (see details in the Method section and Appendix). To reduce the known risks of false confessions (Malloy et al., 2014), the challenge was to ensure that young suspects could make critical decisions when formally questioned (e.g., whether to waive their rights, whether to plead guilty) based on an adequate understanding of their rights and the opportunity to reason/think without pressure (Rodriguez Steen & Malloy, 2023).

Rapport and support

It is well established that rapport-building is essential when interviewing suspects (e.g., Walsh & Bull, 2012). For example, Alison et al. (2013) showed that rapport-building techniques were associated with positive interview outcomes, while Place and Meloy (2018) found that rapport strategies involving empathy best overcame interviewee resistance. More recent studies emphasize that supportive interviewing promotes rapport, cooperation, and informativeness on the part of adult suspects (e.g., Dianiska et al., 2021; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2023; Vallano et al., 2022). Interestingly, a concern with rapport throughout the interview is more effective than a focus on rapport-building only early in the interview (Baker-Eck & Bull, 2022).

Investigators may find it difficult to build rapport with older children and adolescents who are often reluctant to discuss embarrassing topics (Magnusson et al., 2020). On the other hand, adolescents may especially benefit from rapport with their interviewers. Sauerland et al. (2018) reported that adolescents who established rapport were more likely to be accurate than younger children or adults. Similarly, Dianiska et al. (2024) found that, although various rapport-building tactics differed in their impact, rapport was associated with longer and more detailed narratives, especially from the youngest adolescents.

Question types when interviewing young suspects

Many studies have shown that open-ended invitations which activate free-recall retrieval processes best elicit detailed and accurate accounts from both children and adults (e.g., Kelly & Valencia, 2021). Wyman et al. (2021) found that older children (10–11 years old) were more likely to disclose another's transgression in response to open-ended rather than closed questions, and Lyon and Henderson (2021) showed that recall questions and

rapport elicited valid information without increasing the amount of false reporting. However, interviewers often fail to ask appropriate questions, including when interviewing young suspects too: Hershkowitz et al. (2004) showed that young Israeli suspects, like victims, disclosed more information in response to open-ended prompts than to focused prompts yet 43% of the questions asked by interviewers in Hershkowitz et al. (2004) study were option posing and suggestive, likely compromising the accuracy of the information elicited. A later study conducted in Sweden (Winerdal et al., 2019), similarly showed that police officers most frequently asked leading or suggestive questions of young suspects and put pressure on them.

Interestingly, open questions also facilitate rapport building and maintenance (Brubacher et al., 2020; Kelly & Valencia, 2021), and their co-occurrence in suspects' interviews was associated with higher cooperation from suspects (Kelly & Valencia, 2021), suggesting that the interaction between the two can be especially beneficial. Indeed, Baker-Eck and Bull (2022) reported that the proportion of interviewers' open versus closed questions and interviewer's empathy were associated with real-life suspects' production of forensically relevant information.

Informed by this research on the value of (a) effectively explaining the suspects' rights, (b) rapport building and maintenance, and (c) appropriate questioning strategies, we revised the SSP to include corresponding evidence-based practices and trained a group of Israeli interviewers to use the RSP (see the Method section and Appendix 1). We predicted that, when using the RSP, rather than the SSP, interviewers would: (a) more consistently read the suspects' rights informatively, check that the children understood them, verify that their understanding was accurate, correct understanding when necessary, and provide enhanced support, while the children understood their rights better; (b) establish better rapport with the children before the allegations were discussed, with children providing more personal information and descriptions of their thoughts and feelings; (c) maintain a more supportive approach throughout the questioning phase, encouraging children to be more cooperative, less reluctant, more willing to make a full confession and provide relevant information; and (d) continue questioning non-suggestively so as to elicit more information.

Method

Sample

A total of 198 interviews were conducted with adolescents (12–14 years old, 7 females, 191 males) who were suspected of having committed sexual offenses against other children. Most of the young suspects (123, 62%) did not admit the accusations (e.g., denied, claimed their right to remain silent). Of 75 (4 females) young suspects who made admissions, 50 (66%) admitted all the accusations against them, while 25 (33%) admitted committing less severe sexual crimes than those suspected by the interviewer (e.g., admitting skin-to-skin touching but not penetration).

Because there were too few girls to study the dynamics of those interviews closely, only interviews with boys ($n = 71$) who admitted sexual offenses against other children were included in our analyses of interview quality. Of the 71 boys, 28 ($M = 13.00$ years, $SD = 0.53$) were interviewed using the SSP, whereas 43 ($M = 12.83$ years, $SD = 0.40$) were interviewed using the RSP. The alleged offenses involved vaginal, anal, or oral penetration (35.2% of the cases), fondling under the clothes (29.6%), fondling over the clothes (18.3%), and sexual offenses

without physical contact (such as self-exposure, or cyber sexual crimes,16.9%). The interviews were conducted in a police station (52.1%), in a youth service or child investigation office (33.8%), or in other places (4.2%). Data about the interview location was missing for 9.9% of the cases.

Eleven youth investigators employed by the Israeli Child Investigation Service who were already trained to use the SSP interviewed suspects between January and December 2017. They were then trained to use the RSP and conducted the RSP interviews between January 2017 and August 2018. The study was approved by the research committee of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services and by the University of Haifa IRB.

The standard NICHD suspect interview protocol (SSP)

The NICHD Suspect Interview Protocol is fully structured, covering all phases of the investigative interview (Hershkowitz et al., 2004). Interviewers are instructed to begin by explaining the purpose of the interview and reading the suspects' rights while warning them that their statements could be used against them in legal proceedings. Attempts are then made to establish rapport before the switching focus to the accusations. Open-ended prompts are encouraged throughout the interview, followed by more directive, option-posing and disparity-clarifying prompts when necessary. Whenever possible, however, interviewers are instructed to ask for open-ended elaboration of information provided in response to more focused prompts.

The revised NICHD suspect interview protocol (RSP)

The RSP (see Appendix) represents a revision of the SSP interview guide and is characterized by an enhanced emphasis on developmentally appropriate and supportive interviewing. First, the rights formulation was adjusted to accommodate children's understanding, and the text was divided into 5 short segments. Interviewers were instructed to read each segment separately, check whether or not the children understood it, and then verify comprehension by asking the child to express the content in his/her own words. If the child fails to do so accurately, interviewers are instructed to provide a simple explanation, then verify understanding again.

Second, the RSP guides interviewers to use a variety of rapport-building practices to achieve meaningful rapport. In order to promote children's emotional comfort, trust, and cooperation, rapport building in the SRP precedes rather than follows explanation of the ground rules. Welcoming greetings and expressions of interest in the child's well-being are offered at the beginning of the interview alongside supportive utterances reflecting personal interest in the child, empowerment, and encouragement to disclose personal and intimate information. During rapport building (and throughout the interview), interviewers are shown how to identify expressions of reluctance and emotion by the child as they occur and how to respond in non-suggestively supportive ways (see examples below).

Third, the RSP encourages interviewers to exhaustively probe children's memory using free-recall prompts before asking directive questions, with few option-posing questions (only if necessary). When inconsistencies make clarification necessary, interviewers are instructed to postpone such requests for clarification and to formulate them in a non-confrontational way. Both option-posing prompts and requests for clarification should first focus on omissions or inconsistencies within the child's statement, followed by those arising from comparison with the

alleged victim/s statement, and then those arising from other external evidence.

Fourth, the RP instructed interviewers to use several types of non-suggestive but supportive comments throughout the interview to reinforce the child's efforts, mention the availability of the interviewer as a supportive figure, provide encouragement when the children express difficulty, offer help, or make small gestures of good will. In addition, interviewers were guided to acknowledge, contain, echo and explore emotions expressed by the children and to prompt for emotions if emotions were not mentioned spontaneously.

Data coding

Transcribed recordings of the interviews were checked for their completeness and accuracy before coding using Atlas.ti software (Muhr, 1997).

In the Miranda portion of the interview, coders checked whether the interviewers (1) read each of the 5 segments to the child, (2) checked whether or not the child understood each, (3) verified understanding by asking the child to explain the meaning of that segment in his own words, (4) provided a clear explanation when the child failed to understand, before (5) checking comprehension again, coding it as either correct or incorrect.

Coders then determined whether the specific types of interviewer utterances and children's responses described below were present or absent in each conversational turn. *Supportive interventions* by the interviewers were defined as expressions designed to promote rapport with the child, to communicate the interviewer's trustworthiness, to positively reinforce the child's efforts, or to express emotional support and encouragement. *Substantive interviewer utterances* were classified as open-ended invitations (prompting free-recall responses from the child "Tell me everything that happened"), directives (mostly Wh-questions refocusing the child's attention on details that s/he had already mentioned "When did it happen?"), option-posing (mostly yes/no questions focusing the child's attention on details that the child had not previously mentioned "Were other people present at that time?"), or suggestive prompts (e.g., those that strongly communicated what response was expected as in "You forced him to do that, didn't you?"), using the definitions provided by Lamb et al. (2018).

Expressions of reluctance by the children included omissions (no answer, "nothing to say,"), expressions of resistance ("I don't want to tell you," "I'll answer only this last question"), or denials ("It didn't happen," "I didn't say that"). Child utterances were coded as *responsive* when the child gave a reply relevant to the question asked and *details*, when provided, were quantified using a technique first developed by Yuille and Cutshall (1986) and later used in many studies, including that by Hershkowitz et al. (2004). Details involved the identification of individuals, objects, or events, and descriptions of their features (e.g., appearance, actions, locations). Details were only counted when they added to understanding of the target incidents, so restatements of facts were not counted.

The *internal content* of the child's response was coded whenever the children described their own emotions (e.g., "afraid," "happy"), thoughts ("I was planning to run away"), feelings (e.g., "I felt like I wanted to bang my head against the wall"), or sensations ("my body was shaking").

Four raters first established inter-rater reliability on a separate set of transcripts. To ensure that high levels of reliability were maintained throughout the course of coding, 20% of the transcripts were independently recoded. Coders were blind to the research hypotheses.

Results

The analyses compared interviews conducted using the RSP with those conducted using the SSP using the GLMM procedure. The first results reported are based on analyses involving the larger sample ($N = 198$), which includes both children who admitted the allegations ($n = 75$) and those who denied them ($n = 123$), allowing comparisons between the admission rates in both groups. We then focused on the children who admitted the allegations, comparing interviews with children in the two groups with respect to the description of the children's rights, rapport-building, interviewer support, and questioning style as well as their correlates. Finally, we examined the factors associated with full and partial admission of the alleged offences.

Admission rates

We examined 198 interviews with children (12–14 years old, 7 females, 191 males) suspected of having committed sexual offenses against other children. Most (123, 62%) did not admit the accusations (e.g., denied, chose to remain silent). In the course of SSP interviews, 32 of 87 children (36.78%) confessed fully or partly, compared to 43 of 111 children (38.73%) in RSP interviews. However, in SSP interviews, 15 of 87 (17.2%) fully confessed, in comparison with 35 of 111 (31.5%) in RSP interviews ($\beta = 0.77$, SE = 0.20, $p = 0.026$, 95% CI [0.36, 1.18]). By contrast, 17 of 87 (19.5%) partially confessed in SSP interviews compared with 8 of 111 (7.2%) in RSP interviews ($\beta = -1.06$, SE = 0.44, $p = 0.018$, 95% CI [−1.94, −0.18]). Protocol type thus did not have a significant effect on the overall confession rate, but children who confessed were more likely to do so fully, rather than partially, when interviewed using the RSP, showing the superiority of that version.

Interviews of young suspects who admitted the alleged offenses (n = 71)

Communicating the suspects' rights

In total, interviewers read or re-read some or all of the rights an average of 5.17 times ($SD = 1.27$) in RSP interviews, compared to 3.79 times ($SD = 1.64$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = 1.38$, SE = 0.34, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.68, 2.907]). Interviewers checked understanding an average of 4.26 times ($SD = 2.38$) in RSP interviews and 2.25 times ($SD = 1.62$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = 2.01$, SE = 0.51, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.98, 3.04]). Interviewers also verified comprehension an average of 2.93 times ($SD = 1.81$) in RSP interviews compared to 0.64 times ($SD = 0.95$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = -2.28$, SE = 0.37, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [1.54, 3.03]). Interviewers also provided explanations an average of 1.78 times ($SD = 2.14$) in RSP interviews and .57 ($SD = .87$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = 1.24$, SE = 0.42, $p = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.35, 2.07]). Overall, then, interviewers using the RSP attempted in multiple ways to ensure that the suspects were aware of and understood their rights.

The association between the type of protocol used and the interviewers' supportive behavior during this portion of the interview was then assessed. Interviewers provided support an average of 2.57 times ($SD = 3.18$) in RSP interviews compared to 0.75 times ($SD = 1.24$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = 1.82$, SE = 0.63, $p = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.56, 3.08]).

Finally, the association between the type of protocol used and the interviewee's comprehension of their rights was examined.

When asked what they understood, the children correctly communicated the meaning of their rights 1.62 times ($SD = 1.36$) in RSP interviews but only 0.18 ($SD = 0.48$) in SSP interviews ($\beta = 1.44$, SE $= 0.26$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.90, 1.97]). Comprehension was predicted by each of the practices incorporated into the RSP: reading the rights ($\beta = 0.25$, SE $= 0.29$, $p = 0.008$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.44]), checking understanding ($\beta = 0.29$, SE $= 0.05$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.39]), verifying understanding ($\beta = 0.53$, SE $= 0.53$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.63]), providing explanations ($\beta = 0.23$, SE $= 0.08$, $p = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.39]) and providing support ($\beta = 0.14$, SE $= 0.05$, $p = 0.011$, 95% CI [0.03, 3.25]). However, when all practices were used as predictors in the same model, verifying understanding was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.60$, SE $= 0.06$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.47, 0.73]), followed by providing explanations ($\beta = -0.31$, SE $= 0.08$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [−0.48, −0.15]), then checking understanding ($\beta = 0.15$, SE $= 0.06$, $p = 0.014$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.27]), while reading rights and support had no significant independent effects.

For children interviewed using the RSP, the correlation between claims of understanding and actually understanding the rights was significant and positive ($r = .551$, $p = .000$), whereas it was non-significant and negative for those in the SSP group.

Rapport-building

In the rapport-building phase, use of the RSP was associated with higher levels of responsiveness by the children ($\beta = 0.10$, SE $= 0.47$, $p = 0.028$, 95% CI [1.11,7.08]), and by production of more details about a neutral event than was use of the SSP ($\beta = 0.10$, SE $= 0.47$, $p = 0.028$, 95% CI [1.11,7.08]).

The quality of questioning during the substantive phase

In the substantive phase, about .72 ($SD = .19$) of all information-seeking utterances ($M = 141.23$, $SD = 70.87$), were of a recall nature (open-ended and directive prompts combined) with .25 ($SD = .12$) free-recall open-ended invitations and .47 ($SD = .11$) focused-recall directive prompts. Option-posing questions comprised .19 ($SD = .10$) of the utterances and suggestive prompts .09 ($SD = .08$). There were no differences between the questioning strategies employed in SSP and RSP interviews.

A repeated-measures GLM model compared the average number of details elicited using 4 types of utterances: open-ended, directive, option-posing and suggestive. A significant effect, $F (3,62) = 14.07$, $P = .000$, confirmed that the average open-ended invitation elicited more forensically relevant details ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 3.78$), than the average directive ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .93$), option-posing ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 1.35$) and suggestive ($M = .69$, $SD = 1.30$) prompt, with no significant effects for protocol type or protocol type $\times$ question type. Not surprisingly, therefore, more forensically relevant details were elicited in total by open-ended invitations ($M = 127.65$, $SD = 66.56$), than by directive ($M = 100.10$, $SD = 78.43$), option-posing ($M = 22.54$, $SD = 21.67$) or suggestive ($M = 8.36$, $SD = 12.75$) questions, $F (3,62) = 75.90$, $P = .000$ Again, there were no significant effects for protocol type or protocol type $\times$ question type

Interviewer support during the substantive phase

Use of the RSP was associated with more interviewer support than was the SSP ($\beta = 0.41$, SE $= 0.21$, $p = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.99,2.31]). The overall level of interviewer support positively predicted the level of child responsiveness in the interview ($\beta = 8.53$, SE $= 2.61$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [3.21,13.84]), which in turn, predicted lower levels of reluctance ($\beta = -0.02$, SE $= 0.01$, $p = 0.034$, 95% CI [−.03, −.01]), higher levels of emotional expression ($\beta = 0.01$, SE $= 0.00$, $p = 0.021$, 95% CI [.00, .01]) and more relevant details provided by the children ($\beta = .23$, SE $= .10$, $p = 0.033$, 95% CI [.02,.44]); reluctance predicted fewer details being reported ($\beta = -3.21$, SE $= 1.05$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [−5.31, −1.11]). The overall level of interviewer support also predicted the level of emotional expression ($\beta = 0.27$, SE $= 0.06$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI [.52, .39]); emotional expression did not directly predict the number of details reported but seemed to do so indirectly by affecting the level of responsiveness: when both predictors were used in the same model, responsiveness no longer had a significant effect on details, while emotional expression had an effect ($\beta = 9.00$, SE $= 3.99$, $p = 0.031$, 95% CI [.87, 17.13]).

Full versus partial confessions

Of the 71 young male suspects who made admissions, 48 (67.6%) admitted the accusations entirely, while 25 (32.4%) admitted less severe sexual crimes than those alleged. Significantly more of those who were interviewed using the RSP (81.4%; 35 out of 43) than the SSP (46.4%; 13 out of 28; $\beta = 3.84$, SE $= 1.41$, $p = 0.007$, 95% CI [1.06, 6.63]) confessed entirely.

Full confessions were positively predicted by the number of practices employed in the rights portion of the interview ($\beta = 4.02$, SE $= 1.53$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI [.96, 7.08]), full understanding by the children of their rights ($\beta = 17.06$, SE $= 7.59$, $p = 0.028$, 95% CI [1.91, 32.22]), interviewer support ($\beta = 1.68$, SE $= 0.64$, $p = 0.05$, 95% CI [.00, 2.55]), and the proportion of interviewer prompts that were open-ended invitations ($\beta = 2.63$, SE $= 0.77$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI [1.08, 4.11]). When all predictors were combined into a single model, only the proportion of interviewer prompts that were open-ended invitations ($\beta = 2.28$, SE $= 0.77$, $p = 0.009$, 95% CI [.58, 3.98]) and protocol type ($\beta = 0.29$, SE $= 0.12$, $p = 0.018$, 95% CI [.05,.53]) significantly predicted making full confessions.

Discussion

This study was designed to validate the NICHD Revised Protocol for forensically interviewing young "suspects" (RSP). Like the Revised Protocol (RP) for interviewing possible victims, this protocol provided guidance on interviewing young suspects in a developmentally appropriate and supportive manner. Extensive research into the effectiveness of the RP for interviewing young victims who were reluctant to disclose information about abusive experiences encouraged us to design an interview protocol for interviewing young suspects. Specifically, we tested the operationalization of four key evidence-based practices in the current study: (1) explaining in a developmentally sensitive manner the suspects' rights to avoid self-incrimination, (2) establishing meaningful rapport at the onset of the interview, (3) providing non-suggestive social and emotional support throughout the interview, and (4) pursuing an open-ended, non-suggestive, and non-intrusive line of questioning. As expected, the RSP was superior to the Standard NICHD Suspect Protocol (SSP) on all of these dimensions, with no adverse effects apparent.

Communicating suspects' rights in a developmentally sensitive manner

First, the data show that interviewers using the RSP read the suspects' rights to them more often, notably also doing so when the children asked them to do so or failed to understand them. The specific

required wording had been simplified before this project took place, although the required formulation was still syntactically and conceptually complex. Informed by relevant research, we divided the text into smaller segments as recommended by Fenner et al. (2002), read those at a slow pace (Sim & Lamb, 2018), and offered children a written text as well, with each of the segments on a different sheet, written in bold and large characters, in response to evidence that providing an alternative form of communication facilitates understanding (Eastwood & Snook, 2012; Hughes et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2011). Indeed, our study showed that the number of presentations was a predictor of comprehension.

Second, interviewers using the RSP checked the children's comprehension more often, and although affirmation of comprehension is not necessarily a good measure of actual understanding, even by adults (Walsh & Bull, 2012), we found that, in the RSP condition (but not in the SSP group), children's affirmation of comprehension predicted actual comprehension. Perhaps the developmentally appropriate communication of the relevant rights in the RSP increased the children's metacognitive control and awareness of what they really understood. Alternatively, the enhanced supportiveness associated with use of the RSP, including when the rights were being presented, may have allowed the children to admit when they did not understand a segment.

Third, RSP interviewers asked the children to explain the segment in their own words, an exercise that may have helped them reason about (Rodriguez Steen & Malloy, 2023) and thus understand what they were being told. In the current study, as in Sim and Lamb's (2018), allowing suspects the opportunity to process and explain the rights was a strong predictor of understanding, perhaps because such an exercise allows the interviewer to detect misunderstanding and thus target their explanations.

Indeed, interviewers in the RSP condition provided more full and accurate explanations than they did in the SSP conditions. This practice seems important in light of research suggesting that, although explanations improve comprehension (Eastwood et al., 2016; Snook et al., 2010, 2014), interviewers often fail to provide them, and may even mislead suspects by providing partial and incorrect explanations (Sim & Lamb, 2018). Relatedly, children in the RSP condition explained their rights correctly more often than those in the SSP condition: An impressive feat given that many adults understand their rights poorly (Rendall & MacMahon, 2021).

Rapport building and maintenance

Using the RSP, interviewers fostered greater responsiveness during the rapport-building phase, providing more details about a neutral event and sharing more information about themselves, suggesting that the children were more comfortable, trusting, and cooperative (Dianiska et al., 2021; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2023; Vallano et al., 2022). Similarly, the RP better promoted rapport during interviews with young suspected victims although interviewers tend to be more suspicious of young suspects than of alleged victims (Malloy & Lamb, 2010) and therefore rapport building with suspects is probably more challenging. As a result, the enhanced rapport with young suspects achieved using the RSP is a significant achievement, likely to positively affect the interviewee's well-being, as well as the outcomes of interviews with both adults (Alison et al., 2013; Place & Meloy, 2018) and children (Hershkowitz et al., 2021).

Beyond establishing rapport initially, researchers have underscored the benefits of maintaining rapport and providing non-suggestive support to both victims (Blasbalg et al., 2018) and

suspects (Baker-Eck & Bull, 2022) throughout the interview. This proved difficult for the first interviewers to use the RP: although they were supportive in the rapport-building phase, they failed to remain supportive during the substantive questioning (Hershkowitz et al., 2017). Only after further revision of the RP added detailed guidance about how to remain supportive throughout the interview, and a more intensive training and supervision program was implemented, did interviewers provide enhanced support in the substantive phase, meaningfully improving the dynamics and outcomes of the interviews. The data reported above showed that RSP interviewers who had previously been trained to use the RP with reluctant child victims were more supportive of the young suspects throughout the questioning phase and this was associated with enhanced outcomes. As with child victims, support levels predicted improved responsiveness, lower levels of reluctance, and higher levels of emotional expression, all correlations suggesting improved child-interviewer interactional dynamics. These dynamics were associated with increases in the amount of forensically relevant information provided.

Recall-based questioning

There were no group differences in the distribution of question types, which is not surprising in light of the fact that both groups included experienced and highly trained interviewers who had conducted many RP interviews with young victims. The interviews were all of high quality, dominated by recall-based prompts (72% of all information-seeking prompts), with 25% being open-ended invitations and 47% directive questions. By comparison, the interviews in the prior study of forensic interviews with young suspects were of poorer quality (Hershkowitz et al., 2004): those interviewers employed fewer (19%) open-ended invitations and many more risky prompts (43% were option-posing or suggestive prompts). As expected on the basis of other research (Lamb et al., 2018), invitations elicited significantly more details on average than other types of prompts.

Suspects' admissions of the allegations

Although the children were more aware of their rights in RSP interviews, more of them were willing to make full confessions than in SSP interviews, even though equivalent numbers made admissions in both groups, suggesting comparable initial degrees of willingness to acknowledge some responsibility. It appears that the superior interpersonal dynamics of the RSP interviews enhanced the children's willingness to admit all allegations, whereas their counterparts in SSP interviews tended to minimize their alleged involvement in the crimes, making only partial confessions.

Impressively, full confessions were predicted by the implementation of best practices, including the careful and developmentally appropriate communication of the children's rights, thereby ensuring comprehension, rapport building, supportive behavior, and an emphasis on recall-based questioning. As described earlier, all those practices encourage witnesses and suspects to voluntarily provide accurate information, suggesting that the full confessions elicited were no less accurate than those that were partial. This finding is noteworthy because young suspects are disproportionately likely to provide forced or false confessions.

In sum, this study showed that use of the RSP was associated with improved interpersonal dynamics (more developmentally sensitive and supportive interviewer practices) and more

appropriate responses by the children (better understanding of their rights, better rapport, greater responsiveness and informativeness, and greater likelihood of fully admitting the allegations).

Limitations

This field study benefitted from high ecological validity and provided a rather rare insight into the dynamics of real-world investigations involving children suspected of sexually abusing other children. One central finding was that the RSP was more likely than the SSP to elicit full and voluntary admissions using evidence-based practices but we do not know whether the alleged events actually happened. Because this was a field study rather than a laboratory analog experiment, we cannot evaluate the accuracy of the information obtained. However, the use of universally recommended practices suggests that the suspects' statements were likely to be valid and were certainly no less likely to be valid than those obtained in the SSP interviews. In addition, young suspects were only interviewed formally when the alleged victim's allegation were deemed credible and/or when there was evidence that the alleged event/s took place. Nevertheless, the effects of the RSP should be further examined in laboratory analog studies particularly because the quasi-experimental design of the current study precludes clear causal inferences, making experimental research necessary.

In addition, because the RSP interviews were conducted after the SSP interviews, one could attribute the higher quality of the RSP interviews to increased interviewer experience (see, for example, Jäckle et al., 2011; Olson & Peytchev, 2007), rather than to the characteristics of the Protocol. We attempted to minimize the possible effects of experience by scheduling the data collection periods close together in time and by only including very experienced interviewers, so that the additional experience gained by the time they started conducting SRP interviews would be marginal but differences inexperience may have accounted for some of the effects reported.

In addition, because the study was conducted in Israel, the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other legal systems and cultures is unclear. Investigative dynamics and outcomes can be influenced by different societal factors such as the criminal law, age of criminal responsibility, the availability of child/youth courts, treatment and rehabilitation options, and other factors likely to vary across jurisdictions. However, the RP, which was developed and validated in Israel, yet widely and successfully used in other countries (e.g.,Cyr, 2022), suggests that the RSP might similarly be useful in diverse cultural contexts, although further research in other countries is needed.

Implications for practice and policy

The findings reported here obviously have implications for those investigating instances of child-on-child offending but they also have broader implications for developmental psychopathologists. Use of the RSP helped interviewers establish meaningful rapport and respond to displays of distress supportively yet non-suggestively, perhaps thereby enhancing a sense of well-being, a cooperative demeanor, and a willingness to admit allegations of wrongdoing sincerely and voluntarily. As such, the RSP proved to be an effective tool for interviewing young suspects, superior to earlier protocols such as the SSP. Importantly, effective use of the Protocol requires intensive training and regular supervision (Ahern et al., 2018; Blasbalg et al., under review, 2018; Karni-Visel et al., 2019); attempts to implement abbreviated training

programs to teach interviewing skills have largely failed (Lamb, 2016). Accordingly, investigative agencies seeking to implement the SRP need to recognize that costly and time-consuming training is absolutely necessary (Cross & Hershkowitz, 2017). Indeed, the effects obtained in this study may be partially attributable to the fact that forensic interviewers in Israel have been required to use the NICHD Protocol for young victims for more than two and a half decades, facilitating their adaptation to the RSP.

We hoped that the young suspects' disclosures would allow them to benefit from access to professional interventions to assist them in overcoming their sexual behavioral problems and enhancing their social and emotional development. Treatment and surveillance are at the heart of the Israeli laws relating to juveniles; relatedly, forensic interviews of children under 14 are conducted by social workers using the RP with alleged victims and witnesses and the RSP with those suspected of sexual wrongdoing. In this context, obtaining full admissions should be beneficial for them. It remains important to determine whether young suspects who confess indeed benefit more from professional treatment and obtain better developmental outcomes than those who deny allegations against them.

Disclosure by young suspects also means self-incrimination, which may lead, in some legal contexts, to criminal charges and severe long-term consequences. In such cases, the RSP, designed as a tool to support children, might become a double-edged sword. Although justice is better served when RSP interviews are conducted, it is not in the best interests of children to be prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced when we know that a rehabilitative approach using evidence-based therapy is highly effective (Dopp et al., 2017). Clearly, social and legal policy should dictate that supportive investigations be followed by professional treatment for these youth, preferably using evidence-based community treatment involving the parents.

Nevertheless, unless law and public policy change in this regard, or the age of criminal responsibility is raised, we can only ensure that developmentally sensitive, respectful, and supportive investigations help children make voluntary and intelligent legal decisions about such matters as waiving their rights or deciding to plead guilty. Such decisions seem to be more likely when forensic interviewers employ the RSP.

More broadly, the results of this study and our decades of related research with alleged victims underscore how much information children can provide about their experiences, motives, thoughts, and feelings when they are interviewed in developmentally appropriate and empathic ways. However, we must also draw attention to the evidence that, without careful and extensive training, most interviews (not only investigative interviews but also interviews with therapists, health care providers, and educators) are replete with practices that undermine children's capacities and degrade the quality and accuracy of the information they provide. Few would question that suggestive questioning by therapists undoubtedly reduces the accuracy of children's reports and subsequent recollections but we should not overlook how a reliance on closed-ended questions, driven by the professional's hypotheses about the child's underlying problems (typically informed by the referring parent or teacher), also limit the richness of the information elicited and may result in an incomplete or even inaccurate understanding of the child's pathology or distress. As we look to the future of developmental psychopathology, as a discipline and as an arena for practice, we urge much closer attention to evidence about how the way we typically interact with children may routinely lead us to underestimate their capacity to

inform us and, in the worst cases, lead us to reach inaccurate conclusions. We look forward to more process-oriented studies of the factors affecting the validity and usefulness of diagnostic and treatment decisions in the years ahead.

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Appendix
The Revised Suspect Interview Protocol

A. Introduction

A.1. My name is [name]. Today's date is [date], and it is now [time]. I'm interviewing [child's name] at [location].

Verify that the recorder is on.

A.2. Hello, [child's name], I am glad to meet you today. How are you?

My name is _____ and my job is to talk to children about things that have happened. As you can see, we have a video-camera here. It will record us talking so I can remember everything you tell me. Sometimes I forget things and the recorder allows me to listen to you without having to write everything down.

In the introduction, gestures of goodwill are appropriate:
EG: Are you comfortable?/ Can I do anything to make you more comfortable?

The police have received a complaint that you *(concrete brief accusation that might mention: the act, the allegation, and the alleged frequency. EG:' you touched a girl's/several girls' breasts/ private parts/ several times')* and I was asked to talk to you about that. We will talk about that later on.

It is important that the child not give any information before the interviewer has read aloud the section ' Informing juvenile suspects of their rights before the interview' fully. If the child interrupts, say:
We will talk about that in a little while. Now please listen carefully to what I have to tell you:

B. Informing juvenile suspects of their rights before the interview:

Each segment of the rights below (B.1.a to B.3.b) should be read loudly, slowly, and clearly. A written version of each segment can be offered. After reading each segment, the comprehension check, verification and correction, if necessary, should follow:
[Child's name], I want to know if you understood what I just told you/you read.
Wait for the child to respond. If the child says s/he didn't understand, slowly repeat the wording above and check the child's comprehension at the end of every sentence. If the child says s/he understands, say:
Please tell me what you understood.
Wait for the child's response, reinforce the child for any correct report and correct anything that was misunderstood.
Please make sure the child doesn't fail to exercise a right for reasons that could be overcome; suggest possible solutions.

B.1. (Child's name), you should know that:

B.1.a. You have the right to remain silent in this interview and you don't have to tell me anything. According to the law, everyone who is suspected of doing something that's wrong or forbidden can refuse to speak about it.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

B.1.b. If you decide to remain silent, and a trial is held later, the court may consider the fact that you remained silent.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

B.1.c. [Child's name], I will tell the police everything you tell me so that they can investigate further. Everything you say during this interview will be recorded and videotaped. If a trial takes place, what you tell me now may be brought up in court.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

Before we continue, I would like to let you know that you have additional rights:

If the right to consult an attorney hasn't been revoked, say:
B.2.a. You have the right to talk to a lawyer in private before we begin the interview.
Would you like to talk to a lawyer?
Wait for the child to respond. If the child wants to consult an attorney, allow him/her to do so. If the child says no, ask:
Tell me about your refusal to talk to a lawyer. (*and/ or*, if necessary) What's the reason you don't want to talk to a lawyer?
Please make sure the child doesn't fail to exercise a right for reasons that could be overcome; suggest possible solutions. For example, if the child says 'because I don't know any lawyer' you can suggest your help and guidance in contacting one.
If you know the child consulted an attorney prior to the interview, you can ask:
I understand you spoke to a lawyer before the interview. Is that true? What's the lawyer's name?
If the right to consult an attorney has been revoked, say:
Children being questioned can usually talk to a lawyer before the interview begins, but in your case, it has been decided, according to the law, that you're not allowed to talk to a lawyer now.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

If the minor is under arrest or the police intend to arrest him/ her, say:
B.2. b. If you don't have a lawyer, a public attorney can be appointed for you and you can consult with him or her for free. If you would like that, I can arrange it for you.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

To a minor who is not under arrest and is entitled to have the parents notified about the interview, say:
B.3.a. Before we begin the interview, you have the right to talk to one of your parents or to a relative or friend who is over 18.
In addition, you have the right to have one of them with you during the interview.
You can also decide that you don't want them here during the interview.
Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

Would you like to consult one of these people before we start the interview?
Wait for the child to respond, if the child says no, say:
Tell me about your refusal to talk to them? (*and/ or*, if necessary) What's the reason you don't want to consult any of these people? *Please make sure the child doesn't fail to exercise a right for reasons that could be overcome; suggest possible solutions.*
If the child says yes, allow the child to consult an appropriate adult before the interview.
Would you like one of those people to be with you in the interview? *Wait for the child to respond, if the child says no, ask:*
Tell me about your refusal to have one of them with you in the interview (*and/ or*, if necessary) What's the reason you don't want any of them here with you in the interview?

Please make sure the child doesn't fail to exercise a right for reasons that could be overcome; suggest possible solutions.

If the child says yes, let the person that the child named be present for the interview.

Say to that person:

Hello, (*name of the person*). (Child's name) asked you to be present for this interview. I have to tell you that you cannot intervene during the interview, under any circumstances. Also, you can't leave the room unless I allow you to do so, and under the conditions I set for you. Is that clear?

If it was decided that a parent/another adult should not be permitted to be present, say:

Children under investigation usually have the right to have a parent or other relative/adult present during the interview, but in your case, it has been decided, according to the law, that they are not allowed to be present for the interview.

Please check, verify, and correct comprehension.

B.4. [Child's name], do you have questions about what I have said so far?

Please answer the child's question/s and provide explanations.

C. Rapport building and narrative training

C. 1. Now, [child's name], before we talk about the complaint, I want to get to know you better. Tell me about things you like to do.

If the child responds, express appreciation and reinforce the cooperation:

Thank you for sharing that with me, it helps me get to know you/ I am starting to get to know more about you.

If the child does not answer, gives a short answer, or gets stuck, you can say:

We haven't met before, and I really want to get to know you.

If the child displays nonverbal cues of avoidance or resistance (e.g., gaze aversion), address them right away:

[Child's name], let me see your eyes.

[Child's name], come and sit closer to me.

[Child's name], I can see you're [crying, quiet], tell me what is happening, so I can help.

C.2. I really want to know you better, [child's name]. I would like you to tell me about things you like to do.

Wait for an answer.

If the child continues showing avoidance or resistance, invite him/her to talk about a neutral topic you learned about before the interview.

I heard you like [activity, hobby *e.g., animals/sports*]. Tell me about [activity, hobby].

Ask about distinctive items (e.g., of clothing):

I can see you are wearing [a unique item, e.g., soccer team T-shirt]. Tell me about [item].

C.3. Now, [child's name], tell me more about [an activity the child already mentioned].

C.4. [Child's name], tell me about something fun that has happened to you [at school].

C. 5. Tell me about [something the child mentioned].

Use various cued invitations to ask about different topics; one of those cued invitations should focus on internal contents: thoughts, feelings, sensations, or emotions.

C.6. You told me about something [happy, pleasant, fun] that has happened to you at school. Now, tell me about something unpleasant that has happened to you at school.

Important! Do not mention the location in which the alleged abuse may have taken place.

C.7. Please tell me about [something the child has mentioned].

Ask various cued invitations to elicit richer information about a variety of topics; one cued invitation should focus on internal contents: thoughts, feelings, sensations, or emotions.

If the child reveals distressing information, please explore that briefly while making supportive statements (see Addendum). You may want to check whether the child has previously reported it:

You told me about [the distressing incident]. Have you told an adult about that?

If the child says no, say: Would you like me to help you tell someone?

C.8. [child's name], you told me about [pleasant event already described] and about [unpleasant event already described], and shared your [emotions, thoughts] with me (if s/he did). Thank you for letting me know. It's important that you know you can talk to me about anything, both good things and bad things.

D. Further Rapport Building and Episodic Memory Training

Prior to the interview, please identify a recent, short, positive, and meaningful event in which the child actively participated, such as a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, or a sports competition. If possible, choose an event that took place at about the same time as the alleged/ suspected abuse. If the alleged abuse took place during a specific day or event, ask about a different event. Alternatively, it is possible to select a hobby or activity the child mentioned earlier and focus on the last time the child engaged in it.

[Child's name], before we talk about the complaint that brought you here, I would like to get to know you even better.

D.1. *Main invitation*

If an event was reported previously: You told me earlier about [the event previously mentioned]. Tell me, [child's name], everything that happened [during the event], from the beginning to the end, as best as you can.

In case an event wasn't identified previously, ask: Did you do something special [Bar-Mitzvah party/ school activity /youth movement activity] recently? Tell me, [child's name], everything that happened [during the event], from the beginning to the end, as best as you can.

If the child doesn't mention an event, say:

[Child's name], you told me earlier about something pleasant and unpleasant that has happened to you. Thank you for sharing that with me, it helps me get to know you. I would like to get to know you even better. Please tell me about a pleasant experience you've had recently.

If the child doesn't answer, say:

[Child's name] if there is anything that's bothering you, you can tell me/share with me.

If the child asks to discuss the complaint, move to the substantive phase, part F.

D.2. *Follow-up invitations*

Please repeat the first action that started the event. Then ask:

And then what happened, [child's name]?
Use this question as often as needed throughout this section until you have been given a full account of the event.

Thank you, [child's name], you have told me many things (if s/he did). I want to ask you some more questions about what you just told me.

D.3. *Time segmenting invitations*
Try to use three time-segmenting invitations, although you may adjust the quantity and type of invitations to the child's capabilities and reactions.

[Child's name], I would like you to tell me everything about [the event].

Please tell me everything that happened from the moment [an activity the child mentioned] to the moment [a subsequent activity].

If the child has difficulty understanding delineated segments, say:
Please tell me everything that happened from the moment [an activity the child mentioned] began.

Thank you, [child's name], for telling me that. You speak/express yourself very clearly, and that helps me understand what you are saying.

D.4. *Cued invitations*
Try to use three cued invitations, but you may adjust the number depending on the child's capabilities and reactions. Please focus on thoughts and feelings as well.

Cued invitations can be used in one of two formats:
Tell me more about [activity, object, thought, feeling].
Earlier you spoke about [activity, object, thought, feeling]. Tell me more about that.

D.5. [Child's name], thank you for telling me about [title of the event]. When we talk today, it is very important that you tell me everything about things that have really happened to you.

D.6. [Child's name], how are you feeling so far in our conversation?

E. Explaining and Practicing Ground Rules

Adjust the questions according to the child's developmental level.

E.1. In our conversation today, I'll be asking you questions. If I ask a question that you don't understand, please tell me so that I can explain it to you. Okay, [child's name]?

If I ask a question, and you don't know the answer, just tell me, "I don't know."
Pause
In our conversation, please tell me only the things that you know or remember.

E.2. And if I say things that are wrong, you should correct me/tell me what is right. Okay, [child's name]?

If I said that you were born in [a wrong detail about the child's country of birth], what would you say?

(Reinforce the child if s/he gives the right answer): That's right, [child's name], you were not born in _____.

(Ask for the correction if needed:) What is correct?

Correct a wrong answer: No, [child's name], you are not [wrong detail], you are [correct detail].

[Child's name], now you understand that if I say something incorrect/wrong, you need to correct me and tell me what is right.

E.3. It is very important [child's name] that your answers be accurate today.

F. Substantive Phase

Transition to substantive issues.

Important! If the child expresses explicit verbal resistance without denying the allegations at any point, employ support to deal with the resistance (Addendum) without using additional transitional prompts.

F.1. Now that I know you better, [child's name], I want us to talk about the complaint that brought [me/you] here today.

I told you earlier that I am interviewing you about the complaint made about you, and I read you your rights. As I said then, you are accused of (briefly repeat the accusations). I also said that, by law, you have several rights. First, you don't have to tell me anything, although the court may take into account that you didn't say anything. You also have the right to consult with a lawyer and with your parents or other adults. Finally, you have the right to have a parent or adult present when you're being interviewed. Do you want me to explain some rights again? *Accommodate the child's request.*

F.2. Are you willing to talk about the accusations?
Wait for the child's response. If the child says yes, whether or not s/he associates him/herself to the abuse, go to F3. If the child asks to remain silent, go to F4.

F.3. [Child's name], tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end.
(If the child mentions one or more events, go to part G - Exploring the incidents. If the child denies involvement in the alleged events: go to question F5.

F.4. *If the child asks to remain silent, say:* [Child's name], things have been said about you/ accusations have been made against you, and this is your opportunity to tell me what had happened. *Wait for the child to respond.*

If the child remains silent, inform him/her that he can provide an alternative version and that therapy is an available option:
F.4. 1. [Child's name], even if you think the accusations are false/ not true, it is important for me to hear your side/story [alternative account].
F.4. 2. [Child's name], children who perform sexual acts on other children need therapy in order to stop doing that, and there are people whose job is to help them.
(If the child continues to remain silent/ states his right to remain silent, consider ending the interview.)
F.4. 3. [Child's name], if so, we will end this conversation now.

If the child denies involvement in the alleged events and seems avoidant or resistant, provide support to deal with the resistance before and while progressing through the following transitional prompts.
F.5. [Child's name], even if you think the accusations are false/ not true, it is important for me to hear your side [alternative account].
F.6. [Child's name], I want you to take a few minutes to think about that, because it is very important. If you feel more comfortable writing, here's a pen and paper.

Wait for the child to respond, if s/he is writing wait until s/he stops writing, then ask:

Will you share with me what you just wrote? *Wait for the child to respond, if the child says s/he is willing to share, add:* Will you show me what you wrote? You don't have to. If you do, you should know that it can be used as evidence.

If there was an earlier investigation, say:

F.7. [Child's name], I've heard that you talked to [school manager, social worker, other professional] at [time, location]. Please tell me what you talked about.

F.8. [Child's name], do you know about [material or circumstantial evidence connected to the events: e.g. injury from a bottle of alcohol] that happened to someone?

F.9. Did something happen at [time /place/ context of the incident such as a party/camping]?

F.10. Did something happen with [a child/name of the victim]?

F.11. [Child's name], did [present gradually more specific details of the complaint] happen?
Repeat this question as needed.

F.12. [Child's name], I understood that [you told someone/ someone said] that you were involved in [a short summary of the allegations]. I want to check if something like that happened.

If the child keeps denying involvement in the suspected/alleged event/s, go to G.3.b .

G. Exploring the incidents

Throughout the substantive part it is important to preserve and enhance the rapport established with the child and to continue offering support (Addendum) to address expressed inhibitions, distress, and conflicts. If the child mentions a specific incident:

G.1.a. [Child's name], you told me that [briefly summarize the child's version]. Tell me everything from the beginning to the end as best you can.

If the child mentions a specific incident or s/he gives a generic description and you cannot determine the number of incidents:

[Child's name], you told me that [briefly summarize the child's version]. Did that happen one time or more than one time?

If the child mentions a number of incidents:

[Child's name], tell me everything about [the last/first time/ incident at place/at time/ specific incident] from the beginning to the end.

G.1.b. *Follow-up invitations*
Please repeat the child's description of the action/occurrence that started the event. Then ask:
And then what happened?
Use this question as often as needed until you have a complete description of the incident.

G.1.c. *Time segmenting invitations*
You have told me many things and helped me understand what happened. Now, [child's name], I want to ask you more questions about [incident title].

[Child's name], think back to that time [day, night] and please tell me everything that happened from the moment [an activity the child mentioned] to the moment [a subsequent activity the child mentioned].

You may use this question as often as needed to ensure that all parts of the incident are described.

G.1.d. *Cued invitations*
Cued invitations can have two formats:
- [Child's name], tell me more about [activity, object, feeling, thought].
- [Child's name], you mentioned [activity, object, feeling, thought]. Tell me more about that.
Use this question as often as needed throughout this section.

Important! Free-recall invitations should be exhausted before proceeding to directive questions.
G.2. *Directive questions*
If some central details of the accusation are still missing or unclear after the exhaustive use of open-ended questions, use directive questions.

[Child's name], you said that/mentioned [activity, object, feeling, thought]. [How, when, where, who, what, which, how many, what did you mean]?
It is important to pair open-ended invitations with directive questions whenever possible:
Tell me more about that.
Important! If the child mentioned more than one incident, repeat questions G.1-G.2 for each incident before moving to option-posing questions, G.3.

G.3. *Option-posing questions*
Review the information you have received, see if there is any missing information, and plan the rest of the interview. Be sure to formulate option-posing questions in writing and consider replacing them with open-ended (or directive) prompts. Option-posing questions should be followed by invitations. First ask about information missing from the suspect's statement, then information missing based on the alleged victim's statements, and finally about information missing based on external evidence.

G.3.a. *Option-posing questions—eliciting information based on the child's version.*
[Child's name], when you told me about [specific incident embedded in time and place] you mentioned [activity, object, feeling, thought]. [Did, have, has, is, are] [present a detail for child to confirm or deny]?
Follow with an invitation:
Tell me everything about that.

G.3.b. *Option-posing questions – eliciting information based on the alleged victim's version.*
If the child denied the allegations or only partially associated him/herself with the incidents, ask a general option-posing question:
[Child's name], did other things happen with [a child/alleged victim]?
[Child's name], did more things happen with [a child/alleged victim]?
If the child denies, ask specific option-posing questions.
[Child's name], did you go to your house with [a child/alleged victim]?

G.3.c. *Option-posing questions – eliciting information based on evidence*
[Child's name], did you [send WhatsApp message/ did something happen to the child/ alleged victim's clothes]?

G.4. Clarifying contradictions

If substantial disparities remain between the suspect's version and that of the alleged victim/ suggested by case evidence, a general clarifying question might be required:

G.4.a. [Child's name], thank you for everything you've told me. In a conversation with [the alleged victim], different/additional things were said. It is important that you help me understand everything that has happened. I would like you to think back, try to elaborate and be as accurate as you can. *(If the child still denies the allegations or seem reluctant, say:)*

G.4.b. Take a few minutes and think whether there is anything else you would like to tell me.

(Break)

Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

If the child provides some information, listen and elaborate accordingly. If substantial disparities remain between the suspect's version and that of the alleged victim/suggested by case evidence, you may formulate double-cued invitations, which include the two differing items, without suggesting that they are contradictory. Avoid identifying contradictions using terms such as 'but', 'yet' or 'on the other hand'. First address contradictions within the suspect's statement, then those between the child's and alleged victim's statements, and finally those between the suspect's statement and external evidence.

G.4.c.1. *Clarifying contradictions within the suspect's statement*
[Child's name], you said you met her once. You also mentioned a second time.
Please tell me about that.

G.4.c.2. *Clarifying discrepancies between the suspect's and the victim's statement*
[Child's name], you said you touched her over her clothes. She said you touched her under her clothes. Please help me understand.

G.4.c.2. *Clarifying contradictions between the statement and external evidence*
[Child's name], you said you do not know her. On your phone, there is a message sent to her. Please tell me about that.

If the child keeps denying/ sticks to his/her version, you can say the following:

That is your choice and I'll respect it.

G.5. Did anything like that happen with other kids? On other occasions?

Please follow any disclosure by the child and investigate accordingly.

H. Disclosure Information

[Child's name], you've given me [lots of] information and that really helps me to understand what happened, and now I would like to know if other people knew about what happened.

Explore the disclosure process, addressing the disclosure time, circumstances, recipients, potential discussions of the event, and reactions to disclosure by both the child and recipients. Use open-ended questions whenever possible. If the child did not disclose the incident previously, ask why not.

I. Exposure to inappropriate sexual content

If, during the interview, the child mentions exposure to inappropriate sexual content such as watching online pornography, sexual behavior that isn't age appropriate, or poor sexual hygiene in the child's environment, explore that using cued invitations.

Example: Earlier you mentioned (watching pornography, playing sexual games, watching your sister and her boyfriend), tell me everything about that.

If the child didn't mention inappropriate sexual content during the interview but there is a concern that s/he may have been exposed to such content, ask:

I.1 Have you watched sexual activity before?

I.2. Have you seen sexual acts in a photo/ movie/ the internet/ live?

J. Exploring the possibility the child has been victimized:

J.1. Did someone hurt you?

J.2. Did someone (do something sexual with you/undress you/ touch you)?

If the child discloses that he has been victimized, consider a victim protocol interview.

K. Ending the interview

[Child's name], you've talked to me today and I want to thank you.

K.1. Is there anything else you think I should know?

K.2. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

K.3. Are there any questions that you would like to ask me?

K.4. Before we finish, it is important for me that you tell me how you felt before you came to talk to me?

K.5. How did you feel during our conversation?

K.6. How do you feel now that we have finished?

If the child confessed but expressed ambivalence while confessing, ask:

[Child's name], at the beginning of our conversation you had a hard time telling me/you didn't want to tell me [use the child's words] about [the event/s], but then you did tell me. What helped you talk?

Thank you for talking to me today, [child's name], and for helping me get to know you. We will end this conversation now and if you would like to talk with me again you can tell [the school's principal/counselor/teacher]. *You can add if necessary:*

I may want to talk to you again.

L. Neutral topic

[Child's name], what are you going to do after we finish talking?
Talk to the child for a couple of minutes about a neutral topic.
Say to the recorder:
Interview ended at [time]

Addendum

Supportive Non-Suggestive Techniques for the Revised NICHD Suspect Protocol[1]

A. Addressing the Child in a Personal Way

Address the child in a personal way using the name s/he prefers. Avoid using terms of endearment (e.g. 'sweety').

[1]Adapted for the RSP from Table 9.1 in Lamb, M. E., Brown, D. A., Hershkowitz, I., Orbach, Y., & Esplin, P. W. (2018). *Tell me what happened: Questioning children about abuse* (2nd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

B. Establishing Rapport

- Welcoming the child

  I am glad to meet you today/ to get to know you/ to get to talk.
  It's nice to meet you, my name is _____.

- Expressing personal interest in the child

  I really want to get to know you/ about things that happened to you.
  Today is the first time we've met and it is important for me to know you better.

- Making small gestures of good will

  Are you warm enough?
  Let me show you the toilets.
  Here is a glass of water for you.
  Do you want to look at the video camera?
  Do you need a short break?

C. Reinforcement

- Reinforcement during the interview

  You are telling me clearly/ in detail and that's important.
  You're really helping me understand/ know you.
  You corrected me and that's really important.
  I understand what you're saying.
  Avoid 'grading' ("very good") or associating reinforcement with specific content ('You told me that you ran away, which was good').

- Expressing thanks and appreciation

  I want to thank you for your help.
  I really appreciate that you are talking to me.
  I appreciate that you are trying to remember and tell me.
  Thank you for sharing with me.

- Emphasizing the child's agency

  It's up to you whether you talk to me or not.
  I will respect your choice/decision.

D. Using rapport

- Mentioning and building on trust

  You told me a lot about yourself and I feel I know you better.
  Now that we know each other better, you can share with me what happened.

- Expression of care or worry

  I'm here for you.
  I care about you.
  You are important to me.
  People are/ I am worried that something may have happened to you. [You can specify the cause for concern (e.g., The teacher said you were crying this morning).]

- Presenting the interviewer as someone to disclose to

  If something happened, I'm here to listen to you.
  You can trust me and tell me if something happened.
  It's okay to share secrets/ problems with me.
  I talk to many kids who tell me about things that have happened to them.
  It's my job to listen to the children if they have problems.
  If there is something that should stop/ not happen again, you can tell me.
  It is important for me to hear your side.

E. Emotional Support

- Generalized comments about the child's perceived difficulties

  Many children find it difficult to talk/feel ashamed at the beginning but then it becomes easier.
  Many children have secrets.

- Empathy

  I understand it is difficult for you to tell me (when the child said that).
  I know it's been a long interview.

- Checking for the child's feeling

  How are you feeling so far/now that we are done?
  How did you feel before we began/during our conversation?

- Exploring emotions

  Tell me more about your fears.
  Tell me what you're afraid of.
  I can see you're crying. Tell me what is happening.
  You said you don't want to/cannot tell me. Tell me more about that.

- Open questioning about expressing feelings or thoughts

  You said you were sad/disgusted /wanted to run away. Tell me more about that.

- Echoing emotions

  You said you were sad/you were crying.

- Acknowledging/Accepting/Recognizing emotions

  You say that it was very painful, I understand what you you're saying.
  I see what you are saying.

- Reassurance

  Don't worry, I won't tell other children.
  You won't be late for the bus.
  Nobody is going to arrest you.
  Sometimes it helps children when they speak and don't have to keep a secret.
  Sometimes it's possible to help children who have done such things.

Therapy can help children who do sexual things to other children.

- Exploring unexpressed emotions and conflicts

  If there is something you are worried about, please tell me.

F. Encouragement

- Emphasizing the child is the source of knowledge

  I'm asking you these questions because I was not there.

- Legitimating expression

  You can talk about bad things and good things.
  In this office you can say everything.
  It is ok to tell me about this kind of things/ to say these words/ bad words.
  Many children tell me what happened to them.

- Expression of confidence/ optimism

  I think you can explain it well.

- Offering help

  I want to make it easier for you. What would help you tell me?
  Would it make it easier if you wrote it down?
  You can start talking and I'll help you by asking questions.
  I am here to help.
  There are people whose job is to help in these cases.

- Encouraging non-verbal communication

  Could you please turn toward me?
  Come on, look at me.
  I'd like to see your eyes!

- Encouraging disclosure

  It is really important that you tell me if something has happened.

G. Counter-Supportive

1. Suggestive Support –Presuming content, selective reinforcement
2. Confrontation – Interviewer challenges the information given by the child by suggesting it's implausible, mentioning competing external information or pointing to inconsistencies in the child's statements.
3. Causing discomfort – Interrupting or criticizing the child's statements or behavior, being coercive, using the wrong name for the child.
4. Ignoring or not recognizing:
   A. Clarification requests or inquiries by the child.
   B. Resistance, omissions, denials
   C. References to internal content (including conflict, emotions (positive or negative), or physiological responses associated with emotions or pain).
5. Unfounded Support – unrealistic promises or reassurance.