What Did He Say?
I Don’t Understand!

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“Even very young children can tell us what they know if we ask them the right questions in the right way.” (Anne Graffam Walker, 1999)
Safety

Before talking with a child, consider the following:

• If I were in this child’s shoes, would I talk to this person?
  • Why or why not?

• Your perception of safety may be very different from the child’s
Would you tell if ....

• the alleged perpetrator still has access to you?

• your caregiver is unsupportive or aligned with the perpetrator?

• you are emotionally attached to the perpetrator?

• you are/were threatened; manipulated; or intimidated by the perpetrator?
Would you tell if ….

- you witness family violence each time sexual abuse occurs?
- everyone who is supposed to protect you is impaired, intoxicated, high?
- you think agencies like DCF will take you away... or the police may arrest you for talking to them?
Would you tell if ....

• you are embarrassed and ashamed about what happened?

• you have told before and no one believed you?

• you are new to this country and have trouble understanding these funny people?
Would you tell if ....

• you are afraid of disappointing your parents?

• you are afraid of your parents’ reaction?

• you told your parent but didn’t tell them everything?
THINGS TO CONSIDER

• Private setting free from distractions – Phones!
• Parents should not be present
• Alleged perpetrators should not be in the vicinity
• Except in rare circumstances, siblings should be spoken to individually
• Cultural Sensitivities
  ◦ Eye contact, body language, verbal language, spiritual
THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Inquire about any special needs children may have (i.e. developmental delays, assistive devices, meds, etc.)
- Keep an open mind
- De-emphasize your authority
DO’S and DON’TS of Talking With Children

• **DO** engage the child in a conversation prior to addressing the allegations

• **DO** talk about things that the child finds interesting

• **DO** act interested in the child and what he/she is telling you

• **DO** use open ended questions as much as possible
ENGAGE IN A CONVERSATION — NOT AN INTERROGATION
Talking with Preschoolers

- **We Adults are Too Boring**
  Keep things moving, but keep it simple and concrete

- **Break it Up – Attention Span of 3 – 4 Minutes**
  Get a little bit of information and then do something else—little bit of information and then do something else, on and on and on
Talking with Preschoolers

- Preschoolers View Objects with Great Detail

- Preschoolers are Used to Having Conversations with Adults Prompting Them

- Helps them recall and think about things
Talking with Preschoolers

- Give Lots of Pauses for Them to Respond – Slow and Deliberate Pace

You may need to repeat the *exact same* question a second time to give them time to process the question and respond, *BUT be careful with asking the same question over and over in a different way*

**WHY?**

If we keep repeating a question and don’t get an answer, preschoolers think something must be wrong, so they give us a different answer.
Talking with Preschoolers

- What Answer Do They Give Us the Most?

"Yes"

Why Do Kids Answer “Yes?”

- We value “Yes” answers because it shows cooperation

- Children think that’s the answer we adults want

- If given multiple choice questions with limited choices, i.e. was your shirt green or red, the child may answer to the form or usage of the question and say “Yes” instead of picking a choice, or picking no choice at all
Talking with Preschoolers

- Sometimes Preschoolers Don’t Know that They Don’t Understand Something

- When They Understand You, or Think They Understand You, They Look at You—When They Don’t Understand You, They Look Away

- When they walk away, ignore you or don’t respond, they may not understand you
Preschoolers and Memory

- Memory is pretty good, but may not be able to store a lot of detail

  They *know* what they know –
  Be careful not to push them to tell you something that they *don’t* know

- May need some prompting to remember things
- Source Monitoring – knowing how you know things – something you heard or saw or was told; They “just know it”
Preschoolers and Memory

- Rote Memory vs. Autobiographical Memory
  - “Please” and “Thank You” vs. Ability to Tell a Narrative
    - Kids who have not been exposed to autobiographical skills think we are crazy when we ask them to tell us something
What Kind of Attention Span Can You Expect from Children

3 years old = Less than 5 minutes

4–5 years old = Less than 15 minutes

6–10 years old = 15 – 30 minutes

10–12 years old = Up to an hour

** Sometimes it is possible to refocus younger children
Preschoolers and Attention Span

- Need to “Do” Instead of Talk
  - They get bored with us talking
  - They have a limited ability to deal with their boredom, fear, anger, etc. — They can’t get it together to participate in the unfamiliar interview

- “Perceptual Pull” of Their Environment — Can’t tell themselves to stop focusing on something going on around them and pay attention to you
  - Have less ability to pay attention — Are more easily distracted

- Can’t Think about Their Thinking — Metacognition
  - Understanding your own thought processes
Preschoolers and Language Development

- Learn to talk from the people they are around the most — Especially kids who don’t go to school and are not exposed to many people outside of their family
- Families who talk a lot with kids increase their language skills and what they understand
- **Inconsistency** with what they say *is normal*
  - It’s a normal part of language development
Preschoolers and Language Development

- **Receptive Language**
  - What they understand and can respond to

- **Expressive Language**
  - How kids communicate – words, gestures, facial expressions, pointing

Receptive Language is Greater than Expressive Language
Preschoolers and Language Development

- **Avoid pronouns** — It’s alright to be redundant, saying the person’s name over and over

- **Problems with “here” & “come”** — Ambiguity — The meaning depends entirely on who uses the words

- **Problems with “it” & “that”** — Have no meaning unless referring to something else
Preschoolers and Language Development

- Be cautious when using prepositions
  - 3 year-olds — “in” can mean “between”
    “on” can mean “above”
  - 4 year-olds — Confuse “above” “below”
    “in front of”
- “Before” and “after” are not mastered until about 6½ years of age (“after” comes later than “before”)
Preschoolers and Language Development

- “Always” and “never” — Understanding not present until about age 5

Preschoolers interpret the words as a pair that is either all negative or all positive — Make no distinction between them
Building Rapport with Preschoolers is not about *Talking* — It’s about *Doing*
Preschoolers and Rules While Talking

➢ Figure out what is more important for you to spend your time on

➢ Reinforce it if given the chance

➢ May not be useful for 3 and 4 year-olds

➢ Short and simple
What Really Happened/Did Not Happen

- Their sense of morality
  - They understand that if my parent isn’t happy, it’s not a good thing
  - Development of a sense of right and wrong is in its very early stages of development
  - Preschoolers usually don’t lie with the deliberate purpose to deceive
  - Fantasy — Monsters are real, so is the tooth fairy — Don’t worry too much to dismiss fantasies because those fantasies are real to them

Their reality is their reality
Talking with Preschoolers

- Asking About Family
  - Let’s you know who is in the home/in their life
  - Can help you get to know names and nicknames, etc.
  - Most kids love to tell you about their family and themselves
  - Ask Right Before Transitioning to the Allegations – Why?

*It may help prompt a disclosure*
Talking with Preschoolers

- Types of Questions to Use:
  - “What happened?” seems to work better than “Tell me what happened?”—Too many words to focus on
  - Focused Narrative Questions are Even Better
    “You told me you were in the kitchen at your home. Where in your kitchen?”
Focused Narrative Questions

❑ “I heard you had to go to the doctor. What did you do there? What did you talk about?”

❑ “I heard you told your mom something. What did you tell her?”

❑ “I heard the police came to your home. What did the police do?”
Talking with Preschoolers

- **Types of Questions to Use:**
  - Multiple Choice Questions
  - Yes/No Questions
    - Kids think we are satisfied as long as they give us an answer; Yes/No questions give them a choice, so in their minds they think if they just pick one, we will be happy – **Stay away from them if the answer matters**
  - Leading Questions
    - Only when necessary (but always follow up with focused questions and choose them carefully)
Talking with Preschoolers

- They can usually answer the concrete ‘wh’ Questions – ‘Who’ / ‘What’ / ‘Where’
  - ‘When’ / ‘how’ / ‘why’ or ‘how come’ are abstract questions
    - You may only get to ask 3 - 4 follow-up questions, so choose good ones; May not be able to answer — Don’t push to get answers to questions they don’t know
  - Initially try to get the action and the people involved
Talking with Preschoolers

- Information may be disjointed, incomplete or confusing
  - Talk from script memory (general memories) instead of episodic memory (memory of a specific event)

- Preschoolers often make misconceptions of pins, knives, scissors, hammers, etc. for other objects — That is their only reference point for something that has hurt them and they don’t always see what goes in their body
  - Don’t try to clean it up; Let it go and it can easily be explained with child development
Five very helpful thoughts

1. I wasn’t there so...
2. Even if you think I know, tell me anyway.
3. Even if you think it doesn’t matter, tell me anyway.
5. Ask the child if there is something that you forgot to ask them about.
HESITANT OR RELUCTANT CHILDREN

Express compassion or empathy towards the child’s difficulty in talking about the subject matter.

Ask the child to help you understand what happened.
Reassure child that he/she did nothing wrong, and he/she is not in any trouble *with you*

Use different tools, i.e. drawing, writing

Acknowledge and address the child’s concerns

Take a break
Tentative/Hesitant Children Tend to Say...

“"I forgot.""

“I don’t remember.”

“He tried to...but he didn’t do it.”

That didn’t happen to me, but it happened to...”

“Jackie, my brain is just too tired to talk anymore.”
Avoidance Response

- Child responds... “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember.”

- Ask the child... “You don’t know or you don’t want to talk about it?” or “You don’t remember or you don’t want to talk about it?”
If child has acknowledged that something has happened but is hesitant to talk, proceed with:

- What do you think is going to happen if you tell?
- Has somebody told you not to tell, keep a secret, etc.?
- Are you scared about something? What?
- Is somebody worried about you? Who?
Avoid Using Value Judgments

• Good Touch/Bad Touch
  Remember, not all touches are bad!
  Mr. Smith is a bad man.
  You shouldn’t have let him do that.
  Why did you let him do that?
  Why didn’t you tell before?

❖ These can lead to false recantations, guilt on the child’s part and possibly protection of the alleged perpetrator
Do Not Encourage Fantasy

- Tell me your story.
  The word “story” in some cultures means a lie

- Let’s pretend...

- Let’s play a game

- Was he big like Superman? the Hulk? etc.
What does that mean???

- Don’t take for granted that you know what the child means or that the child knows what you mean.
- He had “sex” with me! Have the child define what “sex” means to him/her.
- He put his penis “in” my vagina. What does “in” actually mean to the child?

**Remember contact with the vaginal area, especially in young children, may feel like actual penetration.**
Body Language

- Pay very close attention to your own body language - Non-verbal responses can suggest to the child that he/she is giving a desired response or an undesired response

***Be consistent*** in your use of body language
False Promises

- “I’ll make sure your Daddy never does this again…”
- “After we’re done talking, we can play dolls all day long.”
- “Nobody is going to get in trouble if you tell the truth.”

- **Don’t** make promises you are not sure you can keep!

Children who have been abused don’t need yet **another** betrayal by an adult
So Now, What Do You Do Once You’ve Gotten a Disclosure?

- Don’t ask for more details or probe for more information
- Don’t introduce information the child has not brought up

Do say: “What you’re telling me is very important, and I have a friend that I want you to go see and tell him/her what you’re telling me.”
End on a Positive Note

After telling the child that you have a friend that you’re going to have them go see, don’t leave them hanging.

Go back to talking about something the child previously told you that he/she liked, or go back to a neutral subject.
REMEMBER … Attention Span You Can Expect from Children

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Know When to Quit
Questions

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