

How the Unique Aspects of Adolescent Development Impact the Interview Dynamic*

Differences in cognitive capacities between the adult-interviewer and adolescent interviewee pose challenges to a successful interview.

Cognitive Development

1. Adolescents process questions differently from adults.

- a. Children's and adolescents' abilities to comprehend what others say to them and to express themselves through language progress as they mature. In general, adolescents begin to think and express themselves more like adults than children, they are developing abilities to think that are more efficient and effective.
However, these intellectual changes are gradual, and it is not until middle or late adolescence that these abilities become integrated into the individual's general approach to thinking and reasoning.
- b. It is also important to keep in mind that many adolescents who have contact with the juvenile justice system have learning disabilities and attention deficits.

Implications for interviewing:

Adult interviewers must gauge an adolescent's ability to process language, his/her level of vocabulary, ability to abstract and other indicators of cognitive development in order to structure appropriate questions.

2. Adolescents think more in the present and have trouble focusing on the future.

- a. Adolescents' attitudes about time differ from those of adults. Generally, adolescents seem to discount the future more and weigh more heavily the short term (as opposed to long-term) consequences -- both the risk and benefits -- of decisions.
- b. Adolescents will be more concerned about what will happen that day, and have more difficulty talking about an event that won't occur until some time in the future. Thus, for example, in a cellblock interview, a teenager wants to know if he will be released that day, but you're asking him questions about whether he will go back to school, a seemingly irrelevant, future event.

Implications for interviewing:

Interviewers have to make the connections -- between what information the interviewer is seeking and the teenager's interests -- for the teenager to see. The interviewer has to somehow address the teen's immediate concerns to put the interview back on track.

3. Adolescents are fairness fanatics.

- a. With their increased cognitive abilities, adolescents often embrace principles with a vengeance. They insist idealistically on what should be, and are intolerant of anything that seems unfair or arbitrary. Further, in line with their own development of personal autonomy and resistance to authority figures, they will challenge social conventions in the name of principle.
- b. A common mistake that interviewers make is assuming that if they apologize for having little time, the adolescent should be able to work efficiently on the interviewer's clock. However, teens will often feel resentful about the interviewer's time constraints, and feel cheated. Or adolescents will sometimes get stuck on correcting what they believe is an incorrect statement in the course of an interview, and have trouble moving on, thus stalling the interview.

Implications for interviewing:

An interviewer must learn how to navigate around sticking points like these to put the interview back on track.

Identity Development and Social Development

1. Egocentricity.

- a. Adolescents tend to be egocentric. Intense self-consciousness sometimes leads teenagers mistakenly believe that others are constantly watching and judging them. They doubt that others – especially adults -- can really understand their unique experience.

Implications for interviewing:

Critical to a successful interview is the ability of the interviewer to build trust so that the teenager can feel that s/he can confide in the interviewer. This includes asking questions in a non-judgmental way.

2. Identity development.

- a. Adolescence is a time when young people attempt to establish a coherent, stable identity, and, in the process, "try on" different personalities, interests and ways of behaving. Young people often look to their peers to form their identity, and they have a need to belong. Even seemingly innocent questions about a young person's friends can be interpreted by the young person as a criticism of him/her and therefore the young person's view of himself or herself.
 - (1) For example, adolescents react strongly when someone implies that they should not dress in a certain way or do an activity that defines them as part of a group.
 - (2) Furthermore, they are likely to be loyal to family and friends and get much angrier than an adult would when something negative is implied about people who are important to them (even those people who have abused or neglected them or are known substance abusers and criminals).

Implications for interviewing:

Interviewers must take special care to structure questions and use a tone of voice that conveys to the young person that the interviewer is not judging the young person but is instead truly interested in who s/he is.

3. Relationships with authority figures.

- a. It is not uncommon for young people to mistrust adults, and to be fearful of strangers. Adolescents, when questioned by persons in authority, assume that there is no common ground between them.
- b. They expect adults to be judgmental, even if they appear friendly, and therefore some teens are unresponsive to adult questions. Other young people react to authority figures by being susceptible to adult suggestion and overly eager to please.

Implications for interviewing:

Rapport-building is the necessary foundation for a successful interview. Adults typically use eye contact to convey interest. A young person, however, will sometimes interpret a stranger making eye contact with him/her as a sign of aggression. Therefore, the adult must gauge the situation before deciding whether to use eye contact. Moreover, in general two adults should not interview an adolescent at the same time, because the adolescent will feel "ganged up on." With a child who the interviewer senses is overly eager to please, the interviewer should reassure the child that s/he will not be judgmental of the child's answers (i.e., "I'm going to continue to help you as your attorney no matter what you tell me about what happened that day") and simply wants to hear the child's viewpoint.

D. Competency Development (i.e., Mastering Skills). Talking about what s/he (and his/her family) has done well is a way to build rapport and get the adolescent more involved in the interview.

* From: *TALKING TO TEENS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM: Strategies for Interviewing Adolescent Defendants, Witnesses, and Victims*. American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Center Juvenile Law Center, Youth Law Center Lourdes M. Rosado, Editor <http://www.njdc.info/pdf/maca2.pdf>