

Interviewing Children*

Excerpts from an article for Court Appointed Special Advocates to help professional evaluators interview children

Many of the techniques listed in this article can be used by child welfare workers to interview children to assess the child's safety and well-being. This should not be confused with an ability to use these as therapy or to diagnosis a child.

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Choosing Appropriate Interview Questions

It is difficult to do an entire interview without asking any questions. It is more effective to use open-ended, or indirect questions. Research shows that children provide more accurate information when they are freely narrating, rather than when they are being asked direct questions (Garbarino). Open-ended questions allow children to expand on their ideas and give us a better sense of their thinking. Asking children to describe their home, their parents, or what they enjoy doing, allows them the freedom to elaborate as they choose. Indirect questions provide a margin of safety for the child. If children are asked questions such as, "Some kids believe all boys should live with their Dads, what do you think?" or "Why would it be a good idea if the judge decided_," then they have an opportunity to comment, without feeling that they are directly revealing their choice. As evaluators, we have to try to find indirect ways to help the child share important information. If a child avoids an issue, then it may be necessary to try another approach

As an evaluator, you should encourage children to ask questions, and ask them to share whatever they would like about themselves or their family. Children enjoy having a sense of control over what they will be doing and saying.

Confidentiality

Another issue to consider in interviewing children for an evaluation is confidentiality. Gardner avoids this issue, but does ask the children if there is anything they've said during the interview that they do not want their parents to know. Some courts have guidelines which state that children are to be informed that the information they provide will not be confidential. Evaluators need to comply with their court, or if their court does not offer any guidance, reach a decision of their own. At the end of the interview you may want to ask the child if there is anything they do or do not want you to tell their parents or the judge.

Developmental Stages and Interviewing Techniques

At the beginning of the interview, it is important for you to assess the child's developmental level and to frame the interview so that age-appropriate interview techniques are used. It is important not to confuse chronological age with normal developmental stages. A child's developmental age may not match what may be expected for the child's chronological age. You need to integrate your knowledge of child development with your knowledge of the child's sense of time, temperament, and language abilities. Some of this information may be obtained through interviews with the parents, either through questionnaires completed by the parents, consultations with school teachers, or your own observations.

Once you have a sense of the child, it becomes easier to understand the child's thinking. What the child says and does can best be interpreted by understanding the child's developing cognitive abilities and emotional state of mind.

When formulating questions to ask a child, it is important that the questions be appropriate for the developmental level of the child. The following developmental stages address some of the developmental considerations which can be useful in planning an interview with a child

The Interview Setting

A home visit allows you an opportunity to enter that particular child's world and learn about the child's home and play environment. When doing a home visit, I always take certain items which I may want to use in the interview. The items depend on the age of the child and on the information I am trying to elicit. I always include drawing paper (large and small), felt pens, crayons, puppets, games, and a deck of cards. After the initial greetings with the family, I ask the child to show me the child's bedroom and play area and then proceed with the interview in a room which is separate from the rest of the family. Before leaving the home, I observe the child with the family and engage them in some interactive family activity.

Beginning the Interview

During the initial part of the interview, you need to focus on helping the child feel comfortable and relaxed, and explain to the child why the interview is taking place. Initially, I let the child explore and move towards getting the child to share something about the child's self. I then share with the child my role in the process using drawings or the dry-erase board. I use the latter to depict my meeting with the child's parents and to explain the importance of getting to know the child since I am trying to help the parents plan for the necessary changes in their lives I encourage the child to ask me any questions. As a way of reducing anxiety and engaging the child, I may introduce the "squiggle game," ask the child to "draw yourself;" play a game of hangman (latency-

aged children), or do the card toss.

Squiggle game.

This game was introduced by D.W. Winnicott. In this game, the child and therapist each take a turn making a "squiggle" on a blank sheet of paper. A squiggle is a continuous line drawn in circles or any other shapes. The child creates a drawing from the squiggle and describes what they've drawn. Some children will color in each shape and others will make the shape look like some animal. Squiggles can become suggestive and express hidden conflicts when done repeatedly in a therapeutic situation. I use it as a safe, nonthreatening way to engage children of many ages.

Winnicott describes squiggles as a way to loosen a child's defenses and to begin communication with the child.

Draw yourself.

I use this task to provide an indicator of the child's developmental level and to get a sense of the child's perception of self. After the child completes the drawing, I ask the child to give me some words that tell me what this child is like, thinking, or feeling. If this is a young child, I write the words on the child's picture or, if the child is older, ask the child to write the words which gives me an idea of writing and spelling skills.

Hangman.

Most children eight and older know how to play hangman. I usually use a dry erase board and ask the child to draw a hanging platform and pick a word for me to guess. If the child seems very relaxed during the interview, I will ask the child to pick a word that will tell me how the child feels about being in this interview, how the child feels about the parents not living together, and/or about the parents fighting. If the child is not sure how to spell the word, I get someone to write it on a piece of paper for them. The child then draws blank lines to represent each letter of the word below the hanging platform. I begin guessing letters, and if they are not part of the word, the child writes the letters down along the side of the board and begins to "hang me" by putting a part of the body on the noose for each letter that is guessed incorrectly. If I guess the correct letter, it is written on the appropriate blank line. The objective is for me to either guess all of the correct letters or guess the word. If I have not guessed the word by the time an entire body is drawn, then I'm "hung," and the child reveals the word and wins the game.

Card toss.

I use an empty wastebasket and set it on the far side of the room. I take a deck of cards and the child and I take turns tossing a card into the basket, and keep score as to how many are successfully tossed in. If it is a small child, I make sure the child is standing

closer to the basket than I am. This also works well when I am meeting the siblings together, because it provides a good opportunity to observe sibling interaction.

Age Appropriate Interviewing Techniques and Games

When interviewing children, it is important to remember that what we observe may raise questions about the child and the child's life, but we must be cautious not to misinterpret their play or take their words literally. We do not want to reach a conclusion based on any one piece of information; it is best to use play to assist in formulating a hypothesis which can then be further explored. Information that emerges in play needs to be corroborated by other sources, such as further observation of the child during play techniques, teacher consults, or parental, sibling, and other relative interviews. Observe the affective tone of the play and the context in which the affect occurs.

Infants

Since we cannot "interview" infants, I propose the following process.

Direct observation of the child.

Watch the child while playing, or generally relating to the parent, in order to gain a sense of the child's temperament. Observe the infant's development, and view the infant's reactions to a stranger (the evaluator). It may be useful to use the Baley's Infant Development Scale in assessing the developmental range. Note whether or not the baby makes eye contact (some are gaze avoidant). Ask yourself: What is this baby's affect? Is the baby dour? Does the baby show apathy? Does the baby seem comfortable with the parent? Is this a baby with whom anyone could be happy?

Assessing the parent-child interaction.

It is important to note how the parent relates to the child.

Note whether the parent appears to be calm, gentle, relaxed, and confident about parenting, or if the parent is anxious, easily frustrated, inattentive, indifferent, or detached. Note what the parent does with the baby and what the parent communicates to the child through looks, touches, and gestures.

One diagnostic tool you might use is a colorful object (for example, a red unsharpened pencil) placed between you and the parent holding the child. Observe the child's and parent's responses. Does the baby move towards the object? Does the parent restrain the child, or move the object away or towards the child?

After the observation, ask the parent for their view of the observation. Was this typical behavior for the child, or was it atypical. (Has the child been sick? Did the child have a difficult night?)

Interviews with collaterals who know the infant.

This "interview" with the infant and parent will hopefully provide you with a sense of how secure this child feels and whether or not the baby is wary, not very responsive, not very flexible, and, therefore, not very adaptable, to changing situations. You may also get a sense of whether the parent provides the child with appropriate stimuli, enhances the security of the child, and meets the child's needs.

2 to 5-year olds

With this age group, it often works best to simply have a table with play figures (small people and animals, with small houses, cars, etc., such as Fisher-Price's, "Play Family") and invite the child to play. This can be done with the child alone and then with each parent to see if certain themes emerge in the child's play or if these themes differ in each situation.

Dialogue with the child needs to fit the child's developmental level. The following are some suggestions which have been found to be effective (Garbarino):

1. When possible, use short and simple sentences that incorporate the child's terms. If you are unfamiliar with the child's terms, ask the child: "What do you call _?" or "Tell me about_."
2. Use names rather than pronouns (for example, "Uncle Sam", rather than "he").
3. Rephrase a question that a child does not understand rather than repeating it (if you repeat the question the child may think they gave the wrong answer the first time and change their answer).
4. Avoid asking questions involving time.

Although some 2 and 3-year-olds may not have very good verbal skills, recreating a situation or event often helps to stimulate their memory. The following are examples of structured play which can bring forth important information about who is central to the child's life as well as the child's feelings about a particular person. Young children can often be engaged in doll house play and play with animals (stuffed or puppets) where specific situations can be played out. Even if they are not very verbal, the children can be asked to place the play figures where they think they belong.

They may also respond to, "Please show me what happens when Dad comes to pick you up and you leave Mom." Some kids will have the Mom wave good-bye as the child leaves. One child I interviewed had the Mom figure grab the child saying, "Mama said, 'Don't go, Emily, don't go; stay with Mommy.'" It is difficult to know whether the child was projecting her own feelings of resistance in going with Dad or if she was mimicking her Mom. This, however, provides you with a clue to explore further.

Tea parties can create an opportunity to see who children invite or don't invite. The child can be asked to pick a stuffed animal to represent each in~ tee. Ask the

child to pick an animal who reminds the child of that person. Place the animal at the "tea party," and then have the child continue with the play. If the child does not include the parents, then you may ask if they would like to do so. You may also be invited to have tea and then will have an opportunity to see how the child relates to new people.

Children enjoy putting play figures into cars or airplanes and then going places. These scenes can be suggested such as, "Who will go in the car? or Where will you go?" You can suggest that the car is going to the other parent's home, and see if the child plays that out. The child can be asked questions about the car ride such as, 'What is fun about driving or going in the car with Mom/Dad?' "Who else is in the car when Mom or Dad pick you up?" Sometimes the child is resistant to drive to the other parent's home, another clue which should be explored.

I feel game.

This game is very nonthreatening and familiar to some children, so they feel comfortable playing. It may pave the way for exploring the child's feelings. Use a paper bag with several objects in it, such as a piece of yarn, an eraser, a rock a pencil with a sharp point, or a small ball, etc.

Invite the child to feel one object and describe to you what it's like: "Is it small, big, soft, hard, long, short?"

After pulling all the objects out of the bag, invite the child to draw, or help draw, some faces that show how the child feels, for example a sad or happy face (some will draw other faces). Each face needs to be on a separate piece of paper, near the child. Next, show the child appropriate pictures (from the TAT, or pictures cut out of magazines) and ask the child how they would feel if what is happening in the picture happened to them. Or, ask the child to, "Show me the face that shows how you feel when happens. (I then describe an event that has happened or might have happened to them.) I mix difficult happenings with safe ones ("How do you feel when you get to sleep with Mom?" or "when you go to the park to play?"). It helps to prepare your questions in advance.

Book reading.

I will read to the child an appropriate book about separation/divorce (for example, Dinosaur's Divorce), and as I am reading I ask, "Did this happen in your family?" "Do you ever feel like this?" "What did You do when your Mom/Dad ?"

Telephone game.

Two telephones are needed, or other items can serve as objects to represent telephones (for example, two blocks). Different make-believe phone calls are presented to the child such as:

1. "Let's pretend Dad has called your Mom to ask if he can come pick you up."
2. "Let's pretend Mom calls you when you are at Dad's house."
3. "Let's pretend Dad calls you and Mom is angry at him."
4. "Let's pretend you call Mom when you're at Dad's."
5. "Let's pretend Dad calls you. What does he say to you?"

6 to 9-year olds

The younger children in this age group respond well to some of the above techniques: doll house play, puppet shows, tea parties, car/airplane scenes, telephone game, and reading books.

With this age group, it helps when trying to determine if the child has understood a question, to ask the child to repeat what you have said rather than asking, "Do you understand?" As evaluators, we have a tendency to ask questions repeatedly. Try not to follow every answer with another question. Instead, either comment, ask the child to elaborate, or simply acknowledge the child's response. Learning about a child's routines affords you an opportunity to refer to certain activities that may help a child recall particular events that you may need to learn more about.

The following are common techniques used to elicit information about the child's family situation, the child's feelings, and/or their feelings about their family.

Three wishes.

"If you had three wishes about your family, what would they be?" Common responses are: "That Mom and Dad live together, that they stop fighting, or that we all live in the same house."

Magic wand.

"If you had a magic wand (it is nice if you actually have a magic wand!) and could change anything you wanted, what would you change about a) your family, b) your Mom or Dad, c) where you live, and d) yourself. " Since these children need a sense of control over their lives, they enjoy getting to "change" the parents. Some will say, "I'd make them stop yelling at me." or

"I'd make Dad be more fun." or "I'd make Mom not be so tired all the time "

Draw your family (kinetic family drawing).

Often this will give you the child's idealized version of the family. You might want to ask the child to, "Tell me about your family. " or "Tell me something about your Mom or Dad."

Then ask the child to draw their family with everyone doing something active. You might ask:

"How is feeling in this drawing?" If the child draws a picture with only one parent, ask the child to, "Draw me a picture of the family at 's house."

Draw your Mom/Dad.

After the drawing is complete, tell the child, "Well, this gives me an idea of what your Mom and Dad looks like. Now can you tell me some words that will give me an idea of what your Mom and Dad are like and I'll write the words next to their picture as you tell me." (Some children may need you to give them some examples of words or you may have a list on a large piece of butcher paper which contains a number of adjectives from which they can select.) Some children are quick to use phrases such as: grumpy, yells a lot, fun, and takes me places. Other children are reticent. If the child struggles with providing the adjectives, I may try to guess and ask: "Is Mom fun, sad a lot, quiet, or boring?" Sometimes I get nothing but positive comments about one parent and nothing but negatives about the other. I may also get the same adjectives for each parent. Often this technique gives me an idea of the child's view of each parent.

Animal projection..

Ask the child about having animals at home or what the child's favorite animals are Then ask: "What animal reminds you of your Mom/Dad? Why?" Or, ask the child to draw the animal that reminds them of Mom/Dad. · "If you could change yourself into an animal, what animal would you be? Why?"

Projective storytelling.

I propose to tell a story with the child. I tell the child that I will tell a part of the story, and then stop so the child can add to the story. We go on taking turns adding to the story until one of us wants to end the story. I usually begin with: "Once upon a time Annie lived with her Mom and Dad in a _ (child adds on). Annie, Mom, and Dad liked to go together to_ (child adds

on). "Then one day, Dad ", etc.

The story can give you more information about the child's perception of the child's life history, or of the child's capacity for fantasizing! Nonetheless, children have the opportunity to, in a less threatening way, tell you about themselves.

Draw Mom/Dad 's homes

Ask the child to list the members of their home and then to list next to each home what they like best and least about being there. You can also ask them how they feel about the others living in the home. This can inform you about their relationships with siblings and significant others in the home.

Favorite things in life.

Take three sheets of paper and title them Mom, Dad, and Me. Ask the child to list each person's favorite things (for example, TV program, ice cream flavor, sport, activity, etc.) and have the child list each item on the appropriate sheet. Each response is an opportunity to ask the child to share more about themselves. After the three lists are done, you may have a sense of the areas in which the child identifies with a parent.

Again, we must remember how sensitive these children are about comparing Mom and Dad with the above techniques, it helps to ask about an activity with only one parent, and then ask about another activity with another parent. When asking about Mom and Dad, alternate between asking about Mom first and then about Dad first; It is best if you select which activity you want to use with this child, and avoid using more than two activities that involve comparison.

How do you feel when ...

Prepare a list of applicable situations for the child, mixing the situations, such as, "How do you feel when you get good grades? How do you feel when your Mom/Dad sees you've gotten bad grades? How do you feel when you get to stay up as late as you want? How do you feel when Mom arrives to pick you up when your at Dad's?"

Kids tend to be more responsive to these questions when you have a chalkboard, butcher paper, or a piece of large paper with a horizontal line that is marked "Great" on one end, "Awful" at the other end, and "OK" in the middle. Ask the child to mark a perpendicular line on the horizontal one to indicate their response. Be sure to put the number of the question you

have asked next to the child's perpendicular line. Having lines to mark, rather than responding verbally, sometimes makes it safer for children to express their feelings.

Life story.

"Let's write a short story about your life..." This can be done either on butcher paper taped on the wall or on a large piece of paper. Either the child or you can do the writing. Prompt the child with: "Let's start with where you were born. Do you know who was there when you were born? Joey was born in_ . He lived with_ at

Road of life.

Ask the child to draw a road, marking important happenings in their life. At the beginning of the road, make a notation of the child's birth date and birthplace. Ask the child to make bumps, pot-holes, rocks, or other obstacles in the road to represent illnesses or difficult times that have happened during their life--note these on the road as they are shared. At the end of The road, ask what the child sees ahead (for example, What will he be doing? Where will she live?, etc.).

Sentence completion.

Prepare sentences for the child to complete. Formulate sentences that are relative to the child's situation.

Draw an island.

There are several different variations on the "Island Fantasy." Skaftelund tells the

child to fantasize about living on an island where you have everything you need, but where you are lonely because no one else lives there.

A magic fairy gives the child the chance to have anyone the child wants on the island. The fantasy ends with everyone going back to the land where they live, and everyone living happily ever after. You may get a sense of who is most important to the child through this fantasy. In another version of the island fantasy, I ask the child to draw an island and to put on the island only what the child wants on the island.

When finished, I ask the child to put the persons they want on the island with them. Older kids may put only their friends, in which case, I then ask,

"If your parents need to be on the island, where would you put them?"

In one example of this game, a child put one parent on the island and the other far out at sea. The child had a boat, but only she could take the parents from one place to the other. She had control of whether the parents could get near each other!

Games.

Children of this age enjoy board games. There are certain divorce-related games which can be useful. Some of these games are:

- The Ungame
- The Talking, Feeling, Doing Game
- My Homes, My Places
- Mom's House, Dad's House
- The Storytelling Game (Richard Gardner)

Building toys.

Legos, Lincoln Logs, Connect, blocks, Tinkertoys, etc. can often provide an opportunity for the child to tell a story about what they have built.

10 to 13-year olds

Many of the previously mentioned games are suitable for this age group. I find that the most useful games are the Drawing of the island. How do you feel when...?, Road of Life. and a variation of Hangman.

For the latter, ask the child to think of a word that tells you how they feel about ... (for example, living with Dad, the way their parents get along, the amount of time they spend with Mom/Dad).

The logical thinking for this group is advanced, so I try to challenge them in some way. The following are two techniques I use:

Guessing games.

After familiarizing myself with the child, I engage them in the following, "I'm going to guess a few things about your life. I hope you'll tell me when I've guessed right or wrong." I then proceed with something such as: "I'm going to guess that you like to go over to your Dad's because you don't get along with your stepbrother. Am I right?" I often try to say something that I know is wrong, so that the child will elaborate and correct me. They love to prove me wrong.

The Debate.

I will take a situation and explain to the child that I am going to present some reasons why the situation should be a certain way. If the child thinks my reason has merit, then I get a point. The situation being debated, as well as the points gained, is written down on a chalkboard or piece of butcher paper. If the child disagrees with my statement, then I ask the child to present the reasons why the situation should be another way. I decide if the child's reason has enough merit to warrant a point-and either give or don't give the point. Sometimes I purposely withhold a point, so that the child continues to advocate for the validity of their reason.

This game has worked well in situations involving a child moving out of the area. I usually ask the child to take the position they may not want to advocate (if I have a sense they do want to move, I ask the child to argue on behalf of not moving).

Talk Show.

Tell the child to pretend they are being interviewed or are appearing on a TV talk show. Ask the child, "What is your opinion about what children (in California) find difficult about their parent's getting separated or divorced?" Then ask the child to, "give advice to the TV viewers about some things that might help kids whose parents no longer live together."

Teens

Many of you have experienced teens who are angry, hostile, and defensive. Teens are not usually very responsive to doing drawings or playing games, so the interview needs to be very carefully framed.

Issues of confidentiality may arise, and the teens need to understand that you will be writing a report that only the judge will read. As with younger children, the major focus during the interview needs to be the consideration of the teen's mental health. The needs and conflicts of the teen are very important.

Some adolescents withdraw from the family to protect themselves from pain, and may be very resistant to any questioning. In most cases, the first part of the interview should focus on encouraging the teen to talk about issues central to the child's life which are separate from the divorce, such as dating, friends, classes, sports, and extra-curricular activities.

These are a few other questions which may elicit discussion with a teen:

- Ask them about what they think is going on with their family.

- You might say, "I heard_ happened. What was that like for you?" "Your Mom/Dad already told me that you want. Will you tell me how he/she knows this?"
- Ask the teen to tell you about their earliest memory.
- Ask them what has changed for them since the parents separated.

A few teens have responded to my request for a drawing when I've asked them to draw their family, but instead of figures, I ask them to use symbols (fruits, animals, whatever) to represent something about that parent. One teen drew a potato on a couch to represent his stepfather, a computer for his mom, a musical instrument for his brother, and a boom-box for one of his sisters. The drawing stimulated interesting conversation about his family. Sometimes teens like to be given paper and a pencil to doodle during the interview; sometimes the doodles can reveal some of their conflict.

Evaluate teens carefully; try to distinguish between normal adolescent independence and withdrawal, and what may be depression or intense anger related to the separation/divorce. The answers may be evident when there is an absence of empathy or splitting, such as when the teen has a strong alliance with one parent and rejects the other.

Synthesizing the Information

After compiling data about the child you are evaluating, the painstaking task of putting together what you've learned about the child from others and your own interviews begins. The more clues you have, the better you will understand the child. It is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have these pieces and you have to put them together to create a picture that is clear enough to allow you to formulate a recommendation. Sometimes, however, there are contradictory clues--pieces that don't fit. It is very important not to reach a conclusion prematurely or to allow any one piece of information to influence your thinking before you corroborate it through other sources.

As an evaluator, you need to carefully sift through the information with an awareness of your own biases or countertransference issues. It is possible to have a certain reaction to a parent which could prompt you to interpret the child's play in a way that is favorable or not favorable to one parent or the other. You need to question what you see, hear, and experience in the interviews with the child. For example, the expression of a child's dislike for one parent might represent

- 1) an accurate reflection of the child's feeling towards a parent that is not likable,
- 2) a parent who has not developed a close connection with the child,
- 3) a child who is projecting one parent's feelings towards the other parent,
- 4) a child who has been "brain-washed" with negatives about the other parent,

or,

- 5) a child who feels abandoned by that parent.

Should a child's repeated expression of a parental preference in the interviews be the most important factor to consider? The question needs to be understood in the context of the particular family. It is necessary to understand why it is so important for the child to communicate to you, in a variety of ways, their parental preference.

Before summarizing your conclusions, think about the jigsaw puzzle again. Ask yourself if the pieces really fit or if you might be trying to make certain pieces fit. Consider the many possible reasons for the behavior you have observed. Sometimes all the pieces do not fit and you need more information. Our task, as evaluators, is to put together a picture that is as accurate as possible, using the resources which are most helpful to us.

I hope the preceding chapter serves as a "menu" from which you can select items for interviewing children and adapt them to your own style and to the situation. These items may provide you with insight into children's needs, feelings, and their relationships within their family.

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