

## General Tips for Talking with Children 2009

### General Considerations

A child's ability to communicate is affected by many factors. Some factors include:

- Age of the child
- Vocabulary
- Gender
- Older or younger siblings
- School/daycare/educational opportunities
- Abilities/disabilities
- Exposure to friends or adults other than parents

When talking with children for professional reasons, you will want to (Veith, 2005):

1. Think of the child first. Try to make sure that they are comfortable and feel safe. Consider their developmental needs.
2. Be objective and non-judgmental. The younger the child, the greater the concern is for suggestibility.
3. Focus your conversation on what you need to know and limit any questions to that.
4. **Remember that if you suspect child abuse and neglect, under Delaware Law you are a mandatory reporter and must report your suspicions to the Delaware Child Abuse Reportline – 1-800-292-9582.**
5. If a child discloses abuse or neglect, do not interview the child further about the suspected abuse or neglect. Gather the information you need to have for your profession. Leave the interview and the investigation to the authorities.

### Wording Questions

When talking with children in professional settings, it is important to try and gather accurate information. There are many ways to ask questions, some elicit extensive and accurate responses, and some elicit simple, incomplete or even inaccurate responses (Perona, et al 2006). Therefore, attention needs to be given on how questions are worded. Research has shown that there are certain types of questions that can influence whether a child responds more or less accurately (Saywitz & Lyon 2002).

The least leading questions are termed open-ended or free recall questions. They are more likely to elicit more accurate responses since they are asking the child to provide the detail.

Free Recall--- "What happened?"

Focused Recall--- "Tell me what happened that brought you here today?" "And then what happened?"

But only asking free recall questions may yield limited information. Therefore to gather more complete information, it may be necessary to ask less open-ended questions, such as:

Multiple Choice--- "Were you at home, at school or somewhere else?" "Were you wearing your pj's, play clothes or something else?"

Yes/No--- "Was your teacher there?"

A great follow up question to elicit a free recall response after a multiple choice question or a yes/no question, if appropriate, is to say “Tell me more about that.” This allows the child to tell you what he or she knows or remembers.

The types of questions that will yield less accurate responses are:

Misleading or Leading --- A misleading question suggests what the child’s response should be or introduces information that has not yet been shared by the child. Some examples include “He hurt you, didn’t he?” “Your mommy told me you fell. Is that true?” “Did someone give you a bad touch?”

It is not recommended that you use these types of questions when talking with children for professional reasons.

### **Do’s & Don’ts with Talking with Children**

1. Do keep questions simple.
2. Don’t use jargon or technical terms.
3. Do consider the pace of your conversation. The use of extended pauses and silence conveys to the child that you are interested in their answer to questions you may have asked.
4. Don’t use grammatically complex questions.
5. Do consider your non-verbal behavior. Children will be more accurate if questions are asked by a warm and supportive individual.

### References

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