



Interviewing Child Witnesses and Victims of Sexual Abuse



WHY?

- Children are **not miniature adults** and hence need a **different and easy-going approach**
- Have a **different perspective** on the world
- Young and impressionable minds may feel **threatened and traumatised**
- They are **yet to develop a complex understanding**
- May have **trouble dealing with things** - anxiety, misinterpretations

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- To maximise the **accuracy and completeness** of children's statements
- To **avoid misunderstandings and increase the credibility** of the statements
- To optimise the child's ability to **understand and respond** to the questions **effectively**
- To minimise and **overcome the child's anxiety and trauma** while taking steps toward justice

WHY?

How to approach children for questioning?

- Be **sensitive** to the child's level of development
- Be **flexible** to the child's memory, knowledge, reasoning, and emotional maturity
- Be **objective** by keeping your presuppositions in check to avoid influencing the child
- Be **empathetic** to help them overcome anxiety and recover from the trauma

How to talk to children?



- Phrase the question so the child understands and talk about what they understand
- Help children deal with questions they don't understand
- Avoid suggesting answers or asking leading questions
- Provide a nonjudgemental atmosphere and ask broad, open-ended questions
- At times specific questions phrased like 'did he' can ensure accuracy and unbiased answers
- Help children overcome their anxieties and understand their emotional reactions
- Let children know the limits on confidentiality

Avoid long compound sentences
Use shorter questions and phrases

Avoid three or four syllable words
Use one or two syllable words

Avoid double negatives, complex clauses
Use simple grammatical structures

Avoid categorial terms
(weapon)
Use concrete, visual
terms (gun)

Avoid legalese, uncommon terms (parties)
Use common meaning of the term (people)

Avoid questions that list several previously
established facts before asking the question
at hand

Avoid unclear refernces (that thing)
Repeat the names or things



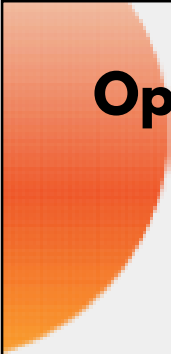
Avoid pronouns (him, they)
Use proper names (John,
Mary)

Avoid passive voice
Use active voice

Simplifying Language


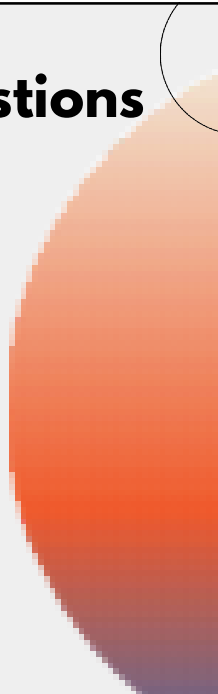

Open-ended To Close-ended Questions

General	Do you know why we are talking to you today?
↓	
Focused	Who - person who may have abused a child What - incident of abuse Where - circumstances of abuse When - duration or situations at the time of abuse Disclosure - prior to interview
↓	
Follow up	Narrative cue - what happened after that Repeat - of child's statement Clarify - the previous statement



Open-ended To Close-ended Questions

Multiple Choice	Did it happen in daytime or night time or both the times
↓	
Direct	Was it your dad who hurt your peepee?
↓	
Leading	You were lying about what your mom did, weren't you?
↓	
Coercive	If you don't tell the truth you're not leaving this room We can go get icecream once you tell me what happened



Phases of an Interview

Phase 1 - Preparation
Phrasing, information gathering, planning

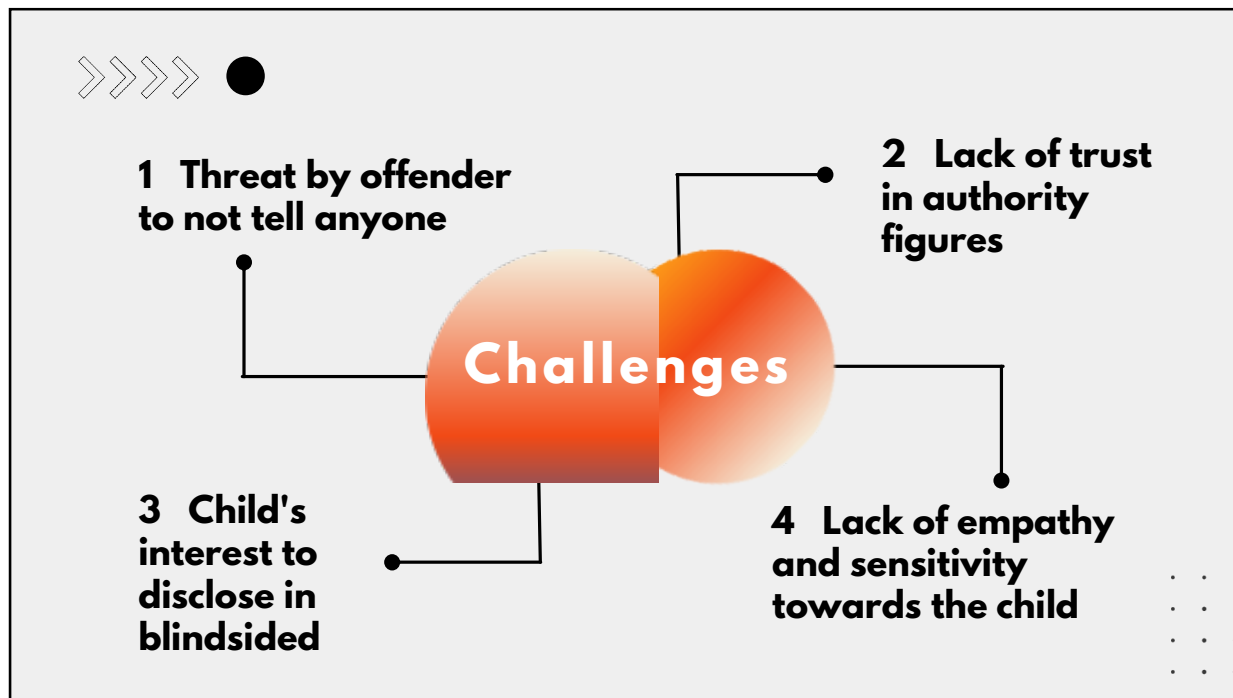
Phase 2 - Setting and Context
Reassurance, child-friendly

Phase 3 - Rapport Building and Developmental Observations
Build trust, analyse the child's understanding and abilities

Phase 4 - Information Exchange
Ask them to narrate everything, ask open-ended questions, prompt more, save closed questions for the end

Phase 5 - Closure
Thank them, praise their effort, tell them what happens next

Interviewing children who may have been sexually abused



Level of likelihood

- The level of likelihood guides the extent of the investigation. **High-likelihood cases require more investigation**
- Concerns may be based on **strong physical evidence** such as medical evidence, the offender's confession, trustworthy third party's observations
- It may also be based on **less compelling evidence** like behavioural changes in children that could be caused by a variety of factors
- It is an **additional situation of lesser likelihood** when a child has described sexual abuse **that could involve potential victims**. For instance, incest with other children in the family, extrafamilial abuse like in a daycare
- Even in these kinds of additional victim cases, the **level of likelihood may vary** - the child being interviewed may or may not have been identified as a victim

• Includes a wide range of behaviour from **sexual touching to child pornography**

• Can be carried out by a range of relationships from **parents to strangers**

• Can occur in a **variety of contexts** like at home, at school, or in a car


• Before interviewing the child obtain:

1. **Information** about the sexual acts that may have occurred
2. **Identity** of the alleged offender
3. **Place** where the abuse is alleged to have occurred

Preparing for the interview

Preparing for the interview

- Gather information about the child's family, school situation, recreational activities and typical day
- Being aware of the social situations can help in understanding the case better
- Be aware that this information may prompt you to ask leading questions which should be avoided
- Involves determining the child's ability to recall past events and capacity to provide factual information



Begin with a general statement or question

"I am a protective services worker. My job is to make sure kids are safe"

Open-ended questions

Focused questions - who, what, where
 Followup questions
 Direct questions - yes/no, did he

Obtain information rather than confirming

Previously acquired information can only guide your questioning in a nonleading way

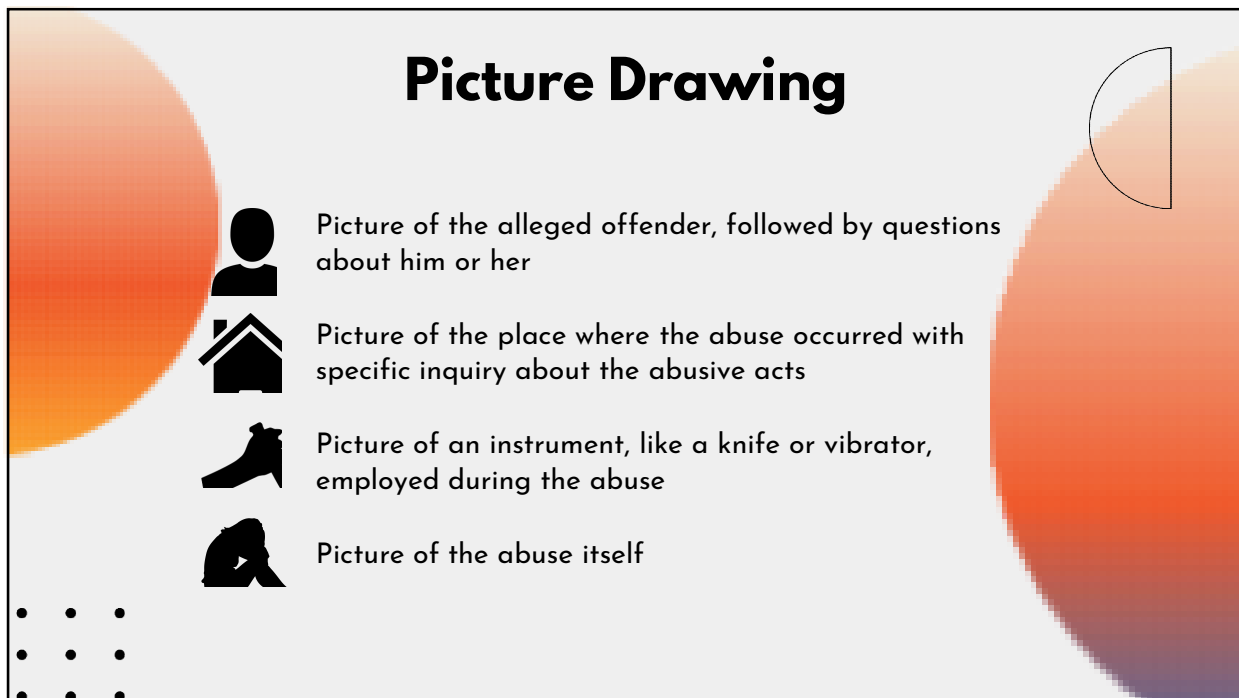
Avoid leading and coercive questions





Children may be vulnerable to giving confirmatory information - didn't she, isn't it

- Children can't explain as well as adults
- Use of **props or drawings** can help the child **easily demonstrate** and explain
- However, in some jurisdictions, it **may complicate the legal case**
- Children may have **difficulty reenacting events** with a doll
- You may ask the child to name all the body parts in the doll and may ask a **focused question** - did he touch your legs
- Ask **focused follow-up questions** - and then what happened

Use of Anatomical Dolls and other Media

Picture Drawing



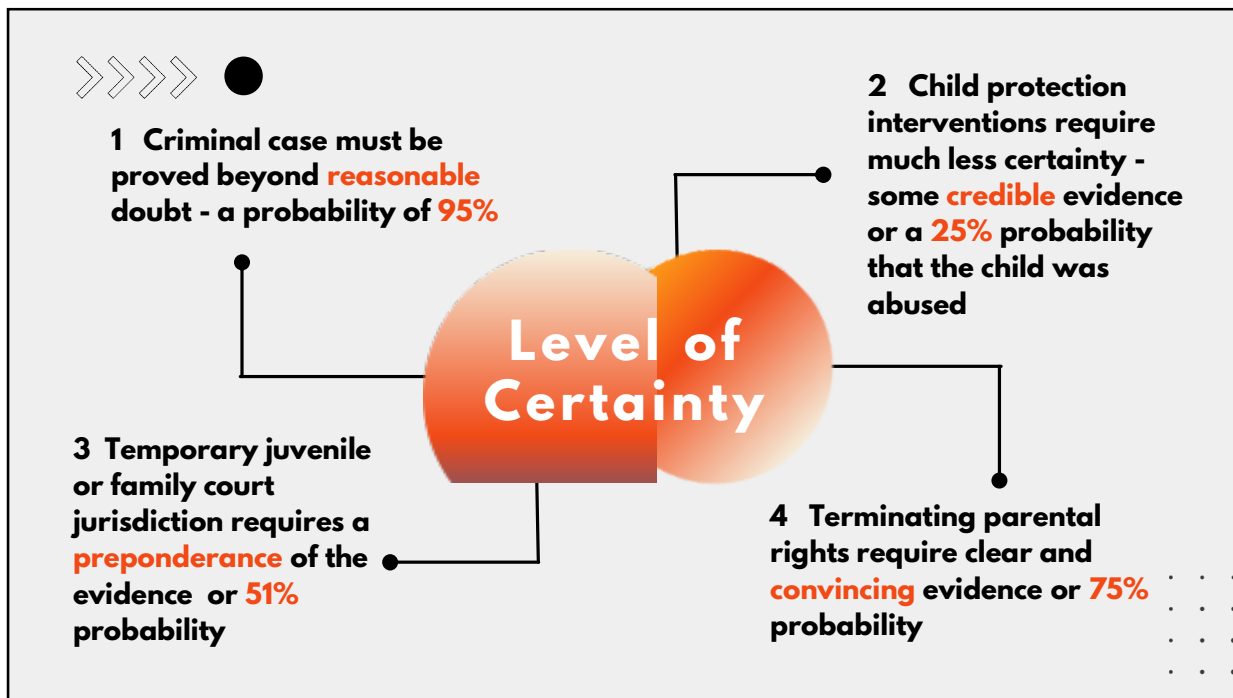
-  Picture of the alleged offender, followed by questions about him or her
-  Picture of the place where the abuse occurred with specific inquiry about the abusive acts
-  Picture of an instrument, like a knife or vibrator, employed during the abuse
-  Picture of the abuse itself

Decision Making

At the end of the information-gathering phase, you must decide whether or not you think the child has been sexually abused and what to do next

Weighing the evidence

- Consider the child's statement about the abuse in other contexts
- Child's symptoms (sexualised behaviour, nonsexual symptoms)
- Other victims or witnesses
- The alleged offender's functioning statements about the abuse, prior history
- Medical evidence
- Physical evidence gathered by law enforcement



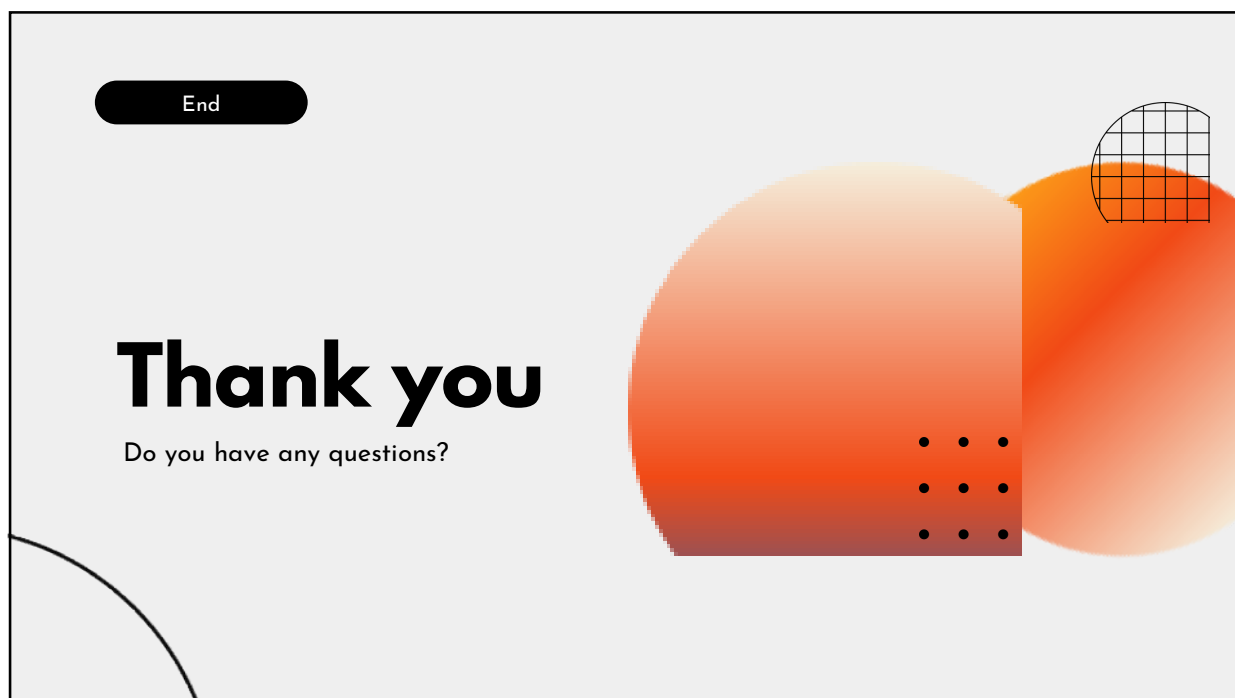
The Polygraph

- Law enforcers often ask if the accused is willing to take a polygraph test and prosecutors decide *whether or not to prosecute* based on the polygraph results
- Even though one may find considerable evidence, these *results are not admissible in the court proceedings* because they are viewed as having an unacceptable level of false positives and negatives
- They *measure physiological arousal to abuse-focused questions* and not whether they are lying



Null Findings

- The absence of evidence does not necessarily imply that no sexual abuse has taken place
- For some, disclosure is an incremental process
- If you are unsuccessful in making a determination but remain concerned about possible sexual abuse, refer the child to a therapist or a child interview specialist who can devote more time and expertise to the case



Thank you

Do you have any questions?

End