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Getting the story in forensic interviews with child witnesses: Applying a story grammar framework

Pamela Snow and Martine Powell, March, 2007

An important Australian study

Taped interviews are key pieces of evidence in child sexual abuse cases. A recent research project funded by the Criminology Research Council demonstrates that asking open-ended questions (*tell me what happened*) rather than specific questions (*who touched you*) provides the most useful evidence with which to convict the offender.

Background research

The authors reviewed international research. The findings strongly supported the effectiveness of open-ended questions. Such questions are more likely to bring forth information that is consistent and credible. This occurs because the child has the freedom to remember properly. remembering is an inward (focusing on memory) rather than outward (focusing on the interviewer) directed task. The result is a cohesive story rather than an attempt to recall isolated facts.

The authors also reviewed studies in linguistics on how the human mind creates a logical account of an event. Fundamental to this process is the use of a "story grammar" framework. Elements of "story grammar" include where and when the event took place, the action that set everything in motion, how the person felt, what he or she decided to do, and what transpired in the face of that plan. The ability to create a logical sequence out of these elements develops with age. Young children need time to concentrate on this task and can be distracted by specific questions. When interrupted and asked for a response, bits of information can fall out of context. There is also the possibility that the child will say anything that seems helpful to please the interviewer.

Creating an Australian study

The authors used the above information as the basis for analysing transcripts of 51 interviews conducted by Australian officers who were investigating a range of child sexual abuse cases. They wanted to find:

- how often they used open ended questions;
- how often they used specific questions; and
- which type of questioning brought forth the most detailed and accurate facts that could be used to convict an offender.

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Findings and trends

1. The majority of questions used by the interviewers were not open-ended.

- Nearly two-thirds of nearly 9,900 questions asked during the interviews were specific.
- Though officers often started an interview with open-ended questions, on average fewer than two such questions were asked before they turned to a specific question.
- Specific questions interrupted the child's active process of piecing together what happened.
- Specific questions did bring forth details relevant to the case but these details were out of context.

2. Open questions brought forth the key facts.

- Although only one-third of the questions were open-ended, the children's answers to them provided almost as many important facts as the much larger number of specific questions.
- In particular, open questions led the children to provide information on what actually happened during the abuse episode.

3. Open-ended questions are useful in cases of repeated abuse.

- Previous research has demonstrated that children accurately remember details which stay the same across repeat instances of abuse. Details that vary from one incident to the other are more easily confused. Unfortunately it is these details (different settings and locations) that are crucial to establishing guilt on a specific charge. Yet specific questions that attempt to nail these details down have the effect of taking the information out of context and possibly contaminating the evidence.
- Open-ended questions can bring forth the necessary time and location details from children. It just takes patience.

5. Children can tell their own stories and recall detail.

- While this capacity varies with age, it was clear from the analysis that children are capable of telling much of their stories.
- Open-ended questions help bring forth accuracy and detail. They also increase the logic and consistency of children's accounts of abuse and provide more credible evidence.

6. Training programs for forensic interviews should be improved.

- Further research will help determine how to improve open-ended questioning techniques and identify which ones might be most effective in bringing forth details that will help convict an offender.
- Forensic interviewing is a highly specialised skill. Systematic changes are required to ensure access to high quality training.

Seven Elements of Story Grammar

Story grammar is fundamental to how we make sense of an event. It provides a structure so that we can tell someone else what has happened in a way that they will understand. Arranged logically, the elements of "story grammar" will show cause and effect. Examples of the seven elements of "story grammar" as they relate to an episode of sexual abuse include:

Setting – where and when the episode takes place. ("In the shed after lunch")

Initiating event – the action that began the episode ("Pop asked us to come and have a cuddle.")

Internal response – the child's subjective response ("It was yucky.")

Plan – either what the child thought might be a good way of dealing with the situation or what he or she thought was the other person's motivation ("I think he wanted me to be scared.")

Attempt – details of the actual abuse episode. ("He did such-and-such")

Direct consequences – what the child did immediately ("I tried to push him away.")

Resolution – the outcome. (And then we had dinner and no one said anything.)

Encourage children to tell their own stories. See tip sheet: Getting the story from children.