

Northern Territory Specialist Vulnerable Witness Forensic Interviewing Training

Best-practice interviewing guidelines

There is widespread literature indicating that child victims as young as four years are capable of providing detailed accurate statements when asked to provide a free narrative account in response to open-ended questions Lamb et. al, 2003; Orbach & Lamb, 2007; Powell & Snow, 2007. Open-ended questions typically provide more detailed and accurate responses than specific questions (i.e., questions that usually start with 'Wh' and dictate what precise information is required) and minimise individual differences in responding arising from variability in memory, language and social skills (Cederborg & Lamb, 2008, Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin & Horowitz, 2007, Lamb et al., 2003, Larsson & Lamb, 2009, Orbach & Lamb, 2007).

Justification for spaced e-learning

Research in investigative interviewing of children has shown that there is a gap between best-practice interviewing guidelines and what is practiced in the field. Poor competence of interviewers in adhering to best-practice guidelines is a result of structural issues related to most current training programs across the globe. Training programs should contain three core elements as a minimum for success: ongoing spaced practice, expert feedback and provision of a structured protocol (see Powell, 2008 for review). However, interviewing training programs are typically delivered in one short block of time (e.g., two or three weeks) in a classroom-based format. That is, trainees travel to one single location where they attend lectures, complete assessments on newly acquired knowledge and engage in minimal interviewing practice. This format and structure of training is not beneficial to trainees attempting to learn a complex skill.

A recent evaluation of a new delivery of investigative interviewer training has shown potential. Powell, Guadagno and Benson (in press) used computer-based activities to train interviewers. The activities were delivered across twelve modules, completed at a pace of one module per week. Prior research has shown that spaced practice or learning conditions (interspersed with rest intervals) are superior to massed practice conditions involving continuous practice sessions devoid of rest intervals (Donovan & Radosevich, 1999). Powell et al., (in press) showed a significant long-term improvement in the proportion of open-ended questions utilised by trainees after completing the learning activities, suggesting that training investigative interviewers could be delivered through the cost-effective manner of e-learning.

The current course delivered to NT Police Specialist Child Interviewers

The Northern Territory Specialist Vulnerable Witness Forensic Interviewing Training program offers 15 modules of approximately 8 hours duration, delivered via an online format. Trainees may progress through the course at their own pace, however, a rate of one module per week was recommended to enhance learning.

Module 1: Establishing what constitutes 'best-practice' interviewing

Module 2: Defining various questions

Trainees cannot progress to the next module until there is a full understanding of question types, demonstrated through correctly labelling questions in mock interview transcripts

Module 3: Considering the process of memory and language development

This module provides an in-depth introduction to child development by describing different concepts of memory and language, such as temporal and numerical estimations, socio-emotional development, metamemory and pragmatic language.

Module 4: Choosing the most effective open-ended questions

Module 5: Putting the right questions into practice

Module 6: Introducing the topic of concern and eliciting a disclosure

Module 7: Assessing your progress on open-ended questions

Trainees are assessed on their newly acquired skills through a mock interview conducted with an actor playing the role of an allegedly abuse child. Individual feedback is provided to each trainee, with suggestions on how trainees could further improve. Trainees cannot progress past this module until they have demonstrated an ability to use open-ended questions.

Module 8: Introducing the interview protocol

The SIM protocol promotes more consideration of other investigative opportunities to corroborate the commission of offences rather than placing the onus solely on the child interview providing everything. As such it reduces the likelihood of false information being introduced by a child, reduces the time taken for interview, reduces jury fatigue and the introduction of opportunities for the defence to discredit the child's account.

Module 9: Interviewing about repeated abuse

Module 10: Evidentiary requirements

Trainees cannot progress past this point until they had demonstrated in a mock interview an understanding of what information needs to be elicited in various scenarios.

Module 11: Considering relationship evidence when investigating and interviewing

Module 12: Considering relevant cross-cultural issues

Films are used to show how to effectively overcome common barriers when interviewing witnesses from different cultures.

Module 13: Interviewing witnesses with complex communication needs

Films are used to portray how various question types elicit different responses from witnesses with complex communication needs

Module 14: A guide to recording the interview process

Module 15: Putting it all together

This module is comprised of various assessments on all of the skills and knowledge learned throughout the training program. Trainees are required to complete a mock interview with an actor playing the role of an alleged child abuse victim and are not provided with certificate of successful completion of the course until they have demonstrated the ability to use open-ended questions and elicit necessary and relevant information in a developmentally appropriate manner, whilst adhering to the interview protocol introduced in the training program.

All of the modules include a variety of learning formats, such as readings, interactive quizzes with immediate feedback, film clips, narrated PowerPoints and computer-simulated exercises and from module 6 onwards, trainees are required to complete a mock interview over the phone with an actor playing the role of the child.

A preliminary evaluation of the training program has shown five important findings:

- 1) The proportion of open-ended questions utilised by interviewers has significantly increased, while the proportion of specific and leading questions have significantly decreased.
- 2) The length of interviews has significantly reduced.
- 3) Interviewers are successfully adhering to the SIM protocol in field interviews.
- 4) There is no significant decrease in the elicitation of essential information (i.e., identification of the offender, location and time of abuse, the nature of the offence, possible witnesses and physical evidence) in field interviews.
- 5) Interviewers have shown a significant improvement in the amount of positive "behaviours" or techniques displayed in interviews (e.g., using minimal encouragers, avoiding asking developmentally inappropriate questions).

In other words, the training is a success!