

Arkansas Division of Children & Family Services Practice Guide Series

How We Do the Work is as Important as the Work We Do

How We Do the Work of Gathering Information to Assess Health & Safety Risk Factors: Interviewing the Alleged Victim & Siblings

Purpose - Provide standard guidance for promising practices when interviewing the alleged victim and his or her siblings in order to gather information to assess immediate danger to children.

Related Policy - Policy II-D

Related Practice Model Principles -

- Safely keep children with their families.
- Enhance well-being in all of our practice with families.
- Safety for children is achieved through positive protective relationships with caring family and community members.

How We Do the Work of Interviewing the Alleged Victim - Most interviews with children should be 30 minutes or less to be effective. However, if you are making progress and the child is still focused, don't hold to this time limit. Assessors must probe deeply, but carefully, into the family situation and the incident. Your interview with this child will greatly increase your understanding of the family dynamics and the factors that could endanger him or her.

- **Explain who you are to the family.** Tell them how you came to be involved and assure them you are there to try to help the entire family.
- **Let the child know he can ask questions.**
- **If the child is old enough, explain confidentiality to her.**
- **Ask the child questions that you know he knows the answer to:** birth date, teacher's name, sibling's names, etc. This helps him get used to speaking with you about non-scary topics.
- **Watch for signs that the child does not understand your questions or comments.** Recapping what the child said is a good way to allow him to correct any misunderstandings. Not all 10 year olds function at the same level. During the interview, you should alter your questions as you get a better feel for the child's functioning level.
- **As you talk about the family, probe into safety-related areas:** what things frighten her; does she see Mom as a protector; what family member is she closest to; does anyone read her bedtime stories, etc.
- **Pay attention to the child's body language** and how he reacts to questions about mom or dad.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Get down to eye level with the child or elevate him to your eye level, if possible.

Questions should center around the child him/herself, the parents/caregivers, and the family in general, and could include the following. It is not recommended you ask all these questions— you should pick those you are comfortable asking. When rapport is established, move to questions about the incident.

Questions About the Child -

1. Who are your best friends? Who do you play with at school?
2. What do you like to do for fun?
3. What part of school is easiest/best? What is hardest/worst?
4. Who cooked dinner last night? What did you have? Do you like that?
5. What makes you afraid? Who can you go to when you get afraid?
6. Who woke you up for school today? Who made breakfast?

7. Where do you sleep? Where do other family members sleep?

Questions About the Family -

1. How old are your brothers and sisters? What are their names? Are they nice to you?
2. Who lives here? Does anyone else spend the night sometimes?
3. What does the family do for fun together?
4. Does your grandmother (aunt/uncle/grandpa) visit? Is that fun?

Questions About the Parents -

1. What fun thing did you do with Mom/Dad this week?
2. Did you get in trouble with Mom/Dad this week? For what? What happens when you get in trouble?
3. What happens when your brother/sister does something wrong?
4. What grown-ups visit your parents? When was the last time? What did they do?
5. Are there things your parents do that scare you?
6. Does Mom and/or Dad work? Where?

Up to this point, you have not asked about the maltreatment that led to the report. However, you have begun to create a relationship that will make it easier for the child to talk to you about the incident. At the same time, you are receiving background information that will better help you understand the whole family situation.

When you believe the child is comfortable talking to you, the alleged maltreatment must be brought up. You should “have a feel” for the child by now and recognize signs of anxiety so you know when to slow down and when to proceed.

Questions About the Maltreatment Incident -

1. Can you tell me what happened (how your eye got hurt, or whatever the specific allegation is)?
2. Remind them they are not in trouble.
3. Ask if he received medical care for the injury if there is one. Ask if he was hurt before and needed to go to a doctor or the hospital.
4. Always ask what else happened. This allows the child to provide additional information. Their responses may not always be relevant, but it helps you see what is important to the child.
5. If there were others present, ask what they did – did they intervene or stop the maltreatment. This is particularly important when one of the parents is not identified as an alleged offender. Even if the parent wasn't present during the alleged maltreatment, it's important to hear how the child feels that parent responded when they did find out.
6. Ask pointed questions about the when, where, why, and how of the incident. What happened before that may have led up to it. However, avoid making the child feel that you believe the maltreatment was justified.
7. Ask if similar things were done to the child's siblings.
8. Ask him to show you where he was hurt – bruises, scratches, etc.

At the conclusion of the interview, provide the child with as much information as possible about next steps. You may not know exactly what's going to happen, but provide what you do know. Recognize his fears and attitudes and offer reassurance if you can.

How We Do the Work of Interviewing the Siblings - Interviews with siblings should build on the information you obtained from the alleged victim, with several purposes in mind:

1. Could the siblings also be victims? How deeply you probe this issue should be based upon information that the alleged victim provided about his or her siblings.
2. Get the siblings' perceptions of the parents – how they react, how they function, how they treat the alleged victim, how they treat the siblings and/or other family members.
3. Determine whether the siblings' information supports the statements from the alleged victim, both regarding family functioning and the alleged incident.
4. Observe them to determine whether they are fearful of the parents.
5. Determine whether the siblings are safe.
6. Ask if anyone else knows about the alleged abuse/neglect.

7. If one parent was hurting the victim, try to probe at how the other parent reacted. Did he encourage the abuse? Did she make the abuser stop?

Follow the same interviewing techniques and questions as provided above for the alleged victim. Make the siblings feel comfortable and build some rapport before approaching the maltreatment incident.

Particular care should be given to any indication of differential treatment of the alleged victim, or any notion that the alleged victim is “bad.” Probe to find out where that notion came from.

Time Frames -

- Begin investigations of severe maltreatment ***within 24 hours***.
- Begin all other investigations ***within 72 hours***.
- Complete all interviews ***within 30 days*** of receipt of the child maltreatment report.

Documenting - For each safety factor presenting immediate danger, the assessor should include explanation for injury, facts that support or do not support explanation, quotes, worker observations, and other professional assessments as applicable. The assessor should also include documentation and corresponding explanation of risk factors.

Outcomes of Quality Interviews with Alleged Victim & Siblings -

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.