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Article *in* Behavioral Sciences & the Law · April 2017

DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2290

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Behavioral Sciences and the Law
Behav. Sci. Law **35**: 253–268 (2017)
Published online in Wiley Online Library
(wileyonlinelibrary.com) DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2290

Self-Reported Current Practices in Child Forensic Interviewing: Training, Tools, and Pre-Interview Preparation

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In child sexual abuse investigations, forensic interviewers within the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) model serve as neutral fact-finders for a team of professionals tasked with investigating and intervening in cases of alleged child sexual abuse. Although empirical evidence has led to the development of best-practice techniques and protocols, there is currently no universally adopted protocol in the field. The present research gathered detailed information from a national sample of real-world child forensic interviewers about their training and current practices, with a specific focus on assessing the information interviewers typically review prior to conducting child forensic interviews. Most notably, the survey revealed a lack of uniformity in interviewing protocols adopted and pre-interview preparation practices. Although rare, some interviewers reported using an allegation-blind interviewing approach, highlighting the need for future research on this and other under-studied techniques.

Within the context of child sexual abuse (CSA) investigations, interview strategies have received much research and policy attention (Bruck & Ceci, 1995; Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Melnyk, Crossman, & Scullin, 2007; Olafson, 2012; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Researchers have focused on improving the effectiveness of CSA investigations by recommending empirically based techniques aimed at reducing interviewer bias and maximizing the quality of information obtained from the child during a forensic interview. Most CSA investigations in the United States adopt a multidisciplinary approach, known as the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) Model, which aims to coordinate the needs of all relevant professionals (e.g., medical, law enforcement, child protective services, mental health, victim advocacy, and prosecution) through a single interview and location, to streamline investigations (Cross, Jones, Walsh, & Kolko, 2007). The National Children's Alliance (NCA) has developed standards for accreditation of CACs, which must include a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach, culturally competent services, a legally sound, neutral fact-finding forensic interview, victim support and advocacy, a medical evaluation, mental health services, case review and tracking, organizational capacity, and a child-friendly setting (NCA, 2011). More specifically, forensic interviewers must meet at least one of the following training standards: "documentation of competency-based child forensic interview training that

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includes child development (or) documentation of 40 hours of nationally or state recognized forensic interview training that includes child development" (NCA, 2011, p. 11). However, there is no universally adopted interview protocol and thus a variety of techniques are currently adopted and used throughout CACs.

Current Forensic Interview Protocols

The NCA recognizes a number of national and state interviewing models as "competency-based" and thus sufficient for accreditation purposes (see NCA, 2015). Among the most extensively researched is the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's (NICHD) Protocol, which consistently elicits more detailed child responses with higher-quality interview questions than more traditional methods in both laboratory and field studies (see Benia, Hauk-Filho, Dillenberg, & Stein, 2015; Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb et al., 2009; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001; and for a detailed description of this protocol, see Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007). The U.S. Department of Justice recently produced a bulletin "Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practice Guidelines", which incorporated generally accepted best practices from the NICHD and several other major forensic interviewer training programs: the National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC), the American Professional Society for the Abuse of Children (APSAC), the CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center, and the Gunderson National Child Protection Training Center (Newlin et al., 2015). According to this best-practice bulletin, interviewers are often trained in multiple models and thus use a blended approach based on the needs of their specific agency and jurisdiction. There is universal agreement among researchers and professionals across protocols that many recommended interviewing techniques are beneficial to children's accurate and plentiful accounts (e.g., using open, non-suggestive questions), but there is a lack of consensus regarding aspects of the forensic interview that have received little to no research attention. Of primary concern to the present research is the extent to which forensic interviewers are, or need to be, pre-informed of allegation information (when available) prior to conducting a forensic interview.

Pre-Interview Preparation

The CAC model requires an MDT approach and thus encourages sharing of information, including pre- and post-interview debriefings (NCA, 2011, p. 4). The NCA's accreditation standards explain the utility of information-sharing for members of the MDT, but do not directly address how forensic interviewers benefit from such information-sharing. Researchers and protocol developers have suggested that information about the child's developmental history, cultural background, and special needs (e.g., a known disability) may be useful when planning a forensic interview for the purpose of tailoring interview questions, arranging an interpreter if necessary, and being sensitive to a child's specific needs or vulnerabilities (Rohrabaugh, London, & Hall, 2016). Some also suggest that allegation information may be useful in guiding interview questions, interpreting children's responses, and introducing the topic of abuse, especially given children's reluctance to disclose abuse spontaneously in an interview setting to open-ended questions (Poole & Lamb, 1998; Saywitz, Goodman,

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

Nicholas, & Moan, 1991). It has also been suggested that knowledge of the allegation history may be useful in forming alternative hypotheses (Poole & Lamb, 1998; State of Michigan Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice and Department of Human Services, 2004). However, unlike child-specific information, allegation-specific information, if inaccurate, may jeopardize the neutrality of the forensic interview and the accuracy of the resulting child statement. For example, previous research suggests that forensic interviewers' preconceived notions can alter how children's statements are interpreted and influence the quality and content of interviewers' questions, particularly when interviewers are less experienced (Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995; Powell, Hughes-Scholes, & Sharman, 2012; White, Leichtman, & Ceci, 1997).

Since a neutral, fact-finding forensic interview is at the center of the CAC model, some scholars have proposed that limiting the interviewer's pre-interview knowledge of the allegations, known as "allegation-blind" interviewing, is a viable strategy to reduce preconceptions and/or biases associated with pre-interview information (Cronch, Viljoen, & Hansen, 2006). It is expected that without case knowledge, the interviewer will be forced to explore all potential hypotheses, will be less likely to adopt a biased questioning strategy, and will be better able to remain neutral. Importantly, the Supreme Court has acknowledged the potential problems associated with non-blind interviewing in at least one known case of child sexual abuse (*Idaho v. Wright*, 1990). As a result of this case, the involved jurisdiction adopted a blind approach to interviewing alleged victims of sexual abuse (Cantlon, Payne, & Erbaugh, 1996). To date, it is unclear how many other jurisdictions are doing the same and why.

Very little research has directly compared the effectiveness of allegation-blind versus informed interviewing without also manipulating interviewers' expectations. A field study by Cantlon et al. (1996) examined the impact of the *Idaho v. Wright* (1990) decision in the affected jurisdiction by comparing the disclosure rates of (post-Wright) allegation-blind interviews to traditional, informed interviews over a 4-year period. Nurses from a Child Sexual Abuse Assessment unit conducted interviews using a "standard format" (i.e., an unspecified structured interview protocol). Analyses revealed that allegation-blind interviewing resulted in a significantly higher disclosure rate than did non-blind interviewing. However, there are considerable limitations in interpreting the results of this study because it lacked random assignment and the possibility of assessing statement veracity.

More recently, a laboratory study using adult witnesses to a mock-crime by Rivard, Pena, and Schreiber Compo (2016) revealed that student interviewers with no pre-interview knowledge of the crime gathered more accurate details from witnesses than those who read a brief, correct summary of the crime, but not significantly more than those who had incorrect pre-interview information. Blind interviewers were more likely to begin the interview with a non-suggestive question than were their informed counterparts and were also able to recall more details about the interview when asked to write a summary of the witness's account. However, the use of adult witnesses and lay interviewers, who arguably lacked the training and motivation to avoid suggestive questions, limits the generalizability of these findings to real-world contexts like CSA investigations.

In an effort to establish best-practice techniques in pre-interview preparation, additional research is needed to understand the advantages and potential disadvantages of reviewing available case information prior to conducting a forensic interview in CSA

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

investigations. If concerns over interviewer neutrality have caused some agencies to adopt a blind approach within the CAC model, an important next step is to gain a better understanding of how widespread this technique is and to assess real-world interviewers' perceptions of and experiences with allegation-blind interviewing. To date, no research has investigated the relative prevalence of allegation-blind and non-blind interviewing or assessed the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches from the perspective of forensic interviewers using each technique. Therefore, the present paper's objective was to gather broad information from real-world forensic interviewers on the training and techniques currently used in the U.S., with a specific interest in assessing the scope of information that interviewers typically review prior to conducting child forensic interviews.

METHOD

We first created a comprehensive list of CACs or other child sexual abuse investigative agencies throughout the United States. The resulting list included 803 agencies, 702 of which we were able to contact by either telephone or email to recruit forensic interviewers. However, data on the number of interviewers employed at each agency were not readily available via public records (and probably fluctuates regularly across agencies), making it difficult to estimate how many forensic interviewers are employed in CACs throughout the country at any given time. Across all agencies contacted, 188 participants provided partial data and 126 participants completed the entire survey. Considering each agency contacted as a potential participant, we estimate the completed response rate to be approximately 18%.

Procedure

The survey, approved by the authors' university ethics committee and created using the online survey software Qualtrics, took 15–20 minutes for participants to complete. If an email contact was not available on the internet, the CAC was contacted by phone to obtain an agency contact person and email address whenever possible. If the contact person agreed, he or she was asked to distribute the email solicitation to the agency's forensic interviewers. In the solicitation email, participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and answers would be kept anonymous. Interested participants were provided with a link to the survey consent form, which explained that the purpose of the study was to gather information about forensic interviewing experts' experience with forensic interviewing techniques and opinions regarding allegations of child sexual abuse.

The survey was developed by the research team and used a combination of open, multiple choice, and scaled questions (1–5 or 1–7). Given that the purpose of the survey was to gather information about interviewers and CAC practices in general and pre-interview preparation in particular, the survey was broken down into two sections: interviewer and agency background (e.g., demographic characteristics, training received, interview tools used); and pre-interview preparation (e.g., the use and perceptions of blind interviewing and the scope of information typically reviewed). When applicable, responses to open-ended questions were coded into categories.

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

Interviewer and Agency Background

The first section was designed to gather important information about interviewers and the agencies in which they were employed. Therefore, interviewers were asked to provide demographic information (gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and major if applicable) and level of interviewing experience (i.e., years conducting forensic interviews). Interviewers were also asked about the types of formal and on-the-job forensic interviewing training received, their agency's policy on supervision and evaluation, the average number of forensic interviews conducted per year by the agency (and interviewer), the age range and type of suspected witnesses and victims interviewed at the agency, the number of forensic interviewers employed at the agency, whether the agency functions under the CAC Model, and the geographic location served by the interviewer's agency.

Interviewers were further asked in an open-ended format to indicate the items and tools they typically bring into an interview. They were then asked to indicate whether they use three techniques in particular (videotaping of interviews, earpieces, and note-taking) and to indicate the percentage of their interviews in which each technique is used.

Pre-Interview Preparation

In the final section, interviewers answered a series of questions about their experience with and perceptions of allegation-blind interviewing [defined as when "the forensic interviewer knows only minimal information about the child (such as the child's name and age) and no allegation information prior to conducting the interview"]. Specifically, interviewers were asked to indicate whether they ever used a blind interviewing technique and why; to list the advantages and disadvantages of this technique in an open-ended format; and to indicate whether they would be willing to conduct blind interviews and why/why not.

To assess what pieces of information interviewers typically have prior to conducting forensic interviews, interviewers were provided with a list of case details they may or may not have prior to conducting a forensic interview and were asked to indicate the extent to which each detail is typically available to them prior to an interview and, if so, how important they believe it is to have the specific piece of information available during the interview. Subsequent questions elicited interviewers' opinions about which pre-interview pieces of information render an allegation more believable. Interviewers were asked to indicate in an open-ended format whether they have ever felt pressured to obtain a disclosure, under which circumstances and how often. Lastly, interviewers were asked what the most difficult part of their job was. Although these final questions were not related specifically to pre-interview information, they were included to assess whether the issue of neutrality (the proposed advantage of allegation-blind interviewing) is deemed an important obstacle in the daily practice of real-world forensic interviewers.

Participants were given "don't know" and "not applicable" options for each question and were allowed to skip any question in the survey. As a result, for each question the number of total responses varied. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were thanked for their time and asked if they would be willing to participate in future research regarding this topic.

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Coding Scheme

After reviewing the responses provided for each open-ended question, the authors created a set of potential response categories for each question. That is, categories were created *post hoc* and were guided by participants' responses. When applicable, example responses are indicated in parentheses to clarify category criteria. Two independent coders then classified answers into as many categories as were applicable (e.g., all perceived disadvantages of allegation-blind interviewing that were mentioned by that interviewer). Inter-rater agreement was calculated on the entire sample ($M\kappa = 0.70$; ranging from 0.519 and 0.901), with percentage agreement ranging from 62% to 92%, thus providing support for the utility of the developed categories. Data from the primary coder are presented in the following sections.

RESULTS

Interviewer Characteristics

A total of 126 participants completed the entire survey. However, 188 participants filled out at least two demographic questions of interest. In line with our goal to gather as much information as possible about general CAC practices, we therefore present findings from each question. Thus, the following descriptive statistics are based on an *N* of 188 or less (when indicated) and percentages were computed out of the total number of participants who responded to each item.

The majority of the sample ($N = 188$) was female (94.7%; male, 4.3%; prefer not to answer, 1.1%) and Caucasian (81.4%; White Hispanic, 8.5%; African-American, 3.2%; Native American/Alaskan Native, 1.1%; Asian, 0.5%; Black Hispanic, 0.5%; other or mixed ethnicities, 2.1%; prefer not to answer, 2.7%). The average age ($N = 183$) was 39.91 years ($SD = 5.67$), ranging from 23 to 67 years. On average, interviewers had been conducting forensic interviews for 6.94 years ($SD = 11.07$), ranging from 0 to 30 years. The majority of the sample ($N = 183$) earned a master's degree as their highest degree (54.8%), followed by 37.2% who earned a bachelor's degree (doctoral/law degree, 2.7%; associate degree, 1.6%; high school diploma, 2.1%; other, 1.6%). For those who indicated their major ($N = 145$), the most common disciplines of study were psychology and social work (both 10.3%), followed by counseling (7.6%), criminal justice or criminology (6.2%), and sociology and education (both 5.5%). For a breakdown of interviewer geographic location by state, please see Table 1.

Agency Background and Training

Forensic interviewers ($N = 162$) estimated that they personally conduct an average of 187 interviews per year (range 3–1000) and an average of 513 interviews are conducted annually at their agency (1–3000). When asked to indicate which categories of children are interviewed at their agency, 100% of interviewers ($N = 162$) indicated sexual abuse victims, 98.8% indicated physical abuse victims, 92.6% indicated witnesses to a crime, and 33.5% indicated other categories, such as drug-endangered (13.5%) and neglected children (12.3%). On average, interviewers reported that there were three interviewers

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

Table 1. Number of interviewers by state (N = 160)

State	n	State	n
Alaska	1	Alabama	5
Iowa		New York	
Massachusetts		West Virginia	
Minnesota		Florida	6
Mississippi		Georgia	
New Jersey		Ohio	
South Carolina		Oklahoma	
Arizona	2	Oregon	
Kansas		Louisiana	7
Michigan		Wisconsin	
Washington		California	8
Idaho	3	Illinois	
North Carolina		Missouri	
New Mexico		Colorado	9
Arkansas	4	Pennsylvania	
Indiana		Tennessee	
		Texas	
		Virginia	

employed at their agency (range 1–19). The majority of respondents (82.4%) indicated that their agency functioned under the CAC Model.

Interviewers were asked to indicate what formal training they had received in forensic interviewing from a list of five protocols and were allowed to indicate all that applied and to include any additional protocols not listed. Overall (N = 162), most interviewers reported being trained in one method (46.9%), with a range of one to five protocols. The NCAC protocol (57.4%) was the most widely endorsed protocol (for a breakdown of all protocols used, see Table 2). A total of 46.2% reported receiving

Table 2. Number of interviewers trained per interviewing protocol

Protocol	n
NCAC	93
RATAC	82
APSAC	47
NICHD	22
Step-wise	15
Unspecified State-level	11
Cincinnati's Childhood Trust	10
State-level CAC	8
RADAR	3
Tom Lyon 10-Step	2
CATTA	2
Cognitive Graphic Interviewing	2
NCAC Advanced	1
Medical Model	1
NCPTC	1
ChildFirst	1

NCAC, National Children's Advocacy Center; ASPAC, American Professional Society for the Abuse of Children; NICHD, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; CAC, Child Advocacy Center; RADAR, Recognizing Abuse Disclosure Types and Responding; CATTA, Child Abuse Training and Technical Assistance Center; NCPTC, National Child Protection Training Center.

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on-the-job training, observing an average of 85.59 interviews (SD = 181.67) before conducting interviews themselves (ranging from 3 to 1000; 9.1% indicating they didn't know or couldn't remember).[1] Importantly, only one interviewer (0.5%) reported having received on-the-job training as the only training method.

When describing their agencies' policies on supervision and evaluation (in an open-ended format), the most frequently reported method was peer review (68.3%; N = 145), followed by supervisory review (46.2%). Interestingly, 31.0% of interviewers considered their initial training to be a type of supervision/evaluation and 6.9% reported there was no supervision at their agency. An additional 5.5% of participants reported using mock interviews, and the remaining 11.3% mentioned other, non-classifiable methods or responses.

Interview Tools

When asked to list (in open-ended format) the items and/or tools typically brought into the interview room, 83.0% (N = 158) bring writing/coloring materials, 64.0% bring blank paper or boards (e.g., easels, smart boards, etc.), 57.0% bring body diagrams (unspecified), 24.0% bring anatomical dolls, 18.0% bring toys (e.g., Play-Doh, plush toys, puzzles), 9.0% bring intake forms (i.e., case information), and 8.0% bring recording devices. When asked specifically about videotaping, earpieces, and note-taking, 96.3% of respondents (N = 162) indicated that they use videotaping, 36.9% (N = 160) indicated they use an earpiece during the interview, and 62.5% (N = 160) indicated that they take notes during the interview. If the technique was used, the tendency was to use it in almost all cases (99–100% of the time).

Pre-Interview Preparation

For detailed information about the prevalence of blind interviewing and the reasons for using this approach, please see Table 3.

Participants were then asked to indicate, in their personal experience, how difficult it is to remain blind to all allegation information on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely difficult). Interviewers, on average, rated the difficulty of remaining blind as 2.72 (SD = 1.05). When given the opportunity to explain, in an open-ended format, why remaining blind is or is not difficult, participants who responded (N = 24) did so in one of two ways: by providing a reason why remaining blind to allegation information is difficult when that strategy is being used; or by providing a reason why blind interviewing as a technique would be difficult. Regarding the first category, respondents indicated that remaining blind to allegation information is difficult because they either received unwanted information (mentioned by 25%) or were familiar with the parties involved (e.g., when from a small community; 8.3%). Regarding the second category of responses, respondents indicated that a blind interviewing strategy would be difficult because they prefer to have information (mentioned by 25.0%), the agency's policies require or encourage reviewing

[1] When interviewers indicated a range, anchor, or estimate (e.g., 20–25, 300+, thousands), we used the lowest provided number (e.g., 20, 300, 1000, respectively) to be consistent. In addition, for many interviewers this estimate included interviews they observed in another role or capacity (e.g., as a CPS worker, director, intern, or attorney).

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Table 3. Prevalence of blind interviewing and reasons for using

Response	%	Reasons (if used)	%
Never	79.6	Personal preference	33.3
Sometimes	18.5	Prefer not to answer	27.3
Always	1.9	Recommended by agency	15.2
		Don't know	12.1
		Required by law	3.0
		No response	9.1

information (12.5%), it would be too difficult to elicit a disclosure without information (8.0%), or it would put the child's safety at risk (8.0%).

Interviewers were then asked in an open-ended format to indicate what are (or would be) the advantages of a blind interview technique. Of those who provided a response ($N = 137$), the most frequently cited advantage was reducing bias during the interview (i.e., fewer suggestive or leading questions, reduced likelihood of introducing information; 47.4%), followed by a similar advantage of enhanced interviewer objectivity (i.e., encouraging a broader questioning strategy and neutrality; 34.3%). Importantly, 13.8% of participants indicated there was no advantage to this technique, reflecting a strong opposition to blind interviewing. Other potential advantages included a stronger defense of the interview in court (14.6%) and higher disclosure rates (2.1%).

When asked to indicate what are (or would be) the disadvantages of a blind interview technique in an open-ended format, respondents ($N = 135$) most frequently mentioned a lack of important background information (e.g., difficulty forming questions, unprepared, or unaware of people involved; 57.8%), potentially missing important details during the interview (e.g., gathering irrelevant information, missing key factors, or failing to corroborate details; 25.2%), and increased difficulties for the child (e.g., unable to give prompts or address purpose of the interview; 25.2%). Other disadvantages included increased difficulties for the interviewer (i.e., context for understanding responses and storyline; 18.5%), a longer investigative process (16.3%), and an increased risk for not obtaining a disclosure (11.1%).

When asked in an open-ended format if they are or would be comfortable conducting allegation-blind interviews, 28.3% of interviewers ($N = 138$) indicated "no" they would never be comfortable. In contrast, 32.6% said "yes" they would always be comfortable, while an additional 34.8% said "yes," but it depended on the circumstances, and the remaining 4.4% were either unsure (i.e. indifferent) or preferred not to answer. Of those who elaborated on why they would be comfortable ($N = 39$), 69.2% of interviewers indicated that their training was sufficient, regardless of access to case information. Of those who elaborated on why they would not be comfortable ($N = 60$), 83.3% of interviewers mentioned that this was because they would lack important background information, and 30.0% voiced concerns regarding developmental limitations, especially with young children who may be unable to provide information without proper cues.

Pre-Interview Information

Interviewers were then presented with potential case details and were asked to indicate whether they typically have this information before interviewing a witness and then to

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rate how important they considered this information for conducting an interview (i.e., to obtain details and an accurate statement from the victim/witness) on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 = not at all important and 5 = very important). For detailed information on these details and rankings, see Table 4.

Participants were further asked (in an open-ended format) what information makes them likely to be skeptical of an allegation prior to an interview. Of those who provided a response ($N = 129$), the most frequently cited reason for skepticism was the presence of custody issues (mentioned by 43.4%). However, a sizeable portion of interviewers indicated they do not have skepticism regarding allegations, are uninfluenced by information or are free from bias prior to conducting a forensic interview (27.9%). Other sources of skepticism mentioned included evidence of coaching by family members (14.7%), refusal to talk in previous interviews (14.0%), potential bias in previous interviews (10.1%), and developmentally inappropriate disclosure language (8.5%). Interviewers were also asked what information makes them likely to believe an allegation is true prior to the interview. Most frequently, interviewers ($N = 128$) reported that they try not to form an opinion prior to an interview and go into the interview without any preconceived notions (39.8%). If information makes them believe an allegation is true, most often it is the presence of concrete evidence (e.g., videos, photographs, injuries or medical evidence; mentioned by 23.4%), a spontaneous previous disclosure (11.7%), presence of an eyewitness (10.9%), circumstances of the disclosure (unspecified; 8.6%), consistent statements in prior questioning (7.0%), and an absence of a motive to fabricate (7.0%).

Forensic interviewers were also asked if they have ever felt pressured to obtain a disclosure. A majority of interviewers who responded to this question stated "yes" (58.0% of $N = 139$), while 39.0% stated "no" and 1.4% indicated either "don't know" or "prefer not to answer." When asked to describe how or why they felt pressured to obtain a disclosure, 43.8% of those who responded ($N = 80$) mentioned feeling pressure from the investigative team (i.e., law enforcement, child protective services) to elicit information. Interestingly, some reported feeling pressure when a disclosure is required for prosecution (i.e., when there is a *lack* of other evidence; 27.5%), while

Table 4. Summary of information typically known prior to an interview and mean perceived importance of that information ($N = 148$; 5 = very important)

Category	Information	% who have pre-interview information	Mean perceived importance (*SD*)
Child	Name	100.0	4.35 (1.07)
	Age	99.3	4.39 (0.90)
	Gender	99.3	3.59 (1.26)
	Developmental level	80.1	4.13 (0.90)
	Living arrangements	73.3	3.12 (1.05)
	Psychosocial history	62.8	3.31 (0.93)
	Cultural background	69.9	3.47 (1.05)
	Name for body parts	27.9	2.40 (1.25)
Perpetrator	Relationship to child	98.6	3.95 (0.88)
	Name	97.3	3.59 (1.00)
	Criminal history	44.8	2.33 (1.12)
Allegation	Details of allegation	87.0	3.53 (1.02)
	Details of disclosure	86.2	3.62 (1.06)
	Number of previous disclosures	63.2	3.13 (1.16)
	Results of previous interviews	69.4	3.30 (1.24)

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

others mentioned feeling pressure when physical evidence is *present* (21.3%) or when the perpetrator has confessed (15.0%). Other examples included when the child's safety is at stake (21.3%), or self-generated pressure (13.8%). When asked to indicate overall, in their personal experience, how often interviewers felt pressured to obtain a disclosure during their forensic interviews using a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all to 5 = all the time), the sample's mean rating was 1.92 (*SD* = 0.84).

Finally, participants were asked, in an open-ended format, to indicate what they believed was the most difficult aspect of their role as a forensic interviewer. The most frequently cited challenge was working with young children (e.g., forming developmentally appropriate questions, having patience, and keeping their attention; mentioned by 27%), followed by the emotionally draining nature of the role (e.g., not being able to console the children, difficult topics; 20.6%), and satisfying the needs of all agencies (18.2%). Other challenges included obtaining information without leading the child (16.5%), failing to obtain a disclosure (13.2%), and lack of field direction (e.g., no universal protocol, dealing with a flawed system, lack of research in the field, etc.; 6.6%).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to gather valuable information regarding the training and techniques currently used in the field of child forensic interviewing and to gather detailed information about real-world CSA interviewers' opinions about and experience with a blind interviewing approach. The wealth of information gathered through this national survey provides important insights into current practices in forensic interviewing of children in the U.S., particularly with respect to interviewers' pre-interview knowledge.

Interviewer Training and Tools

Consistent with similar general practice surveys administered to CACs nationwide (MRCAC, 2013), the present study suggests that interviewing protocols differ considerably across agencies and that many interviewers are trained in more than one method. The most widely endorsed training was the NCAC training, which is not surprising given that our target population was forensic interviewers working in or affiliated with a CAC. Similar to other national surveys, APSAC and the CornerHouse/Finding Words/RATAC combined protocols were the next most popular training methods reported by our sample. Although the NICHD protocol is the most widely researched and validated (Benia et al., 2015), only 13.6% of interviewers reported receiving training in this protocol. This finding is similar to levels of NICHD protocol use reported in previous surveys (e.g., 10%; MRCAC, 2013). It is important to consider, however, that some protocols with different titles are considered variants of the NICHD protocol and therefore contain the same empirically based techniques (e.g., Tom Lyon's 10-step method).

Although not necessarily generalizable to all forensic interviewers, the current findings suggest that interviewers may be trained in best-practice techniques with nationally recognized protocols (i.e., NICHD), yet return to their local agencies and use individual techniques that lack empirical support. For example, a closer

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

examination of those reporting the use of anatomical dolls (24%) and drawings (57%) revealed that these same interviewers were trained in a nationally recognized, structured interview protocol. Thus, results from this survey highlight the need for continued research on the tools actually used in child forensic interviews independent of the interviewers' formal training. This call for future research is mirrored in the U.S. Department of Justice's best-practice guidelines, which falls short of making recommendations regarding media and supplemental tools (e.g., body diagrams, drawings, etc.), acknowledging that the use of such tools "varies greatly by model and professional training. Decisions are most often made at the local level and interviewer comfort and multidisciplinary team preferences may influence them" (Newlin et al., 2015, p. 7).

The present data also suggest universal adherence to one of the most important recommendations in forensic interviewing in any context: almost all forensic interviews are videotaped. This finding is in line with previous statistics, reporting the use of video recording in 90% of CACs nationwide (MRCAC, 2013). In addition, all but one interviewer received formal interviewing training above and beyond on-the-job training. Although lower than previous surveys indicating that peer review was used by 96% of participating agencies (MRCAC, 2013), a majority (68%) of the current sample also reported the use of peer-review as a method of ongoing training and supervision. Given the scrutiny and criticism of early studies of real-world forensic interviewing (see Tubb, Wood, & Hosch, 1999; Wood, McClure, & Birch, 1996), these findings are promising.

Pre-Interview Information

To our knowledge the present study is also the first study to assess specifically the prevalence of the allegation-blind interviewing approach in which the interviewer knows only minimal information about the child and is "blind" to allegation information. Although forensic interviewers in our sample predominantly reported using an informed interviewing approach, approximately one-quarter of interviewers reported using a blind approach in at least some of their forensic interviews. This is particularly surprising given the lack of empirical research on the effectiveness of this technique (but see Cantlon et al., 1996; Rivard et al., 2016). Importantly, when assessing real-world interviewers' opinions about blind interviewing, it is clear that a sizeable portion of the present sample strongly objects to the idea of blind interviewing, not providing any advantage of the technique when asked, with close to a third being unwilling to conduct blind interviews under any circumstance. Most frequently, forensic interviewers voiced valid concerns regarding the feasibility of blind interviewing given developmental limitations, time constraints and reluctant witnesses, reporting that blind interviewing may come at the cost of missed information and difficulty formulating relevant questions. For almost half of the interviewers surveyed, minimizing bias was a notable advantage of blind interviewing, but an even greater number of interviewers felt that lacking background information would leave them unprepared and cause them to potentially miss important information. Many interviewers who elaborated on whether they were comfortable conducting blind interviews mentioned that they are comfortable conducting interviews regardless of access to pre-interview information because they are properly skilled and trained. Thus, with increasing interviewer skill and experience, access to pre-interview

DOI: 10.1002/bsl

information (or lack thereof) may be less important to conducting a quality child forensic interview – an important topic for future investigation. This is consistent with research demonstrating that interviewer skill level can minimize confirmation bias in forensic interviewing (Powell et al., 2012).

Our findings also offer valuable insights into the types of information that interviewers typically have prior to conducting blind interviews. Not surprisingly, child-specific information such as name, gender, and age are known in almost all cases. Interviewers in this sample reported having access to information about the child's developmental level, living arrangements, psychosocial history and cultural information well over half of the time, which is consistent with recommendations for interview preparation that is sensitive to the child's specific needs (Rohrabaugh et al., 2016). Importantly, the present study is the first to assess the scope of case-specific information known to forensic interviewers prior to the interview, revealing that interviewers know information about the perpetrator (e.g., name and relationship to the child) and allegations prior to conducting the interview. Almost half of the interviewers also reported having access to the perpetrator's criminal history, when available. These findings are in line with the CACs multidisciplinary foundation, which encourages pre-interview sharing of information between relevant parties (e.g., police, prosecution). However, interviewers rated the perpetrator's criminal history as the least important information to have. Thus, if interviewers desire to limit their pre-interview knowledge, the team may want to be sensitive to which information interviewers deem unnecessary (or potentially biasing). This may be particularly important when the interviewer is inexperienced and thus more likely to ask leading or suggestive questions based on prior knowledge (Powell et al., 2012).

Finally, we were interested in the extent to which certain pre-interview information may be perceived to trigger preconceived notions about a case. We learned that custody disputes and prior denials raised the most skepticism regarding allegations. In contrast, medical or concrete evidence and spontaneous disclosures rendered allegations more believable. Most importantly, a sizeable proportion of interviewers (between 30% and 40%) reported that they try not to form opinions prior to conducting interviews and therefore couldn't report any information that makes them skeptical or likely to believe an allegation. Unfortunately, even though interviewers in this sample understand the importance of neutrality, almost half of interviewers reported feeling pressured to obtain a disclosure, most often from the investigative team. This perceived pressure may be inherent in the job and a desire to protect children from maltreatment, but future research should explore ways to minimize perceived pressure for those interviewers who may be impacted by this burden.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with any survey research, one notable limitation of the present study is the generalizability of the findings to all forensic interviewers in child sexual abuse investigations. We focused our survey on those interviewers housed in or affiliated with CACs within the United States and primarily used email recruitment for ease of mass distribution with limited resources. The resulting sample, although sizeable given the difficulties accessing a real-world population, may differ in many respects from the average forensic interviewer. For example, the most common education level in the present study was a master's degree and a few participants indicated that they were

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currently the directors of their centers but still conducted forensic interviews on an as-needed basis. The estimated 18% response rate is likely an overestimate, as our data show that agencies in this sample had a mean of three interviewers. Thus, the present findings should be interpreted with caution when making broad generalizations regarding interviewers' self-reported practices and opinions.

Another limitation worth noting is the inability to determine how current tools and items are being used in the interview. For example, 9% reported bringing an intake form into the interview room, but it remains unclear whether the form is used to guide interviewers' understanding of the child's responses, to take notes, or to generate questions. The same can be said of interviewers who reported bringing body drawings and dolls into the interview. As the benefits and risks associated with body drawings are mixed and may depend on how they are used (see Bruck, Kelley, & Poole, 2016; Poole, Bruck, & Pipe, 2011), it will be important for future research to evaluate how various tools are used within the context of the interviews to better understand the risks involved. Of particular interest for future research is the use of earpieces in forensic interviews. Although this may facilitate communication between the interviewer and the rest of the team, it is unclear exactly how these earpieces are used and whether they may have unintended consequences on the child's narrative, the interviewer's questioning strategy, or the relationship between the two. For example, do interviewers explain to the child what the earpiece is for? Does the interviewer have constant exposure to input from the rest of the team or a simple reminder of something that was missed at the interview's conclusion? Clearly these distinctions are important and future research should assess whether/how earpieces influence the interview's effectiveness in meaningful ways.

Similarly, the present survey collected information on interviewers' self-reported practices, without providing insight into actual practices. Research has highlighted the discrepancy between endorsed or reported practices and actual interviewer behavior. For example, a 10-year follow-up study of forensic interviews in CSA investigations revealed the consistent use of problematic interviewing strategies in a sample of Norwegian interviewers despite proper training (Johnson et al., 2015). In addition to assessing forensic interviewers' actual practices, future research should also include researchers and forensic psychologists who frequently serve as expert witnesses in CSA cases. This unique population may provide additional, valuable insights regarding whether issues relevant to pre-interview information and other under-studied topics surface in actual trial proceedings.

CONCLUSIONS

The forensic interviewer's role in child sexual abuse investigations is both extremely important and challenging. Interviewers must work with young children in what is often an emotionally draining context, eliciting details sufficient to satisfy the needs of relevant agencies, while using best-practice techniques that are frequently updated through empirical research. The present study suggests that forensic interviewers across the U.S. consistently videotape all child interviews, are being formally trained in various structured protocols, but may benefit from additional research and training on under-studied and controversial tools. With respect to pre-interview information, a vast majority of interviewers know child- and case-specific information and deem this

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information necessary to carry out an effective interview. However, allegation-blind interviewing exists and although many do this out of personal preference, some agencies mandate this technique. Given many interviewers' strong objections to the allegation-blind approach and a general lack of research in this area, the present study calls for future research to systematically examine the effects of allegation-blind versus informed interviewing on child statements, interviewer behavior, and case outcomes in real-world CSA investigations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was funded in part by the American Psychology-Law Society Grants-in-Aid Award.

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