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“I Only Want to Know What You Know”: The Use of Orienting Messages During Forensic Interviews and Their Effects on Child Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to evaluate orienting messages within the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol in two formats: provided both at the outset and as needed throughout the interview compared to previous practice in which orienting messages were provided only as the opportunity arose. Through the content analysis of 120 videotaped forensic interviews and corresponding case files in which children were interviewed for sexual abuse allegations, results suggest that the use of orienting messages both at the beginning and as needed lead to significantly more autonomous responses from children, that use of more orienting messages was significantly related to more autonomous responses from children, and that the specific orienting messages of “can’t/won’t say” and “ask me a question” significantly predict more autonomous responses among children. Implications for practice include the use of orienting messages as a way to provide a respectful and safe experience for children participating in forensic interviews.

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While widely used in the field, the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol is unique in that it has not historically included interview instructions or rules at its outset. Instead, it incorporated them throughout the interview as the opportunity arose. Practitioners devised orienting messages to be used as an alternative to traditional interview “rules” while providing a strong emphasis on a narrative approach. Such an approach permits avoidance of suggestive and leading techniques and questioning and reinforces targeted behaviors as opportunities present throughout the entire interview. The objective of practitioners was to enhance the autonomy and authority of the child in the interview while avoiding rote presentation of “rules” or a “testing” stance that could serve to enhance, rather than diminish, the interviewer’s authority. The orienting messages were intended to replicate the value of scripted interview instructions because they are grounded in examples and encourage children to practice at the outset of the interview,

which research has found reduces errors in children's narratives about abusive events (Cordón, Saetermoe, & Goodman, 2005; Mulder & Vrij, 1996; Waterman & Blades, 2011), increasing credibility of their statements. In 2012, forensic interviewers at CornerHouse changed their practice to include "orienting messages" at the outset of the interview. This decision was rooted in the child-centered principle, where children are viewed as the experts on their own experience and should be provided with the opportunity to communicate about their experiences in their own way (CornerHouse, 2013). Thus, the orienting messages were incorporated at the beginning to give children information about the culture of the interview through simple, brief statements followed by reinforcement throughout the interview with modifications for developmental considerations as needed (Anderson, 2014). An evaluation of the effectiveness of such a change in practice or the use of orienting messages in general has not been conducted, however.

The purpose of this article is to both introduce the use of orienting messages within forensic interviews and to evaluate the use of orienting messages within the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol in two formats: provided both at the outset and as needed throughout the interview compared to orienting messages provided only as the opportunity arose during the interview and by measuring the number of children's autonomous responses as the outcome. We present detailed examples of both orienting messages and children's autonomous responses later in this article. This study provides important implications for forensic interview practice and research: the introduction of orienting messages as an alternative to interview instructions and an evaluation of effectiveness within the most widely used forensic interview protocol in the United States (Midwest Regional Children's Advocacy Centers, 2013).

Background

Forensic interviews are unique and distinct interactions, the demands of which may contravene some of the social conventions or rules children are accustomed to in everyday life (Cordón et al., 2005). Interview instructions, or "rules," are recommended as best practice in the field of forensic interviewing (APSAC, 2012) in order to better prepare children to participate in a style of interaction with an unfamiliar adult that is new to them. Orienting messages provide important information about the interview itself while preparing children for this unique style of interaction. These messages prepare children by inviting them to correct the interviewer, encouraging children to ask questions, and to say "I don't know" or "I don't understand."

Because orienting messages are based on practice experience with a foundation on research findings, it isn't surprising these specific messages have been shown to improve children's active participation in several studies (Gee, Gregory, & Pipe, 1999; Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999; Waterman & Blades, 2011). One key component of orienting messages is to encourage children to correct interviewers if they say something incorrect, which has been found to improve children's participation during the interview (Gee et al., 1999). Likewise, it is rare that children will spontaneously indicate that they don't understand, but instruction giving permission for children to say "I don't understand" can help children ask for clarification rather than provide an inaccurate answer (Saywitz et al., 1999), as does specific instruction regarding the adult's lack of knowledge about events (Waterman & Blades, 2011). Both encouraging children to let the interviewer know they don't understand and reminding children that the interviewer doesn't know what happened are key orienting messages provided to children and grounded in example throughout the duration of the interview.

Another hallmark of orienting messages is not just listing "rules" but also providing the specific message, followed by the opportunity for children to demonstrate their understanding by practicing at the beginning of the interview through specific examples, along with affirmation by the interviewer when children use these responses throughout. Studies conducted within a controlled environment support this aspect of orienting messages, suggesting that when children are told the "rules" of an interaction and can also practice the rules at the outset they demonstrate enhanced autonomy as well as reduced errors and suggestibility (Cordón et al., 2005; Mulder & Vrij, 1996; Waterman & Blades, 2011).

Orienting messages are also intended to be used flexibly, considering development and best practice guidelines, particularly for very young children (APSAC, 2012; National Children's Advocacy Center, 2014). Research supports this practice as well (Ellis, Powell, Thomson, & Jones, 2003; Scoboria, 2013). For example, Ellis and colleagues (2003) provided 49 preschool-aged children with the introduction of 4 rules (being complete, responding "I don't know," correcting the interviewer, and not guessing) to investigate whether providing ground rules would result in fewer false details regarding a staged event. The authors found that the 4 rules produced negligible impact on preschooler accuracy when rules were not accompanied by practice opportunities and that preschoolers were subject to highly suggestive techniques (Ellis et al., 2003). Specifically in regard to facilitating appropriate "I don't know" responses, children in other research, ages 8 and older, were found to benefit from simple interview instructions, but younger children required more practice and assessment of understanding (Scoboria, 2013).

As discussed, while the literature generally supports the use of interview instructions, additional research will build understanding in regard to maximizing the impact of specific rules within real practice. For example, when Cordon and colleagues (2005) asked children to follow three target rules at the outset of the interview, overall errors were reduced by a significant but somewhat modest 14%. In comparison, in an analog study with over 100 school-aged children, Mulder and Vrij (1996) saw a greater impact in reducing errors with implementation of just two conversational rules. These rules were that the interviewer couldn't help the child with the answer and that "I don't know" is an acceptable response to the interviewer's question.

Furthermore, research recommendations can create some contradictions when practitioners attempt implementation. For example, minimizing authority and providing children with interview instructions are both recommended practice in forensic interviews. From the perspective of reducing authority, Waterman and Blades (2011) caution interviewers against sending a message that there are right or wrong answers. However, practice exercises devised to teach young or deferential children how to correct the interviewer or to respond "I don't know" by definition involve testing the child's ability to demonstrate compliance with the "rule." Furthermore, research support demonstrates that alternative techniques, such as providing children with the opportunity to give a narrative account, can also increase targeted responses such as "I don't know" (Waterman & Blades, 2011).

Finally, despite strong support in controlled research studies for implementation of interview instructions, many practitioners are concerned that rule statements place pressure on children, interfering with the quality of the interview or respect for the child. In one study of child interviews conducted by police officers, interviewers gave the "I don't know" instruction in only 1% of interviews (Schreiber Compo, Gregory, & Fisher, 2012). This lends support to the idea that interviewers in real practice situations may be reluctant or otherwise may prioritize this instruction.

Forensic interview protocols that use interview instructions or rules

Despite some cautions, many established forensic interview protocols incorporate some kind of interview instructions for children at the beginning of the interview, based on research and practice (Faller, 2015). Most of these incorporate aspects of best practice guidelines outlined by APSAC (2012) such as "correct me if I'm wrong," permission to say "I don't know," letting children know to "tell me if you don't know or understand," and to promise to tell the truth. For example, both the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007) and the Ten Step (Lyon, 2005) ask children to say "I don't know" if they don't

know the answer to the question and also asks children to promise to tell the truth. The Ten Step (Lyon, 2005) and RADAR (Everson, Ragsdale, & Snider, 2014) asks children to “tell me if you don’t understand.” The Cognitive Interview asks children to share information “because I wasn’t there, so I don’t know” (Saywitz, Geiselman, & Bornstein, 1992). The National Children’s Advocacy Center (NCAC) guidelines for forensic interviewing include “correct me,” “don’t know,” “don’t understand,” and “true and real” (NCAC, 2014). It is important to note that, within these guidelines, the NCAC cautions that the use of these messages does not work well for all children, including very young children, and that children may benefit from practicing these guidelines. The examples provided are just a handful of forensic interview protocols, and it is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of all forensic interview protocols, nor does it outline each in detail.

The CornerHouse forensic interview protocol

The CornerHouse Forensic Interview was first developed in 1989 by CornerHouse, a Children’s Advocacy Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and initially taught in a five-day forensic interview training format by CornerHouse in 1990. It has undergone regular updating and revisions as new research and information has emerged in the field; most recently the protocol was significantly revised including the identification of stages, approaches, and methods as of January 2013. The CornerHouse interview is not only widely used but is highly regarded within the United States legal system and has been upheld in several states through appellate court opinions for providing expert forensic testimony (*Baker v. State*, 2001; *Mooneyham v. State*, 2005; *State v. Douglas*, 2006; *State v. Hollander*, 1999; *Wright v. Texas*, 2007).

The CornerHouse Interview holds three guiding principles: it is person-centered, semistructured, and forensically sound. Individuals are treated with dignity and respect. The interview is based on the idea that children are experts on their own experiences and are less likely to experience harm by virtue of their participation in the forensic interview if they have opportunities to communicate in their own ways. The semistructured nature of the interview provides for coverage of similar topics in each interview and also allows for flexibility in regard to how the interviewer approaches the topic of concern. The flexibility of semistructured interviews allows interviewers to be sensitive and responsive to the developmental and emotional needs of the children. Interviewers using this protocol rely on open-ended questions, an unbiased perspective, and avoiding leading and suggestive techniques. The format of questions used

is guided by Invitation and Inquiry, which emphasizes open-ended prompts and questions (CornerHouse, 2013).

The current study

This study compared two versions of the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol. In the previously used version, where orienting messages were only used as the opportunity arose, interviewers would interject a message whenever the opportunity presented itself. For example, if a child asked the interviewer a question, the interviewer might say, “Thank you for letting me know you had a question. If you have a question about anything else, I want you to tell me.” In the updated version, where orienting messages were used both at the beginning of the interview and as the opportunity presented itself, interviewers presented these messages right away and also responded to and reinforced the messages throughout the interview. For example, at the beginning of the interview, the interviewer might say, “If I get something wrong, I want you to tell me. I want to make sure I get everything right.” After the initial message is given at the beginning of the interview, if a child later corrected the interviewer, the interviewer would respond and reinforce the message by saying “Thank you for correcting me. I want to make sure I get everything right.”

By comparing both versions of the CornerHouse interview, this study examines whether children provide more autonomous responses when using the revised version of the interview in which orienting messages both at the beginning and throughout the forensic interview and provided, when more orienting messages are used, and when particular orienting messages are used. Specifically, we wanted to know (a) whether using the revised interview and current practice of introducing orienting messages both at the beginning and “as needed” would result in significantly more autonomous responses from children during the interview overall, (b) whether the use of more orienting messages during the interview would predict significantly more autonomous responses from children during the interview, and (c) whether particular orienting messages provided by interviewers at any time during the interview would result in significantly more autonomous responses by children during the interview as compared to other orienting messages.

Hypotheses

In consideration of our research questions, we hypothesized that (a) within the revised practice of providing of orienting messages both at the outset of the interview and “as the opportunity arose” throughout the interview, children will be able to assert autonomous responses significantly more

often than children who were only provided instructions as opportunities arose; that (b) the use of more orienting messages by interviewers will result in significantly more autonomous responses from children; and that (3) children will provide significantly more autonomous responses when provided with specific orienting messages as compared to other orienting messages from the interviewer at any time during the interview.

Methods

To evaluate the change in practice within the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol, we performed a content analysis of 120 video-recorded forensic interviews and corresponding case files of children and adolescents at a child advocacy center (CAC). Children are referred to the CAC by law enforcement and child protective service professionals. On average, approximately 500 children and adolescents are interviewed at the CAC each year. While most of these interviews are pursuant to allegations of child sexual abuse, some interviews are also conducted with alleged witnesses to violent crime and regarding other types of abuse or neglect allegations.

Sample

We examined cases using messages provided only as needed ($n = 65$) and cases in which orienting messages were used both at the beginning of the interview and as needed throughout the duration of the interview ($n = 55$). Interviews were originally conducted in 2012, with interviews using only the “as the opportunity arose” messages from March 2012 through May 2012 and interviews using orienting messages both at the beginning and as needed from October 2012 through December 2012. We collected data from interviews occurring during these separate time periods to allow for the change in practice to become established. Only cases that satisfied inclusion criteria were used, including any interview during which the child participated in a single session forensic interview in which sexual abuse was the primary allegation. Interviews in which children disclosed and did not disclose allegations of sexual abuse were included. We obtained institutional review board approval prior to the commencement of the study.

Overall, the sample consisted of more females ($n = 86$) than males ($n = 34$), and the average age of participants was 8.7 ($SD = 3.52$), with an age range of 2–17 years old. Most of the children were African American ($n = 38$) or Caucasian ($n = 31$). Other children were identified as African ($n = 1$), American Indian ($n = 2$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 5$), Hispanic ($n = 20$), or multi- or biracial ($n = 20$). The first language of most participants was English ($n = 98$), although some participants were identified as being bilingual ($n = 13$), and others had primary languages other than

English, including Hmong ($n = 1$), Spanish ($n = 7$), or unknown ($n = 3$). All forensic interviews were conducted in English. In cases where the participant's first language was not English, an interpreter was made available throughout the duration of the interview ($n = 14$). Some children chose to use the interpreter for the entire interview, portions of the interview, or not at all. Most of the participants in the sample did not have any identified disability or mental health diagnosis ($n = 82$), but some were identified as having diagnoses of autism or a developmental disability ($n = 3$), a learning disability or other disability ($n = 4$), a mental health diagnoses such as anxiety or depression ($n = 8$), or a diagnosis or disability was unknown ($n = 23$).

Interviewers

Seven trained interviewers conducted all of the forensic interviews used in the evaluation of the two interview versions. Interviewers were employees at the CAC and have a range of one to over 20 years of experience completing forensic interviews. Five of the seven have advanced degrees in social work or education. Interview staff underwent extensive specialized training in conducting forensic interviews and in the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol. Prior to the commencement of the study, interviewers engaged in critical analysis of practice techniques and training in using orienting messages through peer review with the goal of improving techniques and adherence to consistent use of orienting messages both at the beginning and as needed.

Data analysis

As previously mentioned, we performed content analysis of 120 video-recorded interviews and corresponding case files. Content analysis is research on existing records, or recordings, of human communications. It makes replicable and valid inferences from participant communication in specific contexts (Berelson, 1971; Krippendorff, 2012). With its roots in communication studies, it is now most widely used in humanities and social sciences, although it is being used more in legal and political research as well. Content analysis is most appropriate for research wishing to study subjects without affecting their communication or behavior, which could ultimately reduce the validity of the data (Babbie, 2010). In the present study, having a researcher present during the forensic interviews could have changed the way that the children responded to the interviewer's questions and caused the children more undue anxiety in an already apparently stressful situation.

Content analysis has several core components when used in reliable and valid research (Krippendorff, 2012). First, definitions of meaning units and

coding instructions must be clear. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), meaning units are words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to one another through their content and context. In the present study, meaning units are both words and sentences. Second, coding instructions must clearly define the units coded, followed by examples. This not only ensures the reliability of the data but also the validity. We used deductive content analysis in this study. Deductive content analysis answers a research question or set of questions as related to a hypothesis or set of hypotheses (Mayring, 2000). Therefore, coding is purposeful and based on previous research or theory. By assigning codes to clearly defined phenomena, content analysis allows for qualitative communication to be quantified for statistical analysis. In the present study, content analysis is appropriate because it uses existing case files and video-recorded forensic interviews.

We created a coding scheme and tested it for interrater reliability using Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) on 10% of cases in the sample with 93% agreement between coders and a Kappa value of 0.83 ($K = 0.83$). When using content analysis, Krippendorff (2012) offers conservative guidelines for assessing whether Kappa indicates conclusions about inter-rater reliability, with values between 0 and 0.67 as being unreliable, values between 0.67 and 0.80 as being tentatively reliable, and values above 0.80 as being reliable and conclusive. According to these guidelines, the calculated kappa value of 0.80 of interrater reliability of codes is conclusive.

The primary and secondary coder each watched the video-recorded interview one time and recorded data on a coding sheet. Coded data included the child's demographic information, the interviewer, the total number of orienting messages and number of orienting messages used within each category by interviewers throughout the interview, whether the interviewer used orienting messages only "as needed" or used them both at the outset and "as needed," and the total number of child autonomous responses (not categorized by type). Orienting messages used by interviewers included any message to help orient the child to the style of conversation utilized throughout the duration of the interview. In this study, orienting messages were assigned to one of seven categories. For a complete list of each of the categories, including examples of specific statements used by interviewers, see [Table 1](#). The outcome variable of child autonomous responses included anytime a child indicated he or she couldn't talk about something, didn't know, didn't understand the question, corrected the interviewer, or asked a question of the interviewer. The child's responses were counted only in total and not categorized as part of the analysis. However, for descriptive purposes, examples of such responses are included in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Examples of Orienting Messages and Children's Autonomous Responses.

Orienting Message Category	Orienting Message Used at Beginning of Interview	Orienting Message Used "As Needed" During Any Part of the Interview	Examples of Child Autonomous Responses
Can't or Won't Say	"If I ask you something you can't or don't want to talk about, you don't have to say if you don't want to. I only want to talk about whatever you can talk about."	"Is it okay to talk about that?"	"I can't talk about that." "I don't want to talk about that."
I Don't Know	"If you don't know something that I ask you, it's okay for you to say 'I don't know.' I only want to know what you do know."	"Thanks for telling me you don't know. I only want to know what you do know."	"I don't know."
I Don't Understand	"If you don't understand something, I want you to tell me."	"Thanks for telling me you don't understand."	"I don't understand."
Correcting the Interviewer	"If I get something wrong, I want you to tell me. I want to make sure I get everything right."	"Thanks for correcting me, I want to get things right."	"That's not right," or "My name is spelled a different way."
Asking a Question or for Clarification	"If I say something that's confusing or if you have a question about anything, I want you to ask me."	"Thanks for letting me know about your question," and "Thanks for letting me know that was confusing. Let me ask you a different way."	"Why are you writing that down?" or "I'm confused."
Reality-Based Discussion	Not done at beginning of interview.	"In this room, we talk about real stuff, things that really happened."	"Mom thinks I lied, but I told the truth."
Ignorant Interviewer Statements	"If I ask you questions, it's because I don't know or because I don't understand," or "I don't want to assume; I want to know what you know."	"I wasn't there, so I don't know what happened."	"Don't you know what happened? Didn't someone tell you what happened," or "I'm not sure if you know the situation."

Statistical analysis

We used multiple regression analyses to assess the relationship between the use of orienting messages and the number of autonomous responses from children. We built three models to test our three hypotheses. Model 1 tested the first hypothesis of whether the use of orienting messages both at the outset of the interview and "as needed" throughout the interview would result in children being able to assert autonomous responses significantly more often than children who were only provided instructions as opportunities arose. Model 2 examined the second hypothesis of whether the use of more orienting messages overall would result in significantly more autonomous responses from children throughout the interview. Finally, model 3 evaluated the third hypothesis of whether the use of specific orienting messages would result in significantly more autonomous responses from children as compared to other categories of

orienting messages. Full models were built with variables of interest and other demographic variables as controls, including the child's age, gender, language, race/ethnicity, and disability/mental health diagnosis status. Final models included predictors of interest and significant control variables. We assessed each predictive model for appropriateness of fit with linear regression and all were found to be within normal limits of the distribution of residuals and homogeneity of variance.

We performed a sensitivity analysis to evaluate each model's assumptions and to determine whether each variable had adequate power within the regression analysis. The sensitivity analysis showed that the variables of disability/mental health diagnosis and race/ethnicity had some subcategories with extremely small numbers of participants. Rather than excluding these participants from the analysis, some subcategories were combined into alternate categories. Children who had a disability or diagnosis such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, neurodevelopmental disabilities (not specified), learning disabilities (other), blind/visually impaired, and mental health diagnosis were combined into the category of disability/mental health diagnosis. Children who identified as African, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander were combined into the category of race/ethnicity "African, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Islander" due to small numbers in each of the subcategories in the sample.

Data transformation

The outcome variable of the number of autonomous responses provided by children during the interview was positively skewed beyond normal limits in the distribution. Therefore, the variable of number of child autonomous responses was rescaled using a square root transformation, which resulted in a normal distribution falling within normal limits of skewness and kurtosis values. Upon completion of the regression analysis, reverse transformation was performed to rescale the coefficients (B) and standard error of the coefficients ($SE B$).

Results

A comparison of the timing of orienting messages

A comparison of the two groups showed that children provided fewer autonomous responses overall when orienting messages were used by interviewers only "as needed" ($M = 11.8$, $SD = 6.5$), as compared to children who were provided with orienting messages by interviewers both at the outset and throughout the duration of the interview as needed ($M = 15.8$, $SD = 6.7$). When controlling for significant child demographic variables and the interviewer using multiple linear regression, our results did support the

hypothesis that orienting messages included both at the outset of the interview and as needed would produce more autonomous responses from children overall as compared to interviews where messages are only provided as opportunities arose ($t = 5.11$ $p < 0.001$). The total variance of the predictive model accounted for 35% in the number of autonomous responses provided by children (adjusted $R^2 = .25$). See Table 2.

Number of orienting messages

Overall, interviewers used an average of 7.6 orienting messages ($SD = 4.9$) throughout the forensic interview. Through multiple regression analysis controlling for significant demographic variables, the final model showed that the number of orienting messages presented significantly predicted the number of autonomous responses children provided ($t = 8.69$, $p < 0.001$) with an overall variance of 52% (adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$). See Table 3 for details.

Specific orienting messages that promote more autonomous responses from children

The regression analysis assessing whether specific orienting messages would result in more autonomous responses provided by children during the forensic interview showed that the specific orienting messages of “can’t/won’t say” ($t = 2.97$, $p < 0.01$) and “ask me a question” ($t = 5.03$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted the number of autonomous responses provided by children. The overall model accounts for 51% of variance

Table 2. Simultaneous Regression Analysis (Model 1): Orienting Messages “As Needed” Only Versus Orienting Messages Both at Beginning and “As Needed” With Children’s Autonomous Responses as the Outcome ($N = 120$).

Predictor Variables ^a	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>
Intercept	8.80	0.20	6.66***
OM “As Needed” versus OM Both (OM both)	1.32	0.05	5.11***
Overall Number of OM			
Disability/Mental Health Diagnosis (yes)	-0.32	0.11	-1.68
Disability/MH Diagnosis (other)	-0.14	0.08	-1.32
Race/Ethnicity (African American)	-0.10	0.09	-1.05
Race/Ethnicity (Hispanic)	-0.07	0.13	-0.75
Race/Ethnicity (Multi)	-3.9 e-3	0.12	-0.18
Race/Ethnicity (African, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Islander)	0.75	0.19	2.00*
Model 1 (OM “as needed” versus OM Both) $F(15,103) = 3.499$ and $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.3521$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.2515$			

Notes: Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

^a All variables included in the models are shown with exception to the seven interviewers included in models 1 and 2. Reference groups for each category included: orienting messages “as needed” only, no mental health diagnosis (disability/mental health diagnosis), Caucasian (race/ethnicity).

Table 3. Simultaneous Regression Analysis (Model 2): Overall Orienting Messages Provided With Children’s Autonomous Responses As the Outcome ($N = 120$).

Predictor Variables ^a	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>T</i>
Intercept	4.28	0.13	5.78***
Overall Number of OM	0.03	0.00	8.67***
Child’s Gender (male)	−0.11	0.04	−1.62
Race/Ethnicity (African American)	−0.10	0.06	−1.28
Race/Ethnicity (Hispanic)	−0.40	0.09	−2.13*
Race/Ethnicity (Multi)	−0.11	0.08	−1.14
Race/Ethnicity (African, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Islander)	0.01	0.14	0.24

Model 2 (Overall number of OM) $F(13,103) = 8.693$ and $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.516$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.4566$

Notes: Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

^a All variables included in the models are shown with exception to the seven interviewers included in models 1 and 2. Reference groups for each category included: females (gender) and Caucasian (race/ethnicity).

Table 4. Simultaneous Regression Analysis (Model 3): Specific Orienting Messages by Category With Children’s Autonomous Responses as the Outcome ($N = 120$).

Predictor Variables ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>T</i>
Intercept			8.57	0.07	10.92***
OM (Can’t/won’t say)	1.03	1.38	0.06	0.01	2.97**
OM (I don’t know)	1.77	1.22	−0.00	0.01	−0.43
OM (Don’t understand)	0.43	0.67	0.05	0.02	1.45
OM (Correct me)	1.85	1.19	0.01	0.00	1.07
OM (Confusing)	0.26	0.54	0.12	0.04	1.73
OM (Ask question)	1.09	1.23	0.25	0.01	5.03***
OM (Reality-Based Discussion)	0.22	0.60	0.00	0.03	0.07
OM (Ignorant)	0.63	0.97	0.00	0.02	0.50
Child’s Gender (male)			−0.46	0.05	−2.93**
Race/Ethnicity (African American)			−0.07	0.06	−1.04
Race/Ethnicity (Hispanic)			−0.56	0.09	−2.45*
Race/Ethnicity (Multi)			−0.06	0.09	−0.85
Race/Ethnicity (African, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Islander)			0.02	0.14	0.41

Model 3 (Specific OM by category) $F(13,106) = 8.349$ and $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.5059$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.4453$

Notes: Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

^a Reference groups for each category included: females (gender) and Caucasian (race/ethnicity).

(adjusted $R^2 = 0.45$) in the number of autonomous responses provided by children during the interview. See Table 4.

Sociodemographics

In addition to interview technique and orienting messages, several demographic characteristics of the children themselves significantly predicted the number of autonomous responses they provided during the interview. Some of these variables were included in all three models and the numbers vary slightly in each model. When included in more than one model, the significant variable is described.

In model 1, children who identified as African, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Islander provided significantly more autonomous responses

as compared to Caucasian children ($t = 2.00, p < 0.05$), see Table 2. Children who identified as Hispanic were significantly less likely to provide more autonomous responses as compared to children who identified as Caucasian in model 2 ($t = -2.13, p < 0.05$) and model 3 ($t = -2.45, p < 0.05$) (see Tables 2 and 3). Finally, in model 3, boys were significantly less likely to provide more autonomous responses as compared to girls ($t = -2.93, p < 0.01$) (see Table 4). The child's language and age did not significantly predict the number of autonomous responses provided by children in any of the analyses and was not included in the final models.

Discussion

Results from our study show that comparing the current practice of using orienting messages both at the outset of the interview and “as needed” resulted in significantly more autonomous responses from children when compared to the previous practice, in which orienting messages were only provided “as needed” during the interview. While other research has not been performed to examine how children's autonomous responses are impacted by orienting messages and when they are given, our findings are consistent with research on interview instructions in which providing instructions at the outset of an interview increases children's autonomous responses (Waterman & Blades, 2011). Since other research has not compared how children's autonomous responses are impacted when orienting messages are provided to children throughout the interview, this finding is an important contribution to the body of knowledge on providing information to children during forensic interviews.

Another finding from our study was that the overall number of orienting messages provided by the interviewers to children resulted in significantly more autonomous responses from children. This finding is important, but one that should be interpreted cautiously. It is important to emphasize that an increase in orienting messages and an increase in autonomous responses provided by children do not mean that more orienting messages cause an increase in autonomous responses in children. Because a portion of orienting messages are provided “as needed” or as “the opportunity arises” and reinforced throughout, the more that children ask a question, ask for clarification, or indicate they don't know or can't say, the more times that the interviewer will reinforce their response with an orienting message letting the child know they should continue to respond in that way if they need to. Therefore, it is not only the orienting messages that are influencing the child's autonomous responses, the child's autonomous responses also influence the number of orienting messages provided to children throughout.

The examination of the relationship between specific orienting messages and child autonomous responses offered another noteworthy finding. In our

analysis, findings indicated that two categories of orienting messages in particular “can’t/won’t say” and “ask me a question” resulted in significantly more autonomous responses from children as compared to the other orienting message categories. While research has found that specific instructions related to telling the interviewer “I don’t know” is an acceptable answer if the child doesn’t know (Mulder & Vrij, 1996; Scoboria, 2013), other research indicates only that the use of several categories is helpful in reducing errors and suggestibility (Cordón et al., 2005; Waterman & Blades, 2011). To our knowledge, other research has not evaluated the categories of “can’t/won’t say” or “ask me a question,” which were significant messages in our findings. While these findings point to new and interesting information, it is clear that this should be investigated further in future research.

Sociodemographics

Although our research questions did not focus on the influence of children’s sociodemographics on the number of autonomous responses provided during interviews, there were a few significant findings when these factors were accounted for in the models for analysis. Children who identified as Hispanic were significantly less likely to provide more autonomous responses as compared to children who identified as Caucasian, although language was not a significant factor. Again, while a child’s race/ethnicity has not been examined in relation to orienting messages and autonomous responses, other research has found that children of color are more likely to provide significantly fewer details during forensic interviews as compared to Caucasian children (Anderson, Anderson, & Gilgun, 2014). While it is difficult to know exactly why these children specifically provided fewer autonomous responses, it is possible that cultural values play a role in how children will behave during forensic interviews when discussing abuse allegations (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). Interestingly, children within the category of African, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islander provided significantly more autonomous responses as compared to Caucasian children. This is an area that warrants further research. Finally, in this study, boys were significantly less likely to provide more autonomous responses as compared to girls. This finding also corresponds to previous research on differences in gender and behavior during forensic interviews, in which boys are less likely to disclose during forensic interviews than girls (DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996) and with fewer details overall (Lamb & Garretson, 2003). Again, because each of these findings has not been directly examined in previous research related to orienting messages and children’s autonomous responses, it is difficult to identify exactly why these significant differences are occurring. However, it is clear that each of these groups of children may provide fewer disclosures and details regarding abuse allegations during forensic interviews as it is, so it is not

surprising that they would provide fewer autonomous responses during forensic interviews. Further investigation into how to facilitate an increase in autonomous responses in children who already experience difficulty in providing detailed disclosures is critical to practice.

Strengths and limitations

Our study had several strengths and limitations. One strength was that it is the only study to explore the use of orienting messages and their impact on the number of child autonomous responses during a forensic interview. Furthermore, no other research has examined the use of any kind of interview instructions or orienting messages using The CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol. Therefore, the findings from this study contribute both to the overall body of knowledge on the impact of using instructions or messages during forensic interviews as well as specific information about using a flexible and child-centered approach.

Another strength of this study is that it had significant findings related to the influence of the specific messages of “can’t/won’t say” and “ask me a question” that have not been examined in previous research. Furthermore, our study also had significant findings related to child demographics that also have not been specifically examined in relation to orienting messages and child autonomous responses, although the findings do corroborate other findings related to disclosure and details during forensic interviews for the same groups of children.

While our study had several significant findings, these findings are limited. First, since the research was conducted in a field setting, the use of a randomized control design was not feasible. Therefore, our results can only point to associations between variables and cannot attribute causation to the use of orienting messages as the only reason for the increased autonomous responses, nor can findings be generalized widely due to our nonprobability sampling method. These limitations occur in many studies conducted in the field, including ours. However, despite limitations in ability to interpret cause or generalizability, because our study was conducted in the field within real practice, our findings are more likely to apply to real practice settings as compared to analogue research.

Implications for practice

While orienting messages are quite similar in some ways to interview instructions, they differ in that the intention is for the messages to open communication and provide information rather than lay out a list of rules and expectations (Anderson, 2013). Furthermore, opportunities for reinforcement and encouragement, along with specific examples, help children understand these messages practically and in a respectful way. Underlying

the development and use of orienting messages is the recognition that participating in a forensic interview is a novel experience for children, even if it is standard practice for professionals. The goal of providing orienting messages is to ensure that children have the most safe and transparent experience in this type of setting, all while holding respect for the children and their experiences as the utmost important factor. Through this, children will be more fully prepared to know what to expect and can become experts on their own experiences by providing credible statements.

Conclusion

This study lends additional evidence for the use of child-centered interview protocols that include orienting messages both at the outset of the interview and as the opportunity arises, as they can help children provide more autonomous responses in forensic interview settings. Although participating in a forensic interview is often an anxiety-provoking event for children, this research shows that through a combination of interview practice techniques and clinical expertise, children do respond to interviewers who provide them with opportunities to assert themselves.

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Compliance with ethical standards

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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