

## Reflections on Emerging Issues

# listen.



Our mission is to ensure that the voices of children are heard and understood in cases of alleged abuse.



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### Orienting Messages

CornerHouse practice and training have historically been rooted in the belief that interview instructions are best incorporated as the situation arises, utilizing developmentally appropriate, concrete statements that are relevant within the context of the interview (Anderson et al., 2010). For example, if the child corrects the interviewer, this is acknowledged (e.g., “thank you for correcting me”) and reinforced with an instruction provided to the child (e.g., “if I get something else wrong, let me know, just like you did”). In addition, CornerHouse has always recommended some orienting messages at the interview’s outset, although these have typically been limited to providing the child with information regarding unique elements of the interview setting, such as video recording and observers, as well as messages regarding the interviewer’s role.

In identifying and forming best practice, CornerHouse values both the findings of research and what has been learned from direct practice of our colleagues in the field (see, for example, APSAC, 2012; Chamberlin, Newlin, & Cordisco Steele, 2011; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lyon, 2010; NCAC, 2011; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011). Through consideration of such information, and based upon what we have learned in our own practice, CornerHouse has begun incorporating a modified practice into our interviews. In recognition of the potential value of providing some additional orienting or instructional messages early within the forensic interview, specific orienting messages have recently been added as a planned activity during the introductory portion of all CornerHouse forensic interviews. Recognizing that the forensic interview is a novel experience for most children who are interviewed, these statements are designed to provide the child with an orientation to the culture of the interview.

One such orienting message is intended to convey information to the individual regarding the interviewer’s lack of knowledge regarding the individual’s experiences, with the interviewer stating, “My job is to listen and to find out more about you. If I ask questions, it’s because I don’t know or don’t understand.” Such a message, in combination with other best practice guidelines, may improve a child’s ability to correctly indicate when they do not know the answer to a question, particularly for younger children (Waterman & Blades, 2011).

Woven into these orienting messages are some statements that may more commonly be viewed as interview instructions. However, the intent and focus of such messages is for the purpose of communication and providing information, rather than a list of rules or expectations. For example: “The video helps me remember and make sure I get it right” (orienting message); if I get something wrong while we’re talking today, you can tell me” (interview instruction). Later in the interview, this orienting message and instruction can be reinforced: “Thanks for letting me know I got that wrong. Like I told you before, you can tell me if I get something else wrong, because I want to make sure I get it right.”

The basic orienting statements provided are simple and brief and, aside from some adjustments based upon individual development, are incorporated into all interviews. Additional orienting statements and interview instructions are utilized as appropriate within the context of the interview, based upon individual presenting factors.

While not dramatically different from previous practice, the subtle differences - such as in the specificity of language, intentionality of providing particular orienting statements, and the joining of some specific orienting statements with a corresponding interview instruction - are intended to better prepare children to do their best when participating in the interview process. CornerHouse has intentionally incorporated such statements in a manner that remains reflective of our core values of conducting the forensic interview through a protocol that is



semi-structured, that is responsive to the individual development and presentation of the person who is interviewed, which focuses on the child as being the knowledge-holder of their own experience, and which prioritizes the needs of the child above all else.

Pilot implementation of this modified practice began May 1, 2012; more solidified practice began July 1, 2012. As each CornerHouse forensic interviewer integrates orienting messages into the rapport-building phase of every forensic interview, it is important to systematically evaluate this approach and its impact upon factors such as eliciting forensically sound information. To that end, we will continue our partnership with Wendy Anderson, a social work doctoral student who has worked with CornerHouse to study our use of narrative practice techniques. In the coming months, Wendy will begin studying the use of orienting messages during CornerHouse forensic interviews. We look forward to utilizing this information to further inform CornerHouse's efforts in developing and implementing best practices regarding orienting messages.

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