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Communicating with Children with Disabilities

Staci Whitney, LMSW

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Realities for Individuals with Disabilities

- Privacy and sense of own body
  - ADL support
- Expectations for life and achievement
- Obedience and passivity
- History of maladaptive behavior

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Realities for Individuals with Disabilities

- Social isolation
- Difficulty being accepted by peers
- Disproportionately criminally victimized

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### Reporting, Prosecutions, and Convictions

- Underreporting
  - Estimated only 3% of sexual abuse cases involving people with developmental disabilities are ever reported
  - Some research suggests that over 70% of crimes against individuals with severe intellectual disability are unreported
- A study in Boston suggested that only 5% of serious crime against people with disabilities were prosecuted compared to 70% general population.

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### Bureau of Justice Statistics – 2021 Report

**Average Annual Rates: 2017-2019**

- Violent victimization for persons with disabilities was **almost four times** the rate among persons without disabilities
- The rate of rape/sexual assault for persons with disabilities was **more than four times** than that for persons without disabilities
- Rate of violence for males with disabilities was **more than three times** the rate compared to males without disabilities
- Rate of violence for females with disabilities, was **more than four times** the rate compared to females without disabilities

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### Bureau of Justice Statistics – 2021 Report

**Average Annual Rates: 2017 - 2019**

- Violent crime against persons with disabilities was **less likely** to be reported to police than violence against persons without disabilities
- For persons with disabilities, family members account for **double** the violent victimization compared to persons without disabilities.
- Sexual assaults against persons with disabilities are reported to police **at half the rate** compared to persons without disabilities
- Persons with **intellectual disabilities** had the **highest rate** of violent victimization from 2009 to 2019

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## Language

- **Person-First language**
- **Identity-First language**
- Preference of the individual
- When in doubt, ask the person how they like to be described.



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## Bias/Assumptions

- Asexual
- Infantilization
- Assumption of Inability

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## Myths about Sexuality and Relationships

- Myths:
  - Individuals with disabilities are not sexual
  - Individuals with disabilities don't need sexual education
- Results of myth:
  - Lack of knowledge/ education surrounding sexuality, healthy relationships or intimate partner violence
  - Less likely to understand what constitutes abuse
  - Unable to recognize abuse
  - Less empowered to report
- Individuals with disabilities experience most if not all the same physical and emotional changes as their peers.

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### Bias/Assumptions

- Asexual
- Infantilization
- Assumption of Inability
  - Unable to accurately report
  - Unable to participate in court proceedings
  - Low intelligence

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### Assumption: Low Intelligence

Impaired speaking

Physical appearance

- Strategy-
  - **Intentionally assume normal intelligence**

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### Language and Perspective

- Use of the terms:
  - "functions like a 5-year-old"
  - "has the brain of a 3-year-old"
  - "capacity of a 5-year-old"



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## Language and Perspective

- Use the following prompts:
  - Do they need assistance with Activities of Daily Living?
    - If so, which ones?
    - How are they assisted?
  - What is their level of independence?
  - What are their best skill sets?
  - What are their support needs?
  - What are their behavior needs?



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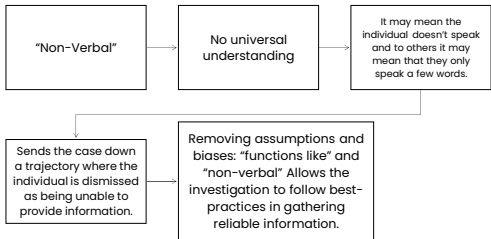
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## Language and Perspective: "Nonverbal"



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## Language and Perspective



- Use the following prompts:
  - How do they communicate?
    - Do they speak?
    - Do they use gestures?
    - Do they write?
    - Do they draw?
    - Do they text?
    - Do they type?
  - How do they get their needs met?
  - Do they understand you?
  - Do they use any augmentative or alternative communication devices?
  - Is there anything else I need to know how they communicate?

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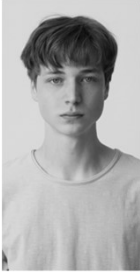
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## Individual Considerations

Deficits in pragmatics of communication:

- Physical proximity (e.g., too close or too far)
- Not making eye contact
- Laughing inappropriately
- Discussing topics unrelated to the situation
- Hyper-focus on a particular topic

• Flat affect:

- Monotone
- Facial expression (or lack of)

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## Perseveration

- Difficulty transitioning from one activity to the next
- Strategies:
  - Give warnings before transitions
  - Be clear and predictable

Hyper-focusing on a particular item or topic of discussion

- Strategies:
  - Re-direct the individual if they perseverate off topic
  - Re-frame the question if it elicits an off-topic discussion

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## Echolalia/ Delayed Echolalia

Repeating of words spoken by others  
Normal in children as a developmental process  
Not random speech  
Taking his "turn" in the conversation

Strategies

- Time
- Reduction of Anxiety
- Patience

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## The Brain, Memory, and Trauma

- It is NOT reasonable to expect a trauma survivor to recall traumatic events in the same way they would recall a happy occasion.
- A happy or emotionally positive experience typically doesn't evoke the biological fight, flight, or freeze response forcing the midbrain to take over.



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## Memory and Trauma

The linear nature of these experiences can be distorted.

↓

The interviewee may remember certain events out of order.

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An interviewee may focus on **one** experience or element and be able to describe that one and not remember anything else.

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## Memory and Saliency

Asking questions that are open, will encourage the interviewee to accurately recall details which are **important and memorable to them.**

Interviewers must be cautious to not ask for details that the interviewer feels are important.

The best option is to offer a platform for the interviewee to provide the details **they** remember.

This is best done using free narrative or open-ended questions.

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## Strategies for Communicating

Assume	Assume normal intelligence unless there are multiple data points to indicate otherwise
Avoid	Avoid infantilizing
Establish	Establish a thorough baseline for their overall language skills, conversational ability and capacity for free narrative or open-ended responses
Practice	Practice patience and pausing (8-10 seconds)

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## Assuming Normal Intelligence



- Assume normal intelligence unless there are multiple data points to indicate otherwise.
  - IQ
  - Conversational capacity
  - Vocabulary
  - Complexity of responses to questions

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## Avoiding Infantilization

- Be cautious of tone of voice that may be whimsical, or body language or topics of conversation reserved for young children.
- Avoid conversational punctuations
  - Examples:
    - "Really?"
    - "Good."
    - "You do?"
    - "I see."



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### Establishing a Thorough Baseline

- Rapport building and Narrative Practice is critically important
  - Identify strengths
  - Identify cognitive and social issues
  - Assess the child's comfort level
  - Assess the child's mode of communication
    - Language skills
    - Conversational ability
    - Capacity for free narrative
- Rapport development begins with the first encounter

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### Four Basic Question Types

*Narrative Prompt*  
*Open-Focus*  
*Choice*  
*Yes/No*

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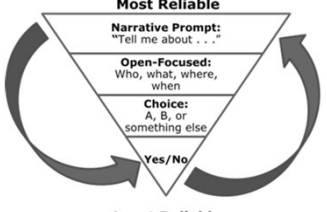
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### The Recycling Funnel Model



**Most Reliable**  
Narrative Prompt:  
"Tell me about . . ."

**Open-Focused:**  
Who, what, where,  
when

**Choice:**  
A, B, or  
something else

**Yes/No**

**Least Reliable**

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**Structured Forensic Interview Protocols Improve Quality and Informativeness of Investigative Interviews with Children: A Review of Research Using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol** Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 2007, V. 31 (11-12) 1201-1231

All ages	Interviewers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open ended prompts produced 3-5 times more information</li> <li>• About half of forensically relevant details given in response to free-recall prompts</li> <li>• Completeness increased when utilizing cued invitations (anchoring using the individual's words)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used at least 3 times more open-ended prompts, used half as many option-posing and suggestive prompts</li> </ul>

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**“She Wanted to Know the Full Story” – Children’s Perceptions of Open Versus Closed Questions**, Brubacher, Timms, Powell & Bearman, *Child Maltreatment* 2019, V. 24(2), 222-231

- Closed questions easier to answer
- Felt most listened to & perceived the greatest interviewer interest when asked open-ended questions
- Open-ended interview elicited approximately 3.5 times more information
- Responses were significantly more accurate in the open-ended interview than the closed interview

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**Research Tells Us...**

- Similar to individuals without ID, open-ended questions elicit more reliable information
  - (Cederborg, A. et. al, 2009; Cederborg, A., & Lamb, M., 2008; Agnew, S. & Powell, M., 2004)
- Questions that are presumptive / leading have the greatest influence on responses for adults with ID regardless of open or closed question types
  - (Bowles, P. & Sharman, S., 2014)

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**Effects of Delay, Question Type, and Socioemotional Support on Episodic Memory Retrieval by Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Almeida, Lamb, & Weisblatt *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 2019, Vol. 49 (3) 1111-1130**

- Children with ASD & Typically Developing Children
  - Open-ended child-led recall prompts elicited accurate information
  - Option posing questions elicited significantly more errors after a longer delay
  - Cued invitations elicited more detailed accounts than all other types of prompts

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**Establishing a Thorough Baseline**

- Expect to spend more time establishing rapport
- Work to match the child's developmental level
- The word and sentence complexity used should match established baseline.

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**Strategies for Communicating**

- Be concrete and literal
  - Use the child's words
    - Use prompting cues (cued invitations) that repeat the end of the previous statement (e.g., "So you just finished cleaning up after dinner...and then what happened?")
  - Use proper names rather than pronouns
  - Avoid figures of speech/idioms
    - Clichés (e.g., every cloud has a silver lining)
    - Idioms (e.g., it's raining cats and dogs)
    - Hyperbole (e.g., I've told you that a million times)
    - Axioms
  - Avoid sarcasm

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## Time Segmentation (Bookends)



From the time you got on the bus.....

Until the time you got off the bus.

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## Cued Invitations (Anchoring)

"You said \_\_\_\_\_. Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_."

- Utilizes the individual's words to follow up on details in an open-ended, concrete manner.



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## Strategies for Communicating



- Avoid:
  - Questions and interrogative statements posed in the negative (e.g., You don't like Frank?)
  - Compound and complex questions
  - Stacking Questions
  - Repeated questions

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## Practice Patience and Pausing

- Pacing:
  - Follow the child's lead
  - Be sure that the pace is set by the child being interviewed
  - Take breaks as needed
- Pausing:
  - 8 – 10 seconds before repeating or rephrasing

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## Strategies for Communicating

- **High Probability (HP) Instructional Sequence**
  - Building momentum and increasing response effort
    - Communicative Response
    - Gestural Response
    - Motor Response
- **Reverse Scaffolding**
  - Ex. "Pick up the paper"
    - "Raise your hand"
      - "Touch your nose"
        - "Give me a high five"
          - "Go pick up the paper"

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Check out MCG's podcast  
"Forgotten Victims: The Forensic Interview"

Staci Whitney, LMSW [sw@modelconsultinggroup.com](mailto:sw@modelconsultinggroup.com)



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