

# Language and Children in Interviews

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## Source Material

- Handbook on Questioning Children. A Linguistic Perspective, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.
- Anne Graffam Walker, Ph.D.
- Julie Kenniston



## Interviewing Children



- Even very young children can tell us about experiences if we ask them questions in the right way.
  - Example: 2 year 10 month old boy brought into clinic for spanking by mother's boyfriend
  - He had bruising to his butt and could say that mom's boyfriend spanked him



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## General principles regarding children

- We do not question children.
- We question one child at a time.
  - Anne Graffam Walker



## Language Learning

- Language is shaped by experience
- Children pick up words by:
  - Real world context
    - What they see, hear and experience around them
  - Linguistic context
    - Do you want a cookie?
    - Do you want a spanking?

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## Language: Adults & Kids

- Children and adults do not speak the same language
- Language is not an all or nothing affair- cannot assume that a child understands all the words they are using
  - foot vs. feet

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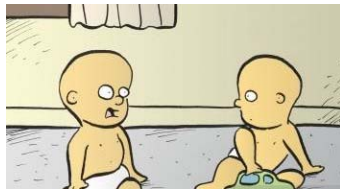
## Language: Inconsistencies

- Inconsistencies in children's statements are normal
- Children are very literal in their language
  - Example: Child denies going to the perpetrator's house but later on states he went to the apartment
  - Example: Did you put your mouth on his peepee? Child answers no as daddy put his peepee in the child's mouth



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## Language and Development



"What's the first thing you're going to think of when your brain is fully formed?"

- Adult-like use of language does not necessarily reflect adult-like linguistic or cognitive capabilities
- Young children in particular have difficulty attending to more than one or two things at once
  - Keep questions simple with only one thought or idea per question



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## Language: Tips

- Pausing is productive
  - Adults talk too fast and children need time to catch up
- Children will not tell you that they do not understand you
  - May not understand that they do not understand
  - Or do not feel like they can correct adults

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## Framing

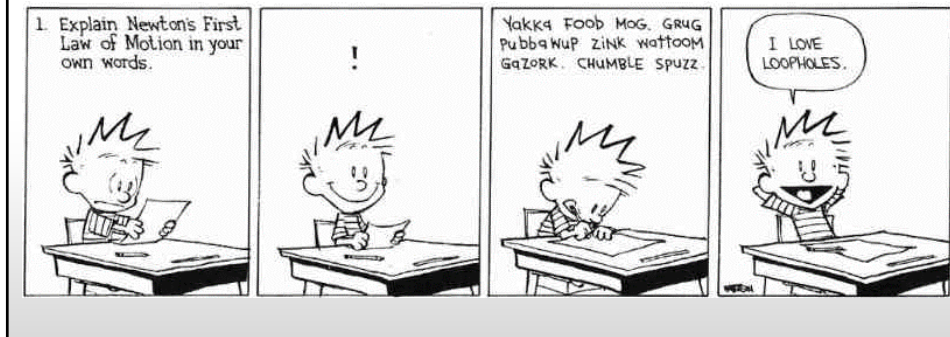
- Framing is good
  - Newspaper or article – the title gives us an idea of what we will be reading
  - Children will do better if they have an understanding of what they will be talking about
  - Also can be used to go back to a subject to clarify



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## Children's Responses

- Children's responses to your questions are not necessarily answers to your questions
  - A response can fail to be an answer if:
    - It does not supply the kind & amount of information required
    - The parties do not agree on what the meaning of the question was
    - One or both of the parties fails to recognize that the question or the answer was ambiguous



## Children and Recitation

- Ability to recite a list is not the same as the ability to understand its contents
  - Example: a child may be able to count to ten but cannot give you ten blocks
  - Example: being able to recite the days of the week and then expecting they could tell you what day of the week the event happened



## High vs Low Elaborators

- Children are not born with the ability to give adult-like accounts of their personal experiences



## Narrative Model

1. Setting
2. Initiating action
3. Central Action
4. Motivations/Goals
5. Internal response (emotions)
6. Consequences/Conclusion

## Some Families Talk/ Some Do Not



- Great Britain Study of 5 yr olds
- 4 pictures shown to children and then asked to describe
- Talkers vs Pointer
- Poverty/ Abuse effects



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## Remember...



- Familiarity matters
  - Children do better talking about topics with which they are familiar
- Culture matters
  - We have a tendency to believe that children have learned language in the same way

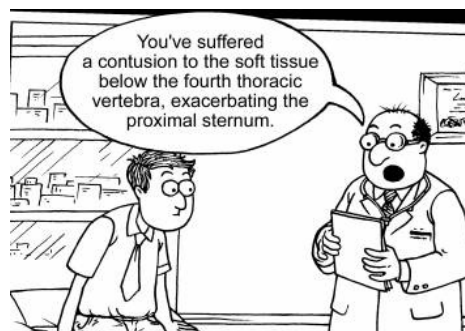


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## Suggestions for Questioning Children

- Keep it simple
- Be alert for possible miscommunication

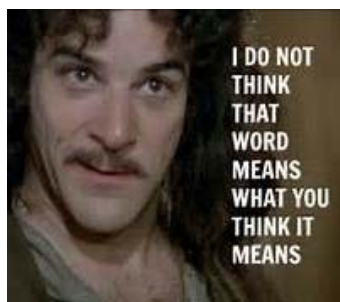


### Jargon

- Short sentences – one idea per sentence
- Use easy words
- Avoid legal jargon or other jargon in your work language

Translation: "You have a bruised rib."

## Definitions



- Check in with the child every now and then to make sure what you know a word to mean is also what they do
  - Example: What does a \_\_\_\_\_ do?



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## Avoid...

- Abstract concepts
  - Example: truth and lie
- The word “story”
  - To a child this can mean fiction or a narrative account



## Names and Places

- Redundancy is a good thing
  - Repeating names and places often is a necessary thing for children
- Watch pronouns
  - Use the person's name rather than he/she
  - Also be aware of "that" – can be tricky for children



## Language

- Avoid tag questions
  - Example: You saw it, didn't you?
  - They are confusing to children
- Help the child shift from topic to topic
  - Now I want to talk again about what happened in the living room



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## Children and Language

- Young children tend to be very literal and concrete in their language
  - Example: Did you have clothes on? Child states no because they had pajamas on.



## Children and Estimates



- Do not expect children under the age of nine or ten to give reliable estimates of time, speed, distance, size, height or weight
- Adults' ability to do this is overrated.

## Words, Word, Words: Time and Space



- Ahead of / behind
  - Can be used to talk about both space and time
  - Do not use with children under age seven to talk about time
  - Cautiously use with children under age six to talk about space



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## Words, Words, Words: Time



- Before / after
  - Children master this by age seven but can still have some difficulties
  - If you use this with children, use it in the correct order
    - Example: Did you tell your mom before you ate dinner?



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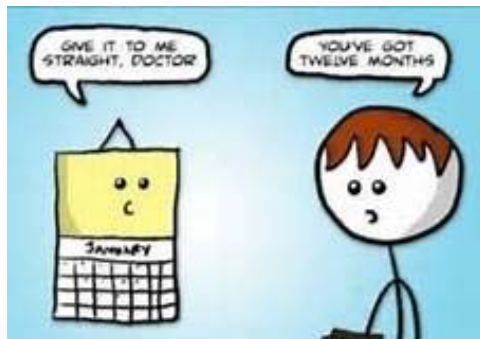


## Words, Words, Words: Time

- First / last
  - This works better for young children than before
  - Five year olds still make mistakes with first and last
  - Try it and if child is unable to do this – just move on

## Words, Words, Words: Time

- Yesterday / today / tomorrow
  - Yesterday can be yesterday, two days ago or a month ago
  - Tomorrow can be tomorrow or a few months from now
  - The only one young children **sometimes** use correctly is today



## Words, Words, Words: “Inside”



- This starts with a child understanding their prepositions
- To understand this a child must have knowledge of what orifices there are and what “inside” the body means
- For young children: anything between their legs can be perceived as inside
- Young females have special problems with this because of their anatomy – no reason to know they have a vagina



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## Words, Words, Words: “Big”

- Remember big is a difficult term for a preschooler
- What is “big” to a preschooler is very different than “big” to a school age child or teen



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## Words, Words, Words: “Touch”



- Touch
  - Higher order word
  - We understand touch to mean many kinds of contact
  - Children, especially young children, do not
  - Part of the reason for doing the touch continuum
    - Hugs, kisses, tickles, hitting, spanking, privates



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## Words, Word, Words: Examples



- Always / never
  - This is hard for even adults to do
  - Requires a global search of memory
- Any, anyone, anything, anywhere
  - More closely associated with negatives than some – so use someone, something or somewhere



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## Words, Words, Words: Examples



- Ask / Tell
  - Can be used as a command or a request
  - Confusing for children
- Different / Same
  - Different is different but same is similar

## Words, Words, Words: Examples



- Let / make
  - Let implies permission
  - Make implies coercion
- Preschoolers mix up these two words
- Cannot assume the child understands these distinctions

## Questions: Restricted Choice

- Restricted choice questions
  - Some points to remember
  - These questions are necessary at times
  - The problem is that children will think they have to pick from the choices
  - We must give them an out
  - Example: Was it in your room, the living room or someplace else?



**Rick Astley's never gonna:**  
**a. Give you up**  
**b. Let you down**  
**c. Run around and**  
**d. Desert you**



## Questions: Do you understand?



- Asking children if they understand you – not very helpful
  - Often the child thinks they do understand
  - Better to have them check back with you
  - Example: I want to be sure I said that question the right way – what do you think I asked you?



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## Questions: Why?

- Asking “why” questions
  - 2 reasons they are problematic
    - “Why...you” questions can be perceived as critical or accusatory
    - Why questions also require children to self-reflect and look at cause and effect. Younger children cannot do this



## Questions: How?

- How Questions
  - How questions can be hard for young children
  - They are better at demonstrating
  - Example: How did he do that? (Hard for a child to do)
  - Show me what he did. (Easier for the child to demonstrate)



## Questions and Answers



- If the answer you receive from a child does not make sense – check back to see how the question was phrased.
- Chances are you could have asked a better question.
- Using appropriate language at all times with children is very difficult – there will be times you ask a question you should not.



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## Questions: Do you have any?



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