

New protocol to help in testimony of child victims

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Psychology Professor Mireille Cyr has adapted an interview protocol from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) that will enable child victims of sexual abuse to provide better testimony in Quebec courts.

"This guide is based 30 years of research on how to best evoke memory in children," says Cyr. "Children have a tendency to avoid talking about sexual abuse because they don't always understand that there's a problem or sometimes they are emotionally attached to their aggressor."

Cyr says it's very difficult to persuade child victims to talk and to provide reliable testimony. It's especially difficult when children are very young, since their communication skills aren't as developed and they are more impressionable, which can lead to discrepancies in their testimony.

The strategy of the NICHD protocol is to help the child access his or her recollection, by using open-ended questions: "Tell me everything that happened?" rather than leading questions such as, "Is this how it happened?"

Multiple-choice questions should also be avoided because they imply there is a right answer. "Asking open-ended questions is not a natural procedure," admits Cyr. "It's more natural to ask 'is this how it happened?' and insist. Using this approach requires that the interviewer receive specific training."

Cyr compared the data of traditional interviews with that of interviews conducted using the NICHD protocol. Some 166 interviews were matched based on similar characteristics such as age of the victim, relationship to the aggressor and frequency of abuse.

In NICHD-type interviews, details directly related to the central event (i.e. the aggression) increased 30 percent. And 65 percent of these details were obtained by using inviting, open-ended questions. The figure drops to 16 percent in traditional interviews.

What's more, in NICHD-type interviews the rate of unreliable details obtained through directive or multiple-choice questioning dropped from 75 to 30 percent.

Source: University of Montreal

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