

Forensic Interview by Local CAC

What is a forensic interview?

A forensic interview is a non-leading, victim-sensitive, neutral, and developmentally appropriate investigative interview that helps law enforcement determine whether a crime occurred and what happened. The goals of a forensic interview are to minimize any potential trauma to the victim, maximize information obtained from the victim or witness, reduce contamination of the victim's memory of the alleged event(s), and maintain the integrity of the investigative process.

When is a forensic interview appropriate?

A forensic interview is designed as an appropriate method for interviewing children and adolescents who are victims of suspected child maltreatment. It can also be appropriate for young adult victims of human trafficking, particularly when the victim endured severe trauma or has a developmental disability. The effects of trauma can influence behavior of a victim during an interview. Memory loss, lack of focus, emotional reactivity, and multiple versions of a story can all be signs of trauma displayed during an interview. Forensic interviews are child-focused, victim-centered, and structured to minimize re-traumatization of the victim.

Who conducts forensic interviews?

In South Carolina, forensic interviews are conducted in local children's advocacy centers by individuals who receive intensive and ongoing training, including peer review, in interviewing victims of suspected abuse and neglect. Many forensic interviewers are specifically trained to conduct interviews with suspected human trafficking victims.

What is a minimal facts interview?

A minimal facts interview is an initial, basic, fact-finding interview that may be conducted by a first responder of a child victim of suspected maltreatment. It can be used by a first responder to determine the immediate needs of a child or to determine whether or not to take action for a child's safety. The first responder should ALWAYS seek to gather the minimal facts from a non-offending adult, away from the child/victim, including: name, ages, current location of victim and suspect, the type of abuse, how the adult learned about the allegation, and where and when the most recent incident occurred. **The minimal facts interview of the child ONLY takes place if a non-offending adult is not available to provide information.** The first responder may then ask the child simple questions to establish: the type of abuse, who did this to the child, their relationship to the alleged perpetrator, and when and where the last incident occurred. Caution should be taken in directly asking children younger than eight about "when" the most recent incident occurred, as their cognitive development for questions about time is more limited. However, simple questions about location, people, and events may assist the responder in inferring the date of the last incident.

What is law enforcement's role in the forensic interview?

Law enforcement should refer the child/victim to the local children's advocacy center for a forensic interview. Law enforcement should attend the interview and observe it from the center's designated viewing room. It is recommended practice that the forensic interviewer pause the interview before its conclusion to consult with law enforcement on the need for any additional information or clarification. After consultation and discussion, appropriate follow-up questions can be asked of the child. The presence of law enforcement also enables a more rapid investigative response to be able to search for and obtain corroborating evidence.

Below is a list of types of information you may need or want from the child/victim. This list is intended only to assist in obtaining the *possible* information they may be able to provide. Forensic interviewers are trained to pose questions in a developmentally appropriate and non-leading manner, and they would not be posing these questions as phrased below. Forensic interviewers may be able to present evidence to the child during the interview to assist in developing information. You would need to discuss with the interviewer whether this is appropriate in the given situation based upon the type of evidence and the particular child.

RECRUITMENT

- How, when, and where they met the suspect?
- Promises, lies, coercion used to recruit
- Grooming process
- What indications would suspect have as to the child's age? (e.g., told age, picked up from school or parent's home, never asked to buy alcohol)
- What indications of the child's vulnerability were there? (e.g., offered drugs, recruited from rehab center)
- What names / nicknames does the suspect go by in person and on-line?

GENERAL OPERATION

- Timeline of events
- Who decides what sex acts are performed?
- Who sets the prices & receives the money?
- Ability to say "no" to type of sex act
- Who rents the rooms and whose name is used?
- Who pays for the room and how is payment made?
- Who sets the rules?
- What are the rules?
- What were the suspect's instructions to the child to tell police regarding: age, relationship, residence, etc.?
- Who provides transportation?
- In which cities and places did they do this work?
- Did the trafficker pay for their cell phone, hair/nails, rent, or supply them with alcohol or drugs?

ADVERTISEMENTS

- Method of paying for ads
- Who took the pictures for the ads?
- Where were the pictures taken?
- Where were ads posted?
- Who is allowed to respond to the ads?
- In what format are ads responded to? (e.g., direct message, WhatsApp, TextNow)

THREATS / COERCION

- Consequences for not working, including depriving addicts of drugs
- Consequences for cuffing money
- Consequences for breaking the rules
- Weapons
- Specific acts of violence: dates and medical attention, photographs, or other evidentiary documentation of the injuries
- Did the suspect or anyone else take and hold documents or other items belonging to the victim?
- Did the suspect deprive basic needs like food or medical attention? (e.g., untreated STDs / pregnancy)

OTHERS INVOLVED

- Dates, locations, individuals who purchased sex
- Do they know of other victims or traffickers?
- Did the suspect have arrangements with others such as hotel managers or car rental agencies?
- Stories the victim may have heard of the suspect using violence against others
- Prior contact with law enforcement during time trafficked

OTHER EVIDENCE

- Vehicles involved and descriptions
- Cell phones and telephone numbers
 - Contacts
 - Texts
 - Photos
 - Call summary
 - Internet history
 - Social media accounts and apps
- Places suspect may have hidden evidence

Source: Adapted from the Human Trafficking Investigator Checklist by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jamie Schoen. Office of the United States Attorney - District of South Carolina.