HEARING CHILD VICTIMS OF EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING AND CHILDREN AT RISK:

PRACTICE-ORIENTED GUIDANCE FOR CHILD-SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION AND INTERVIEWING TO OBTAIN ACCURATE AND RELIABLE STATEMENTS FROM CHILDREN

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Hearing child victims of exploitation and trafficking and children at risk: Practice-oriented guidance for child sensitive communication and interviewing to obtain accurate and reliable statements from children

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Table of contents

1. Introduction

In the context of joint European Union and Council of Europe Horizontal Facility (HF) Programme for the Western Balkans and Turkey (2019–2022), the Council of Europe and national partners identified a need to promote the implementation of the right to be heard of children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk. A main concern to achieve this goal is the need to strengthen the capacities of national stakeholders in the area of child-sensitive communication and interviewing, and the assessment of the credibility of child victims who act as witnesses in criminal investigations and proceedings.

The development of guidance and training material in this area shall contribute to implementing recommendations issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and by the Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA).[1] It contributes to the progressive implementation of relevant Council of Europe standards and recommendations, in particular the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, as well as the EU acquis promoting the right of child victims of crime to be heard in administrative and judicial proceedings concerning them.

This practice-oriented guidance document was developed under the HF II action "Preventing and combating trafficking in human beings in Serbia". It builds on international and European standards, state-of-the art research and good practice models in relation to child-sensitive communication and forensic interviews with child victims of crime.[2]

[1] See for instance: Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009. Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Serbia, CRC/C/SRB/CO/2–3, 7 March 2017, par. 29. Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), *Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Serbia*, Second Evaluation Round, adopted on 24 November 2017, published on 29 January 2018, p. 47, https://rm.coe.int/greta-2017-37-frg-srb-en/16807809fd.

[2] This document builds on and incorporates previous work of the author in this field, in particular the following: Wenke, Daja, *Guidelines on the Human Rights and Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Situations*, Council of the Baltic Sea States Children's Unit and Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk, 2015, https://www.childrenatrisk.eu/projects-and-publications/protect-children-on-the-move/. Wenke, Daja, *Listen Up! Creating conditions for children to speak and be heard, Professional communication with children at risk of exploitation and trafficking – Experience and lessons learned from the Baltic Sea Region,* PROTECT Children on the Move Project, Council of the Baltic Sea States and Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Listen-Up-2019.pdf. Wenke, Daja, *Service Providers as Champions for Non-Violent Childhoods, Service provision for children and parents to end corporal punishment*, Non-Violent Childhoods Project, Council of the Baltic Sea States, 2018, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/nonviolence/2018/11/09/service-providers-as-champions-for-non-violent-childhoods/. Wenke, Daja, *Oslo Conclusions on Identifying Children at Risk of Exploitation and Trafficking: Strengthening child-sensitive communication and best interests determinations – Hearing the Child's Story*, Conclusions and Conference Statement from the Oslo Conference on Cooperation in the Best Interests of the Child: Good Practices in Identifying Children at Risk of Exploitation and Trafficking, organised by the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Nordic Council of Ministers, hosted by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, 29–30 May 2018, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Oslo-Conclusions-on-Identifying-Children-at-Risk-of-Exploitation-and-Trafficking-May-2018-FINAL-15-June.pdf, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/blog/hearing-the-childs-story-regional-expert-consultation-to-take-place-in-may-in-oslo-norway/. Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Guidelines Promoting the Human Rights and the Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Child Protection Cases*, Addendum, 2016.

1.1 Child-sensitive communication: A key for safeguarding child victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking and children at risk

Children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk may have to interact with many different state officials and service providers and participate in numerous interviews and hearings. Important decisions depend on the quality of these conversations. Good communication is a precondition for children to exercise their right to be heard and to access information. It enables the identification of exploitation and trafficking or any risks and helps clarifying doubts. Good communication is also a precondition for the provision of services in the best interests of the child and the identification of a durable solution that supports the child's recovery and rehabilitation. Hearing the child's story offers valuable clues for the identification of child trafficking, especially when information from other sources remains unavailable. To communicate with the child in a meaningful way and hear the child's story, professionals have to be trained and skilful, and equipped with practicable methods that work.

Conversations with children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk take place in informal settings, in formal and forensic interviews, and as hearings in the context of judicial or administrative proceedings. These conversations are often highly sensitive due to the level of violence that children have experienced and the issues at stake. Many different factors might inhibit the child from speaking openly, such as fear and trauma, experiences of discrimination and intimidation, threats against them or their family members or debts they have incurred with traffickers or smugglers.

A child's recruitment into trafficking represents often the culmination of a history of violence and exploitation. Many children who are exploited have grown up in situations characterised by neglect and emotional, physical or sexual violence and have been repeatedly let down by adults, within their family or community, by service providers and when trying to seek help. These experiences make it particularly difficult for the child to establish a trusted collaboration and communication with state officials and professionals. In addition, the child's age, gender, language, social and cultural background, evolving capacities and level of development, as well as health impairments or disabilities have an influence on the child's capability and willingness to communicate.

In particular when children are exploited in criminal or street-based activities, the underlying forms of pressure, threats, dependencies or the exploitation of a child's vulnerable situation can rarely be identified by mere observation. Stereotypes about children and youth who are living in highly precarious situations, who live and work on the streets or are in conflict with the law, tend to make it even more difficult for these children to be heard and listened to. In these cases, weak communication increases the risk that the identification of exploitation and trafficking fails, and that the child is mistakenly considered a "runaway" or in trouble with the law. A trusted and open communication remains often the only way for professionals to understand patterns of exploitation and prevent misidentification and secondary victimisation of the child.

Professionals who work with child victims and children at risk need to be confident in how to assess a child's situation, background and experiences and adjust their behaviour and communication accordingly. Whether the communication between the child and the professional succeeds is decisive for the correct identification of the child and the referral to the type of services he or she needs. Quality communication helps professionals to overcome preconceptions about child victims of trafficking, and to interact with the child in an unprejudiced manner and free of stereotypes. Interpreters and cultural mediators can offer help when a child has a different linguistic and cultural background.

1.2 Key facts and principles for the communication with children who are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking or at risk

- The rights and principles afforded under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child offer guidance for professionals' communication with children. ***Children have a right to be heard and to have their views considered in all matters concerning them***. In the communication with children, professionals have to respect legal and quality standards with regard to ethics, safety and privacy. They need to be confident in handling sensitive conversations, reporting incidents or suspicions of violence and exploitation and providing follow-up services.
- ***Children are able to remember events and express their memories from an early age***. The accuracy of a child's account depends on numerous factors such as age, evolving capacities, trauma, as well as the enabling support provided by professionals. Professionals require specialised training to provide support in accordance with the child's specific needs and best interests. Training effectiveness can be maximised when professionals benefit from a longer-term process of supervision, the use of evidence-based methods and practical guidance.
- Obtaining accurate statements from child victims is particularly important in cases of exploitation and trafficking, where the child's statement remains often the most important evidence. The interviewing method and the capability of the interviewer have a significant influence on the quality of the child's statement. ***Evidence-based protocols provide a clear structure to guide the interviewer in obtaining detailed and reliable statements from children***. Where professionals are trained and skilled to conduct sensitive communications with child victims of exploitation and trafficking, provide for a child-friendly environment and use evidence-based protocols as a guide for the interview, they can trust to obtain an accurate and reliable statement from a child victim.

2. The right to be heard and the evolving childhood

2.1 The right of the child to be heard

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for the right of the child who is capable of forming his or her views to express those views in all matters affecting the child, and that these views are given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. This right applies to the child's participation in social and political matters (Article 12.1) as well as in judicial and administrative proceedings (Article 12.2).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty. It combines social and economic rights with civil, cultural and political rights in a single treaty.

The CRC affirms and interprets the rights afforded under inter-national human rights treaties specifically for children. A child is defined as any person under the age of 18 years of age (article 1).

The provisions under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are considered such a fundamental right that they have been reiterated by all European regional standards concerning children, such as the Conventions and recommendations issued by the Council of Europe and relevant EU Directives. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has dedicated its General Comment No. 12 (2009) to the right to be heard.[3]

2.2 The participatory rights of children

The right to be heard is often interpreted as a right to "participation". Participation refers to the consultation and hearing of children to ensure that children's views inform decision-making processes and procedures affecting them. Participation is relevant for each child individually and for groups of children and the child population more generally. Due to its significance, the right to be heard is considered a general principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means that being heard is a human right that can be exercised, claimed and enforced, and that should be considered in the implementation and interpretation of all other rights.[4]

Together with other civil rights and freedoms, article 12 is at the centre of the so-called "participatory rights of children". These include in particular the child's right to freedom of expression (article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 14), freedom of association (article 15), and the right to seek and access information (article 17).[5]

The right to be heard is also closely linked to the other general principles of the UN Convention:

- the right to non-discrimination (article 2),
- the primary consideration of the best interests of the child (article 3), and
- the right to life, survival and development (article 6).

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[3] Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009.

[4] United Nations Children's Fund, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child,* Fully Revised Edition, 2002, p. 159. Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009, par. 2.

[5] United Nations Children's Fund, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child,* Fully Revised Edition, 2002, p. 159.

The Convention recognises further that the evolving capacities of the child need to be considered to understand the degree to which children are able to exercise the right to be heard, in accordance with their age and maturity. Article 5 provides that the guidance from parents – or a guardian – are important to support a child in exercising their rights with gradually increasing autonomy as the child grows up.[6]

2.3 Child-friendly information

The child has the right to be informed about the purpose of any formal interview or hearing they participate in and how the information they share will be used subsequently. Information has to be provided in a language that the child understands, adapted to the child's age and maturity, language, gender and culture.[7] Access to child-friendly information is important for children to exercise their rights and participate in the procedures that concern them. When providing children with information, professionals have to assess the child's specific communication and information needs and adapt the language, methods and contents of their communication accordingly.[8]

2.4 Children as informed decision-makers and active members of society

By providing for all these rights of children, which are closely connected, the Convention recognises the right of the child to develop their evolving capacities, resources and potentials, the right to protection from all forms of violence and exploitation, and the right of the child to seek, receive and impart information and to have their views heard and taken into account in all matters concerning them. This broad perspective reflects the concept of children's agency, viewing children not only as persons with a limited legal capacity and in need of special protection, but also as informed decision makers and active members of society – and as rights holders.[9]

2.5 Children as competent service users

The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 set in motion a process of change regarding the role of children in society and their upbringing. Although childhood and family structures are typically shaped by traditions, culture and religion, the way children are raised and cared for in families has been changing over the past decades. Children are no longer expected to tacitly obey adults but are taught to reflect and to form an opinion, to participate in matters concerning them and to act as responsible members of their families and communities. Adults encourage children to take responsibility for their actions and to judge what is good for them and others. Children demand respect from parents, teachers and service providers, and complain when they feel their views and interests are not taken into account.

In light of these developments, adults need to reflect on their own roles in relation to children – as parents, service providers or state officials. The relationship between adults and children is

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[6] Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009, par. 68, 69, 80.

[7] Council of Europe, *Guidelines on child-friendly justice*, 2010.

[8] Council of Europe *How to Convey Child-friendly information to children in migration, A handbook for frontline professionals*, Building a Europe for and with Children, 2018.

[9] Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009, par. 1.

no longer focused only on protection but is also based on communication, mutual respect, trying to understand the perspectives and ways of thinking of the child and the adult. These changes influence also the role of professionals working with children and parents. Social workers, professionals in childcare, youth work and education, medical professionals and law enforcement officials observe and feel these changes in their work. They are challenged to adapt their skills, behaviour and working methods accordingly.

Children can be competent service users from a young age, as long as they receive the appropriate support to participate and get involved in accordance with their evolving capacities. Consulting children can be essential to understand how services can become meaningful for them, how to support them so that they trust and collaborate with service providers and how to protect them better against risks of violence and exploitation.

Child-sensitive communication is useful for all situations where service providers communicate with children. Child-friendly material helps to support the information flow, communication and mutual understanding of children and service providers.

2.6 A trend towards evidence-based working methods and service tools

As childhood and the role of children in the society evolves, some of the methods and tools that service providers used in the past are today no longer considered appropriate or effective. Across Europe, there is a trend towards the use of evidence-based methods that are increasingly treating children and parents as partners in service provision and encourage their active engagement in the planning, delivery and review of services. Some of these tools are guiding service providers in transforming their own professional roles, attitudes and behaviours to gradually take on the role of a facilitator who is coaching and guiding children and families in taking responsibility for resolving the challenges they are struggling with. Evidence-based interviewing protocols, for instance, demonstrate how strong tools can support professional service providers and children to communicate better.

3. Creating a trust-base for the collaboration with the child

Children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking may find it difficult to trust others. They may not trust that service providers can offer meaningful help and may not even be aware of any services that could help. When enrolled in assistance programmes, some children might feel that they depend entirely on the decisions of others. This may feel disempowering and like a continuation of the trafficking experience. To regain a sense of control, respect and self-worth, children appreciate when service providers talk to them, ask questions and listen genuinely, explain all steps and are transparent about decisions and procedures.

Children on the move and child victims of trafficking often feel reluctant to share information with state authorities due to fears that disclosing information might not be in their interest and that telling their stories might lead to the return to their place or country of origin. In the home community, return could be associated with a feeling of shame about not having lived up to the expectations, in particular financial expectations and the need pay off debts incurred for the journey with the family or with smugglers. Children might have been instructed by traffickers or smugglers to reveal only certain parts of their stories, there might be threats and fears of reprisals involved and the child might not trust that the police and other service providers will be able to protect them. A reception and assistance system that demonstrates respect and upholds the dignity of the child is essential to foster a sense of trust in the child towards the officials and professionals whom she or he meets with.

For service providers, it is essential to hear the child's views, questions and concerns and respond to them, and to obtain information from the child for the assessment and any investigations related to the child's case. Hearing the child's story and understanding the child's needs is a precondition for service providers to plan and deliver services that are meaningful for the child. Children tend to appreciate when service providers demonstrate a genuine interest in how they feel. Asking the child to share his or her views and listening to the child makes the child understand that his or her opinion matters.

To win the child's trust, service providers should take time and show they care for the child as a person. They may need to ask questions again over a period of time, without being too intrusive. A service provider may have to persist and maintain a neutral and empathic approach when a child behaves in a hostile or aggressive way. Engaging the child in conversations about hobbies or sports could work as an ice breaker. It is important that service providers refrain from blaming or judging the child or giving up on the child because of his or her behaviour.

Service providers can pose simple questions, such as "what do you think about this?" or "tell me how you feel about this." After listening to the child's response, the service provider can summarise what the child said, for instance by saying, "so, you think that… did I get that right?".

This creates an opportunity for the child and the service provider to correct any misunderstandings that may occur when sensitive issues are at stake. A child who feels heard and taken seriously is more likely to trust that the service provider is there to help.

In the absence of good communication, children may perceive a service provider as someone who interferes with their personal life without knowing anything about them, and this might lead to situations where children refuse services and withhold their cooperation.

Building confidence and trust also requires the ability to convey information in language that the child understands. Due to fears, worries, lack of information or misinformation, the child may not speak openly to service providers. To prevent this, service providers should inform the child about who they are and what their role is, what type of services they can offer to the child, the referrals they can make, and the different steps in the procedure. Service providers also need to be transparent about data protection regulations, rules of professional secrecy and reporting obligations they are bound by. This is important for the child to know how the information he or she provides is used, shared and stored. When informing the child about all this, the service provider may ask the child to repeat the information in his or her own words to be certain that the child has understood.

When exiting from a situation of exploitation and trafficking, children are not only victims of crime, they are also rights holders and survivors with specific talents, skills and ambitions. By engaging the child in trusted communication, professionals are able to assess and strengthen the child's evolving capacities and resiliency. With support, children succeed to develop their potentials, to leave harmful or exploitative relationships permanently and to rebuild their lives. Children who survive a situation of exploitation and trafficking require continued support for (re-)integration in communities, school and vocational training, as well as protection from stigmatisation.

What professionals can do to create a trusted collaboration with the child:

- Introduce yourself and explain your professional role.
- Take time to talk to the child.
- Ask the child how he or she is, how he or she feels at the accommodation and if there is anything he or she needs.
- Engage in a gentle conversation with the child about day-to-day matters.
- Provide information in a language that the child understands and ask the child to repeat the information in his or her own words to be certain the child has understood.
- Give the child time to reflect about the information you shared and to come back for a second or third meeting to ask questions, if and as required and appropriate.
- Ask the child about his or her views and show genuine interest in the child's opinion.
- Listen to the child.
- Summarise what the child said and ask if you got that right.
- Treat the child with empathy and respect.
- Do not judge or blame the child.
- Be transparent about services and the steps in relevant procedures concerning the child.
- Sense if the child is comfortable talking to you, reassure the child and give the child a feeling of control of what is happening.
- Make the meeting room child-friendly, even with minor accessories and gestures.
- Explain the purpose of your meeting and what the meeting is about, why you are there to talk to the child and what will happen afterwards.
- Make available quality interpretation and cultural mediation wherever required.

4. Interviewing child victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking and children at risk

Obtaining accurate statements from child victims is particularly important in cases of exploitation and trafficking, where the child's statement remains often the most important evidence. The interviewing method and the capability of the interviewer have a significant influence on the quality of the child's statement. Evidence-based protocols provide a clear structure to guide the interviewer in obtaining detailed and reliable statements from children.

Evidence-based interviewing protocols are able to facilitate interviews with children in social and health care, law enforcement and justice, immigration and asylum. Being evidence-based means that these interviewing protocols have been tested and validated scientifically. Research has shown that they improve the quality of interviews with children and that they are reliable tools to obtain accurate statements from children.

When applying evidence-based interviewing tools correctly, interviewers can consider the child's statement trustworthy. These tools enable professionals to respect quality standards and deliver meaningful results even in highly sensitive situations.

Working with evidence-based protocols has several advantages for professionals and children. They enable professional interviewers to conduct the interview in a manner that is ethical and safe and respects the specific needs of the child. They provide a structure and approach that enable the child to give an accurate and reliable statement. This is a precondition for the child to express opinions and share information and for service providers to take the child's statement into account for casework, service planning, judicial and administrative proceedings and any decisions concerning the child.

Evidence-based interviewing tools are used in formal interviews with children who are involved in administrative or judicial proceedings as victims or witnesses. In cases where the child testifies as a victim or witness of a criminal offence, forensic interviewers use evidence-based interviewing protocols to obtain a statement with a high probative value for criminal investigations and proceedings. The principles of evidence-based methods are however relevant beyond the forensic context. They offer orientation for all contexts where service providers communicate with children, such as interviews for the identification of a trafficking case, case assessments and best interests determinations.

A child-sensitive interview requires a clear structure and rules:

- The interviewer acts as a facilitator for the child to talk about a specific event.
- The interviewer ensures that the child has the necessary time, supportive conditions and a friendly environment to talk.
- The interview is arranged in such a way to take the child's needs into account, for instance with regard to the gender of the interviewer, appropriate timing and duration of the interview and the presence of a support person for the child where appropriate.
- The interviewing room is quiet and comfortable with as little distractions as possible.
- The child and the interviewer are sitting in comfortable chairs arranged around an angle, ideally without the use of tables and a seating across a table should be avoided.
- The interviewer should have a neutral appearance, behave in a professional way and treat the child with empathy.
- If an interpreter is involved, he or she sits next to the interviewer and maintains a neutral role.

4.1 Preparing the interview: Considerations during the planning phase

Formal interviews with children have to follow a set of basic rules concerning the role of the interviewer, as well as the preparations and the setting of the interview. The following considerations need to be made in preparation for the interview:

a) Preparing the interview

When preparing for the interview, the interviewer takes the child's specific needs into account and ensures the conditions of the interview are supportive for the child to talk. This concerns, for instance, the gender of the interviewer, appropriate timing and duration of the interview and the presence of a support person for the child where appropriate.

The interviewer has to ensure that the child is informed about the interview and understands the information.

The child has a right to be informed:

- When and where the interview takes place,
- Who will be present during the interview and who will be observing through closed circuit video transmission or otherwise,
- The purpose of the interview,
- How the information from the interview will be used, shared and stored subsequently and who will have access to it,
- If the interview is video recorded and how the recording will be used, shared and stored.

Depending on the circumstances of the case, the interviewer might share this information with the child in the introduction phase of the interview, or the child might be informed beforehand by the interviewer, a caseworker or another competent professional. In accordance with the child's age and relevant national legislation, this information may be provided directly to the child and/or to the child's parent or guardian.

b) Who conducts the interview?

The child may have preferences with regard to the gender of the interviewer. Especially in cases of gender-based and sexual violence, the child might feel more comfortable when speaking with an interviewer who has the same sex as the child. If the perpetrator was a man, the child might prefer to be interviewed by a woman, and vice versa. This has to be clarified with the child and the child's parent and/or guardian prior to the interview.

c) Interviewer's appearance and behaviour

The interviewer treats the child with empathy, care and respect. The interviewer acts as a facilitator, behaves in a professional way, speaks with a calm voice and remains focused on the conversation with the child. In order to follow the structure of the interview, the interviewer takes leadership and gently directs the conversation, without being too demanding or controlling. The interviewer avoids showing his or her own feelings and opinions as the child talks and refrains from making

promises or raising any hopes with regard to the child's situation. The interviewer's appearance should be neutral, not too overdressed nor untidy, avoiding to wear or bring along any items that could distract the child's attention.

d) Location of the interview

A quiet and comfortable room with as little distractions as possible is a suitable environment for conducting an interview with a child. Smaller rooms are preferable. There should be a pillow in the chair for the child to be comfortable. A soft stress ball, teddy bear or another small item that the child can hold in her or his hands during the interview can help reducing tensions. Apart from these items, the interviewer has to take care to remove any toys or other distracting objects. Depending on the case and the child's age, the interviewer might keep crayons and paper or play-dough available for the child in the interview room to facilitate the conversation, especially for younger children.

e) Interview setting

A few practical considerations help to create a conducive interview setting for the child to talk. The use of tables in the interview room should be avoided. The interviewer should never sit in an interrogation style in front of the child or face the child across a table. It is preferable to use comfortable chairs that are arranged at an angle, so that the interviewer and the child can look at each other without directly facing each other. There should be free access to the door so the child does not get a feeling of being trapped or captured. It can be helpful if there is some space for the child to move, although the interview should not be conducted in a very big room.

f) Support persons and other participants in the interview

In some cases, the interviewer may consider inviting a support person for the child to be present during the interview, for instance when the child is shy, intimidated or reluctant to speak, with very young children or children with disabilities. A support person might be a staff member of the facility where the child lives, a family member or guardian whom the child trusts. The selection and admission of a support person has to be informed by a best interests assessment. In certain contexts, such as asylum interviews or other formal interview settings that are part of an administrative or judicial proceeding, the child has a right to be accompanied by his or her parent or guardian and the legal representative or lawyer.

g) Interpreters

When an interpreter is involved in the interview, the interpreter is seated next to, and possibly slightly behind, the interviewer. The interviewer keeps eye contact with the child during the interview, without looking at the interpreter. An interpreter should never sit next to the child and face the interviewer, as this way of seating would cause the child to turn his or her head to make eye contact with the interpreter rather than the interviewer.

Prior to the interview, the interviewer clarifies the wording of the questions with the interpreter and gives instructions for the interpreter's role. In some languages, the length of sentences and the number of words used can differ significantly. The interviewer should be aware of such differences and address these general issues with the interpreter prior to the interview.

The interpreter has to be trained and qualified to maintain a neutral role when translating. When the interviewer has suspicions that the interpreter is changing questions or adding content, exerts pressure on the child or influences the conversation in any other way, the interview should be interrupted immediately. Some diaspora communities are particularly small and closed, so that the interpreter could be known or related to the child or the child's family members. The interviewer has the responsibility to clarify if there are any relations that could inhibit the child and prevent him or her from speaking openly. Particularly when disclosing acts of violence within the family or community, when speaking about sensitive issues such as sexual orientation or sexual violence, or when threats and risks are involved, as might be the case when a child has been trafficked, the presence of an interpreter during the interview can be intimidating for the child. If necessary, the interpreter has to be changed to prevent that he or she influences the interview or the child.

Many professionals prefer using telephone interpretation services or online communication technology to connect an interpreter from a different city or country. These options are appreciated especially with rare languages, small diaspora groups and in sensitive cases as they offer additional safety and protect the child's identity and privacy.

h) Timing and duration

Interviews should be as short and to the point as possible and should ideally last not more than 40–45 minutes. Children should be interviewed during the mornings wherever possible. The child's age, cognitive skills and personal situation could require a shorter interview. Any other factors that influence the child's concentration and participation in the interview should be taken into due consideration, such as hunger, naptime or the administration of medication.

i) Coping with difficult situations during an interview

The child's behaviour in an interview setting can be unpredictable and, at times, difficult to handle. Whenever a difficult situation arises, the interviewer has to handle it with a sound balance of patience, determination and clear directions. The interviewer must never raise her or his voice or lose the temper. In some cases, the interview may need to be interrupted or ended, which is preferable over trying to push the child's limits.

4.2 The NICHD protocol: An effective method to obtain reliable statements from children

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol[10] from the United States is one of the most widely used methods for interviewing children. Extensive testing has confirmed its effectiveness: It improves the quality of interviews with children and enables the interviewer to obtain accurate and reliable information from the child. The protocol has been developed by a multi-disciplinary team on the basis of research on children's memory, linguistic and communication abilities, social knowledge, suggestibility, the effects of stress and trauma, forensic needs, as well as the behaviour and communication of the interviewer.[11]

[10] NICHD Protocol, International Evidence-Based Investigative Interviewing of Children, http://nichdprotocol.com/. A recent version of the NICHD Protocol can be accessed from http://nichdprotocol.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/InteractiveNICHDProtocol.pdf.

[11] NICHD Protocol, International Evidence-Based Investigative Interviewing of Children, http://nichdprotocol.com/. Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

The NICHD protocol offers operational guidance for professionals conducting investigative and forensic interviews with children. The protocol was developed as research had demonstrated the limited impact of training on the communication and interviewing skills of professionals. Professionals found it difficult to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquired in training seminars, so that the quality of their interviews and the accuracy of the information obtained from the child often remained compromised even after training.[12]

The NICHD protocol aimed to redress this issue. It provides practical step-by-step guidance for the interviewer on all phases of the interview. It includes examples of open-ended and non-leading questions, free-recall prompts and techniques to obtain the maximum results from an interview, both in terms of the detail and amount of information elicited from the child and its accuracy and reliability. The protocol guides professional interviewers in conducting the interview in a way that respects ethical standards in communicating with children on sensitive issues.[13]

Evidence-based interviewing methods such as the NICHD protocol are used for investigative or forensic interviews with children. Interviewers use them to obtain statements from children who are victims or witnesses of violence in different contexts, including physical or sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking. The method has also proven effective for interviewing children on the move who have fled from violence in their home countries or who have experienced severe violence during their migration. The Barnahus ("Children's Houses") and comparable models throughout Europe use the NICHD as well as the NCAC protocols, which are comparable in structure, method and approach.[14]

The NICHD protocol is structured into different phases and steps that have to be followed as closely as possible. The interview starts with an *introduction phase*, followed by a *narrative phase* where the child speaks about substantive issues, and ends with the *closing phase*.

Phase 1: Introduction

The introduction phase serves the following main purposes:

- Introducing the interviewer and the child.
- Explaining the rules for the interview and the child's tasks.
- Becoming acquainted and building rapport.

Introducing the interviewer, the child and the interpreter

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer introduces him– or herself to the child and explains the purpose of the interview and the role of the interviewer. The interviewer seeks to make the child feel at ease and assures the child that he or she is allowed to talk about anything, positive and negative things.

[12] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

[13] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

[14] National Children's Advocacy Centre, *The National Children's Advocacy Centre's Child Forensic Interview Structure*, 2012, http://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NCAC-Child-Forensic-Interview-Structure.pdf.

If an interpreter is involved in the interview, the interviewer introduces the interpreter, irrespective of whether the interpreter is present in the room or connected by phone or internet.

After this basic introduction, the interviewer makes the following additional remarks and questions:

- We are here to find out something about your situation.
- We are here to understand how it is to be in your situation.
- You should feel free to say what you feel is important.
- Is there anything you would like to ask or say before we start talking?

After these introductory explanations, the interviewer asks the child to introduce him– or herself and asks some basic questions about the child, such as the child's age and level at school. If the child is from a different country, the interviewer might ask general questions about the child's life in the home community.

Explaining the rules for the interview and the child's tasks

The interviewer explains the child's tasks during the interview, which is to describe events in detail and to tell the truth. The interviewer explains the rules of the interview and the expectations of the child, invites the child to ask questions for clarification whenever the child has some doubts or something remains unclear. Reaching a common understanding on these basic rules it important to make the child's statement more accurate and reliable. The interviewer might use the following questions and explanations:

- Let me know if I ask the same question more than once. If that happens, it is simply because I have forgotten that I asked the same question before.
- Clarifying this rule is important because the child might feel insecure about his or her response when asked the same question twice, and think that the interviewer did not like or approve of the response given before. Some children tend to vary or change their response when asked repeatedly.
- Let me know if you do not understand the question.
- Correct me if I am wrong.
- If you do not know the answer to one of my questions, it is ok to say "I don't know".

  A child might not know how to respond to a question. The child might not understand a word due to their young age, level of development, language or cultural differences.
- Do you know the difference between the truth and a lie?

  The interviewer makes some examples of obvious truthful and wrong statements to clarify the difference, for instance asking about the colour of his or her shoes, describing first a wrong colour and, when the child identifies the wrong statement, let the child confirm the correct one. The objective is to reach a common understanding with the child on the importance of being honest and to commit the child to responding truthfully.
- Let us make an agreement to only tell the truth during this interview.

Becoming acquainted and building rapport

After this introduction, the interviewer engages the child in a brief conversation that is interesting to the child, for instance talking about the child's skills or hobbies.

- Tell me more about yourself.
- Tell me about your hobbies.
- What are you good at?

This type of conversation helps to reduce the formality of the situation. It also provides an opportunity for the interviewer to assess the child's skills in communication and free narration. It is therefore important that the child does most of the talking and not the interviewer. If the child talks about skills in music or drawing or sports, the interviewer can connect to these themes and ask open-ended questions about these topics to let the child respond in free narration.

- Tell me all about your drawings, tell me all about the last picture you drew.
- So you like football, tell me all about the last match you played.

Before shifting to the main topic of the interview, the interviewer gives the child an opportunity to rehearse free recall. This is done by asking the child about a recent event in his or her life, for instance activities during the past weekend. If the child is very reluctant and shy at this point of the interview, he or she is likely to be even more reluctant about disclosing hurtful experiences and incidents of violence or exploitation in the interview's second phase.

These introductory remarks, explanations and questions aim to establish rapport. In formal interviews, the rapport building phase helps the interviewer to get acquainted with the child and to establish trust. In informal settings, professionals have made good experience engaging children in conversations on sports, hobbies or other themes that interest them.

Building rapport

Rapport building is a communication tool that serves several purposes:

- By building rapport with the child, the interviewer aims to establish a positive atmosphere where the interviewer and the child communicate attentively and with mutual trust. A calm and trusted interaction between the interviewer and the child is a precondition for the interview to succeed.
- Rapport building enables the interviewer to assess the child and his or her emotional situation, communication skills and other factors that might impact the child's capability to provide accurate information during the interview.
- On the basis of this assessment, the interviewer has to adjust the interview style in order to create the most conducive and supportive conditions for the child to speak out.
- The assessment enables the interviewer to positively influence the child's feelings about the interview and to encourage the child to communicate clearly without feeling inhibited by the interviewer, the style or pace of the interview questions or any other issues.
- If rapport has been established well, the child and the interviewer have eye contact while they speak, the child is calm and considers the interviewer trustworthy. A good rapport makes it easier for the child to disclose more personal or sensitive information.[15]

15 See for instance: Tickle-Degnan, L., Rosenthal, R., The Nature of Rapport and Its Nonverbal Correlates, *Psychological Inquiry*, Vol. 1(4) 1990, pp. 285–293. Collins, R., Lincoln, R.A:, Frank, The Effect of Rapport in Forensic Interviewing, *Psychiatry Psychology and Law*, Vol. 9(1), 2002. Roberts, K. P., Lamb, M. E. and Sternberg, K. J., The effects of rapport-building style on children's reports of a staged event, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 2004, 18, 189–202. Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Yudilevitch, L., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W. and Hovav, M., Effects of introductory style on children's abilities to describe experiences of sexual abuse, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 1997, 21, 1133–1146. Collins, Kimberly, Doherty-Sneddon, Gwyneth and Martin J. Doherty, Practitioner perspectives on rapport building during child investigative interviews, *Psychology, Crime and Law*, Volume 20, 2014, Issue 9, 884–901.

Phase 2: Narrative – Speaking about substantive issues

The narrative phase serves the following main purposes:

1. The child narrates in free recall.
2. The interviewer guides the child's narration without influencing it.
3. The child shares information about substantive issues.
4. Where applicable, this part of the child's statement could be used as evidence in judicial or administrative proceedings.

In the *narrative phase*, the interviewer directs the conversation to the main topic of the interview and lets the child speak in free recall. To direct the child's narration, the interviewer asks open-ended and non-leading questions and makes the questions increasingly specific as the child talks. By using open-ended and non-leading questions, the interviewer does not influence the child's responses. This is particularly important in cases of forensic interviews that take place in the context of judicial or administrative proceedings.

Closed and leading questions have to be avoided, as the way the questions are phrased might influence the child's responses. The child's responses to closed and leading questions would therefore not be considered fully reliable. In consequence, the child's account might not be admitted as evidence in judicial or administrative proceedings. Table 1 provides a few examples of open-ended and non-leading versus closed and leading questions.

Table 1: Examples of leading and non-leading questions

Examples of open-ended and non-leading questions:	**Examples of closed and leading questions:**
Tell me what happened?	Did he hit you?
Where did it happen?	Did this happen in your home?
Who did this to you?	Did your uncle do this to you?

In the cases of children who have been exploited or trafficked or are at risk, the interviewer might guide the narration by asking questions about the child's home and family background and the current living situation of the child.

If the child is a migrant or asylum seeking child, the interviewer will ask about the child's situation in the country of origin and the experiences during the journey. Questions might be phrased, for instance, as follows:

- Now that I know you better, I would like to know how you came to this country.
- Tell me everything about your family and your home community.
- Tell me everything about your journey.
- Tell me everything about your life in your country.

The interview starts with broad questions and becomes progressively more focused. At the beginning, the interviewer asks open-ended questions and then shifts to more specific questions that

must always remain non-leading. In many contexts, the interview aims to obtain details from the child's perspective about the family situation, how many family members there are, the quality of relationships and communication in the family. Only towards the end of the interview, if the child has not disclosed anything, it is ok for the interviewer to ask more specific questions to prompt a disclosure of an experience of violence, exploitation or trafficking. Specific questions might include the following:

- Were you asked to do something that you did not like to do?
- Did anyone force you to do something you did not like?
- Did anyone do anything to your body and you did not allow it or did not like it?
- If you think someone will do things to you that they are not allowed to, we want to know about it.
- Tell me all about that. Tell me everything from the beginning to the end, even if you think that something might not be important.

If the interviewer has previously had information on what happened to the child, as for instance information about acts of exploitation and trafficking or other forms of violence, and the child is not disclosing, the interviewer can ask the child about it at the end of the interview:

- I know you are worried about something that happened to you, tell me about that.

The interviewer must avoid asking leading questions and suggest something that the child has not yet addressed. If the child discloses an act of violence, then the interviewer should follow up with questions about details of the incident and how often it has happened. The objective is to obtain information about the context and environment and everything that has to do with the child's senses such as feelings, smells, hearing and seeing.

In cases of children on the move, it is also important to understand how the child paid for the journey and if he or she was accompanied by someone. The interviewer might ask if the child had any possibility to seek help during the journey and if was there anyone they could trust. The interviewer asks the child how they felt when they lived in their home country, how they felt on the way to the country they are in now and how they are feeling on the day of the interview. Where children are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking and are struggling with mental health impairments as a consequence, it is important to ask the child about suicidal thoughts or if they wish to die. In addition to eliciting information on the child's journey, interviews with children on the move that follow the NICHD protocol provide information for asylum or immigration procedures and for the identification of risks of exploitation and trafficking.

Towards the end of the narrative phase, it is important to ask the child about his or her dreams or how they would like to live in the future, their hopes and wishes. This helps the child to close the narration of the harmful experiences and proceed to more positive and forward-looking thoughts.

Obtaining information from children on the move on risks of exploitation and trafficking:

When interviewing children on the move, where there is a suspicion that the child could be a victim of exploitation and trafficking, the interviewer will aim to gather responses to the questions below, without asking these questions directly. The child's responses can provide hints and clues for the identification of exploitation and trafficking. The aim of the interview is to gather as much information as possible on these themes from the child in free recall. Only if the child has not addressed these issues by the end of the interview, the interviewer can asked direct questions. This list of questions may need to be adjusted according to the context and purpose of the interview.

- How long have you been in this country?
- Are there some adults that you have more contact with than others?
- Who is your primary contact or guardian?
- How often do you see your primary contact?
- Is there someone you can talk to if something is difficult or when you are sad?
- If you get visitors, where can you spend time with them?
- Do you have your own phone or you can borrow a phone?
- Is there someone who controls whom you are calling or what you say?

Phase 3: Closure

The closing phase serves the following main purposes:

1. The interviewer returns to speak about neutral topics
2. The child can ask questions
3. The interviewer and the child discuss a safety plan for the child

The interviewer sums up what the child has said using the child's words. The interviewer returns then to a neutral topic, for instance talking about a hobby that the child mentioned in the introduction phase. The interviewer responds to any questions or concerns of the child and thanks the child for his or her participation.

If the interview was about a sensitive issue, such as experiences of exploitation and trafficking or other forms of violence, the interviewer uses the closing phase to discuss a safety plan with the child, for instance by asking the following questions:

- Whom can you talk to if something is bothering you and when you are sad?
- Who is there for you when you need help?

The safety plan helps the child to feel more confident about seeking help after the interview and to deal with any bad memories or issues that might upset the child.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer tells the child what will happen next, when and how the child will be informed about relevant decisions or proceedings, and what support services will be provided to him or her and how.

5. Children as witnesses: Eliciting accurate and reliable statements from child victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking

Children who have lived through experiences of exploitation and trafficking are often perceived primarily as vulnerable victims. Due to their young age and exposure to traumatic events, professionals may have little confidence in the capability of child victims to remember events in detail and to give accurate accounts of their experiences. These doubts are dispelled by research findings, which show that children are capable of remembering, expressing their memories and acting as reliable witnesses, even after exposure to traumatic stress.

Research confirms children's capability to make accurate and reliable statements, even at a young age and after traumatic events. Children are able to remember events and express their memories from an early age.

The accuracy of a child's account depends on the child's age and evolving capacities, trauma, a conducive child-friendly environment, as well as the enabling support provided by trained professionals.

Professionals require specialised training to provide support in accordance with the child's specific needs and best interests. Training effectiveness can be maximised when professionals benefit from a longer-term process of supervision, the use of evidence-based methods and practical guidance.

5.1 Assessing the credibility of the statement of a child witness

Children who are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking are often considered to be unreliable witnesses in criminal investigations and proceedings. To dispel doubts and ensure that the child's statement has a high probative value, the assessment of the credibility of a witness involves consideration for several factors[16]:

- ***Memory***: Does the witness remember the event that he or she is asked to testify on? How detailed and accurate is the memory of the witness? Research shows that children are generally and starting from a young age able to remember events that they have experienced. Younger children tend to remember less details than older children.
- ***Suggestibility***: To what degree is the witness able to resist suggestive and leading questions? Are there indications that the statement of the witness has been influenced or distorted by the way the questions have been formulated and posed or by the interview setting? Evidence-based interview protocols help professionals to avoid suggestive and leading questions while conducting the interview.
- ***Ability to communicate***: How well are the communication abilities and skills of the witness developed? Is the witness able to understand the purpose and context of the interview or hearing and the specific questions? To what extent is the witness able to express what he or she remembers in response to the questions? In the introductory phase of the interview, the professional interviewer assesses the child's ability to communicate. On the basis of this assessment, a trained interviewer is able to adjust the communication style accordingly during the interview and to support the child in making an accurate statement.

[16] Bala, Nicholas; Ramakrischnan, Karuna; Lindsay, Roderich; Lee, Kang, Judicial Assessment of the Credibility of Child Witnesses, *Alta Law Rev*, 2005 April, 42(4): 995–1017, accessed from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4640896/.

- ***Honesty***: Is the witness being honest and making the statement in good faith to provide accurate and truthful information? Is the witness lying deliberately or withholding some information on purpose? Trained forensic interviewers will be able to judge the demeanour of the witness during the interview. By observing the consistency of the story, the flow of the statement, pauses and manner of speech, the mimics and gestures of the witness, forensic experts are able to make a judgement on the honesty and reliability of the statement. Law enforcement officers leading the criminal investigation of a case will be able to judge to what degree the testimony of the witness is consistent and compatible with other evidence gathered in the case.

Assessing the credibility of the statement made by a child victim of violence, exploitation and trafficking requires therefore the collaboration of different experts. The use of evidence-based interviewing protocols, a careful preparation of the interview and observing principles of chid-sensitive communication are the most pertinent measures to remove doubts about the credibility of child victims acting as witnesses. The following sections explain in more detail how different factors influence the ability of children to act as credible witnesses in criminal investigations and proceedings and how professionals can best support children in making reliable and accurate statements.

5.2 Are children able to make accurate statements?

Children are generally able to remember events and emotions they experienced. Their capability to provide accurate information and disclose what they remember depends on several factors. The most important factors are the interviewer's ability to elicit information and the child's willingness and ability to disclose it. Research in this field has identified some fundamental principles and rules that professionals have to observe in order to positively influence the child's willingness and ability to express what they remember. These rules and considerations form the basis of evidence-based interviewing protocols, which guide the interviewer step-by-step through the interview and help creating supportive conditions for the child to speak out and to make an accurate statement.[17] The NICHD protocol, for instance, is an evidence-based interviewing protocol, which professionals can rely on to elicit accurate statements from child victims of crime.

5.3 How does age affect the child's capacity to make accurate statements?

Children are able to give accurate accounts of their experiences even at a young age. The child's capability to narrate in free recall and to resist suggestive questions by an interviewer evolves significantly with age.

As of the age of three, children are generally able to provide information on a specific event they experienced. At that age, the child's capability to share information in free narration is still limited so that the interviewer has to ask them specific questions and the child will be able to respond on the basis of their memory. 4–6 year old children tend to provide slightly more information when they are asked specific and directive questions, whereas open-ended questions might elicit less information from this age group. As of the age of 5–6 years, children tend to be better able of sharing information in free recall and to remember more details about an event they experienced.

[17] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/eutils/elink.fcgi?dbfrom=pubmed&retmode=ref&cmd=prlinks&id=18023872.

Younger children are more susceptible to the way questions are phrased and are more likely than older children to respond erroneously to leading and suggestive questions, or to questions posing a choice between different options. Interviewers who are trained and experienced in using free recall questions and prompts, however, are able to elicit accurate and detailed information even from young children. Researchers advise that interviewers use child-sensitive and evidence-based methods for communicating with children and interviewing them irrespective of the child's age.[18]

5.4 How do experiences of violence impact child's communication?

For service providers, it can be difficult and almost impossible to judge from a child's behaviour or communication whether a child is a victim of violence, exploitation and trafficking. While some child victims appear to be notably harmed, intimidated and scared, others act in an empowered way and display strong personalities, yet others might behave aggressively. Behaviour and communication depend on a range of factors, such as the level of development, the support a child receives, self-confidence, personal resilience and level of choice or self-determination in life.

It is however not untypical that children who have had traumatic experiences feel tired, have a low self-confidence, mistrust adults and state officials, have feelings of shame and guilt and find it difficult to concentrate. Fear and threats against the child or the child's family members might prevent the child from speaking openly about his or her experiences. Child victims might suffer physical and mental health symptoms, including illness, poor teeth and hygiene, anxiety and depression. Experiences of violence, neglect and exploitation that continue for prolonged periods of time slow down a child's physical and cognitive development. All these symptoms have an impact on the child's communication and behaviour. Professionals need to be prepared to treat the child with care, respect and empathy, irrespective of the child's communication and behaviour. Child-sensitive communication can help children to feel valued as persons, to speak out about their emotions and to regain confidence and resiliency to cope with adverse experiences.[19]

5.5 How does traumatic stress affect the child's memory?

Stress and traumatic experiences have an impact on memory. Children react however differently to stress and trauma, as the specific circumstances of the case, their personal resiliency and the level of support they receive influence their ability to cope and to remember. The brain is typically associating traumatic events with the emotions and sensations of the moment and stores these associations at an unconscious level. After the traumatic event, memories of it can be triggered by fragments of events, sensations or emotions that are similar to those experienced during the traumatic event. Remembering and talking about traumatic experiences is always stressful. This stress level can create difficulties for the child to remember, find the right words and express their memories. Prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences are particularly difficult to remember as the chronic stress they create is impacting the child's memory in the longer term.[20]

[18] Hershkowitz, Irit, Lamb, M.E., Orbach, Y., Katz, C., The Development of Communicative and Narrative Skills Among Preschoolers: Lessons from forensic interviews about child abuse, *Child Development*, December 2011, 83(2): 611–22. Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

[19] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 10, 12–14.

[20] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 13, 18.

The interviewer has to be aware of these dynamics when interviewing child victims of exploitation and trafficking, take time for the interview, be patient and empathic. Interviews with child victims of violence are recommended to take place as soon as possible after the incident, while the child's memory is still fresh.[21] In cases of prolonged exposure to violence and exploitation, as might be the case when a child has been exposed to violence and exploitation for a long period of time, it can be appropriate to provide the child first with a possibility for rest and recovery before conducting the interview.[22]

Qualified professionals and child-sensitive communication: Core elements of a functioning child protection system

Child-sensitive communication is a fundamental element of a functioning child protection system. Children have to be heard and listened to in order to benefit from protection and support services that are targeted to their needs. Meaningful assessments and referrals can only be made when professionals have the skills, the conditions and methods to create an enabling environment for children to speak out and to be heard and listened to.

Professionals who have not had the possibility to be trained in child-sensitive communication and interviewing might feel insecure in interacting with children and asking questions. Without access to information on the child's story and views, professionals might refrain from taking decisions, take decisions too late or take wrong decisions. To prevent this, training has to ensure that professionals are prepared to handle sensitive conversations to obtain information from children as the basis of their casework.

A combination of training, guidance and supervision enables professionals to apply communication and interviewing skills effectively in practice

Research on the effectiveness of training in child-sensitive interviewing revealed that professionals often find it difficult to apply the knowledge and techniques they acquired during a training course in their workplace. Evidence shows that training effects can be maximised when the training is followed-up by a longer-term process of supervision. This continued support helps professionals to adopt and maintain recommended practices in their work. Continued support after training can be provided by verbal and written feedback and review, supervision and guidance material. Periodic supervision with trainers and peer review sessions with colleagues enable professionals to consistently reflect on and improve their skills, behaviour and practice, to consolidate learning and gain more confidence about the methods or tools they have been trained to use. In addition, hands-on guidance material such as the NICHD protocol provide orientation and help professionals to operationalise the knowledge obtained in training courses in their daily work practice.[23]

Carrying out sensitive conversations with children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking is stressful for professionals as the cases and levels of violence are often difficult to handle. Training is therefore also required to strengthen professionals' resiliency to cope with the stories they hear from children in their workplace. Adequate training and supportive working conditions, including time to rest and recover, as well as supervision are essential to prevent chronic exhaustion, burnout or fatigue.[24]

[21] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

[22] See: Unicef, *Reference Guide on Protecting the Rights of Child Victims of Trafficking in Europe*, 2006, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49997af7d.pdf.

[23] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 2007, 31(11–12): 1201–1231.

[24] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 19.

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