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Listening to Young Voices

**A Guide to Interviewing Children and Young People
in Truth Seeking and Documentation Efforts**

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Valerie Waters
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About the Author

Valerie Waters is a psychology specialist focusing on trauma-sensitive approaches to the provision of humanitarian aid and the design of human rights initiatives. During her time at ICTJ, she provided technical assistance to government and community partners endeavoring to engage young people in transitional justice processes. Since 2015 she has been based in Iraq and Myanmar implementing psychosocial support interventions in integrated humanitarian aid programs.

About ICTJ

The International Center for Transitional Justice works across society and borders to challenge the causes and address the consequences of massive human rights violations. We affirm victims' dignity, fight impunity, and promote responsive institutions in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved. ICTJ envisions a world where societies break the cycle of massive human rights violations and lay the foundations for peace, justice, and inclusion. **For more information about ICTJ, visit www.ictj.org**

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Foreword: Learning to Listen

“The government must hear us, because we have a lot to say. We don’t want to become frustrated adults and a generation broken by silence and the weight of the pain.”

– *Pascale, 24, after presenting recommendations for reparations from youth to the Ivorian Ministry of Solidarity*

Too often, truth-seeking processes forget a vital segment of society: the young.

When youth as the inheritors of current societies speak out, their voices have the potential to reveal hidden and overlooked impacts of massive human rights violations, such as what it is like to be a child denied an education because schools have been destroyed or turned into military barracks or what it is like to be a child denied an identity after a parent was disappeared. More importantly, their viewpoints also suggest what the future may hold for a society emerging from violence or repression.

It is in the best interest of both children and society to listen to young voices. Throughout our work in diverse contexts, ranging from Canada and Colombia to Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, and Tunisia, we have witnessed the power of young peoples’ voices to provide new insights on the way forward for their communities and societies in pursuing peace and justice.

But if we want to hear the revelatory insights of children and youth, we have to check our tendency to talk at them with pre-formulated solutions and, instead, listen to them on their own terms. As adults in positions of power, we need to open our ears to hear the reality of how young people are impacted by human rights violations, how they see their society, where it is going, what role they see for themselves, and their vision for the present and future.

It is in that spirit we present this guide to help practitioners speak with children and young people in a way that involves them in the truth-telling process and opens a space for them to speak the unvarnished truth, share their unique and invaluable perspectives, and pave the way for them to lead us into a healthier future.

We know that conflict and repression affect children in specific and enduring ways because they are in their formative years and hold a more vulnerable position in society. Where efforts are taking place to acknowledge and address past wrongs, the voices of children and youth are needed to show the full picture of what happened, who was harmed, and how it continues to affect people’s lives. Without their stories, any truth-seeking process will be incomplete.

Understanding the intergenerational consequences of past violations and building a collective sense of responsibility around addressing them is a crucial first step in breaking cycles of violations and building a more just society. Samantha, a 14-year-old who spoke at a youth forum of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, reminds us that even if young people did not live through the conflict or period of repression in question or were not directly targeted by human rights violations, they still have a stake in their country's search for the truth. Reflecting on a system by which indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in government-funded, church-run schools in order to strip them of their indigenous culture, Samantha noted: "Although we may have not taken part in the creation of Residential Schools, it can still be easy to feel ashamed that the country where you have lived your whole life was willing to put these children in as much suffering as they had to go through. It's a healing process we must go through as a whole." After all, it is Samantha's generation that will need to cope with the legacies of unresolved human rights violations.

As direct victims, children must be consulted as to the best way to address their experiences. Often their needs are different from what adults assume is best for them. Maria, a former child soldier in Colombia, was frustrated when she was offered training in baking and cobblery when what she really wanted was to pursue a university degree: "Many of us possess vast experience in the areas of survival, health, and discipline that we gained as a result of our time in the armed groups. But it's not appreciated . . . [The programs we're offered] do not help us to achieve our dreams and a higher purpose." Defying stereotypes of what a traumatized child with limited capacity should be, some youth may want to build on what they learned from these challenging, formative experiences to forge their own futures.

Opening spaces for children and youth to speak also lays the groundwork for their ongoing civic engagement. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, at a time when the official truth-seeking process was stalled, ICTJ worked with a group of youth leaders in creating their own truth-seeking process using a radio program based on testimonies and dialogues they had documented across the country. The program chronicled a very different history than the one told in official circles, setting aside the notion that youth violence was a form of mass hysteria, instead suggesting that the 2010–2011 election crisis was the boiling point in a long-standing intergenerational conflict.

These youth took responsibility for their past and, even more importantly, for their future. Amandine, 22, one of the radio show hosts, notes: "Actors we have been. Perpetrators, too, in the recent history of Côte d'Ivoire. But what type of actors will we be? What role do we want to play in the future of our beautiful nation, our beautiful country? What do we need to do to avoid the return of massive human rights violations and the unnecessary suffering of the population?" Bringing children and youth into the truth-seeking process had a catalytic effect in Côte d'Ivoire, turning disparate youth activists into a youth-led organization working towards peace and justice.

It is this momentum and civic engagement that a country needs as it emerges from conflict or repression, to serve as a check on power and to continually push for human rights to be respected, so all citizens can live in dignity.

As adults, the best thing we can do to help facilitate that action is to take a seat and listen.

Virginie Ladisch
Head of ICTJ's Children and Youth Program

Introduction

As human rights advocates and state representatives increasingly acknowledge the necessity of involving children in truth-seeking processes,¹ there is a growing need for practical tools that facilitate children's participation while prioritizing their protection. This statement-taking protocol provides a framework for interviewing children who have expressed a desire to recount their experiences to truth-seeking and documentation efforts, outlining protection principles, inquiry strategies, and behavioral guidelines for interacting with children.

This protocol is intended to help advance effective responses to human rights violations committed against children in the context of armed conflict and oppressive rule; however, the techniques and guidelines contained herein are not themselves new. This tool has been developed based on decades of research and reflection from social workers, mental-health professionals, and child-protection advocates working to address child maltreatment at the individual, family, and community levels.²

The primary principle in the creation of this document is the child-centered approach. The well-being of the child is prioritized above all other concerns, including, but not limited to, the accuracy and completeness of the information gathered. While tension may at times exist between the child's best interests and the goals of the truth-seeking body, on the whole, research has found that principles that prioritize the child's well-being above other concerns are compatible with principles that prioritize data collection. For example, open-ended questions serve the dual purpose of creating a comfortable atmosphere for the child and increasing the accuracy of the information the child provides.³ Similarly, investing time in building trust and rapport between the child and the statement taker at the start of the interview can reduce the child's stress about discussing traumatic personal experiences and events, while also acclimating the child to the approach the interviewer will use to help the child retrieve their memories, facilitating the collection of more complete statements.⁴

One significant departure this protocol makes from established best practices in forensic interviewing of children is the exclusion of "truth induction."⁵ While the original version of this protocol included an elicitation of the child's promise to tell the truth, it has since eliminated this element. This change has been instituted in order to account for the atmosphere of intense mistrust often present in societies facing legacies of massive human rights violations, including the proliferation of allegations

1 Cécile Aptel and Virginie Ladisch, ICTJ, "Through a New Lens: A Child Sensitive Approach to Transitional Justice," 2011, www.ictj.org/publication/through-new-lens-child-sensitive-approach-transitional-justice

2 This protocol was originally designed in the course of technical assistance provided to the Commission Dialogue, Vérité et Réconciliation of Cote d'Ivoire in 2013. It has since been adapted to be more broadly applicable and available to members of truth-seeking initiatives or documentation efforts in other contexts.

3 Larsson & Lamb, 2009.

4 Brown et al., 2013.

5 Michigan Forensic Interviewing Protocol, 2003; Lyon et al., 2008.

and denials of human rights violations. It is the responsibility of truth-seeking bodies to conduct broad investigations (including by collecting physical evidence, electronic and paper documents, media archives, other sources, and interviews from both children and adults), of which children's narratives are only one component. Therefore, in these efforts children's narratives need not stand on their own, as they often do in criminal justice cases. Thus, it is unnecessary to risk alienating a child with the implication that they may be inclined to lie during the interview. Instead, it is better to err on the side of building a trusting rapport between the child and the statement taker.

As a general guide for engaging with children, this protocol cannot cover all the specific considerations in all cultures and contexts that will need to be accounted for. The protocol and all other procedures for incorporating child participation in truth-seeking efforts must be adapted to the local context, in order to ensure their appropriateness and utility. Adaptations may include: expansion of the rapport-building section to enable greater time for relationship development in contexts where there is a strong atmosphere of mistrust between institutions and members of marginalized groups, conversion of the protocol's use of probes ("*Tell me about . . .*") to questions ("*Can you tell me about . . . ?*") depending on conversational norms and cultural conceptions of politeness, altered structure of informed consent procedures allowing for varied literacy levels among adult populations, and any other changes that increase the protocol's suitability for the context while upholding child-protection principles.

In the course of utilizing this protocol it may be useful to refer to the key source documents it is based on. For this reason, the bibliography points toward additional resources that informed the design of this tool. For further guidance on implementing or adapting this protocol, please contact ICTJ's Children and Youth Program at info@ictj.org



1 How to Use This Protocol

This protocol is intended to serve as a resource for anyone seeking to take statements or testimony from children in the context of truth-seeking, truth-telling or documentation efforts, whether it be with a formal truth commission, documentation program, or civil-society initiative.

The recommended ages of children who could be interviewed with this tool are 7–18. This protocol may also be used with young people over the age of 18 and adults, though some procedures (like guardian consent) may be unnecessary. It is **not** recommended that statements be taken from children under the age of seven.

This protocol outlines the full process for collecting statements from children, from the point at which they express interest in giving a statement to arranging for follow-up care.

Again, this protocol is designed as a general tool to be adapted to each specific context, content, and child. **It is not intended as an exact script to follow with every child.** Children’s abilities differ depending on their age and numerous other variables. As the statement taker or interviewer, you will need to adapt your language and approach to the individual child.

This protocol offers guidance for interacting with children who need the most careful handling and are the least developmentally advanced, thus the partial scripts represent the simplest and safest ways for you to interact with a child. When working with older children or children with advanced cognitive abilities, you may use more complicated phrasing or otherwise adapt your interaction to the level of complexity best suited to the child.

ICTJ recommends that anyone seeking to take statements from children first read through this entire protocol and familiarize themselves with its key recommendations and then adapt it as necessary to their specific project. For example, if a documentation initiative seeks to gather testimony about a particular incident, in the introduction portion of the interview, you would explain that the interview will focus on that incident and then they could simply provide the broadest possible prompt, “*Tell me everything you can remember about [that incident].*”

The protocol covers key information related to taking statements from children from start to finish, including: creating a suitable environment for interacting with children, the child’s arrival, introductions, using open-ended questions, assent and consent, ground rules, practice questions, taking the statement, how to respond to a child in distress, de-escalation (or ending an interview before it is completed), reunion with guardian, completion of data collection, and additional resources.



MAIN PARTICIPANTS

- **Child Statement Giver:** Child aged 7–18 who has voluntarily agreed to give a statement about personal experiences of rights violations
- **Guardian:** The primary caretaker of a child, with legal powers to act on their behalf
- **Statement Taker:** Person taking statements or testimony from children in the context of a truth-seeking, truth-telling, or documentation effort
- **Psychosocial Support Worker (PSW):** Staff person of a local organization trained in social work or psychology, qualified to assess children’s emotional, social, cognitive, and occupational functioning and to provide supportive counseling services to children and families. Ideally, the PSW should have an existing and ongoing relationship with the child
- **Local Organization(s):** ICTJ advocates close collaboration with a local organization capable of supporting children throughout the statement-taking process and beyond. Truth-seeking or documentation initiatives are generally temporary institutions, without deep or long-term ties to the children from whom they gather statements. Building a partnership with local organizations (such as psychosocial organizations and local child protection agencies) ensures that children who participate in the statement-taking process have a local reference point for accessing supportive services and addressing any urgent child protection needs that may be disclosed in interviews

Prior to Scheduling an Interview

Before scheduling an interview, a PSW should meet with the child and guardian to conduct a safety assessment that will determine whether the child has the psychological resilience and social support network necessary to safely give a statement to the truth-seeking body. Once the child’s eligibility has been confirmed, the PSW should arrange an appointment for the child to give a statement. The PSW should also explain in detail to the child and guardian what the truth-seeking body is, what its goals are, what it can and cannot accomplish, and what the child can expect during and after the statement-taking interview.



2 Guidelines for Creating a Suitable Environment for Interacting with Children

Allow sufficient time: It is important to allow enough time for the statement-taking process so that the child has the time to settle in, learn about the process, ask any questions, give their statement, and close the process. As an estimate, you should plan to spend at least 2 to 3 hours with each child, from the time of the child's arrival to the finalization of data forms (depending on the truth-seeking body's own process and forms). The exact length of time for the statement taking should be determined by the child's age, emotional state, and attention span.

What you may need to take the statement:

- Pen and paper
- Recording device (optional)
- Consent form
- Water
- Snacks for the child

Child-centered Approach

The statement-taking process should be designed to be child centered, meaning that the child's well-being, comfort, and wishes should be prioritized in every aspect of the process. This requires the organization collecting children's statements to carefully consider the physical, social, and emotional environment in which statements are taken. In practical terms, this includes such actions as:

- Seeking the child's input prior to seeking the guardian's input. This demonstrates that it is the child's input that is of foremost importance in this process. This approach necessitates a conversation with the guardian before the day the statement is taken, to brief them on the statement-taking process and the reasons for prioritizing the child's input.
- Allowing the child the opportunity to speak with you alone before offering the child the chance to be accompanied by a guardian or PSW. This eliminates the possibility that in the presence of a guardian the child might feel an obligation to state a wish to be accompanied by a guardian during the statement collection.
- Creating a welcoming space to receive children, with furnishings that are comfortable for children, such as small chairs and tables, cushions on the floor, or plastic cups a child is comfortable drinking from. There also should be good lighting and ventilation.
- Children should be given a choice of whether to have a male or female interviewer. In general, adolescents and young adults should be interviewed by someone of the same gender, young girls should be interviewed by a woman, and young boys can be interviewed by either a man or woman. If the child expresses no preference, the default interviewer should be a woman.



Respect

The overarching principle in creating a child-centered process is respect for the child. You should treat the child with great respect, providing as close to equal status as is appropriate for child-adult interactions in the local context. This dynamic of respect can be demonstrated by:

- Requesting the child's permission/participation for all procedures related to the interview (moving to a separate room, recording the statement, taking a break, resuming after a break, etc.)
- Sitting on the same level as the child. Ideally the room where you take the statement will have a variety of places to sit. After the child has chosen where to sit, you should follow suit, sitting at the same level as the child
- Refraining from interrupting the child, regardless of whether their story is necessarily "on topic"
- Answering any and all questions and addressing all concerns the child may have about the institution and the interview process
- Listening intently to everything the child shares, whether or not it appears to be relevant
- Maintaining eye contact with the child, if culturally appropriate and the child appears comfortable (do not force the child to maintain eye contact with you)
- Matching language use to the child's communication style. You should mirror to the degree possible the length of phrases and complexity of words the child uses, speaking in a manner that is neither too complex to be understood nor too simple as to seem patronizing

Statement Taker's Demeanor

You should exhibit a calm, reassuring demeanor throughout your interaction with the child. You should not display surprise, disgust, horror, happiness, or any other strong emotional reactions in response to anything the child says. All statements by the child, whether positive memories or recounting of traumatic events, should be met with neutral but generally encouraging responses.

Statement Taker's Verbal Utterances

In addition to asking questions, you should utilize **select** verbal reactions that are linguistically and culturally appropriate, including:

- Nonverbal utterances of encouragement, such as "Mm-hmm," and "Uh-huh"
- Noncommittal verbal utterances of encouragement, such as "Okay," and "I see"
- Nonverbal indications of encouragement, such as nodding and tilting the head
- Reflecting the child's language back when asking follow-up questions. For example, "You said that the policeman did 'bad manners' to you. Could you tell me more about that?"
- HOWEVER, the statement taker should **NOT** restate the child's narrative in words the child has not used or offer interpretations of the child's experiences or feelings that the child has not provided



A CHILD IN DISTRESS: SIGNS TO LOOK FOR AND HOW TO RESPOND

The best interests of the child should always guide the statement-taking process. It is normal for children to exhibit distress when recounting difficult experiences. You should, therefore, be on the lookout for signs of distress from the child and be ready to respond appropriately, secure support, or end the interview, if necessary.

Signs of distress:

- Crying
- Rocking
- Falling silent
- Biting fingernails
- Other self-comforting behaviors

If a child exhibits distress during a statement-taking session, you should follow these steps:

1. Pause. Give the child time to process their feelings.
2. Ask the child what they need. Example, *“I see that you are crying, [CHILD’S NAME]. I understand this is difficult. Is there something you need right now?”*
3. Pause. Give the child time to think about what they need and to reply.
4. Offer. If the child does not request something specific or resume talking on their own, offer means of comfort beginning with those that require the least interruption to the child’s environment and escalating to more intense support.
 - a. Water
 - b. Break/rest
 - c. PSW
 - d. Guardian
5. If the child regains emotional equilibrium after any of the above steps, ask the child if they would like to continue the interview. If the child says no, proceed to the De-escalation section of this protocol (page 30). If the child does wish to continue, restate that it is okay to stop at any time and ask for breaks, and ascertain whether the child wishes to continue with or without the presence of their PSW or guardian who may have joined the session.
6. **Note:** Children may cry or exhibit other signs of distress while recounting difficult stories but decline means of comfort and instead continue their narrative. In these cases, follow the child’s lead and allow them to continue speaking, but offer water, tissues, breaks, and other support if the child’s level of distress increases.



The statement taker should **NOT**:

- Touch the child. Unless the child directly approaches you and initiates or requests a hug or other physical contact. You should maintain distance between yourself and the child. Any physical contact initiated by the child should be minimized as much as possible, without causing the child to feel rejected.
- Offer counseling to the child. Regardless of whether you have psychosocial support training, you should not attempt to counsel the child by exploring the child's feelings in more depth or helping the child to reframe past events or identify responses or courses of action related to their emotional or life problems. This work should be done by the PSW.



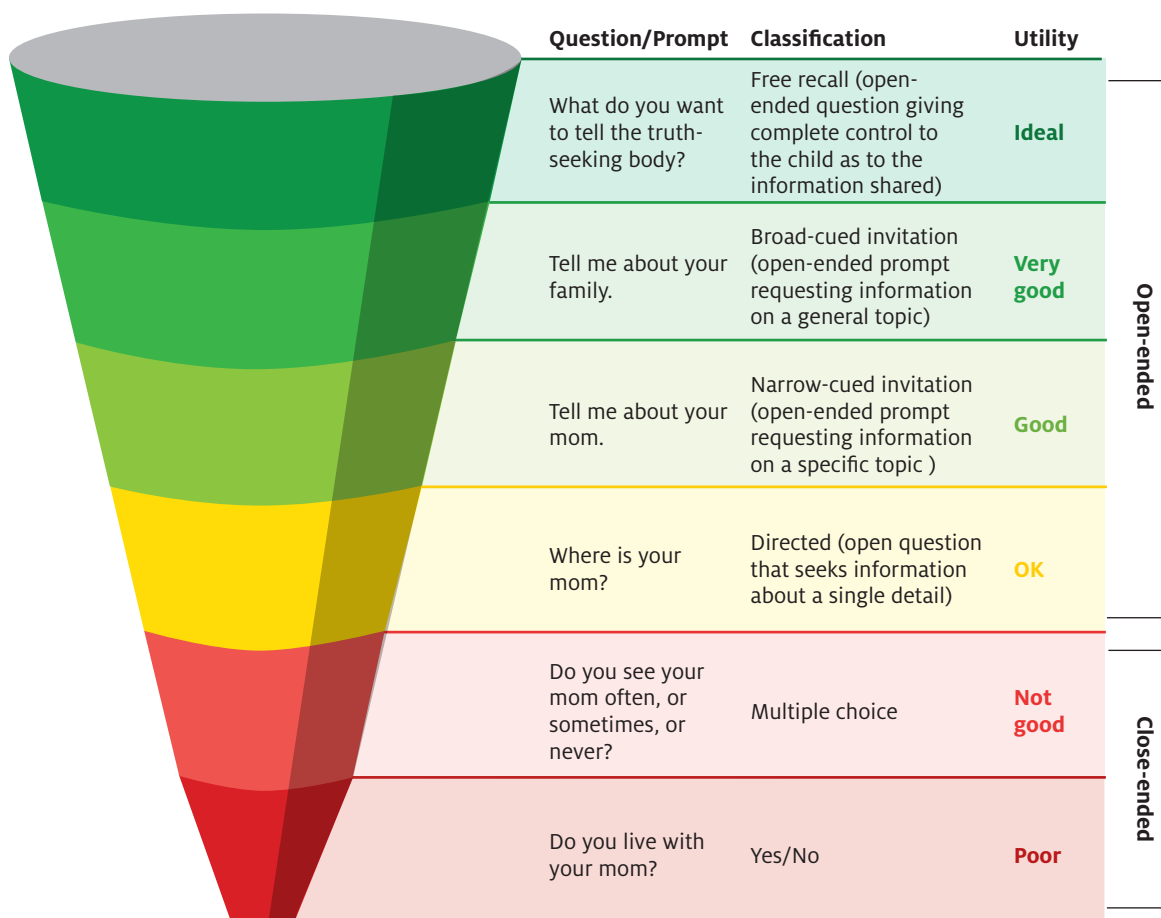
3 Using Open-Ended Questions

Funnel technique

Questions fall on a spectrum from open-ended to closed. An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the statement giver's own knowledge and/or feelings. A closed-ended question encourages a short or single-word answer.

The funnel technique for interviewing children starts with the broadest, most open-ended question possible, *"Tell me about why you are here today,"* and, as necessary, gradually narrows down to more specific questions, *"What color was the person's clothing?"*

You should use the funnel technique in designing interview guides for use with children. It prioritizes the use of open-ended questions that encourage narrative responses from children and discourages the use of closed-ended questions, which can be leading and confusing for children.





Open-Ended Questions

The less cognitively advanced a child is (whether due to age, trauma, emotional state at the time of interviewing, or a combination of these), the more quickly it may be necessary to drill down to more focused questions. However, going past focused questions to closed-ended questions is not recommended, as it dramatically increases the possibility of errors given the inherently suggestive nature of multiple choice and yes-or-no questions. If you cannot elicit information from a child using open-ended questions, then the statement should not be taken. (If the child wishes, they can reschedule and try again another day.)

The more cognitively advanced a child is (and depending on their emotional state), the less you may need to use questions at the more focused end of the spectrum. It is possible that an older adolescent may come to the statement taking session with their narrative fully formed and need only be asked the free recall question (“*What do you want to tell me today?*”) in order to give their statement. It may not be necessary to ask for details about family or other specifics of interest to the truth-seeking body, as older children are likely to already include all relevant information while giving their statement in response to a free recall question.



4 Introductions, Confidentiality, and Consent

Children who are less anxious provide better information in interviews and have a more positive reaction to the experience of being interviewed. Therefore, ways of easing children's fears and creating a comfortable, relaxed environment should be prioritized in interview preparations and in dialogue with the child. The sample introduction script below incorporates a few techniques to help children to relax, including informing them about what will happen during the statement, explaining why they are being taken into a separate room, and assuring them that they will be reunited with their guardian and continue their normal day after the interview.

On the day of the statement-taking session, the PSW should meet and greet the child and guardian, take them to a comfortable room, and introduce the statement taker. If possible, the PSW should sit with the guardian while the child gives their statement and remain available to join the statement-taking session if the child requests their presence.

The sample script is included for illustrative purposes only. The wording utilized here will not match any one truth-seeking body's needs, but you should adapt it to tailor the interview to the mandate of the institution and the needs and abilities of each child you interview.

Brief Initial Introduction (with guardian present)

Hello, my name is _____. What's your name?

I work for [truth-seeking body]. Do you know what [truth-seeking body] is? Tell me what you know about [truth-seeking body].

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Introduce yourself** as informally as is appropriate within the culture, signaling to the child that they may speak freely with you. Explain who you work for and that your job is to talk to children.
- ❑ **Ask the child what they know about your institution.** The child should have received information about what your institution is and what it will do. Therefore, you can ask the child to tell you what they know. By asking a question right away you establish that you are interested in what the child has to say.



Explanation of Truth-Seeking Goals

That's right, *[truth-seeking body]* is *[reflect something the child said back to them]*. My job is to talk to boys and girls all over the country about things that they saw or things that happened to them.

And then *[truth-seeking body]* will look at all the things that children have said, and we will *[explain what will be done with the statements]*.

- ❑ **Respond to the child's answer** and reflect the child's answer back when you reply. This shows that you are actively listening to what they say. If they do not respond to your question, assure them that it is okay if they do not know.
- ❑ **Explain the purpose of your institution and your job as a statement taker.** Setting the tone of your interaction with a child as respectful, informal, and informative will help to put the child at ease. In a very simple and direct manner, explain your job and then explain why your institution is taking statements from people and what it plans to do with the statements.
- ❑ **Assess the child's expectations of giving a statement.** This is also a good time to assess what the child expects from this process and to ensure that their expectations are in line with reality.



Anonymity and Confidentiality

Sometimes children talk about difficult things that they want to keep private, so we have rules about who can know what children have said. Our first rule is that we will not tell your family, your teacher, or anyone else in your community what you have told us. We will keep what you tell us private and confidential. That way, you can tell us about private things, or scary things, or confusing things that happened, and no one else will know what you told us.

In very special cases, we may have to tell someone what you told us. We would only tell someone what you told us if someone in your life is hurting you or mistreating you right now or if someone who hurt you or mistreated you in the past is still in your life. We would tell your PSW if you are in danger, so that they can help you. Does that make sense? It's a hard rule to understand, so can you say that rule back to me so that I can make sure I explained it well?

[pause for answer]

That's right, the only time we will tell someone you know is if you are in danger, and then we will tell [PSW] so that they can help you. That's the first rule that I follow. Do you understand that rule?

- ❑ **Explain how the child's statement will be confidential.** Children and parents/guardians may be afraid of how the information given in the statement will be used. Therefore, during this session you should explain that the child's name will never be published, a photograph of the child will not be taken, and very few people will know that the child gave this particular testimony. Nothing the child says during the statement will be repeated to anyone they know, *unless* the child is in immediate danger, in which case the PSW will be informed so that the child can be protected. Verify that the child and guardian both understand this concept of confidentiality.

- ❑ **Explain how the child's statement will be anonymous.** Once the child understands that no one will know what happened to them, specifically, you should explain that their story will help people to understand what happened to children generally. Parts of what the child says may be included in reports and may even be talked about on the radio or television, but it will never be said that this is what happened to [CHILD'S NAME]. They will only say that this is what happened to "a young girl." Verify that the child and parent both understand this concept of anonymity.



Anonymity and Confidentiality (continued)

[pause for answer, rephrase if child does not understand]

Now, even though I won't talk to your family or the people here in your town about what you said, the things that you tell me are going to be very important to understanding what happened to people in our country. If it's okay with you, sometimes *[truth-seeking body]* will remove all the parts of the story that identify you and then share other parts that are important to understanding what happened.

We might talk about something you told us, but we wouldn't say your name, or your town, or anything else that might make it possible for people to know it was you who told us. If you tell me today that at school you read 1,000 books, then I might say "Somewhere in the south of the country an 11-year-old girl read 1,000 books," but I will never say "[CHILD'S NAME] read 1,000 books." That way we can talk about the things that we learn from children, but no one ever knows which child said it. That's the second rule that I follow. What do you think about that rule?

[pause for answer, rephrase if child does not understand]

- ❑ **Make sure the child and guardian understand anonymity and confidentiality.** These are not easy concepts, and this may require some additional discussion among you, the child, the guardian, and the PSW.



Child's Questions

Now that I have told you about myself and *[truth-seeking body]*, do you have any questions about anything I've said?

[pause for answer, address any questions]

Is there anything I haven't told you that you want to know?

[pause for answer, address any questions]

- ❑ **Ask the child if they have any questions and answer them as fully as possible.**

It is important to give the child many opportunities to ask questions. This will help to ensure that the child understands the process and is giving **informed** assent. Continue to seek the child's questions and answer them as fully as possible until they understand the truth-seeking body, the statement-taking process, and how their statement will be used.

Guardian's Questions

[Mr./Mrs./Ms. GUARDIAN'S NAME], do you have any questions about *[truth-seeking body]* or about the interview today?

[pause for answer, address any questions]

- ❑ **Ask the guardian if they have questions and answer any they have,** only after you have answered all of the child's questions. This demonstrates to the child that they are the most important person in this process and that their statement is about what they want to say. Seek and answer the guardian's questions until they understand the process as fully as possible.



Child's Assent

There is a special room here for talking to children. It is quiet and comfortable and a good place to have an interview. Is it okay with you if we go to that room and talk?

- ❑ **Ask the child's permission to go to a separate room to talk to you one-on-one and give a statement.** If the child does not want to go to the room, spend some talking casually about other things and then ask again if the child has any questions.

After several minutes of general conversation you can request the child's assent again and ask if they would like to give a statement now. You may also ask whether the child would like their guardian or PSW with them during the statement. If the child still does not assent, stop the process and do not conduct a statement-taking interview with this child. All child and youth statements must be given voluntarily.



Guardian's Consent

[Mr./Mrs./Ms. GUARDIAN'S NAME], is it okay with you if [CHILD'S NAME] and I go to talk about their experiences? Could you please sign this form to show that you give your permission for [your child/ grandchild, etc.] to be interviewed?

- ❑ **Ask for the guardian's consent to take the child's statement.** If the child assents, ask the guardian for their permission. Always ask for the child's assent before seeking the guardian's consent. This establishes that it is the child whose opinion is most important, and it prevents children from feeling pressured to give their assent if their guardian has already said yes to the interview.
- ❑ **Ask the guardian to sign the consent form** if the guardian verbally consents to the child being interviewed. The form should be drafted in the simplest terms possible and available in all local languages. Obtaining written consent is considered a best practice because the paperwork provides a mechanism for ensuring all statement takers are operating according to procedure. If the guardian is not literate or is otherwise uncomfortable signing paperwork, you may proceed with verbal consent alone.

Assure the Child

Ok, [CHILD'S NAME], let's go to the interview room now. We will talk for a while, and then when we're done talking, I will bring you back to this room, where your [GUARDIAN] and [PSW] are waiting and then you will continue on with your day.

- ❑ **Assure the child that their guardian will be waiting for them and that they will go on with their day after the interview.** Before leaving the room with the child, show where their guardian and PSW will be waiting and explain that when the interview is over they will return to their guardian and go about their normal day. Children feel more comfortable during an interview if they can visualize where their guardian is and if they understand what will happen when the interview is over.



5 Questions to Set the Ground Rules

On entering the interview room, you should invite the child to sit where they please, and you should sit at the same level. For example, if the child sits in a low chair, you should also sit in a low chair; if the child sits on the floor, you should sit on the floor. You should then go over the interview process with the child. An example script is below.

Child's Comfort

Thank you for coming to the interview room with me, [CHILD'S NAME]. Are you comfortable?

[pause for answer]

Do you want some water?

[pause for answer or bring water as needed]



Reintroduction of Purpose of Interview

So, like we talked about before, I work for *[truth-seeking body]* and I talk to lots of children about things that have happened to them. I talk to children because *[truth-seeking body]* is trying to find the truth about what has happened to people in our country, so that we can understand what the problems are and how to have a better future.

It's important to understand that I cannot promise you any kind of reward for your statement. *[Truth-seeking body]* will use what you say to try to understand the past, but we cannot give you anything directly. Do you understand?

[pause for answer]

What are your questions about *[truth-seeking body]*?

[pause for answer]

What else would you like to know?

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Restate your position and the purpose of your work.** Once you are in the new room you will need to reorient the child to the purpose of the interview. In a few words, state again who you work with and that your job is to talk to children about their experiences.
- ❑ **Ask the child if they have any more questions** now that you are alone. They may have more questions that they did not want to ask in front of their guardian or that they thought of in the last few minutes. Ask if the child has any questions, and answer them fully.



Use of Notes and Recording Devices

As you can see, I have some pens and paper and an audio recorder here with me. I'm going to use these to record the things that we talk about today, so that I can remember them better later, if that's ok with you. Is it alright if I take notes?

[pause for answer]

And is it alright if I record what we talk about?

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Ask the child's permission to record the statement.** Some children, particularly any who have been in conflict with the law, may be accustomed to notes and recorders being used in adversarial settings. Assure the child that these tools are not going to be used against them and are only being used to ensure that you accurately record their statement. If the child does not assent to their use, do not use them.

Okay to Say "I Don't Know"

Now, sometimes you might not know the answer to a question. It's always okay to say, "I don't know." For example, what if I asked you, *[What's inside that cabinet?]*, what would you say?

[pause for answer]

That's right, you don't know, and it's ok to tell me that. It's best not to guess when you don't know the answer, and good to say "I don't know."

- ❑ **Help the child to understand that it is okay if they do not know the answer to a question.** For younger children you may need to demonstrate by talking about how it is not possible to know everything, then asking them to answer a question for which they cannot possibly know the answer. If the child says "I don't know," reaffirm that is the correct response to any question they are unsure about. If the child guesses the answer, explain again that for this talk it is better not to guess, but instead to say "I don't know" if they are unsure. Then try another example until the child understands.

For older children you may not need to demonstrate with examples, but make sure the child understands that they do not have to have all the answers.



Okay to Correct the Statement Taker

Also, I don't know lots of things, and sometimes I might say things that are wrong. It is okay to correct me if I say something wrong. Like, if I say, *[You have 28 brothers and sisters]*, what would you say to me?

[pause for answer]

Exactly. Woops! *[I was wrong about how many brothers and sisters you have. Tell me, how many brothers and sisters do you have?]*

[pause for answer]

Thank you for correcting me.

- ❑ **Tell the child that it is okay to correct you.** Children are often discouraged from correcting adults and may be hesitant to point out if you have misinterpreted something they have told you. Explain that you might not understand everything the child says and sometimes you might get things wrong. Make sure the child feels comfortable correcting you so that you can accurately record the statement.



Okay to Ask Questions

I am going to try to use words that you understand, but sometimes I might make a mistake and say something you don't understand or use a word that you don't know. You can always ask me questions if you are not sure what I am saying. So, if I asked you, *[Are you wearing any aglets?]*, what would you say?

[pause for answer]

Oh, thank you for asking. *[An aglet is the little plastic part on the end of a shoelace. See this? This is an aglet. Are you wearing any aglets?]*

❑ Encourage the child to ask questions.

Explain that you may say things that may be confusing or that the child does not understand. Be sure the child knows that they can ask questions about anything you say or do.

Younger children may need a demonstration of this principle. To do this, ask them a question using a word you think they will not understand and then encourage them to ask you a question about that word. Thank them for asking the question, then answer their question, then state your question again. This exchange will show that it is okay to ask questions if they do not understand something.

Older children may not need a demonstration, but they might need an invitation to ask a question. If at any time during the interview you sense that the child does not understand something you have said, gently ask them, *"Did you understand my question? Do you want me to explain anything?"*



Ground Rules

Option to Ask for Breaks/Stop

Now, if you get tired or you need to use the restroom, it is ok to say you need a break. And if you want to stop the interview at any time you can say you want to stop. Do you understand?

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Tell the child that they can ask for a break or stop the interview at any time.** Explain that sometimes it is difficult to talk about these things, and if they want, the child can ask to take a break, drink some water, etc. Explain that if the child decides not to talk anymore at all, then they can ask to stop the interview whenever they want. It is important to let the child know that they are in control of the interview and that if they do not want to talk, they do not have to.

Option to Have Guardian or PSW Present

Your [GUARDIAN] is waiting for you in the other room, and you will go back to them when you're done. But if you want them to come here while we talk or if you want [PSW] to come here while we talk, you can ask for that.

- ❑ **Again, give the child the option of having the PSW or guardian join the interview.** Let the child know that if at any time they want their PSW or guardian to be present, all they have to do is ask and the PSW or guardian can come into the room.

If the child does request their presence, make sure that the adult is seated behind the child or otherwise out of the child's line of sight during the interview. This ensures that the adult does not unknowingly send signals (through facial expressions) to the child about what is being said. You want the child to be as uninfluenced in giving the statement as possible.



6 Practice Questions

In most day-to-day conversations, children are accustomed to being asked directed questions by adults and to supplying short, one- or two-word answers. The purpose of asking practice questions is to help make the child feel more comfortable answering in a narrative format and to make it clear that the communication will center around what the child wishes to communicate, rather than what an adult wants to communicate. This may take some practice trying various topics, but all practice questions should be as neutral as possible. Given that you will not know what subjects may be distressing for the child (family, school, home life), it is advisable to keep practice questions focused on impersonal topics, such as the trip to the interview location, a recent holiday, or even the weather.

Practice Interview Question

I have been talking a lot, but now I want to listen to you. Tell me everything you can about how you got here today. Start from when you woke up this morning and tell me everything.

[pause for answer]

What else can you tell me?

[pause for answer]

[You said your sister woke you up.]
Tell me more about that.

[pause for answer]

Tell me more about *[where you walked]*.

[pause for answer]

- **Ask the child an open-ended question and let them respond in as much detail as they can give.** Now that the rules and information are covered, it is time to let the child set the pace and tone of the interview. Give them lots of time to respond to each question.

Pausing and waiting for a response is the most important thing you can do to make the child comfortable and have a successful interview.

Each time the child speaks, pause and wait to see if they add anything else. If they do not, ask an open-ended prompt question, such as “*Tell me more about that.*”

The cycle of questioning should be:

1. Ask
2. Listen
3. Pause
4. Prompt
5. Listen
6. Pause
7. Prompt . . .



Practice Questions

Second Practice Question

Now I want to ask you about something else. It is *[sunny]* out today, but sometimes the weather is *[very bad]*. Tell me about the *[very worst weather]* you have ever seen.

[pause for answer]

Tell me more about that.

[pause for answer]

What else do you remember?

[pause for answer]

Think back to that day and tell me everything you remember, starting from the beginning.

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Ask the child a second practice question on a different topic.** Again, pause and wait for responses. After the child has answered the question, pause and wait to see if they say anything else. If they do, ask for more details.

Always pause and wait for a response.



Establish Child’s Conception and Vocabulary of “Violence”

Let’s talk about the word “violence.”
Can you talk to me about what
you think of when I say the word
“violence?”

[pause for answer]

What kinds of things do you think
would be violent?

[pause for answer]

Can you tell me about any other
kinds of violence?

[pause for answer]

□ **Ask the child what they think about the meaning of the word “violence.”**

As it is likely many children will speak of experiences of violence, it is important to know how the child defines this. There is no right answer to this question. You do not need to tell the child how you define violence, only to make sure that they recognize and understand the word. If the child does not understand the word “violence,” you may need to find out what words the child uses to describe the same actions (for instance, “hurting people” or “people doing bad things”).



7 Taking the Statement

At this point you should have established a comfortable atmosphere for the interview, with the child recognizing they can set the pace and direction of the conversation. You can now begin to take the child's statement, utilizing a semi-structured interview approach.

First Question

Now it's time to talk about the reason you came here today. What do you want to tell *[truth-seeking body]*?

[pause for answer]

What else to you want to say to *[truth-seeking body]*?

[pause for answer]

What else happened?

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Begin the interview with the most open-ended question possible.** For some children, this may be the only question you need to ask. If the previous narrative practice has gone well, the child may proceed to give a full statement, sharing as much of their experiences as they wish to share. Open prompts may be freely used to elicit more detail.



Guide the Child to Cover Subjects of Importance

Can you tell me about the worst thing that ever happened to you during *[the incident/the time period in question]*?

[pause for answer]

What else do you want to say to *[truth-seeking body]*?

[pause for answer]

What else happened?

[pause for answer]

- ❑ **Proceed to ask open-ended questions on different topics, in order to ensure all relevant information is collected.** Working from a list of questions developed by your institution for taking statements from children, continue to ask open-ended questions about various topics and demographic details, including (but not limited to) the child's experiences of violence and, as relevant, displacement, the impact of violations committed against the child's caregivers, and the social and economic status of the child's family.

Validate and Witness Child's Experience and Feelings

You've told me about some difficult things today. You've been brave to speak with me about *[a traumatic experience described by the child.]* I'm so sorry that you are hurting and sad. Thank you for talking about these things with me.

- ❑ **Acknowledge the difficulty of the experiences the child has shared with you.** Before posing the final question, take the time to acknowledge the difficulty of the things the child has shared, express empathy for the child's feelings, and thank the child for sharing these things.



Confirm Realistic Expectations

We are almost finished with our interview, but before I ask you my last question I would like us to remember what we talked about earlier, about *[truth-seeking body]* I work for and what we do.

[It is recommended that this section be developed in great detail by the truth-seeking institution.]

- ❑ **Restate what *[truth-seeking body]* can and cannot do for the child.** Before asking the final question, remind the child of what was discussed earlier regarding the capabilities and purpose of the truth-seeking process. Tell the child that your institution cannot provide money or assistance, but explain how it hopes to create change, for example, by making recommendations about how the government can help people.

Last Question

Tell me about what you want for the future. What do you think *[truth-seeking body]* should try to do to help children like you to feel safe and achieve their dreams?

- ❑ **Ask a final question that focuses on the child's hopes and dreams for the future.** It should shift the child's focus from past events and current problems to hopes for a better future and enable the truth-seeking body to understand not only what children have experienced, but what change they believe would be required to improve their situation. Once again, it may be necessary to restate at the conclusion that you cannot promise anything.



8 De-escalation

Children will likely experience difficult emotions while recounting painful and difficult experiences. Telling their story may rouse feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, shame, or fear. If the interview ends before the child has the chance to regain emotional equilibrium, negative feelings evoked by painful memories may also become associated with the statement-taking process itself, which can lead to regret for having given the statement. In addition, children may have additional questions about the statement-taking process after they have given their statement, which they can more readily articulate if they are in a calm or relaxed mood.

For these reasons, once the substantive portion of the interview has concluded, you should bring the discussion back to neutral topics to allow the child to regain a stable emotional state. A potential script for this follows.

Neutral Topics

How are you doing right now?

[pause for answer]

Would you like some water?

[pause for answer. Bring water as needed.]

I really like *[your t-shirt]*. What can you tell me about it? **OR** You said earlier that you *[play soccer with your brother.]* What else can you tell me about that?/Where do you *[play]*? **OR** What do you think you will do when you get home tonight?

- ❑ **Ask the child about something that has made them smile or something that you know is a positive topic for them.** Think through your interactions with the child over the course of your time together. Ask the child about something that has previously made them smile or happy to talk about, such as friends, games they like to play, favorite foods, etc. This conversation should help to give the child time to relax after discussing difficult topics.



Child's Questions

I'm all done asking you questions for today. Do you have any questions for me now?

[Answer the child's questions.]

Do you have any other questions for me?

[Continue until the child has no further questions.]

- ❑ **Ask the child if they have any more questions for you, now that the interview is over.** They may have more questions about what will happen with the information or what the truth-seeking body will do. Answer these questions fully until the child has no more questions.



Urgent Protection Issues (IF APPLICABLE)

[CHILD'S NAME], do you remember the rules we talked about when we first met today, about how I would only share your story if I thought you might be in danger now?

[Pause for the child's answer. If the child does not remember, restate the limits of confidentiality as explained earlier.]

Something you told me today does make me worried for your safety. You said that *[briefly describe urgent protection issue]*. This is something that I need to tell [PSW], in order to make sure that you are protected.

We can do this in two ways, and you can pick which is best. Either I can ask [PSW] to come join us in here and we can tell [PSW] together, or I can go to a different room and tell [PSW] and after that [PSW] will come and talk to you without me here. Which way do you prefer?

[Wait for the child's answer. Once it is decided how disclosure of the protection issue will take place, proceed to thank the child for giving the statement.]

□ Discuss any urgent protection issues that were disclosed during the statement with the child

Before notifying the PSW, discuss with the child the reason you are breaking confidentiality. Do not give the child a choice as to whether the information will be shared, but do give the child a choice as to **how** this information is relayed to the PSW.

□ Some children may resist informing the PSW about protection issues.

In such cases, explain to the child that you understand that it can be scary and uncomfortable to talk about these things and explain again the reason that you have determined that the child is in danger. Be gentle but firm, letting the child know that the disclosure must happen, but it will be done in the most comfortable way possible, with their best interests in mind.



Thank the Child

[CHILD'S NAME], thank you very much for talking with me today. I appreciate your coming here today and working so hard to answer my questions. Are you ready to go back to your [GUARDIAN] and [PSW] now?

[If child says yes, take them back to the other room. If child says no, say:]

Ok, we can sit here for a few more minutes. What would you like to talk about?

- ❑ **Thank the child for their hard work.** It is important to thank the child for giving a statement, but do not thank them for anything specific they have said. Praise them for their hard work and tell them that you and your institution appreciate the time they have spent with you and their willingness to talk about their experiences.
- ❑ **Ask the child if they are ready to return to their guardian and PSW.** The interview session is now over, but the child may need a little more time before going back to the room where their guardian and PSW are waiting. Ask the child if they are ready to go, and if so, walk them back. If not, ask them what they would like to talk about before going back. They may have more things to tell you, more questions to ask, or they may simply want to sit and be calm for a few minutes before returning. Follow the child's lead and accompany them back to the other room when they are ready.



9 Reunion with Guardian and Psychosocial Support Worker

You should escort the child back to the room where the guardian and PSW are waiting. You should thank the guardian once again for allowing their child to be interviewed, and thank the child again for the interview, then say goodbye and leave the room.

The PSW should engage the child in play or discussion of neutral topics for several minutes before asking the child about the interview process. The PSW should then assess the child's psychological state and whether immediate counseling is needed prior to the child leaving. If the child does not need immediate counseling or once counseling has concluded, the PSW should make arrangements with the child and guardian for a follow-up appointment in several days or a week (timeframe to be determined by PSW) to check-in with the child again. One follow-up counseling session is recommended for all children, with additional follow-up sessions to be scheduled based on the child's needs.



10 Final Steps

Once you have left the child in the care of their guardian and PSW, you should return to the statement-taking room. Depending on the specific process of the truth-seeking institution or your organization, you may need to write out any final notes and input information into a form or computer. The data/interview form, along with the parent/guardian's signed consent form, any notes used during the session, the tape/card containing the session recording, and all other materials related to the statement should be sealed together in an envelope and stored securely until they can be de-identified (or made anonymous) and digitized by data entry agents. The institution should design and adhere closely to data storage, transfer, and maintenance policies developed to protect the information shared during statement taking and the identity of all child interviewees.

Additional Resources

If you have questions or need further guidance on implementing or adapting this protocol, or would like to receive training on how to interview children, please contact ICTJ's Children and Youth Program at info@ictj.org.

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Notes
