

F.

**The Casework Interview:  
Implementing the Helping Process**

---

***Conceptual Framework***

The term "interview" often brings to mind a formal process of targeted and pointed questioning designed to elicit specific information from a respondent about an identified topic. Our society's conception of interviewing is heavily influenced by frequent exposure to the media's investigative reporters, who conduct interviews to gather information for television news programs, documentaries, or published articles.

The dictionary definition of an interview, however, is "a meeting of people, face-to-face, to confer about something." The dictionary further defines confer as "to consult together, to compare opinions, to carry on a discussion or deliberation; to converse" [Webster's Unabridged Dictionary 1983].

The term "interview," as used in casework, is more consistent with the spirit of Webster's. A casework interview is a dialogue, a conversation, an interpersonal exchange of ideas and information, not an interrogation, a cross-examination, or a strategy of investigative reporting.

The casework interview is the means by which we implement the casework and case planning process. The purpose of casework distinguishes it from other types of interpersonal exchanges. Most social interactions develop to fulfill the social and affiliative needs of both participants. By contrast, the purpose of casework is to meet the needs of the client family. Therefore, the family's situation is the focus of dialogue in casework interviews, and it is the worker's responsibility to guide the interview to maintain this focus. In most other social relationships, if the needs and expectations of both parties are not met equitably, the interaction generally ceases.

From Rycus, Judith S, & Hughes, Ronald C. *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, 1998. All Rights Reserved.

The casework interview creates a safe environment in which family members can consider, develop, and implement strategies to change and improve their life situation. The worker's role is to utilize communication and intervention strategies that ultimately strengthen families and enable them to achieve this goal. We cannot minimize the interpersonal nature of this interaction. Casework can only be effective in the context of an interpersonal relationship characterized by trust, empathy, and honesty. Without the supportive environment of a trusting relationship, family members will be reticent to disclose personal and sensitive information, and will be cautious about investing themselves in a collaborative change process. Both communication and collaboration are essential for effective casework.

At times, workers equate interpersonal warmth, genuineness, and empathy with unprofessionalism. They see themselves becoming too familiar, personal, or "emotionally involved" with their clients, and believe this interferes with their ability to be "objective" professional enablers and problem solvers. They withdraw affect, and instead, become emotionally bland and impersonal in their relationships with families. Their behavior and questioning during interviews is stiff, stilted, and often artificial. Families interpret this demeanor as evidence of disinterest and disingenuousness. This interferes with the development of trust and confidence in the worker.

In casework, a primary determinant of professionalism is the worker's adherence to the clearly defined and agreed-upon purpose for the contact. The manner in which the worker achieves this purpose not only can be, but must be in the context of a trusting relationship, characterized by empathy, honesty, and collaborative dialogue.

## Purpose

In casework, purpose is considered at several levels. Initially, we as child welfare workers must define the purpose of our involvement with the family. This is always driven by our mission of protecting children from maltreatment. Involvement with any family is validated by this overriding purpose; unless a significant risk of serious harm to children is suspected, we have no right to intervene in the private lives of any family. In a casework model, defining the nature and purpose of agency intervention for a client family is an essential part of the engagement phase.

The effectiveness of casework depends upon the planned implementation of a series of discrete steps. We must first get to know a family and establish a positive rapport. We can then exchange and evaluate information to assess and understand the family's needs, strengths, and problems. Armed with this knowledge, we jointly set goals and objectives for services; we develop an intervention plan; we work together to implement change strategies; and finally, we evaluate our outcomes, and either recontract for additional services or close the case. Each contact with family members must, therefore, have a predetermined and explicit purpose that furthers the development of one or more of the steps in the casework process.

Finally, the topics to be discussed during an interview and the workers' interviewing strategies should both be selected to promote achievement of the purpose identified for the interview. For example, if we are in the early stages of relationship development, we will choose interviewing strategies that demonstrate our trustworthiness, our interest in the family, and our ability to understand. If we are conducting an assessment, we will choose strategies that elicit relevant information; we will listen and observe; we will ask clarifying questions when we don't understand; and we will provide support and

reassurance to help the family feel more comfortable discussing personal or painful issues. If we are trying to engage a family member who has not participated fully in the change process, we may use planned confrontation, or probe to identify the barriers to his or her involvement. And, if we are helping families implement change, we may use constructive feedback and coaching strategies, we may model and demonstrate a new skill, or we may use praise and positive reinforcement to validate and support their efforts.

The skilled interviewer works with family members to set a clear purpose for each interview, and is an expert at guiding the communication to achieve that purpose. Family members must clearly understand the purpose of each interview in order to participate in it. Mutual agreement regarding the purpose of each interview also helps both worker and family remain focused and goal-directed as they talk.

### Where To Begin

Whenever we meet someone new, it is normal to begin an assessment of them. We try to determine if they are likeable, sincere, and of interest to us. If we feel appreciated and valued, we are likely to respond in kind. If we feel insulted, ignored, or otherwise treated badly, we are likely to withdraw or become defensive. If we cannot physically avoid an offensive person, we become emotionally remote, and we behave in a contrived manner that, while "appropriate" for the situation, reveals very little about ourselves. Our willingness to enter into a relationship is strongly determined by the way in which the other person responds to us.

An initial casework contact with a family sets the tone for all subsequent interactions. If the initial contact is positive and helpful, family members will be encouraged to work with us. If the initial contact is negative, family members

will often withdraw, avoid subsequent contact, or act defensively. If they cannot avoid the worker, they may appear to cooperate, but will reveal very little of themselves, and will possibly sabotage change efforts. Therefore, the manner in which a caseworker approaches the family in the early stages of a relationship is critical to a successful outcome. (Refer to Section IV-B, "The Casework Relationship: The Foundation of Family-Centered Child Welfare.")

The first task in any casework relationship is to establish rapport with a family. To do this, we must act in ways that are consistent with child welfare values, even as we stress the necessity of protecting children. The child welfare profession adheres to principles of respecting families, supporting their right to self-determination, appreciating their strengths and individuality, believing in their desire to protect and care for their children, and expecting them to be partners in a change process. We cannot simply espouse these values. Our behavior, tone of voice, and body language must also communicate our adherence to these principles.

For example, if we enter a home without permission and demand that someone talk to us, we communicate profound disrespect for the family. We should, instead, ask permission to enter the home, and explain why it is in the family's best interests to discuss certain matters with us. Opening closets and cupboards to examine their contents is demeaning and intrusive; asking clients if they have sufficient food, and involving them in identifying what they need is a more respectful and collaborative way of obtaining this information. If we expect families to become invested in the change process, we must encourage and value their input. If we elicit their ideas, but always discard them in favor of our own, we do not have a legitimate collaboration, and our behavior negates our verbal message about collaboration.

Since involvement with families is often prompted by a referral from outside the family, as caseworkers we must clearly explain the purpose for agency involvement. We must communicate our intent to objectively assess risk and to respond with helpful, not punitive, interventions if we do determine the children to be at risk of harm. We must also share our expectations regarding the family's involvement. If we want family members to collaborate in problem solving, we must define child welfare as, first, a collaborative service process that helps families protect their own children, and explain that the agency will assume responsibility for a child's care and custody only if the parent can't, or won't.

Once we have explained our purpose, the most effective strategy to engage family members is to "start where they are." This fundamental social work principle affirms the importance of understanding a family's life circumstances, point of view, and feelings early in the casework process. We facilitate this by creating an environment in which families can feel less threatened disclosing personal information. We often must deal with anger and anxiety about the referral, suspiciousness and lack of trust in the worker or the agency, and embarrassment or shame. Validating these as expected responses to a child maltreatment complaint communicates acceptance of their point of view, and demonstrates we are capable of understanding their feelings. We can then implement the appropriate interviewing strategies to further the casework process.

### ***Application***

To effectively implement the casework process, the caseworker must be skilled at using a variety of interviewing methods, and must know how and when to use them appropriately.

There are several types of interviewing strategies and question formulations. Each has its preferred uses, benefits, and limitations. A skilled interviewer will use them all, usually several concurrently, and will select the best strategy to further the dialogue, to encourage family members' involvement, and to achieve the purpose of the interview.

The following are the general categories of interviewing methods, their purpose, and their benefits and limitations.

### Observation

Observation refers to what we see while we are with a client family. As we interview, we should notice family members' body language, facial expressions, behaviors, and their interactions with each other and with us. These cues can provide us with considerable information that, at times, supports what the family is telling us, and at other times is inconsistent. When verbal and nonverbal messages are not congruent, the client's behaviors are often very important indicators of the more accurate message. For example, a father might verbalize his affection for his son, but may consistently ignore or dismiss his son's approaches. Similarly, a client may strongly verbalize her interest in job training, but may repeatedly fail to attend scheduled job interviews.

Attributing accurate meaning to nonverbal behavior can provide considerable insight into family members' personal and interpersonal dynamics. However, the operative word is "accurate." It is easy to misread nonverbal cues, particularly when the worker has preexisting biases about a family, or does not understand the cultural context of family members' behaviors. Garrett [1942] describes a social work class assignment in which pairs of students observed an individual or group of individuals in a public place, and documented what they saw, without comparing notes. Invariably, she reports, the write-ups were so

different that the students could not believe they had been written about the same situation. For example, one student described a parent as "angry, callous to the pleas of his child for an ice-cream cone." The student's partner described the parent as "anxious, uncertain, indecisive, frustrated, and helpless in the face of a demanding offspring in a temper tantrum." The purpose of such an exercise is to "direct a student's attention to the limitations of his own capacity to see what is actually happening, and to his tendency to distort the objective facts with his own preconceived ideas of what he himself would feel or do in such a situation" [Garrett 1942].

While we should take note of certain behaviors, and can speculate on their possible meaning, we should seek supporting evidence from other observations and interview responses before making a judgment about the meaning of any particular behavior. Understanding cultural norms, values, and the meaning of culturally-specific behaviors is also essential in properly interpreting what is observed. (See related discussion in Chapter III, Culture and Diversity.)

The following case example demonstrates how careful observation of family members can provide important information about family dynamics.

### *The Wetherall Family*

The Wetherall family had been referred by the school principal for suspected abuse of six-year-old Nicole. During the 30-minute interview with Nicole's mother, the caseworker noted that Nicole stood quietly by her mother and patted her softly on the shoulder, knee, and back while the mother cried and told the worker her story. Nicole brought her mother a box of tissues, threw the used tissues in the trash, and asked her mother if she would like a glass of water. When her mother began to look for her cigarettes and lighter, Nicole jumped to get them for her. Nicole



repeatedly said, "It's okay Mommy, it will be okay." Nicole's mother sometimes ignored Nicole, and at other times rested her head against Nicole's shoulder. Nicole's face reflected serious concern. She did not smile or laugh. She intently watched her mother, scrutinized her mother's face and body language, and responded immediately when her mother seemed to want or need something. The worker noted that Nicole's behavior could potentially be interpreted as the "role reversal" that is typical of abused children. Further assessment substantiated that Nicole had, indeed, been abused by her mother for several years.

### Listening

Listening is one of the most effective interviewing strategies. Listening involves not only hearing a client's communication, but also understanding its meaning. Workers can learn a lot by listening. They can infer affect, or feeling, by listening to a client's tone of voice. They may recognize that a family's use of certain words has special meaning. They can identify what a client chooses to tell them, and can infer what the client chooses not to discuss. They can listen for hints, prompts, and unfinished statements, and can infer that there are things a client wants to say, but cannot. They will recognize the potential importance of an issue when it is casually mentioned by a client for the third time in half an hour.

Listening can also help build the casework relationship. By listening without interruption or censure, the worker communicates interest in family members' viewpoints, and validates the legitimacy of their feelings. For some clients, they may feel "heard" for the first time.

Talking about an issue with a concerned and caring listener can also, at times, be therapeutic. This is called "ventilation" in social work terminology, and for some clients, simply talking about an issue reduces its threat and brings considerable

relief. This is often a necessary intervention for persons who have been subjected to an exceptionally traumatic situation. Pam, age 14, is an example.

### *Pam Bellamy*

Pam had gone to the garage to call her father for dinner and discovered that he had hanged himself from the rafters. Pam's mother had a severe reactive depression, and Pam was placed temporarily with her aunt. Pam went home a month later, but three months after her father's suicide, she was still experiencing debilitating anxiety attacks in class, and was referred to the school social worker. With encouragement, Pam told the social worker, in great detail, what had happened, what she had seen, what she had done, and how frightened she was that her mother would also commit suicide. The worker had talked to the mother's therapist, and was quite sure Pam's mother was not, nor had she ever been, suicidal. The worker was able to reassure Pam of this.

In the weeks that followed, Pam would ask to leave class and see the worker when she experienced her attacks. She would come to the social worker's office and say, "I'm seeing it all again." The worker would let her talk it through and tell the story again, always ending with reassurance that despite her loss and grief, life would one day again be more normal, and her mother would not also abandon her. Talking about the event appeared to give Pam some feeling of control over it, and her descriptions often began to include verbal reassurances to herself. For example, "I'm still scared my mom will go off the deep end again, especially when she starts crying about Dad... but I think she's pretty strong." Over the weeks, Pam's visits to the school social worker became more infrequent. After six months, Pam's visits were to talk about future plans. She was relieved

that she only had her "visions" once in a while, and they weren't as scary. She could usually talk herself out of them.

Listening does not imply an absence of response by the worker. The worker who "sits like a bump on a log" and doesn't respond is often perceived as polite but disinterested, which discourages further communication. The worker must use strategies that encourage the client to continue, and that reinforce and support their continuing. These include nodding; maintaining appropriate eye contact; assuming a comfortable, listening posture; and using verbal confirmation and encouragement, such as "Yes, go on," or "I see."

Conversely, a skilled interviewer is not compelled to fill all silences with comments or questions. Silences may mean the client is thinking, trying to decide what to say next, struggling for emotional control, or has run out of things to say. The worker can use nonverbal cues such as nodding, waiting, and continuing to listen to encourage the client to continue. When the client's verbal or nonverbal behavior signals that he or she is finished, the worker can then comment or begin another line of discussion.

### Question Formulations

Purposeful questions, comments, and other interjections are used by the worker to direct and guide the interview to achieve its purpose. The nature of a question or response, how it is phrased, the tone of voice used, and its placement in the conversation are all calculated to achieve a very specific goal. Each questioning strategy has its benefits and its limitations. The following describes the most often-used interviewing strategies, and exemplifies how and when they should be used.

### *Active Listening and Supportive Responses*

*Description* Active listening is listening combined with verbal and nonverbal responses that communicate the worker's involvement and interest in what the client is saying.

Supportive responses are purposeful interjections in the interview, where the caseworker's presence, actions, and responses have an enabling, soothing, and facilitating effect on family members.

*Purpose* Active listening and supportive responses communicate and demonstrate that the caseworker is concerned, and understands family members' feelings and situation. These methods are important during the early stages of casework, when the caseworker is trying to establish a positive casework relationship.

Supportive responses have an enabling effect on a family, and should be used when the family has the ability, but needs assistance, to implement changes.

### *Examples*

Mother: "I haven't had a good night's sleep in months. I lie awake all night wondering where Teddy is."

Worker: "I can tell you're awfully worried that something has happened to him." (Active listening.)

Mother: "You can say that again!"

Worker: (Nodding) "Mm, hmm."

- Mother: "I don't know what to do."
- Worker: "You must feel very frightened. I know how hard that must be." (Supportive response.)
- 
- Grandma: "It's been awful around here lately, especially with Jenny moving back in. The whole house is in chaos. I don't know where to begin."
- Worker: "Your normal routine seems to have been disrupted lately." (Active listening.) "It would be hard to get everything done." (Supportive response.)
- 
- Dad: "I know that I should talk to John's teacher. But I just hate going to that school. They don't listen to you."
- Worker: "It sounds like you'd rather not go to see John's teacher." (Active listening.) "You might be uncomfortable about it, since your last experience there was so bad. But if you like, we can decide together what you'll say, so you will feel more comfortable about it." (Supportive response.)

*Benefits* Active listening and supportive responses build trust, communicate the worker's interest and willingness to listen and to help, and may have an enabling effect on the family.

*Liabilities* The family has considerable control of the direction of the interview. The caseworker listens and responds to what the family chooses to say. Little change is generated, few goals are set, unless support by itself enables the family to take action.

### *Closed-Ended, Forced Choice/Yes-No, and Probing Questions*

<i>Description</i>	Closed-ended or forced choice questions are questions for which there is only one appropriate answer, or which can be answered adequately with "yes" or "no." Probing questions ask directly for detailed information about a topic.
<i>Purpose</i>	To gather factual information and obtain answers to specific questions.
<i>Examples</i>	Where does your son go to school? (Closed-ended) How many years have you been married? (Closed-ended) Have you talked with the teacher lately? (Yes/no) How long has your boyfriend been living with you? (Closed-ended/probing) Does your husband beat you? (Probing) Are you going to go to work or apply for public assistance? (Forced choice)
<i>Benefits</i>	Forced choice and closed-ended questions are the fastest way to obtain direct, to the point, specific answers to very specific questions. They are an excellent way to obtain a lot of factual information in a short period of time about the topic in which we are interested.
<i>Liabilities</i>	Forced-choice questions limit the potential responses to those directed by the interviewer, and therefore, may provide limited information.

Closed-ended and probing questions may be threatening to the family, and may encourage the respondent to be evasive, or to lie as a way of avoiding revealing personal information.

### *Open-Ended Questions*

- Description* An open-ended question is one in which the interviewer does not limit the content or scope of the response. As there are no restrictions placed upon the family to provide specific information, the open-ended question permits family members to answer in any way that they choose.
- Purpose* Open-ended questions are best used when the caseworker wants to learn as much as possible about the family, and to become aware of the wide range of factors and occurrences which contributed to the family's situation. Open-ended questions also allow the family to reveal more spontaneously the dynamics of their situation by allowing and encouraging them to express their own views, feelings, and perceptions.
- Examples* "Tell me about Katie. What kind of a child is she?" Compare with a yes/no formulation: "Is Katie shy?" "Is Katie friendly?" etc. By asking closed-ended questions, the worker leads the family to focus on specific issues which are determined by the caseworker. The open-ended format allows the respondent to answer with information he or she feels is most relevant to the situation; "She's stubborn as a mule."

"What kind of relationship do you have with your mother?" is an open-ended question. By contrast, "Are you and your mother on good terms?" which is a "yes/no" formulation, forces a choice without providing any information about the nature of their relationship. An open-ended format allows family members to provide what they perceive to be important information, and to elaborate on it, such as, "We generally get along pretty well, if we don't talk about my living with Joe. She doesn't approve of him at all."

Other examples of open-ended questions are:

"You said that the past two years have been especially hard. Can you tell me why?"

"What was it like for you when Dan was in the hospital?"

"You seem upset. Will you tell me about it?"

"I'm not sure I fully understand. Can you try to explain it to me?"

### *Benefits*

Open-ended questions provide more extensive and elaborate information, and may help reveal family members' perceptions and feelings about the situation. Responses to open-ended questions may provide information about the "process" issues which are contributing to the problems.

A person's response to an open-ended question may provide new and unexpected information for the caseworker.



*Liabilities* Open-ended questions take time. Once the question is asked, people must be given the freedom to respond in their own way and in their own time. If the caseworker cuts them off or refocuses them, they may feel the worker is not really interested.

The caseworker may need to sort through extraneous information to identify those issues which are most pertinent to the situation.

The open-ended question may be used by some people as an opportunity to digress, and to avoid discussing important and relevant, but potentially threatening, issues.

### *Clarification*

*Description* Clarification is the process whereby the caseworker, with insightful interjection, helps family members develop an understanding and appreciation of their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, while achieving a better understanding of the dynamics of the family's situation.

*Purpose* Clarification is an integral part of the assessment process. It is used to guide the family to provide information which helps them and the caseworker identify the personal, interpersonal, and other factors which contribute to the presenting problems, and to determine needs and strengths.

Clarifying responses are also used to help the family attain insight into their own feelings and behaviors.

*Examples*

Mother: "I get so angry at Alex. He won't take the trash out, he won't clean his room, he talks back, and he refuses to do anything I tell him. And his father lets him! I've asked my husband dozens of times to help me, and he tells me it's my job to raise Alex; he's worked hard all day and just wants to be left alone to read the paper!"

Worker: "Sounds like you might be just as angry at your husband as you are at Alex."

Father: "I don't think I'm going to apply for the job. I don't really have the qualifications. Besides which, I'm sure they won't hire me."

Worker: "Well, you really are pretty qualified. Sounds to me like you might be feeling nervous or scared about going, and are having second thoughts."

Mother: "I never realized how much work there is in caring for an infant. You're busy all the time! I never have a minute to myself. And when she screams, I think I'm going out of my mind. But when she started smiling and cooing at me, it's

like the rest of this awful world doesn't matter. It's a wonderful feeling to know she's happy."

Worker: "Sounds to me like you really are enjoying her, in spite of all the work. It also sounds like it's very important to you to feel that you can comfort and satisfy her, and frustrating when you can't. Is that how it is?"

### *Benefits*

Clarifying responses help the caseworker make an accurate assessment of the contributing or dynamic factors related to the presenting problems, and to accurately identify family strengths and nascent abilities.

Clarifying responses help the caseworker move family members from the content level to the process level in the interview, which facilitates a better understanding of the situation.

Clarifying responses may facilitate the development of family members' awareness and understanding of themselves and the nature of their needs and problems, which, by itself, can sometimes generate positive change.

### *Liabilities*

Clarifying responses are often threatening to the family, because they bring into open discussion feelings, issues, and concerns that the family may either not be fully aware of, or may not want to talk about.

In the absence of a supportive, trusting relationship, clarifying responses may be perceived by the family as probing, and may increase resistance to talking with the caseworker.

## Summarization, Redirection

*Description* Summarization includes strategies to review what has been discussed, to restate conclusions that have been drawn, and to help a client organize information.

Redirection includes strategies that move discussion into content areas of greater importance, and avoid discussion of less relevant issues.

*Purpose* 1) Keeps interviews focused and on track; 2) helps family members organize their thinking and communication; and 3) creates order by identifying salient points and curtailing discussion of less important details or issues.

### *Examples*

Worker: "From what you've told me, there are three things that are really important to you – moving to a nicer apartment, getting coats for the children, and seeing that your son gets the help he needs." (Summarization.)

Worker: "Before you tell me about Ted, will you finish what you were saying about the landlord? You said he had come out once and started to repair the roof, and then never came back. Then what happened? (Redirection.)

<i>Benefits</i>	Makes the most efficient use of interview time by keeping discussion focused on pertinent issues.  Helps family members organize their thinking, keep the important points in mind, and avoid becoming overwhelmed by multiple issues and details.
<i>Liabilities</i>	People may feel cut off when redirected by the caseworker. They may interpret the worker's redirection as not wanting to listen to what they think. Also, if the caseworker redirects, summarizes, or closes discussion of an issue prematurely, important information may be missed.

### *Giving Options, Suggestions, and Advice*

<i>Description</i>	Responses in which the caseworker provides an opinion or suggestion regarding what the family should do, and responses that direct the family into a particular course of action.
<i>Purpose</i>	By providing options and making suggestions, the worker may help a family identify possible solutions, and steps to achieve these solutions. Family members may be encouraged to try new ways to solve their problems.
<i>Examples</i>	

Mother: "I don't know what to do about this court order. "

Worker: "Well, you should call the court to find out why you have been subpoenaed. You may have to get an attorney to represent you. Legal Aid is a place to start.

Grandma: "Nothing I do to control Jenny has worked. It doesn't matter what I do. She still screams and throws herself on the floor. I can't stand it any more. I'm out of ideas!"

Worker: "You might try 'time out.' I'll show you how it works, if you like."

*Benefits* Gives the family options they hadn't thought of, or didn't know how to use. By providing the family with other perspectives, the caseworker can encourage action which the family may not have considered.

Keeps the interview goal directed by focusing discussion on "What do we want to do, and how should we do it?"

*Liabilities* If the caseworker offers solutions too quickly, or provides most of the solutions, the family may be prevented from arriving at their own solution to the problem, may not learn how to solve their own problems, and may not become aware of their own skills and resources.

The caseworker may be blamed for any failure the family experiences in implementing the recommended solution. The family may expect the caseworker to provide another, more successful solution, as in, "Okay, that didn't work. Now what?"

### *Confrontation*

*Description* An intervention, wherein the caseworker empathetically, but insistently, directs a family member to become aware of and consider issues, feelings, or processes which he or she has been avoiding. Most often this means disagreeing with the person, and pointing out defensive, avoidant, inadequate, or inappropriate thinking or behavior.

*Purpose* Confrontation may be used to push family members to take steps toward solving problems when other interventions by the caseworker, including supportive and clarifying responses, have failed. Confrontation is an alternative to help family members face the reality of their situation, their feelings, or their behavior.

### *Examples*

Bob: "It's my mother's fault. If she weren't so lazy, she would have helped me, and I wouldn't have failed the test."

Worker: "You failed the test because you didn't take the time to study, Bob. You didn't ask anyone for help. In fact, you went to a party the night before the test. That's not your mother's fault."

Aunt: "Well, if she wants to move out and get her own apartment, let her just go ahead. See if she can make it on her own. I don't care any more what she does. I really don't."

Worker: "If you didn't care you wouldn't be this upset. I think you care more than you're willing to let on. In fact, I believe you're very hurt that she doesn't want to live with you any more."

*Benefits* Proper use of confrontation may facilitate insight on the part of family members when other, less directive interventions have failed.

Can help individuals become aware of their own defensiveness, including denial, as a means of coping with problems.

*Liabilities* Confrontation, as an interviewing strategy, should not generally be attempted unless a strong casework relationship has been established between the family member and the caseworker.

Confrontation can be very threatening to family members, and may greatly increase resistance. If overly threatened, people may refuse to talk further with the caseworker. This is less likely if the relationship between the caseworker and family members is well established, and family members perceive the caseworker as caring and helpful.

Confrontation will usually increase a person's anxiety and discomfort. Family members may require considerable follow-up support and assistance from the caseworker. Once confronted, their feelings and needs must be fully dealt with. This takes considerable time and commitment from the caseworker.



## Avoiding Common Pitfalls

In this section, we will examine common interviewing pitfalls, and provide more effective alternatives.

### *Leading Questions*

A leading question is not really a question. It is generally a statement of the speaker's belief or opinion, phrased in a manner that seeks confirmation from the listener. For example, "Don't you think that John really likes his brother?" would be more accurately communicated if the speaker had said, "I think John really likes his brother. Do you agree?"

When a worker asks a leading question, a client has three options. The client may agree with the worker's statement. If he does not, he can directly express his own dissenting opinion: "No, John doesn't like his brother; he and his brother don't get along, never have." This, however, directly implies that the worker is wrong. To be this assertive, a client must feel secure with the worker, and comfortable with open disagreement. If he is not, his options are to avoid the question, make an equivocal response, or feign agreement. He might evade the question by saying, "Well, his brother certainly doesn't like him!" He may make a noncommittal remark such as, "Well, maybe, I'm not sure," or, "In a way, perhaps." Finally, if a client believes it important to maintain harmony, believes it impolite to contradict someone in authority, or wants to be conciliatory, he might verbalize agreement, even though he does not really agree. So, even if the client verbalizes agreement to a leading question, we may still not know what the client really thinks.

Other formulations should be used, depending on our reasons for asking. Open-ended questions, forced-choice, clarifying responses, or summarizing help us

From Rycus, Judith S, & Hughes, Ronald C. *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, 1998. All Rights Reserved.

learn the client's opinion about the topic. Confrontation and direct statements should be used to communicate the worker's opinion. The following examples illustrate leading questions and more appropriate formulations:

"Wouldn't you be happier in a bigger apartment?" (Leading)

"What kind of apartment would you like?" (Open-ended – preferable in that it allows the client to describe all the qualities desired in a living space)

"Do you prefer a larger or smaller place?" (Forced choice – appropriate if we are interested in learning our client's preferences regarding apartment size)

"Aren't you angry about your husband having left you?" (Leading – the worker presumes, from personal experience, that the client *should* feel angry)

"How do you feel about his having left you?" (Open-ended – preferable if we want the client to express the full range of her feelings)

"It sounds as if you're angry about your husband having left you."  
(Clarifying response – would only be used if we had heard anger in the client's tone of voice or choice of words, which makes it more likely to be an accurate statement. However, the client can still comfortably disagree, since the worker has phrased the response as an observation, not a foregone conclusion.)

"Aren't his bruises evidence enough to conclude someone has been hitting him?" (Leading, and accusatory)

"Can you tell me how Billy got the bruises?" (Open-ended – preferable because it gives the client the opportunity to explain the circumstances around abuse)

"Billy has bruises all over his face, chest, and arms, and they are in various stages of healing. That kind of bruising is rarely, if ever, accidental. I have to consider that someone has been hitting him." (Confrontation – the statement clearly expresses the worker's opinion, and justifies his or her reasons for that position)

"You do want to go back to work, don't you?" (Leading)

"You told me last time we talked that you were looking for a job, and that you wanted to go back to work as quickly as possible, if you can find day care. Do I remember that correctly?" (Summarization, and requesting corrective feedback if our summary is wrong)

### *Disclosing Personal Information*

Casework requires both personal honesty and openness to foster the development of a trusting relationship; yet, the focus must remain on the family's situation. This may create confusion for workers regarding whether, and how much, personal information or points of view should be shared with a client. Some disclosure in the proper context is helpful, even constructive, especially in building a relationship. Other information is better left private.

In some contexts, it can be appropriate for the worker to disclose basic, factual personal information. This helps the client view the worker as a person. This can strengthen rapport and identify areas of commonality, both of which support relationship development. For example, the worker could appropriately disclose that he has three children of his own, and that raising teens was difficult. He could disclose that his wife is an accountant; that he has been with the agency for three years; that he works on cars in his spare time; and that he loves Monday Night Football.

Consider the client's feelings if, when asked about himself, the worker were to respond, "I really can't talk about myself. We're here to talk about you and your family." The message to the client is that there is no reciprocity in the relationship, and that the client is expected to fully disclose very important information to a worker about whom he knows absolutely nothing.

It would not, however, be appropriate for the worker to engage in extended discussion about his own lifestyle, goals, needs, fears, or future plans, nor to talk about his own abuse as a child, recent divorce, or problems with his own children. This type of discussion draws the focus of attention away from the client to the worker. However, if asked directly, the worker should provide a short, factual response, and return the focus to the client. The worker may determine that the client is simply curious and trying to get to know the worker; or, that the client may be posing personal questions to the worker as an entry to discussing certain topics, albeit in a roundabout manner. For example:

Client #1:

Client: "Are you married?"  
Worker: "No, I'm divorced."

- Client: "How long were you married, and why did you get divorced?"
- Worker: "I was divorced three years ago after a seven-year marriage. Why are you asking?"
- Client: "I guess if you've been divorced all this time, you know what it's like to live on your own."
- Worker: "Well, I know what my experience has been, but everyone doesn't see it the same way. What's it been like for you?"
- Client: "Very hard. Do you ever feel depressed?"
- Worker: "I did; more so at first, and now, every once in a while. Why, do you feel depressed?"
- Client: "I've never been so depressed and lonely in all my life."
- Worker: "Tell me about it."
- 
- Client: "Have you ever felt angry about being alone?"
- Worker: "In moments. How about you?"
- Client: "I'm so mad that at this time of my life I have to do everything myself!"
- Worker: "Sounds like you don't have a lot of support or help from other people. Is that true?"
- 
- Client #2:
- 
- Client: "What do you think about abortion?"
- Worker: "I think it's a pretty controversial topic, and people's feelings are pretty strong. Why do you ask?"
- Client: "I just wondered. I think it's wrong for anyone."
- Worker: "Well, you're not alone in thinking that. Why is it an issue for you just now?"

Client: "Because my daughter is pregnant, and I don't know what we're going to do. I can't take care of another child, and she's too young, and yet I can't go along with an abortion. I don't know what we're going to do."

Client #3:

Client: Have you been to college?

Worker: Yes, I have.

Client: Do you have a degree?

Worker: Yes, two of them – a bachelor's degree and a master's. Why?

Client: Well, you seemed so well educated. I've always admired that in people.

Worker: Is that something you'd like for yourself?

Client: Sure, but it'll never happen. I'm not smart enough.

Worker: How do you know that?

Client: I never did well in school. In fact, I quit. I've always regretted it.

Worker: You're older now. Sometimes that makes a big difference. Had you ever considered going back?

Client: You mean to get a GED (general education degree)? Yeah, I've thought about it. But I doubt I could do it. Do you think I could?

Worker: Truthfully, I don't know you well enough to make a judgment about that. But you do express yourself very well, you read well, and you follow through with other things that you want. All that helps. We can get more information about it, if you like. It's something to think about, anyway.

Sometimes, the worker can use a personal experience as a model for a client of how to handle a similar situation. This can be presented as an option, with a clear expectation that the client has the right to choose whether to follow the worker's suggestion.

Client: "I get so mad with Tessa. I know she's only three, but any time I try to correct her, she throws a screaming fit. Sometimes it lasts for hours. I can't tell you how that upsets me! Some days I'm ready to strangle her, or walk out that door and never come back. But I can't just let her do anything she wants... that's not right."

Worker: "I know how you feel. My own daughter was a terror when she was three. There were days when I wanted to pack her in a shoe box and leave her on the closet shelf until she was five. She was a lot like Tessa; spirited and strong, but willful. I learned to use time-out with Laurie and it often worked. I can show you how to do it, if you like."

In the above example, the worker might have simply offered to teach the mother time-out without disclosing the information about her own daughter. However, the mother has expressed a strong negative feeling about her child, and in doing so, has placed herself at risk of being negatively perceived by the worker. The worker could also have offered blanket reassurance, such as, "Lots of people feel that way," but clients often experience this as a meaningless platitude, rather than as genuine support. The fact that the worker has had similar feelings, and was willing to acknowledge them, can be reassuring to the mother. It can communicate that the worker is not likely to think she's awful; that the worker has the capacity to understand; and, most important, that the worker has handled it in a way the mother might learn and model.

The worker's calculated self-disclosure provided the greatest amount of support possible, while still promoting growth. Yet, the mother still has the choice whether to follow through, since the worker made her offer as a simple statement and did not ask for confirmation of her interest.

If the mother does not express interest, but continues the discussion in another way, the worker should listen for another message. For example:

- Client: "Oh, they taught me that in parenting class. It works, sometimes. But not well enough."
- Worker: "Sounds like you're not sure what to do. Tell me more about what happens, and how you feel about it."
- Client: "I know three year olds are hard, and I should be more patient, but it just gets to me."
- Worker: "Tell me what you mean... how does it get to you?"
- Client: "It's like something shoots off inside me, and I can't stop it. I don't know what starts it. Well, Tessa starts it. But once it's started, I can't stop it. It's not good."
- Worker: "Sounds like you don't feel in control. Are you afraid you're going to hurt her?"
- Client: (quietly) "Yeah, it's awful to say it, but sometimes I think if I don't leave, I'm going to hurt her bad."

### *Handling Hostile or Accusatory Statements*

There are many reasons clients make accusatory statements or behave in hostile ways toward a worker. The client may feel threatened and try to assert power or control; the client may be testing the worker to see what kind of response will be generated; the client may feel shame or embarrassment, and respond



defensively; or the client may be legitimately angry about the perceived intrusion by the agency into his or her privacy.

In dealing with hostile and accusatory remarks, the worker must do two things. First, respond in a matter-of-fact and unemotional manner. The old adage, "It takes two to fight," is particularly relevant. If the worker becomes defensive or angry, the client often feels all the more justified in continuing to be hostile and defensive. However, if the worker cannot be engaged to argue, and is neither angry nor defensive, often the client's anger will diminish in intensity. It is more difficult for a client to continue to be hostile in the face of calm, rational, and supportive responses from the worker.

The worker must also try to understand what feelings are generating the anger. It may be fear or anxiety; embarrassment or shame; threatened self-esteem; or hurt. If the worker can identify and acknowledge the client's other feelings, it may also help to defuse the client's anger.

The following examples demonstrate both inappropriate and appropriate worker responses to provocative statements or questions.

Client #1: "You have no right to come in here and accuse me of abusing my child! How dare you! I think you'd better leave."

*Inappropriate Responses:*

Worker: "I not only have a right, I have a responsibility to protect children from maltreatment. It's my job, and you need to cooperate, or else I'll involve the police." (Defensive, threatening)

Worker: "Sit down, let's discuss this, in a calm and pleasant manner, please. Let's not have any more yelling. We can behave like rational adults here." (Demeaning, sarcastic. Treats client like a child.)

Worker: "Look, there's been a referral that Raymond was abused. I think it's important that we find out how it happened!" (Accusatory)

Worker: "Well, maybe you're right. Sorry." (Self-deprecating)

*Appropriate Responses:*

Worker: "I understand why you're angry; you thought I was accusing you. I'm not here to make accusations. We do need to find out how Raymond was burned, however, to protect him from being hurt again. I was hoping you'd work with me to do that." (Matter-of-fact, validates feeling, clarifies intent, reengages.)

Worker: "I expected you to feel angry. Most people in this situation are angry. But I'd like to talk with you further about how we can prevent this from happening again. Will you hear me out? (Acknowledges feelings, restates purpose for contact. Leaves client with a choice.)

Client #1: "Why should I work with you, of all people!"

Worker: "Whether you believe me or not, I really would rather work with you, not against you. Raymond's burns were very serious. How it happened is important, but only to help us prevent it from happening again. The choice is yours. But before you say no, I'd rather you ask me whatever you want, until you're satisfied that I mean what I say about working together. (Restates purpose and desire to be collaborative. Leaves choice with client, puts client in control.)

Client #1: "Well, say what you have to say." (The client, while not yet convinced, has given the worker the opening to begin to dialogue.)

Client #2: "Who do you think you are. You're 25 years old, have no children, and you are going to tell me how to raise my kids? (Laughs). Go on!"

#### *Inappropriate Responses*

Worker: "Just because I don't have children doesn't mean I can't help. I have studied a lot about child development. I've also worked with many other families. (Defensive)

Worker: "Yes, you're right. I can have my supervisor call you. She has children of her own. Or maybe she can assign a more experienced worker. (Self-deprecating)

Worker: "Well, it would seem you haven't done too good a job yourself, even after raising five of them. What does that say for experience?" (Accusatory)

*Appropriate Responses*

Worker: "Sounds like you're concerned that I don't have the ability to understand or to help you." (Active listening)

Client #2: "You're right on that one. It would be a waste of time! Meanwhile, Janna's still running the streets."

Worker: "Sounds like you think this is too important to entrust to someone who doesn't know what he's doing." (Clarification, support)

Client #2: "Yes."

Worker: "I don't blame you. I'd feel the same way. And you're right, I don't have all the answers, but then, raising kids can be pretty complicated, and I've never found anyone who had all the answers. I'd like to help, and I know of many other resources we can use if I can't help you directly. But I can't even help you find the best services, if I don't understand what's happening. Can you tell me?" (Confirms validity of feelings; restates intent; clarifies own abilities and limits; and reengages.)

### *Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep*

The casework relationship is based on honesty. We expect families to be honest with us; we must also be honest with them. This means we must be truthful about what we can and cannot do, and about the possibility of negative as well as positive outcomes from the worker's involvement.

For example, while we can assure the client we will not unnecessarily divulge personal information, we cannot promise complete confidentiality, since certain information may be subpoenaed during court hearings. We should, however, reassure the family of our intent to retain confidentiality wherever we can, and explain the circumstances under which we cannot.

Another example: we cannot guarantee that we will never have to place the children. But we can reaffirm our intent to help maintain the child at home, and explain the circumstances when we would have to move the child. Here is an example of how a worker might handle this type of situation.

Shellie, age four, has been hospitalized with bronchial pneumonia. She is underweight, developmentally delayed, has had no medical care since birth, and was critically ill when admitted to the hospital. The caseworker has begun discussion with Shellie's mother to develop a safety plan for Shellie.

Mother: "I have nothing to say to you."

Worker: "It's important that we talk about this. Shellie is a very sick little girl. We have to talk about what will happen when she's ready to come home from the hospital."

Mother: "I have nothing to say to you."

Worker: "What are you trying to tell me?"

- Mother: "That I have nothing to say to you! Are you deaf or something? (pause) Don't keep looking at me. I won't talk to you. I know you people. You're going to put her into a foster home, regardless of what I say. So why should I even bother?"
- Worker: "Why would you think that?"
- Mother: "Don't give me that bull."
- Worker: "I'm quite serious about this. You're right. It's our job to protect children, and if we can't protect them at home, we will place them with someone who can protect them. But I haven't decided whether Shellie needs foster care. That all depends on you."
- Mother: "What do you mean? I have nothing to say about this."
- Worker: "As far as I'm concerned, you do have a lot to say about this. Whether Shellie comes home or not depends on whether we're both sure you can protect her and keep her from getting sick again. That's what we need to talk about. It's up to me to get you the help you need to take good care of her. It's up to you, first off, to convince me you're willing to try."
- Mother: "Of course I am. I'm her mother, aren't I?"
- Worker: "Good, I'm glad you want to try. The next step is to figure out why she got sick, before we can decide how to keep it from happening again."
- Mother: "I'll just take better care of her."
- Worker: "How do you mean?"
- Mother: "I'll just do better. Isn't that enough?"
- Worker: "You need to be more clear than that. I don't understand what you think you should change."
- Mother: "If I tell you, you'll call me unfit and you'll take her out. I know how you people operate."

Worker: "Well, if I believe you're a serious danger to her, I may have to consider temporary placement. But even if you did things really wrong before, if we understand what they were, and why it happened, we can develop a plan to help you. It's called a safety plan, and with it, we may be able to avoid placement. That's my hope. But I can't do it alone. I need you to help me understand everything that happened, so we can decide what has to change."

Mother: "What if you people still think I'm unfit?"

Worker: "Well, there are several options. Foster care is certainly one. But I'd see if anyone in your family could provide safe care for Shellie before I placed her with a stranger. We can also consider letting her come home from the hospital, if a homemaker came here and worked with you every day, or if Shellie went to day care during the day. We may find that parenting classes could help you, or counseling. And even if we do have to place her, I'll want to keep working with you to get her home as soon as possible. So, as I said, the most important thing now is to talk about what went wrong, and develop a safety plan. Shall we do that?"

Mother: "If you say so."

Worker: "I'd rather we both agreed... at least to start talking about it. What do you think?"

Mother: "I guess."

Worker: "Okay, good. I'd really like to be able to help you. Can you tell me what happened?"

If a worker is honest and straightforward with families early in the relationship, the family will be more likely to trust the worker, even if the worker's actions ultimately have negative repercussions for the family. The worker can then help

the family deal with the realities of their situation and make necessary, hard choices. A lack of honesty by the worker, by contrast, will violate the family's trust, severely limiting the worker's ability to be helpful to the family in any situation.

### Interviewing Children and Youth

Caseworkers may directly interview children for several purposes: to establish a trusting, helping relationship; to gather relevant assessment information about the child and the situation; to explain and prepare the child for a change; to help the child deal with concerns or fears; to engage an older child or youth to participate in problem solving; to provide support and assistance in a traumatic situation; or to help the older child or youth plan and implement changes. In this regard, interviewing children is not dissimilar to interviewing adults; it is the means by which we implement casework.

There are differences, however. Children don't usually have the capacity to participate in the lengthy, verbal communication we usually refer to as an interview. Infants and toddlers lack the cognitive/linguistic capacity to understand, much less participate in, such a verbal exchange. We can usually converse with a preschooler for short periods of time, but the scope of information gained may be limited, and we may not always be sure of its accuracy or veracity. It is not until children reach late school-age that they can engage in focused, reciprocal, interpersonal verbal exchanges with adults. Even then, the degree to which an older child or youth can participate in a verbal interview will depend on his or her level of cognitive development, verbal fluency, comfort with verbal communication, and overall comfort with the worker.



Most workers are all too familiar with the behavior of a child or youth who doesn't want to talk. The more we question, the more reluctant the child is to divulge important information. Direct questions invite one-word answers. "How are you?" "Fine." "How was school?" "Okay." "What do you like best about it?" "Recess." "How do you get along with the kids?" "Good." "How do you feel about it?" (Shrug.) In addition, when forced to sit still in a face-to-face, formal conversation with an adult, most children and some youth will fidget, squirm in discomfort, avoid eye contact, and behave as if they are prisoners who can't wait to get free. Many workers avoid direct work with children because of their frustration and discomfort with this awkward, unproductive scenario.

The first step in learning to "interview" children is to change our focus. Our goal, after all, is to "communicate" with children – to learn important information from them, and to communicate things that may be helpful to them. Before beginning, we must first determine exactly what we want to communicate, and then select the communication strategies best suited to the child's age, developmental level, verbal and linguistic ability, and preferred communication style. We can then communicate with the child at his or her own level, and we will likely be much more successful.

In general, the basic principles of casework with adults apply equally to children. Children are likely to be suspicious, withdrawn, frightened, and resistive if they do not know us; don't understand who we are or why we are there; have misperceptions about our intent; or are worried that some harm will come to them from talking with us. We must engage children as we do adults by clearly communicating who we are, why we are there, and what will happen, before we can ask them to divulge information about themselves and things important to them. The first step with any child is to develop the casework relationship. Children must see us as dependable, kind, trustworthy, helpful, and genuinely interested before they will be comfortable relating to us.

Children also want to know all about us. They will ask a million questions: Where do you live? Do you have any children? Do you like ice cream? Do you have a mom too? Do you have a dog? Unlike adults, however, children usually do not have a hidden agenda for these questions. They are simply relating to you the way they relate to anyone new. Children know you by knowing things about you, and children appreciate it when there are things you have in common. The worker should answer with simple, but accurate, information. Adolescents, on the other hand, not only use personal questions to get to know the worker, but to test the worker, or to broach discussion about other issues. (See earlier discussion about disclosing personal information.)

Developing rapport and interacting with children happens most naturally if we involve our child clients in play or other activities while we get to know one another. This may also be true for many adolescents. Conversing casually while playing a game, throwing a ball, riding in a car, going for ice cream, or walking through the park is often more effective than trying to talk in a formal interviewing room. It is less intense, and children or youths are usually more comfortable. They can say things as they feel them, and they don't feel they are expected to answer on command. Workers can use open-ended questions, such as "Tell me about...," and then listen. Using gentle clarification and feedback can let a child know you're listening and understand. Using nonverbal feedback to communicate your continued interest will encourage the child to continue. Finally, when children are reticent to talk, we can let them know we're there to listen and help, whenever they're ready to talk.

The issue of authority, always present in casework, is also relevant when working with children. They will want to know your rules and how you will respond if they break them. They want to know if you'll punish them if they do something wrong. Some will have been told that the social worker moves

children to different families. Some families may have threatened their children with, "If you're bad, I'm going to call the social worker and have him take you to the juvenile detention center." For some children, a social worker is akin to the devil's helper. The worker must clearly define his or her role, and deal with the child's fears before the child will feel like trusting.

Children, like adults, will test the worker to see if he or she can be trusted. They may act out and see how the worker will react. At times, they may contrive situations to test the worker's response. Ten-year-old Arthur had been very upset, and was asking his adoptive parents about his biological mother. He was at risk of disrupting his adoption. Yet, the social worker could not get him to talk about his feelings. After several sessions, the worker simply said, "I know you don't want to talk about it now, but I know it's important to you. So, whenever you're ready, I'm here to listen and help." Arthur appeared not to hear her. Three visits later, Arthur presented the worker with a "terrible problem at school" and asked for her opinion on what to do. It became quickly evident that the problem was not at all serious, and had probably been greatly exaggerated for effect. However, the worker recognized Arthur's problem as a test, listened intently, responded very seriously, and helped Arthur think through solutions. Two visits later, Arthur asked the worker what she knew about his mother.

Child welfare workers should become proficient at alternatives to verbal communication with children and youth. The worker can use art, dolls, stories, photographs, puppets, or other toys to help children communicate. Workers can use play techniques to prepare children for visits with their families; to change placements; to help them understand why they were placed; to rehearse different ways of handling stressful situations; and to learn how they are feeling. The worker might say, "I know it may be hard for you to say it in words. Maybe you could draw me a picture. Or show me with the puppets." Or, the worker could say, "Maybe you could tell me a story about a little boy just like you." Another

strategy is: if a worker is trying to determine a child's feelings, he or she can ask the child to draw a "happy face," a "sad face," a "mad face," and a "scared face," and then ask the child to point to the face that most accurately expresses how the child feels – "Show me Dana's face when Mommy goes away?"

Acting out a scenario with dolls and photographs, accompanied by simple statements of explanation, also gives preverbal toddlers a visual representation of what is happening. This is an excellent means of preparing a toddler for adoption or a move to foster care.

Engaging children in play also has its own rewards; children readily relate to adults who are willing to play with them. A worker can do more to establish rapport with a child by playing a favorite game or reading a story than almost any other intervention. Workers must also remember how they appear from a child's perspective. We are larger, stronger, more powerful. The threatening aspects of this perception can be lessened if we approach a child in his or her own medium – play – and literally, at his or her own level. Children really like people who will sit on the floor with them, or who seat them so they are at eye level while they are talking. Interviewing rooms should be equipped with child-sized tables and chairs, and both the worker and the child should use them.

There will be times, of course, when we must ask children direct questions. The question formulations outlined earlier in this chapter are valid when conversing with children. However, we must consider the child's level of cognitive and linguistic development before we phrase our questions. We must be sure the child will understand what we are asking, and that the child has the ability to answer. For example, a caseworker would not ask a four year old, "Does your mommy do anything to hurt you when she's angry and upset?" Rather, we would ask, "Does Mommy ever get mad?" and then, "What does Mommy do

when she's mad?" In general, the simpler the question, the more likely we are to get a valid response.

As with adults, leading questions directed to children are a sure-fire way to get misinformation, and will also guarantee that information gained during the interview will be inadmissible, if ever needed in court. Direct, uncomplicated questions are preferred. Rather than, "Your mommy hit you on the face, didn't she?" (a leading question), the caseworker would ask, "Did your mommy hit you?" If the child responds yes, ask, "Where did she hit you?" If the child answers no, then ask, "How did you get that bump (sore, boo boo... whatever word the child uses for bruise) on your cheek?" Open-ended questions are also effective. However, if they are too broad, they invite a barrage of extraneous and unrelated information, particularly from younger children. Rather than, "Tell me about it," the worker might narrow the scope and provide more direction by saying, "Tell me what happened next, after you watched cartoons."

Clarifying responses are particularly effective in helping children understand and share their feelings. One strategy is to label their feelings for them, using simple words – "mad," "scared," "happy," "worried," "sad." In response to a belligerent child, a clarifying response would be, "It looks like you're really mad today. Can you tell me what is making you so mad?" Clarifying children's feelings can also be supportive. "You look really sad. I wonder if it's because you miss your mommy." Workers can also encourage children to divulge their feelings by saying, "I know you've had a pretty hard time, and most children like you have lots of worries. I'm here to help you with your worries."

Workers must also recognize when children are uncomfortable talking about or divulging personal, or emotionally-laden information. The worker may need to prepare the child for such discussions by first identifying the child's feelings, and then providing considerable support. For example, "Lots of times children feel

sad about this. You might too." "Lots of children cry when they talk about their mommies. I know how hard it is, and I know how sad you feel." "I can tell you're feeling mad right now. That's okay. Can you tell me what makes you mad?" "Does it make you scared when I come to see you? Are you afraid I'll take you to another house again?" While we want to help children deal with their feelings, if we push too hard, or allow them to become emotionally overwhelmed, they will often shut down and refuse to continue. However, providing opportunities to communicate their feelings in a supportive and nurturing environment can be extremely helpful to children in pain.

Finally, the worker should not underestimate his or her importance to a child. Termination of the relationship should be handled sensitively.

A worker should never simply disappear, or introduce a new worker, without helping the child with separation and termination issues. (Refer to Section IV-E, "Case Closure and Recidivism.")

### Putting It All Together

Interviewing is both a science and an art. It has been stressed in previous discussion that interviewing is much more than a means of gathering information from a family. It is the tool with which we implement the helping process – "where the rubber meets the road." Child welfare workers often wish there were an easy way to acquire and perfect interviewing skills. Unfortunately, skilled interviewing requires considerable training and practice.

When a caseworker is first learning to interview, it is common to become so preoccupied with our own performance – whether we're using the right questions or responses, whether our tone of voice is right, whether we're assertive enough, or supportive enough – that we often fail to hear what the client is saying, and we miss critical information. It is always important to take

the few necessary seconds to choose the best interview option before responding. But, it is generally more important to observe and listen carefully than it is to say everything exactly right. Most workers, if tuned in to the client and focused toward a clear purpose, will be able to move the interview along well enough.

There is, therefore, legitimate concern about providing workers with a list of sample question formulations and responses. There is always a risk that the unskilled interviewer will consider this listing as the definitive "how to" of interviewing, and overuse them, or use them out of context. Our intent in providing a list of possible responses is simply to illustrate ways to achieve the various purposes of the casework process. These can serve as a model for workers in formulating their own questions and responses to meet the unique situation in each case.

*Purpose: Opening The Interview, Developing Rapport*

"May I talk with you for a few minutes?" (Note the use of "with" rather than "to.")

"Where would you be most comfortable meeting with me?"

"I want to understand this from your point of view."

"Maybe you'd like to ask me some questions before I ask you mine?"

"Do you have any concerns about our agency? Or about me? I'd be glad to answer them."

"I'd like us to work together. You may not believe that. I understand you'll need to get to know me better before you feel confidence in me."

"I'd prefer not to do anything against your wishes. But you'll have to work with me; otherwise, we can't work out a solution that we can both agree on to protect Larry."

"I know this is hard for you. I'll try to make it as comfortable as I can."

"That's what we need to discuss. Where would you like to begin?"

"Please let me know if I say things you don't understand, or that bother you."

"Would you be willing to hear me out before you make a decision?"

### *Purpose: Assessment*

Two types of formulations are particularly well-suited for assessment. They are open-ended questions and clarifying questions. Generally, open-ended questions provide considerable information about a wide variety of topics. Clarifying responses help the worker and client focus on particular topics or issues to gain a more in-depth understanding.

Open-ended formulations might include:

"Tell me what you know about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Can you tell me more about it?"

"Can you help me understand what you're saying?"

"What would you like to see happen? If the world were perfect, what would it look like?"



"In your mind, what might the worst possible outcome be?"

"What do you think your strengths are?"

"What's most important to you?"

"What's the hardest for you to deal with?"

"What do you do when you're hurting?"

"Has it ever happened before? Tell me about it."

Clarifying responses could include:

"I think I understand why you're angry – but would you tell me again, so I can be sure?"

"Sounds like you're saying that your mother is a real problem for you. Can you tell me more about that?"

"You've mentioned your ex-husband three times. It sounds like he may still be important to you."

"I'm not sure I understand why you won't talk with her. I can't tell if you're afraid, or just angry at her. What do you think?"

"You keep referring to his temper. Can I assume you're saying he has a bad temper?"

"You seem afraid to trust anyone, including me."

"Seems like you don't have a lot of confidence that anything can change."

"Sounds like you'd like certain things to stay just as they are."

"Sounds like caring for your children may be more than you can handle. Is that how you feel?"

"You sound like you feel really defeated."

"I'm hearing that you might want to consider releasing your children for adoption. It's always an option. Would you like to talk more about it?"

"Sometimes people are afraid to fail. I'm hearing you express lots of concerns about trying this. Are you worried you won't be able to do it?"

"I understand you want to protect him, and I understand you may also be afraid of him. But from what you've told me, I'm thinking perhaps he has hurt you and the children when he's angry."

*Purpose: Introducing Change Strategies*

"I have an idea about that... I'd like your opinion on it."

"What would you think about .... ?"

"What have you done in the past that's worked? I might be able to help you do it again."

"Well, it's going to take hard work. Let's start with something we know we can accomplish. What should that be?"

"You don't have to do this all by yourself, you know."

"The most important thing is to make sure Rita is healthy. Let's talk about how to do that."

"I know you want me to give you an answer. I can't guarantee that my suggestion is the best one for you. Let me tell you how I'd think it through. Then you can help make the decision."

*Purpose: Confrontation*

"I know this is hard to accept, but you can't avoid the fact that he has hurt Michael, more than once."

"I know you'd like to blame the foster mother... and maybe she did overreact. But you did go over there at midnight and create a scene in her front yard, and you were, by your own admission, very drunk. What else would you have expected her to do?"

"You keep telling me there's nothing wrong, but you have an eviction notice on your door – the third in as many months – you have no food in the house, and you're freezing here. That says to me that there are a lot of things wrong."

"I want to believe you, but I'm having trouble doing so. Everyone at the mental health center is telling me you took the wallet. They found it in your jacket pocket. I'm more interested in understanding why you took it."

"I know you're not happy. Every time I come by you've been crying."

"Just trying isn't enough. You told me last time that you could, and that you would. Can you tell me why you didn't? Did something get in the way? Did you change your mind?"

*Purpose: Reassuring and Supporting*

There are two supportive interventions that caseworkers should probably never use. The first is, "It must be really hard for you." The second is, "I'm sure everything will be all right." The first is so overused that it has become a trite phrase, rather than a genuine expression of understanding and concern. People use it when they don't know what else to say and want to appear supportive. The second is superficial and patronizing, and greatly minimizes the importance of the situation, particularly when we cannot say with any certainty that everything will be all right.

Support and reassurance must be situationally specific. They are not meant to gloss over or make light of problems. They must be honest, related to reality, and timed properly. They should be a natural extension of the conversation. Examples are:

"You've been through quite a lot these past months. It's no wonder you're so tired!"

"I think you're doing fine, considering you just learned how to do it. You'll improve with practice. Maybe I can help you by giving you some feedback."

"I've talked with William. He still wants to come home, even with all that's happened. If we continue what we've been doing, I think we have a good chance of making it work."

"You may feel very alone at the moment, but I want you to know that we're here to help as you need us."

"You're not the only one who feels that way. I know of many people who have shared your experience. It might be helpful if you could talk to some of them directly."

"I know it feels overwhelming. Let's try it a little at a time. It'll be easier to handle that way."

"Yes, you messed it up, but I wouldn't call it a dismal failure. After all, you got the first half right. Let's work on the rest."

"Your anger doesn't frighten me. You can't scare me away just by being angry. If I understand why you're angry, I can handle it."

"In my opinion, I think it looks wonderful! It's obvious you've put a lot of work into it. Where did you find that chair?"

"How long has it been since you've had an hour to yourself?"