

Intervention Strategies for Adolescent Victims of Maltreatment

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The strategies to be employed when interviewing adolescents about abuse related issues vary based on stage of cognitive and emotional development, purpose of the interview, adolescent's relationship with the interviewer, and the amount of stress on the adolescent. The interviewer must strive to build rapport with the adolescent by creating a nurturing environment while keeping in mind the ways in which cognitive and moral/social development factors could impact the interview. Angry, depressed or younger adolescents may require extra sensitivity on the part of the interviewer.

Building confidence and creating a comfortable environment for the teen is essential for any interview because an adolescent victim must have trust in his or her interviewer. Establishing trust should be the primary focus at the start of the interview. Starting the conversation with less serious topics and following the adolescent's lead by letting him or her speak without interruption are ways to establish rapport. Praising and complimenting the youth's strengths and providing encouragement also add to the trust relationship. Another way to make the youth comfortable is to utilize a person the teen knows and trusts to conduct the interview or at least be present during the interview. It is important not to take any of the youth's behavior personally. Recognize that adolescents, particularly those who are previous victims or under stress,

process questions differently and are more likely to “act out” or be uncooperative.

Cognitive development should be assessed prior to or at the beginning of the interview. At the start of the interview, ask basic inconsequential questions first. Responses to these questions are often indicators of cognitive development because verbal communication is directly tied to cognitive processing. Once the interviewer has a good idea of the adolescent’s development level, the interviewer can ask further questions accordingly. Other techniques to encourage adolescent response include asking short, clear and easy to answer questions, avoiding yes or no questions, and re-phrasing and clarifying when in doubt.

Moral and social developments also impact the interview process. The interviewer should first convey that the teen is valuable and worth getting to know. Next, the interviewer should try to objectively address the adolescent’s behavior without condoning it or forcing his or her own values on the adolescent. Adolescents who have committed a previous offense or display a “bad attitude” require additional interview techniques. Adolescents with “attitude” sometimes try to get a rise out of the interviewer as a way to escape the interview. It is important not to take teen aggression as a personal affront, because the youth needs to understand that exhibiting a bad attitude will not end the interview. The interviewer should not judge or express disapproval about the youth’s behavior.

Interviewing angry or depressed adolescents can be a challenge for any interviewer. In both cases, it’s essential not to push an agenda and instead treat the interview as “meeting this young person over someone’s kitchen table.” Strategies for diffusing anger include expressing empathy, making sincere gestures,

and maintaining a peaceful environment. Showing a legitimate interest in the adolescent will also diffuse anger.

CONCLUSIONS:

Adolescent maltreatment often goes unnoticed and unreported. Reasons for the failure to recognize and report adolescent maltreatment include: misperceptions about the ability of adolescents to protect themselves, an unawareness that certain types of abuse, such as sexual abuse and abandonment, are more common in adolescents, and a difficulty in recognizing adolescent abuse patterns. In addition, adolescent victims caught in the web of maltreatment have often learned to mistrust adults, and as a result may resist the need for help.

The results of adolescent maltreatment can be disastrous, with long-term effects. Maltreated adolescents experience developmental and behavioral problems that may lead to depression, injury, and even suicide. Adolescent maltreatment is a core contributor to both delinquency and homelessness.

Medical, social work, and mental health professionals must work together in conjunction with law enforcement and the legal system to identify, report, and address adolescent abuse.