

Rapport building

Developing a relationship or bond with the witness so they feel comfortable and how this improves the accuracy and amount of information they give.

First published 24 November 2020

Written by College of Policing

Building rapport – guideline

Officers and staff should, wherever possible, take steps to build and maintain rapport with the witness throughout the interaction.

Evidence summary

On balance, the evidence suggested that building rapport with interviewees can increase the amount and accuracy of information provided. The evidence comes from eight studies, seven of which were experiments set in a laboratory using university students and/or staff, which tested the effects of rapport building. Practitioners also felt that rapport building is an essential part of obtaining quality information when obtaining an initial account. Both practitioners and Guideline Committee members stressed the importance of rapport being maintained throughout the interaction and not just being used at the beginning of the process.

Empirical evidence

Moderate

Practitioner evidence

Not available

Maintaining rapport

Building rapport has been shown to be an important way to improve the accuracy and amount of information elicited from victims and witnesses. Practitioners described rapport as how they communicate to develop a relationship or bond with the witness which allows them to 'feel comfortable in your company'. This may seem somewhat aspirational in some response contexts but practitioners felt that rapport is an essential part of the initial account which should be built from

the beginning of the encounter and needs to be maintained throughout. As is emphasised in existing guidance on achieving best evidence, it is not a step that can be ticked off as completed once the initial account taking has begun.

Although rapport building has been shown to be effective, there is little information in the research on what this means in practice. Indeed, every practitioner interviewed described rapport differently, but the factors they identified as helping to establish good rapport can be grouped together.

Factors for establishing good rapport

Hints and tips from the front line

Officer/staff behaviour

- Be yourself, human not robotic, honest, open, professional, non-judgmental, polite, empathetic, friendly, culturally aware.

Officer/staff treatment of the witness

- Allow or help them to: be emotional if that's what they need to explain their story, be calm or settle down, be comfortable, gain trust, ask questions, focus on the important points.
- Listen and show interest, make them feel believed.

Officer/staff deployment

- If possible, think about deploying an officer who may have particular experience and/or expertise to speak to a person, considering gender, age, culture, familiarity/previous contact.

Dynamics of the conversation

- Keep the conversation natural and simple, avoiding jargon.
- Open and close the conversation clearly.
- Explain who you are, avoiding artificial 'rapport-building' topics like their favourite football team.
- Explain what is going to happen and what is expected from them.
- Use appropriate pace and tone of voice (especially important for creating rapport over the phone as the person cannot see you).

Adapt the approach to the person

- Give them time and reassurance if they need it, or just get on with it if that's what they want.

- If the witness is a child you might: get down to their level, engage with their issues, avoid overdressing if there is an opportunity to plan ahead.
- Ask the witness how they would like to be addressed. If they indicate they are of a non-binary gender identity, ask about preferred pronouns. Consider introducing yourself using your name and pronouns to provide an opportunity for them to express their own preferences. Use the gender neutral terms 'they/them' if you are not sure.

Gender considerations

Increasingly in our society, a person may use a range of terms to describe their gender including, among others, transgender and non-binary. These are not always well understood but may affect the information provided in an initial account, particularly if the incident witnessed relates to a person's gender identity. A witness may be less open about gender identity if concerned about how the police may react. Asking the witness how they wish to be addressed may help build rapport, encourage better engagement and set the dialogue on the right track.

Emotional witnesses

Witnessing or being a victim of a crime can be a traumatic experience. Practitioners felt that remaining calm, trying to calm the person and letting them take their time were important for managing rapport with an emotional witness.

Building rapport with an emotional witness

Hints and tips from the front line

- Take your time. You have to be gentler with victims who have never dealt with the police.
- Reminding them of the need to collect the best evidence, and that I am there to do my job to the best of my ability so that I can do the best for them, sometimes helps people concentrate more on the incident, as opposed to how they feel.
- Patience and perseverance – there's nothing worse than putting them under pressure.
- Slow down the probing questions so as not to overwhelm. Reassure them if they are struggling for answers.

Hints and tips from existing guidance

To establish rapport during a first account, you should try to personalise the process and engage the witness, you should:

- introduce yourself and treat the witness as an individual
- help the witness feel as safe and relaxed as possible, for example by asking some brief neutral questions
- try to interact meaningfully with the witness, making it feel like a two-way conversation rather than asking a list of predetermined questions
- try to communicate empathy
- explain to the witness what you would like from them, to make the experience less intimidating

Be aware of your non-verbal behaviour during the initial account. Try to:

- respect the witness' personal space
- avoid speaking to the witness face-to-face which can feel confrontational – a ten-to-two position may encourage more positive conversation
- be as calm and relaxed as possible yourself, to encourage similar behaviour from the witness

Tags

Evidence-based policing