

Talking to young children – what I've learned

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Tips for talking to children who have witnessed a crime

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I spent 34 years in the Metropolitan Police Service. It wasn't until 17 years into my service, when I started to work in child protection, that I realised some of the skills I was learning would have been helpful to me as a frontline cop.

The tips below would have helped me to establish some essential details – 'who', 'what', 'when' and 'where' – in that initial account from a young child who has witnessed domestic abuse, a murder or another serious crime.

You don't need specialist child witness interview training – that's for the detectives investigating child abuse – but these simple tips could make it easier to help a child help you.

- Use your first name when introducing yourself. Formalities don't work, as it reminds them of school and rules. Rules mean being quiet and listening, which is the opposite of what you want to achieve.
- Children are not little adults. Get down to their level but don't demand eye contact. Ignore the old phrase 'look at me when I am talking to you', as that can be intimidating.
- Children can remember a lot of detail when given the chance to tell. Compassion and patience are key.
- Younger children may believe that adults know everything. They may not tell you something because they think you know already! Empower the child by telling them that you need their help, as you weren't there and you don't know what happened.
- Communication is important, so don't use big words or police lingo. Keep it short and simple. Remember that young children will use words they have heard but won't necessarily know the meaning.
- Be patient, take your time and stay calm.
- Don't make any promises you can't keep.

- Learn about non-directive communication, also referred as observational commentary, where you say out loud what you see without interpretation or explanation. This can help with rapport building. Practise this approach with others, as it works well when making that initial contact
- Remember the value of good listening. Try not to be distracted with your radio or phone.
- Avoid long sentences and multiple questions. Remember that no two children are the same cognitively, even if they are the same age.
- Don't repeat questions if the child doesn't answer straight away, as they may be scared or traumatised.
- Young children may not understand what has happened or may not have the words to describe it, but they can remember. You just need to work out how to help them tell you, which may mean leaving it for a specialist child witness interviewer.
- Always make a written record of what you saw, what you said, and what the child said or did. Non-verbal communication is often more informative, so note how the child presented and don't forget the usual, day, date, time and place.
- Finally, don't make assumptions about a child, as assumptions cause most of our decision-making errors.

This article was peer reviewed by Detective Sergeant Lucy Edgeworth, Avon and Somerset Police

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