

Interview Guidelines based on Age and Developmental Stage

Talking with child survivors requires service providers to take into consideration several factors, including the child's age and stage of development. The level of a child's development is influenced by many factors besides age. The environment has an important impact, as do education, culture, nutrition, access to health care, social and family interactions, as well as war and violence and their consequences (psychosocial and mental health problems, displacement). Service providers responsible for talking with children about their abuse experience should adapt the length of time according to the child's age. Age-appropriate lengths of time to talk with children about sexual abuse are:

- 30 minutes for children under the age of 9;
- 45 minutes for children between 10–14 years;
- One hour for children 15–18 years old.

Infants and Toddlers (0–5 years old)

- Children in this age range should not be interviewed directly about their abuse. They have limited verbal communication skills and are unlikely to make any disclosures about abuse. The non-offending parents/caregivers should be the primary sources of information about the child and suspected abuse. Other significant adults in the child's life, particularly people who have provided care, should be consulted, including the person accompanying the child.

Younger Children (6–9 years old)

- Children in this age range can be directly interviewed by the service provider, it is recommended that, if possible, information about the abuse be gathered from trusted sources in the child's life.
- Children in this age range may have a difficult time answering general questions. This may result in children saying, "I don't remember" or "I don't know" often, or they may give vague responses such as, "The man did a bad thing," but not share more.
- Caregivers/parents or someone the child trusts can be involved in the interview as long as the child requests that the adult be present (and the adult is not a suspected abuser).
- Children in this age range benefit greatly from a mixture of both verbal and art-based communication techniques.
- Children in this age range shouldn't be asked questions that involve abstract ideas like justice or love. They tend to think in concrete (literal) terms.

Younger and Older Adolescents (10–18 year olds)

- Children in this age range can be directly interviewed by the service provider. Open-ended questions can produce important information about sexual assault.⁵¹
- Caregivers/parents or someone the child trusts can be involved in the interview as long as the child requests that adult to be present (and that adult is not a suspected abuser).
- Adolescents have more capacity for analytical thought and reflection but service providers should remember they are also still developing.

Reference: UNICEF IRC (2012) Caring for child survivors of sexual abuse, Interview guidelines based on age and developmental stage, pg 73-74