

## Chapter 14

## INITIAL CONTACTS AND INTERVIEWS

14-1. Purpose. Information collection and analysis, including information validation and reconciliation, occurs best by implementing a systematic and structured approach to interviews. During pre-commencement planning, the investigator shall plan the sequencing of interviews and consider the following factors to facilitate the collection of information.

14-2. Procedures.

a. Establishing a working relationship with the family to facilitate information gathering requires the investigator spend sufficient time establishing and building rapport with the child's parents/caregivers. This is accomplished by:

(1) Notifying parents of their rights relative to the investigative process at the very beginning of the investigation.

(2) Explaining, as part of the introductory process, the role of the investigator, role of the agency, and the essence of the report (without getting into the details of the maltreatment until the interview process has begun in full).

(3) Addressing parental concerns, deflecting strong reactions, and demonstrating empathy in response to significant emotions resulting from the parent's response to being a subject of an investigation.

(4) Empowering parents by asking for assistance in arranging for a private place to conduct interviews, scheduling follow-up interviews, and asking for additional contact information on family members, friends and individuals in their support network who they want the investigator to talk to about their family's circumstances.

(5) Guiding the interview process by redirecting the conversation back to the collection of relevant information related to the information domains when parents repeatedly move off-topic. It is critical for the investigator to recognize the difference between this intentional avoidance or misdirection from parents, and the need for the investigator to make the effort and take the time to address a parent's legitimate concern before refocusing the interview.

b. With few exceptions, household members should be interviewed separately in the home when possible, in the following order, using information gathered from one interview to assist in the development of questions for the next interview:

(1) Identified child victim.

(2) Siblings or other children in the household.

(3) Non-maltreating parents and caregivers, including all adult household members.

(4) Other parent (as a collateral contact when parent no longer lives in the same household).

(5) Maltreating parent/caregiver.

c. Based on the information gathered during pre-commencement planning, each contact should be planned with consideration given to:

(1) When and where the interviews will take place.

(2) Development of an appropriate line of questioning (i.e., broad or general, not necessarily specific questions).

(3) Whether other agencies should be notified to participate in the interviews.

(4) Section [39.301\(13\)](#), F.S., specifically requires that face-to-face interviews with the child or family be unannounced. Pre-commencement planning should include an understanding that interviews can create outright safety issues. For example, if an intake contains information that the maltreating caregiver threatened to harm a child if anyone in the family, but especially the child, speaks with child protection staff, etc.

d. Whenever safely possible, the child should be interviewed in the home so that the investigator can observe family interactions and obtain firsthand information on family dynamics.

e. When a child is interviewed outside the home, the investigator will make every effort to interview the non-maltreating parent and, to the extent practical, the maltreating parent before the child returns home. It is very important to the engagement process for the parent to be informed directly by the investigator and not secondhand by the child, siblings, school or childcare staff regarding the child having been interviewed earlier by the investigator.

f. If the child's parents cannot be interviewed prior to the child returning home, the investigator will attempt to inform the parents that the child has been interviewed as part of an investigation unless notification could compromise the child's safety or law enforcement personnel have specifically requested a delay in parental notification due to a concurrent criminal investigation.

g. The following circumstances should be considered when determining how and when to inform parents about the investigation:

(1) The intake specifically mentions the child victim is not likely to feel comfortable talking about the incident in the home or in the near presence of the maltreating or non-maltreating parent.

(2) The intake specifically mentions or the child victim discloses fear of reprisal from the maltreating or non-maltreating parent for talking with a child protection professional.

(3) A joint investigation is being conducted with law enforcement which has the lead in determining the order and settings for the interviews.

(4) The investigator has credible information the family is likely to flee to avoid the investigation.

(5) The maltreatment allegations, if true, likely involve criminal charges and serious ramifications for the family (e.g., child placed with relatives, non-relatives or in licensed care) typically including, but not limited to the following:

(a) Sexual abuse.

(b) Bizarre punishment.

(c) Any maltreatment that is alleged to have resulted in serious or severe injuries.

h. When a child and a maltreating or non-maltreating parent are interviewed in separate locations and at different times, the investigator, to the extent practical, will arrange a follow-up interview in order to directly observe the child-parent interactions.

i. The non-maltreating parent should be the first adult interviewed in the investigative process followed by any other adults living in the household.

j. To the extent possible, the alleged maltreating caregiver should be the last household member interviewed. If law enforcement requests the alleged maltreating caregiver not be interviewed at initial contact because of an ongoing criminal investigation, the investigator should document this request and the Supervisor's approval to delay the interview. If law enforcement allows the investigator to interview the individual during a criminal investigation but requests that the investigator avoid discussing the actual incident, the following information can still be collected:

(1) Child functioning;

(2) Adult functioning;

(3) General parenting; and,

(4) Discipline and behavior management. NOTE: If the criminal investigation involves excessive corporal punishment resulting in physical injury, the investigator should check with law enforcement before exploring this last domain.

k. Postponing the interview does not negate the investigator's responsibility for taking immediate safety actions to protect an unsafe child.

l. Postponing the interview does not negate the investigator's responsibility to interview the alleged maltreating caregiver as soon as clearance from law enforcement has been obtained.

