Significance and Supports for Interviewing Children

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Even if not the alleged victims, interviewing children is a crucial step in gathering safety and risk related information. Children are often privy to substantial family information and dynamics. Even when no abuse or neglect has occurred, interviewing a child can help DCS best know what protective factors are in place (or need to be in place) to prevent maltreatment. Far beyond the context of a case, children remember adults who were kind, listened, and desired to keep them safe.

Case Example:
A CPS Investigator collected initial evidence suggestive of a mother's sobriety and overall family safety. Children appeared well, and the home was extremely clean. The father seemed appropriate and involved. A baby had been born and tested positive for Subutex, but the mother was prescribed this drug. The mother never seemed impaired in CPS' presence, so the Investigator chose to only speak casually with a 5-year-old child in the home. A few weeks into the case, the investigator learned of severe, aggravated domestic violence and drug use in the home. The child participated in a private interview and disclosed regular violence, including the use of a firearm, and being fearful during such incidents.

Strategies and Supports:
Regardless of circumstances or initial conclusions, children benefit from CPS taking every effort to privately interview all children who live a household. Interviews are often best conducted in a setting outside the home, such as school, a relative's home, or daycare. Interviewing a child about abuse or neglect in their home may be difficult, as the home environment itself may be inciting and too traumatic a location for disclosure. A child may also fear someone else in the home overhearing, even if you, as the adult, logically know this is impossible (e.g. because parents are outside, etc.).

Some tips for interviewing children:
1) Position yourself on their eye level. This may mean sitting on the floor or in a children's chair.
2) Describe what you do in a child-friendly way.
3) Be relaxed and start with some easy/fun questions.
4) Give the child an opportunity to ask you questions.
5) Consider a child's developmental age in how you interview. Some children do great being asked to draw a picture of their family, then describe what they drew, and what each person is like.

Don't hesitate to reach out to your local Child Advocacy Center, as needed. If an Alleged Child Victim or another child in the home begins to disclose abuse likely to be used in a CPS Investigation, remember to gather only what is most needed and schedule a forensic interview. 

You may always seek out the safety and risk related information (e.g. What is a typical day like? Who normally takes care of you?) you need to guide your safety decisions for the child.