
Investigative Interviews with Child Victims of Crime: Principles, Best Practices, and Challenges

An International Review

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The review was commissioned by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and funded with its support.

Suggested citation:

Nijim-Ektelat, F., Sorek, Y., & Toporek Barr, O. (2026). *Investigative interviews with child victims of crime: Principles, best practices, and challenges: An international review*. RR-065-26. Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute.

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Abstract

Background

Investigative interviewing of child victims of crime is a unique and complex field that requires balancing the needs of the justice system with the need to protect children's well-being. Over the past three decades, many countries have developed a range of systemic arrangements, including legal regulation, multi-agency organizational structures, professional guidelines, and dedicated protocols and practices designed to regulate child investigations as a comprehensive process.

Although service structures, legal frameworks, and professional training vary across countries, the core challenges are shared: ensuring the reliability of testimony, adapting the investigative process to children's developmental characteristics, and minimizing potential harm throughout the criminal justice process. Against this background, and with the aim of updating its practices, the Child Investigations Service approached the research team at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct an international review to identify key trends and innovative practices and to assess their relevance for Israel.

Objective

To provide information from Western countries on best-practice principles and evidence-based methods for conducting investigative interviews with children, in order to examine how these can be integrated into the service's work to improve the quality of investigations and contribute to optimal protection for child victims of crime.

Method

An in-depth review of professional and academic literature from Western countries was conducted between March and July 2025. A systematic search was conducted using academic databases and search engines, based on keywords relevant to the study.

In addition, six semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with researchers and experts familiar with the Israeli context or engaged in academic collaborations with Israeli researchers (August–October 2025). An additional interview was conducted with the director of the Child Investigations Service and representatives of its headquarters in Israel in order to update the review regarding professional development and knowledge advancement processes in the child investigations service in Israel. This interview served as a complementary source for understanding the current Israeli context.

Findings

The review highlights that understanding children's linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development is essential for conducting age and developmentally appropriate interviews. Age- and developmentally sensitive interviewing improves the reliability of reports and reduces the risk of secondary harm.

Children's memories are influenced by emotional, social, and developmental factors. Interviewers should therefore avoid overinterpreting consistency, level of detail, or emotional expression as definitive indicators of reliability, and instead assess testimony within a broader context of age, experience, and emotional state.

Although there is no single standardized protocol for conducting optimal investigative interviews with children, there is broad agreement among researchers on key principles: consistent use of open-ended questions, gradual development of rapport, full documentation of the interview procedure, and cultural and developmental adaptation to the child's background.

Evidence-based practices improve both the quality of information and children's well-being; however, their effectiveness depends on the interviewer's skills, the organizational context, and the availability of ongoing professional support. Continuous professional development combined with fostering emotional resilience is essential for maintaining quality, ensuring interview reliability, and reducing burnout among professionals.

The legal system, the level of national regulation, the degree of inter agency coordination, the professional status of child investigators, arrangements regarding parental consent, and the location of interviews all influence how investigations are conducted, children's well-being, and the validity of the legal process.

Recommendations

1

Adopt a trauma-informed approach across all stages of the investigative process. Implementation in Israel requires comprehensive, multi-stage training for child investigators and strengthening and deepening ongoing emotional support and supervision for child investigators.

2

Promote cultural, social, and age-appropriate adaptation of the investigative interview protocol. This includes adapting the protocol for Arab and Haredi populations and developing dedicated protocols for adolescents.

3

Advance practical and technological innovation. Integrate artificial intelligence and virtual reality technologies into training programs, develop AI-based analytical tools for analyzing interview recordings, and explore the use of advanced technologies in multilingual interviews.

4

Examine the expansion of multiple session interview models. Consider broader implementation while ensuring continuity, trust, and adherence to trauma informed principles.

5

Use supportive tools in a structured and controlled manner. For example, incorporating drawing as a complementary communication tool in interviews.

6

Strengthen systemic infrastructure. This includes maintaining and developing a skilled professional workforce, strengthening research and learning systems, and integrating technological tools for management, monitoring, and investigative interviewing in safe and protected environments.
