

## **Tele-Forensic Interviewing: Implications for Policy & Practice**

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### **Background**

Interest in tele-forensic interviewing (tele-fi), the practice of forensic interviewing with interviewer and interviewee in different locations communicating via video, is a practice initially born of necessity. Many children and families living in remote areas did not have access to forensic interviewers except through remote options. The need for tele-forensic interviewing became more pressing in other parts of the country with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Forensic interviewers in Baltimore at the Center for Hope (CFH) quickly moved to adopt tele-forensic interviewing to maintain continuity of service for the community while minimizing health risks. Tele-forensic interviewing is another tool in our toolbox. It must be approached with the same best practices as traditional interviewing, with additional forethought and planning.

### **Analog Research**

Analog research studies provide the evidential basis for best practices in forensic interviewing. A growing research base supports tele-forensic interviewing and informs this new practice. Prior to Covid-19, such studies investigated tele-forensic interviewing as a potential tool. Two important studies found that the amount of correct information recalled in face-to-face and video conditions did not differ (Doherty-Sneddon & McAuley, 2000), and that video interviewing is “just as effective” as face-to-face interviewing (Hamilton et al., 2017).

A recent and extraordinarily promising study conducted by Dickinson, Lytle, and Poole (2021) purposefully introduced misinformation regarding bodily touch to children participating in innocuous activities. Subsequently, children were interviewed in face-to-face or tele-forensic interview conditions, both of which included best practices as established in the current forensic interviewing literature.

The results of the study were that children were no more suggestible in tele-forensic interviews than they were in face-to-face conditions. Tele-forensic interviewing, therefore, does not appear to reduce the quality of children’s testimony for true disclosure rates, false disclosure rates, or accuracy. Best practices must be applied whether in tele-forensic or face-to-face interviewing to elicit the most accurate information.

### **What Do Children Think?**

Approximately 75% (over 800) of all forensic interviews conducted at CFH from March 2020 to March 2022 were tele-forensic interviews. Of these, the vast majority were intra-CAC, meaning that both parties were on-site in separate rooms, and the interview was conducted via video conferencing. Based

on positive feedback from children, Center for Hope plans to continue tele-forensic interviewing as an optional tool and supportive method for conducting forensic interviews.

#### **Survey findings:**

- When children have been offered a choice to talk with the interviewer face-to-face (while masked) or via video, a significant number of children chose tele-forensic interviewing
- When surveyed after tele-forensic interviews, most children reported they liked talking to the interviewer via video
- Most children who experienced tele-forensic interviewing said they would prefer the tele-forensic condition if they were interviewed again
- A significant number of children surveyed after face-to-face interviews also said they would prefer the tele-forensic condition if they were interviewed again. (Results were not solely based upon mask wearing)

### **Practice Recommendations**

#### **Choice**

When possible, clients are offered their choice of interview condition at CFH: in the same room with masks on (face-to-face), or in different rooms without masks (tele-forensic). Children are introduced to the choice by child advocacy center staff (not the assigned forensic interviewer) immediately before their interview. Children are shown both interview methods while being introduced to the interview space (a brief experience of the video and face-to-face environments). Interviewers may also have preferences about the method of interview (tele-forensic or face-to-face). Some prefer to conduct face-to-face interviews with younger children, and tele-forensic interviewing is simply not appropriate in all cases.

#### **Media**

There is no evidence-based guidance for the introduction of media (body diagrams, screen shots, photographs, etc.) in tele-forensic interviews. Logistic and legal challenges are notable risks to sharing digital media. During intra-CAC tele-forensic interviewing at CFH, evidence presentation occurs within a brief shift from tele-forensic interviewing to a face-to-face conversation for media/evidence presentation. Due to the risks mentioned above, when tele-forensic interviews are conducted in which the interviewer and/or child are in remote locations, no media or evidence is shared virtually.

#### **MDT**

Implementation of tele-forensic interviewing should be done in cooperation with your multi-disciplinary team. Discussion with various cooperating agencies will provide support to the practice and prepare effectively for troubleshooting.

#### **Legal Process**

Prosecutors in Baltimore support the use of tele-forensic interviewing. Several cases using tele-forensic interviewing have gone to trial and been prosecuted with no difference in procedure than face-to-face interviewing. We have yet to experience local court challenges to the practice in Baltimore City.

#### **Challenges & Benefits**

Some children who prefer face-to-face interviewing dislike being in the room by themselves. The focus on facial expressions in video conferencing also polarizes child opinions; some report enjoying seeing their own face while for other children this is a more difficult interaction. Interviewers who feel more comfortable conducting conversations face-to-face may be challenged by children who prefer tele-forensic interviewing. On the other hand, reasons that children prefer tele-forensic interviewing include a feeling of safety in their own space and reduced anxiety. Thus, tele-forensic interviewing can be a

valuable tool to use with reluctant children. Additionally, interviewers with specialized skills (language proficiency, specialized training) may reach children in areas of need using tele-forensic interviewing.

### References & Resources

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