Interview with Experts – Interviewing Persons with Disabilities

Scott Modell on Improving your Interviews with Persons with Disabilities.

Scott J. Modell received his Ph.D. from the College of Education at Florida State University in 1997. From 2013 to 2016, he served as the Deputy Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services. He has also served as the Deputy Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Prior to moving to Tennessee, Dr. Modell spent fifteen years as a Professor at California State University, Sacramento. Over his last five years at the University, he additionally served as Director of the University's Autism Center for Excellence. He is an expert in child abuse, crime victims with disabilities, disability etiology, and interview techniques. He has authored nine books and has over 300 published articles and abstracts. Dr. Modell is frequently invited to lecture at national and international conferences regarding child abuse and crime victims with disabilities.

What are the biggest challenges APS workers face when interviewing persons with disabilities?

These interviews can be quite challenging in a number of ways. First, obtaining the necessary background information can be difficult depending on where the individual resides and who the caregivers are. This typically is easier when individuals are receiving services through a provider. Second, having the requisite skill set to conduct these interviews in the most reliable and most legally defensible manner is necessary. These skills go beyond basic interviewing and basic knowledge of disability.

What are the most common mistakes?

Common mistakes include making assumptions about intelligence based on the person's speech patterns or assumptions based on the person's disability label. Additionally, the goal of any interview is to gather reliable information. As such, asking leading questions and questions that are forced choice response (yes/no) type questions are less reliable.

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What recommendations do you have to improve the outcomes of interviews with persons with intellectual disabilities?

First, assume normal intelligence until you have multiple data points to tell you something different. Second, don't use or accept the label "non-verbal." This is problematic in several ways. It is not useful as there is no universally understood meaning of "non-verbal" and people's mental models of what that means are very different. Additionally, it more likely leads to not speaking to or trying to interview these individuals, and less

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likely to go down a prosecutorial route if a crime has been committed. Third, get trained in forensic interviewing from one of the nationally recognized models. Even though all forensic interview protocols, with the exception of Project FIND (Forensic Interviewing Individuals with Disabilities), are geared toward children, it is still recommended to get trained. Fourth, conduct peer reviews of your interviews. It is the only way to improve. Lastly, if you don't have experiences working with individuals with disabilities, try to get that experience by volunteering.

You recommend interviewing individuals who don't speak. How do you conduct such an interview? What tips do you have?

I recommend at least trying to communicate with individuals who don't speak. While you won't be successful with all individuals, there are many who can report information reliably using gestures or AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices. If an individual has a yes/no repertoire (gesture) then questions can be presented in that format in the most non-leading manner. Project FIND has a protocol for that. It would take too long to discuss here.

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Any advice for dealing with clients with multiple disabilities, such as clients who have an intellectual and a sensory disability?

These can be tricky. It also depends on the sensory disability. If they have a visual or auditory disability, then learning about adaptations and accommodations for those populations would be helpful. If the sensory disability is sensory processing disorder, then gathering background information on what sensory input the individual is sensitive to is important. That could be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and so on.

Are there tools/software/assistive devices and such that you recommending using to improve interviews?

I don't recommend introducing assistive devices or creating gestures for an interview. I would argue that it would not be reliable as it assumes that person has learned the device/gesture and that they are using it reliably in real time. The reality is, it can take people a significant amount of time to learn to use adapted/assistive devices and to ensure that they are using them reliably. That should be taught outside the interview context.

One final question, where do you recommend that APS workers go to get additional information and training on interviewing persons with disabilities?

There is a lot of information on the web, but it is difficult to sift through. I would suggest that National Children's Advocacy Center (I know it is child focused, but could be adapted for adults) has some resources on interviewing individuals with disabilities. Additionally, as mentioned before – Project FIND.

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