

# APSAC Research to Practice Brief

**Study Title:** Facilitating the Expression of Emotions by Alleged Victims of Child Abuse During Investigative Interviews Using the Revised NICHD Protocol

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## **Introduction:**

In legal proceedings, children are expected to provide detailed narratives regarding abusive events. Previous research has been done related to how engaging emotional responses enhance aspects of interviews such as narration quality and assimilation of information. There was, however, no clear evidence of the connection between emotional support and informativeness in field studies. The Revised NICHD Protocol (RP) is designed to help interviewers conduct more emotionally supportive forensic interviews compared to the Standard NICHD Protocol (SP). The goals of the present study were to determine whether the RP increased emotional expressiveness in forensic interviews compared to the SP and whether emotionally-sensitive forensic interviewers impact expression of emotions in children and result in more forensically informative interviews.

## **Research Questions:**

Compared to the SP, children interviewed using the RP would:

1. Express more emotions about the interview and about abusive events;
2. Be more forensically informative (measured by number of details that added to the understanding of the target incidents);
3. Report a more diverse array of emotions.

## **Study Sample:**

The sample for this study included a total of 278 interviews (100 using the SP and 178 using the RP) conducted with children aged four to thirteen years who disclosed physical abuse by family members. The interviews were conducted in the children's educational settings in all regions of Israel and were based on prior disclosures to professionals or disclosures that had been substantiated by independent evidence.

## **Findings:**

The authors found a high prevalence of contact with CPS for public school students before third grade (approximately 18%), ranging from 1% to as high as 59% across all school districts. Of all investigations, over one third were substantiated. Students receiving free lunch (an indicator of family poverty), students from poor neighborhoods, and Black students had disproportionately higher rates of CPS investigations.

Further, any involvement with CPS was negatively associated with all four measures of negative academic outcomes, even when controlling for other factors that may affect performance (i.e., race, gender, and poverty). Having substantiated investigations resulted in even larger negative outcomes than did unsubstantiated investigations.

## **Recommendations:**

This study is consistent with previous research showing that when an interviewer adopts a supportive demeanor, informativeness and accuracy of a child's responses increase, child-

interviewer engagement is higher, and feelings of intimidation are decreased. Interviewers should provide support regarding expressions of emotions and prompt for emotions if they are not reported spontaneously.

The reinforcement of emotional expression increases a child's awareness of the expectations of the interviewer and promotes expression of additional emotions, which in turn increases the number of details a child is able to provide about an abusive event. Coupled with emotional expressions and verbal descriptions highlighting the impact of abusive events on children, these factors make children appear more coherent, credible, and effective as witnesses. Additionally, since emotions can promote memory retrieval, this research suggests a connection between interviewer support and increased emotionality, which then increases retrieval.

**Bottom Line:**

The RP helps children express their emotions during the forensic interview and overcome emotional blocks that may be in place. Authors of this study suggest additional nonsuggestive, yet supportive interview techniques are needed to facilitate expression of emotions and increase informativeness and credibility. This would be especially helpful for child victims who had more difficulty expressing emotions, such as that noted by younger children and boys in this study.

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**About the Research to Practice Author:**

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