Child Protection: Top 10 Tips for Effective Communication with Children/Youth

1) Ensure the area where you have your conversation is as private and child-friendly as possible, while respecting child protection policies regarding meeting with children and youth alone.

2) Speak directly with the child/youth and include them in conversations when a parent or guardian is present.

3) Take time to build rapport and trust before posing sensitive questions. This can include asking the child or youth about nonthreatening topics, addressing their basic physical needs (“Are you hungry? Are you warm enough?”), explaining your role, and asking how they are feeling about being here (this can open the door for reassurance and explanations).

4) Use simple language, even for adolescents. After explaining an important idea, process, or concept, check to make sure the child/youth understands. Ensure the language you use is appropriate to the child’s developmental level. For children with special needs, it may be helpful to ask the caregiver how best to communicate with the child or youth.

5) Ask open-ended questions that invite narrative (“Tell me all about your family.”). You can follow up with more directed, focused questions to clarify (“Who lives in your house?”). Avoid leading questions (questions that introduce new information the child has not disclosed) and suggestive questions (“I’ll be that hurt, didn’t it?”)

6) Describe to the child/youth what you need to do and why you need to do it. Talk about what is involved in the activity and ask if they have any questions. This respects the individual’s basic right to information and helps to minimize their anxiety about the unknown.

7) Once you describe what you would like to do, ask the child/youth for permission to proceed. Respect their choice to decline whenever possible. Make it clear
that they may choose to answer some, all or none of the questions during the conversation and may decline to participate in parts of the evaluation process (if the latter is true). You may need to build more rapport and trust before the child or youth agrees to participate in a conversation or procedure.

8) Empower the child/youth by a) providing them with control and choices whenever possible; b) actively listening to what they say, c) asking their opinion and exploring their reasoning; and 4) pointing out their strengths and resilience.

9) Remain open and nonjudgmental when speaking with the child/youth. Accept their perspective and explore it, rather than try to impose your own perspective.

10) Keep in mind that traumatic experiences impact the way an individual perceives themselves and the world around them; it influences their feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and the things they say. Their behavior may seem to you to be unusual or inappropriate in a given situation (e.g., irritable, jocular or very withdrawn) but actually may reflect their effective adaptation to a life of unpredictability and potential danger or may represent their way of coping with stress and anxiety.

Bibliography:
