

# Recommendations for a Work based Training & Practice Model (WTPM) for Sri Lankan Police Officers Conducting Child Forensic Investigations

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## ABSTRACT

Child abuse is an immense problem creating profound distress within the children globally as well as locally. Therefore, carried out as the first step in child forensic investigations, child forensic interviews can be considered as the one of the initial aspect pertaining to child maltreatment interventions. Thus, forensic interviews require highly specialized skill that warrants extensive training for people who conduct it. Moreover, the importance of investigative officers requiring clear incentives, effective supervision and monitoring of performance within the workplace looms large. It is also important to identify minimum, essential knowledge and skill requirements for Sri Lankan child forensic investigative officers conducting forensic interviews, with varied competencies, educational and experiential backgrounds. Another challenge would be to identify cost-effective ways of keep them continuously equipped with information, skills and competencies based on recent developments. The present study explores the nature, content and duration of the current training programs available to investigative officers in the Children's and Women's Desks in Sri Lanka. After reviewing the strengths and limitations of the available training programs the paper offers recommendations and suggestions for an effective, culture sensitive, continuous Work-based Training Practice Model (WTPM) for Sri Lankan police officers conducting child forensic interviews. It also provides recommendations for optimum future trainings in the context of content, duration, provisions, mode, training of trainers, and resources of the WTPM. The paper also suggests that the training be offered under two tiers based on the prior educational qualifications of the investigative officers.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Police Officers, Child Forensic Interviews, Work Based Training Model

## I. INTRODUCTION

Child maltreatment is a complex problem requiring comprehensive and sensitive interventions. Therefore, inarguably; it requires urgent attention and intervention. Child forensic interview can be described as a structured conversation with a child intended to elicit detailed information about a possible event(s) that the child may have experienced or witnessed. It can be considered as one of the most fundamental aspects of any child abuse investigation. It is often carried out as the first step in most child protective service (CPS) investigations. Therefore, the purpose of a child forensic interview is to obtain a statement from a child, in a developmental and culturally sensitive manner. When conducting forensic interviews the interviewer also requires being unbiased and require to conduct the interview in a fact-finding

and a scientific manner. Forensic interviews should also support child-centred, accurate, fair decision making by the involved multidisciplinary team in the criminal justice and child protection systems; to avoid multiplications, impacting further distress within the child victims and their caregivers.

Studies have examined several factors that influence disclosure during child forensic interviews, including interviewer's characteristics (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, Smith, & Sharman, 2014). They convey that eliciting reliable and detailed information from a young child pertaining to the incident of abuse would necessitate specialised skills in forensic interviewing. Therefore, the experience and training of the interviewers is a crucial factor in conducting successful forensic interviews. Hence, the outcome of any investigative interview

would to a large extent be determined by the competence and skills of the trained police officers

**Present Situation** - Initial training of the police officers are often limited to the two weeks which they receive, upon their entry into the Sri Lanka police. In Sri Lanka, incidents of child abuse is reported to the Children and Women's desks. They were established in 1998 at police stations by Inspector General of Police Circular No. 1416/9817 (De Silva & Punchihewa, 2010). There are 36 Children & Women Desks (Sri Lanka Police, 2014). Systematic, specialized and structured training programs with a relatively extensive duration on child forensic interviewing is often unavailable to the Sri Lankan police officers assigned to the Women's and Children's Bureau due to heavy workload and multiple duties such as overseeing traffic. As a result, the CWD police officers are often prevented from attending even the few random training programs available to them.

Even if available, these training programs exist mostly in the form of cursory short-term trainings (i.e. often in the range of few days to one or two weeks). Further, they generally provide knowledge and the basic, essential information on child forensic interviews. Therefore, fresh recruits to the CWD's often do not receive a specialized training on child conducting child forensic interviews. Further, regular supervision and evaluation of these interviews does not appear to be standard practice, raising concerns about the quality of interviewing practices. Hence, these training programs may not be effective in promoting expertise (Powell et al, 2008; Fisher, 2010) on forensic interviewing within the investigative officers assigned to the CWD's.

Majority of the training programs conducted for the police officers in the Children's and Women's desks are conducted by National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), while some are conducted by other government and non-governmental organizations (Pathirana & de Soyza, 2015; UNICEF, 2012). The existing programs have been meticulously structured to provide its participants about the process and basic information of interviewing. This is either provided over a single intensive session or as a workshop spanning few hours, often one or several days. They are so structured to save travelling cost and time for CWD officers who are serving in regional, rural and geographically challenged

and distant districts from the capital of Sri Lanka, in which the training programs are usually held.

Within the training programs, instruction related to interview techniques is usually offered to the group in a lecture format by an internal or external expert/s with specialist knowledge in interviewing, legal structure and child development. Further, one or few multiple practice sessions are usually scheduled to allow participating police officers to practice their newly taught interview techniques during the workshops or short-term training program. Practice sessions usually involve having other participants play the role of an alleged child abuse victim. Usually participating police officers are then given brief feedback (if any) from the expert trainer or from a more experienced colleague.

However, literature on child forensic interviews vociferously argues against short-term, sporadic training programs (Powell et al, 2008) as they may not be effective in promoting expertise in forensic interviewing. Literature (Brubacher, Roberts & Powell, 2009; Powell, 2008) also highlights the importance of comprehensive knowledge based on the job training for police officers conducting child forensic interviews.

### **Recommendations for a Work-based Training & Practice Model (WTPM) for Sri Lankan police officers**

The paper recommends for a formal and scientific Work-based Training & Practice Model (WTPM) for Sri Lankan police officers. WPTM refers to learning that uses opportunities, resources, and experience in the workplace and has outcomes that are specifically relevant to an interviewee's work practice (Billett, 2001).

In line with the previous literature the paper also highlights comprehensive knowledge based training, the quality of evidence obtained from child victims, clear incentives, effective supervision and monitoring of performance within the workplace (Sternberg, Lamb, Hershkowitz, Yudilevitch, Orbach, Esplin, & Hovav, 1997; Powell, 2008).

Recommendations for Work based Training & Practice Model (WPTM) are based on the review of literature (Powell, 2008; Powell & Snow, 2007; Daly, 2004; Poole,

& Lindsay, 2002) and the experience of the author as a child forensic interviewer/ trainer as well as a child protection trainer for the past 15 years. When presenting the WPTM the paper addresses the specific training needs expressed by the trainee police officers assigned to CWD's (i.e. conducting child forensic investigations) during the training programs facilitated by the author. The paper makes recommendations for the optimum future trainings in the context of content, duration, provisions, mode, training of trainers, and resources of the WTPM.

### **Relevance of WTPM within the Sri Lankan milieu**

In support of the WTPM the paper argues that the services provided by the Sri Lankan police officers are complex, specialized and multidimensional in nature. The paper further argues that such a model would provide investigative officers, with learning structures to utilize opportunities, resources, and experience in their workplaces. It also believes WTPM would yield outcomes which are specifically relevant to an interviewee's work practice (Billett, 2001). Further, paper views WTPM should be offered as a continuous/routine and natural experience involving team based approach to police officers.

The paper stresses the importance of extensive WTPM to Sri Lankan CWD police officers based on two vital pieces of information. First, there is high correlation between complete accuracy of the child's story during the examination and the quality of the initial investigative interview (Powell et al, 2010). Second, literature conveys that high quality investigative interviews make the child's account in cross-examination less susceptible to distortion (Powell et al, 2005).

Apart from improving the effectiveness of interviewers, there are several advantages to adopting a WPTM for the Sri Lankan milieu. First, a WPTM would alleviate organisational pressures that arise from the large abstraction of CWD police officers from the workplace into training program venues. Second, it would ensure continuous and quality services to children enabling schedule of case conferences, investigations and forensic interviews between training sessions. Third, WTPM would also be cost effective as it would reduce travelling costs and time for CWD officers working in regional or

geographically distant areas from the capital of Sri Lanka. .

However, the delivery of an effective WTPM depends on several factors. These include: the availability of expert in-house trainers who can provide precise and constructive feedback, the time and willingness for trainee (participating police officers) to engage in practice & supervision sessions, and the availability of brief, standardized measures by which supervisors can measure performance.

Hence, the paper provides recommendations in the context of content, duration, provisions, and methods of training for an effective, child friendly and culture sensitive WPTM. It also provides suggestions and recommendations for training of trainers, development of resource materials and research pertaining to child forensic interviewing in the Sri Lankan milieu.

### **Recommendation 01: Provision of continued, specific feedback and effective supervision/ monitoring within the workplace.**

Literature (Sternberg et al, 1997; Powell, 2008), repeatedly conveys the importance of the quality of evidence obtained from child victims. However, the present training programs, concentrates specifically on providing the basic information and training skills to CWD police officers in the form of lectures, workshops and brief role plays limiting it to one or multiple practice sessions. These practice role play sessions usually involve practicing with another trainee interviewer playing role of the alleged child abuse victim. Usually trainee interviewers are then given brief feedback (if any) from the expert trainer.

The paper recommends against such one-time short term trainings which Sri Lankan police officers receive. Though such trainings may increase their knowledge and awareness of desirable practices (Pathirana et al., 2015) as such trainings may not contribute to their skills/competency development. Further, literature also states that they do not contribute to the quality of the child protection services provided to the children (Orbach & Lamb, 2000). On the contrary, literature highlights the value of specific feedback provided to the interviewers on a regular basis as a strong predictor of

high quality forensic interviews (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Price & Roberts, 2011). Literature also convey that **continued and specific feedback** about interview practices are essential to ensure that interviewers adhere to recommended practices (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Esplin, 2002, Fisher, 2010).

Based on this data the paper also recognizes the importance of the investigative police officers to receive specific, continuous feedback pertaining to the quality of their interviews with children. The paper envisions this could be provided through effective supervision and monitoring within the workplace by an in-house senior police officer with experience on child forensic interviewing as well as peer de-briefers with a similar training background. The paper also recognizes the importance of clear verbal and other forms of (e.g. certificates...) incentives provided to the trainees by supervisory bodies.

**Provision of practice opportunities** – The paper is of the opinion that the expertise is best achieved by the provision of extensive feedback and multiple practice opportunities, which need to be specifically tailored to suit the individual trainee's skill level. Literature states (Powell, 2008) that the training programs that make use of practice opportunities by using trained respondents have found to be more effective in improving the performance of investigative interviewers (Powell, 2008; Powell, Fisher, & Hughes-Scholes, 2008). Hence, the paper also recommends the trainers to include practices sessions with feedback for forensic interviews for participating police officers.

The paper also stresses the importance of the time and willingness of the participating police officers to engage in practice and supervision sessions. The paper highlights the need for the availability of brief, standardised measures/tools (i.e. survey questionnaires, observation schedules) by which in-house and external supervisors can measure performance.

### **Recommendation 02: Importance of identifying/developing suitable training models**

The paper provides recommendations for several methods in which the training can be provided. Among

them are audio, video lectures, role plays, workshops, seminar and webinars

**Recommendation to develop and implement a training model** - The paper urges the police officers in charge of the forensic investigations and child protection experts to explore the feasibility of developing and implementing a training model to accommodate skills and competencies pertaining to child forensic interviewing. Some of the competencies identified by this paper are (1) Competency to be clear about the child protection services that the CWB investigative officer can offer and convey it to the services users (e.g children and their families, community), (2) ability to network with varied stake holders (i.e. Professionals, community workers, family members of the child victims) (3) ability to co-coordinate, plan and conduct child friendly/sensitive forensic interviews (4) knowledge/information pertaining to the referral system (i.e. understanding what to do whom to consult in the next step), (5) ability to identify resources and use them appropriately, (6) Skills to gather information and document them, (7) Skills to carry required follow ups, (8) Skills to address the preventives aspects of child protection such as conducting awareness programs (9) Skills to ensure the confidentiality of the children and their families (10) Skills to convey empathy, (11) Skills to listen to children, in a non-discriminative, sensitive manner and, (12) Skills to be sensitive towards gender, sex, disability...

### **Recommendation for an online training**

However, in the absence of expert trainers the WPTM can be provided through online. In considering the difficulties associated with procuring the training expertise of professionals from varied disciplines and also considering the need for greater collaboration between professionals when organizing trainings and workshops, the paper urges the training coordinators to examine the possibility of an online work-based training model. This endeavour would ensure the services of the expert trainers working in different geographical areas in Sri Lanka as well as abroad to provide consultations, facilitation and training when such services are essential.

Moreover, while not intended to completely replace face-to-face training workshops and feedback per se, this would also minimise the travelling cost and time of the police officers arriving from different parts of Sri Lanka

on a specified day or a week to the training venue. It would also alleviate organisational pressures that arise from the large abstraction of officers from the workplace to attend the training. Further, it offers a cost-effective way for trainees to become familiar (in a flexible, private learning environment) with the types of questions and concepts that underpin the elicitation of a free narrative account from witnesses.

In line with that recommendation the paper also request the forensic child protection trainers to explore the possibility of including simulated computer exercises that provide immediate feedback regarding interviewers' performance. However, the paper does not undervalue the face to face practices and feedback, and is against complete replacement of such face to face practices. In recommending an online training model it is also aware of the current constraints which may exist such as limitation pertaining to resources and computer literacy of Sri Lankan police officers attached to CWD's. Therefore, it recommends the training and other responsible/concerned authorities to explore creative and feasible ways of overcoming such problems.

**Refresher courses** - Since literature convey that even trained forensic interviewers coming from highly systematized structured systems do not seem to adhere to best practice guidelines (La Rooy, Lamb, & Memon, 2011; Powell, Wright, & Clark, 2010), due to absence of refresher courses, the paper stresses the significance of refresher courses and continuous, skills and knowledge based training to broaden and extend their knowledge beyond that which has been provided during the initial training courses (Powell, Wright & Clark, 2010).

### **Recommendation 03: Content of the training**

Conducting child forensic interviews - Based on literature and the feedback procured from the participants the paper identifies following contents to be considered when developing a training program for Sri Lankan CWD investigative officers. The paper recommends these contents to be offered under following knowledge categories:

**Category I** – Knowledge and skills pertaining to child development (Information addressing developmental milestones of the children pertaining to varied

developmental trajectories, general behaviours and thoughts of children who have experienced abuse or have experienced difficult situations,

**Category II** - Knowledge and skills pertaining to interviewing skills (verbal and non-verbal gestures/prompts, open and close questions, summarizing and reflection, confidentiality...).

Considering the importance of the open end questions to elicit long narratives (Kuehnle & Connell, 2009; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach & Esplin, 2008, Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy & Katz, 2011)the paper recommends those responsible for training to include information and skills pertaining to the rationale and importance of asking open ended questions during forensic training/ practice/ supervision sessions .

**Category III – Knowledge and skills pertaining to risk assessment and child protection awareness programs.** The paper is of the opinion that the investigative officers attached to Sri Lankan police have a significant role to play not just in the investigative process but also in the prevention of abuse. In the course of their work Sri Lankan police officers may also come across situations where they can assess whether a child may be at risk for maltreatment. This could be assessed when called out to deal with cases of domestic violence or any other police investigation that requires a visit to an address where there are children. Due to the presence of Children's and Women's Desks which is considered to be a specialist units dealing with this area of work, uniformed officers may not be in a position to detect the signs and indicators of abuse. Moreover, they may also not see it as their responsibility. Hence, the paper recommends a general training for all police officers on risk assessment and a module incorporated into the training programs of CWB officers.

### **Recommendation 04: Duration of the training**

The paper recommends the training to exist in two tiers. First tier of training should exist as a certificate program in child protection for police officers attached to CWD's having completed basic training in the Sri Lanka police. The paper recommends the duration of this training to be offered in 10 credits and 150 hours.

The second tier of training to be offered as a Post Graduate Diploma in Child protection for police officers who have completed a degree in any field. The paper recommends the duration of this training to comprise of 21 credits and to be of one year duration.

**Table 01:** Structure of the training programs

No of Credits	Content	Duration	Target Group/Minimum Education Qualification
<b>Tier I – Short term training program on child protection (e.g. Certificate Program in Child Protection)</b>			
10 (150 Hrs.)	Child Development (n =03), Basic Listening Skills (n = 02), Documentation, Legal issues pertaining to child protection (n = 02), Introduction to child protection (n = 02)	3 Months	Police officers with Ordinary Level (having completed 11 yrs of educations) or Advanced Level (having completed 13 years of education).
<b>Tier II – Long term training program in child protection (e.g. Post Graduate Diploma in Child Protection)</b>			
21 (600Hrs)	Semester I - Child Development (n = 03), Introduction to child protection (n = 03), Basic Listening Skills (n = 01), Gender Studies (n = 03), Legal issues pertaining to child protection (n = 01)  Semester II – Children in difficult circumstances (n = 3), Advanced Listening skills (n = 03), Legal issues pertaining to child protection (n = 02), Dissertation (n = 02), Intimate Partner Violence (n = 01)	01 Year	Police Officers having qualifications equivalent to degree
02	Refresher course – 3 to five years of successfully completing the diploma course	1 Week	

**Recommendation 05: Training of trainers (TOT’s)**

It has been established that expertise is best achieved by the provision of extensive feedback and multiple practice opportunities, which need to be specifically tailored to suit the individual trainee’s skill level. Further, the paper suggests that the WPTM requires the cooperation of multiple professionals of varied backgrounds; with the orientation to deliver achievable targets tailored to suit Sri Lankan CWD police officer’s learning style and skill levels. Moreover, the design and

delivery of effective learning tools, sessions, activities and exercises should be enhanced by the input of expert internal trainers with knowledge/experiences as well as external consultants (e.g., academics, legal officers, psychologists).

In order to achieve this broad objective it is important to identify and train trainers who in turn could contribute to the WPTM. Since Sri Lankan police has large number of police officers conducting child forensic interviews, one cost-effective approach would be to engage the assistance of consultants in training sufficient number of

police officers external to the organisation who can provide high quality training and develop resource materials such as manuals, resource books and booklets which can be used during the training. In addition, services of these external consultants can be procured to train experienced police officers with experience in child forensic interview. These supervisors could be internal senior investigative officers (Billett, 2001). The delivery of an effective WPTM is dependent on the availability of expert in-house trainers who can provide precise and constructive feedback. Thus, the paper recommends creating a pool of training of trainers (TOT), with minimum of one TOT per district as well as recognizing and training professionals (i.e. legal officers, Psychologists...) to train CWD police officers.

#### **Recommendation 06: Developing resource materials for WTPM**

The paper recognizes the importance of developing a manual and resource materials for WTPM. When developing a manual and resource materials the paper highlights the significance of simple, easy to comprehend resources, preferably containing illustrations; especially for investigative officers completing a basic training of 10 credits. It further recommends that the manual should provide clear guidelines for trainees. The manual should be given to the investigative officers within two weeks of being assigned to the CWB. The paper provides recommendations for resources, at different levels. 1. A general module for police officers who undergo the basic training immediately after being recruited to police services and 2. a detailed resource packages for police officers enrolled for different tiers child protection training programs or potential trainees who are conducting forensic interviews

#### **Recommendations 07: Conducting Research**

Further, literature states that knowledge about how to maximise the learning experience should be supported with up-to-date human learning research (Powell, 2008). Thus, the paper believes that the design and delivery of effective WPTM would be enhanced by the input of external consultants (e.g., academics) who have the time and networking facilities to keep abreast of the emerging literature and conduct research. Hence, the paper also

stresses the importance of more effective collaboration between stakeholders (expert external trainers, academics, and in-house trainers/supervisors). The paper also recommends extensive research on the following areas: most effective ways to train Sri Lankan police officers –cost effective, culturally feasible/sensitive ways of rapport building, asking questions, provision of up-to-date training which incorporate new information

#### **Recommendation 08: Developing a constructive work culture**

The paper also stresses the importance of constructive work culture as opposed to a passive/defensive or aggressive/defensive work culture (Powell, 2008). The feedbacks received from the CWD police officers convey that they experience burnout due to other duties that they are assigned (e.g. overseeing traffic) along with the child forensic investigations mainly as a result of staff shortages. Further, limited space, passive or insensitive remarks of the colleagues towards the child as well as absence of child friendly physical structure to conduct the interviews within the reporting police stations was also listed as issues creating distress within the investigative officers. Hence, the paper recommends a constructive work culture with the provisions for continued supervisor, peer support, optimum physical environment and role appropriate assignments.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The forensic interview is a crucial tool in child welfare. When investigating cases of child maltreatment, the importance of skilful forensic investigations conducted by trained and experienced investigative officers looms large. Further, effective and efficient forensic interview would ensure the protection of the child victim and the conviction of perpetrators. Hence, given the importance of forensic interviewing, one would expect that training on best interviewing practices would be extensive and mandatory in the Sri Lankan milieu. However, due to shortage of resources, personnel and training skilful forensic investigations in the Sri Lankan milieu faces varied challenges.

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