



# Reliability of Forensic Interview with Child Victims of Sexual Abuse in Türkiye

## *Türkiye’de Cinsel İstismar Mağduru Çocukla Yürütülen Adli Görüşmenin Güvenilirliği*

● Gülçin Orhan<sup>1</sup>, ● Hatice Gülsen Erden<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy, Ankara

<sup>2</sup>Ankara University, Ankara

### ABSTRACT

Sometimes the only evidence in child sexual abuse cases may be the declaration of the victim child. It is only recent phenomenon in Turkey that forensic interviews with child victims of sexual abuse prioritize the child victims and they are administered in a careful and delicate way that would not cause secondary traumatization, and they are conducted by professionals educated. Child advocacy centers and forensic interview rooms are formations where forensic interviews are conducted with children who are victims of sexual abuse. In this article, reliability of forensic interviews conducted with sexually abused child victims are covered on the basis of practices in child advocacy centers. From this point of view, the place of child abuse in Turkish law, institutional practices on this issue and the importance of coordination among institutions are mentioned. Subsequently, the importance of forensic interview for the investigation conducted with the child is explained, and basis components of the forensic interview process are listed. Afterwards, the characteristics of widely used protocols for forensic interviews in the world are mentioned and the reliability of victim’s statement effect and elements affecting the trustworthiness are touched upon. Last, the failures experienced in the system which includes forensic interviews in Turkey and suggestions to remedy these are assessed. Forensic interview should be done within the framework of a joint meeting protocol, increasing the frequency of forensic interviewer supervision training and making it compulsory, public prosecutor, judge, law enforcement officer and professionals working in the child protection system should also participate in the training of forensic interview with the child and consideration of all factors in the reliability evaluation of the forensic interview has been the suggestions conveyed in the light of the relevant literature.

**Key words:** Sexual abuse, forensic interview, child victim, reliability, child advocacy centers

### ÖZ

Çocuğun cinsel istismarı davalarında bazen tek delil, mağdur çocuğun beyanı olabilmektedir. Mağdur çocuğu ön planda tutarak ikincil travmalar yaşamalarının önüne geçmek için titiz ve dikkatli bir şekilde yönetilmesi gereken cinsel istismar mağduru çocukla adli görüşmenin eğitilmiş profesyonellerce yürütülmesi Türkiye’de yakın zamanlı bir olgudur. Çocuk izlem merkezleri ve adli görüşme odaları, cinsel istismar mağduru çocuklarla adli görüşme gerçekleştirilen oluşumlardır. Bu yazıda, cinsel istismar mağduru çocukla yürütülen adli görüşmelerin güvenilirliği, özellikle çocuk izlem merkezi modelindeki uygulamalar temelinde aktarılmıştır. Buradan hareketle öncelikle, çocuk cinsel istismarının Türk hukukundaki yeri ve bu konudaki kurumsal uygulamalar ile kurumlar arası koordinasyonun öneminden söz edilmiştir. Ardından adli görüşmenin, mağdur çocuk ile yürütülen soruşturma açısından önemi hakkında bilgi verilerek adli görüşme sürecinin temel bileşenleri sıralanmıştır. Sonrasında dünyada yaygın şekilde kullanılan başlıca adli görüşme protokollerinin özelliklerinden bahsedilip mağdur beyanının güvenilirliğine ve güvenilirliği etkileyen unsurlara değinilmiştir. Son olarak, Türkiye’de adli görüşme uygulamalarını içine alan sistemde karşılaşılan aksaklıklar ve bunlara yönelik öneriler değerlendirilmiştir. İlgili yazın ışığında aktarılan öneriler; adli görüşmelerin ortak bir görüşme protokolü çerçevesinde gerçekleşmesi, adli görüşmeciler için süpervizyon eğitimlerinin sıklaştırılması ve zorunlu hale getirilmesi, çocukla adli görüşme eğitimlerine Cumhuriyet savcısı, hâkim, kolluk görevlisi ve çocuk koruma sisteminde görev alan profesyonellerin de katılım sağlaması ve adli görüşmenin güvenilirlik değerlendirmesinde tüm faktörlerin dikkate alınmasıdır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Cinsel istismar, adli görüşme, mağdur çocuk, güvenilirlik, çocuk izlem merkezleri

## Introduction

In the Turkish legal system, the issue of child neglect and abuse has been defined within the provisions related to the violation of the welfare of individuals (Oral et al. 2001). Article 103 in the

section “crimes against sexual inviolability” in the Turkish Penal Code has been regulated as “sexual abuse of children” (TCK 2004).

The most important of the interventions for the child who is the victim of abuse is to ensure that the child is protected and

**Address for Correspondence:** Gülçin Orhan, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy, Faculty of Security Sciences, Department of Security Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye

**E-mail:** gulcinpsy@gmail.com **Received:** 15.03.2022 **Accepted:** 20.05.2022

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-3116-9901

restored to health. According to the Turkish Constitution, this duty belongs to the State of the Republic of Turkey (Bilen and Akbulut 2019). In various institutions of the State of the Republic of Turkey, there are child protection practices where interagency cooperation is also available. The Ministry of Family and Social Services, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Education, and the Ministry of Justice carry out many studies aimed at protecting children (Ulukol 2019).

Social work in the juvenile justice system in Turkey is carried out by psychologists, child developers, and social workers, and interviews with victimized children are conducted in juvenile courts, nursing and social rehabilitation units, and child protection centers (Erükçü and Akbaş 2013, Alpar 2017). Child protection centers providing services within the university hospitals have the property of being diagnostic, treatment and monitoring centers operating with teamwork and approaching the child victim in a holistic way (Aydın 2017). In addition, these are centers where children are referred by judicial authorities for that their interviews and assessments are conducted for expert-testimony review. If directed by the judicial authorities, evaluations of victims of domestic violence, criminalized and witness children, and children included in the judicial system due to custody assessment can be made by child protection centers (Bağ et al. 2017).

In Turkey, to be able to conduct forensic interviews with children and prevent their secondary traumatization, child advocacy (monitoring) centers (2010) have been opened in hospitals in some cities, and forensic interview rooms (2017) have been created within courthouses. The training of the professionals working in these structures is organized by the relevant ministries (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019). Child advocacy centers are centers where statements of children who are victims of or suspected of sexual abuse are received, examination procedures and investigation procedures are carried out, and that work in coordination with many institutions (Shamar 2018). In child monitoring centers, procedures and assessments such as internal and external body examination and pregnancy detection, bone age detection, assessment of the victim's mental capacity, and assessment of the reliability of the victim's statement are carried out within the center or within the health facility to which the center is connected with the instruction of the Public Prosecutor. Regardless of judicial proceedings, the assessment of sexually transmitted diseases, acute medical intervention after sexual assault, and routine child health examinations can be carried out thanks to the fact that child monitoring centers are located within the hospital (Bağ et al. 2017).

Forensic interview rooms are places that provide services to prevent secondary traumas of victims and criminalized children during the investigation and prosecution phase (Shamar 2018). In addition to the forensic interview, the forensic interview rooms can also be used for the purpose of conducting a social analysis interview to be conducted with the child. In some exceptional cases, these rooms can also be used for judicial proceedings involving adults. While the forensic interview rooms can be used by the investigation and prosecution processes and

the civil courts, the child advocacy centers can only be used during the investigation process. In places where child advocacy centers are located, statements of children who have been victims of sexual abuse should be received at these centers. If the child advocacy centers have not started operating in that province, the statements of children who have been victims of sexual abuse should be taken in the forensic interview rooms, and if there are no forensic interview rooms, they should be taken through video and audio recording, in which the expert participates effectively. Also, if a child advocacy center is not available or it is deemed more appropriate, cooperation with child protection centers can be provided to hear the child (Aydın 2017).

A forensic interview with a child is a method of collecting complete information from a child in a way that is sensitive to the child's development and legally reliable in relation to allegations of child abuse or violence directed at the child (Newlin et al. 2015). In the model of the child advocacy center, which is also located in countries other than Turkey and is a recent formation in Turkey, the statement of the child is taken by a professional trained in the field of the forensic interview, so that it is aimed to prevent the child from being traumatized by expressing his or her abuse experience many times (Erükçü and Akbaş 2013). Teamwork and case management are of great importance in cases of sexual abuse. In models such as the child advocacy centers of Turkey, which are of great importance in preventing the secondary trauma of the victim as much as possible, many experts from different fields work together (Çelik 2017). In this context, in this study, it is aimed to investigate the reliability of forensic interviews conducted in this new application model operating in Turkey recently (Erükçü and Akbaş 2013) by taking into account forensic interview protocols, forensic interviews conducted in our country's practices, forensic interviews conducted with young and vulnerable children, and criteria-based content analysis. It is estimated that thanks to the forensic interview protocols and recommendations that will be submitted taking into account a multidimensional reliability assessment, there will be an increase in the quality of forensic interviews to be conducted within the framework of models providing services for the high benefit of children (Toth 2011, Ermagan Çağlar et al. 2019, Bilginer et al. 2021).

### **Importance of a Forensic Interview with a Child**

The literature points to the coercive nature of children's participation in the criminal justice system. In many countries of the world, children encounter the criminal justice system on suspicion of being subjected to abuse. This encounter is challenging especially for preschool age group children, regardless of their age (Katz and Kosher 2020). Due to the fact that sexual abuse is a crime, victims may be in a situation of repeatedly expressing their experiences of abuse. The fact that the victimized children have to constantly express their traumatic experiences causes them to experience secondary trauma and also prevents the reduction of the negative consequences of abuse. Since sexual abuse is not only a judicial incident, but also an issue related to health and social services, and due to the lack of coordination within institutions, the victim may give answers to the same

questions repeatedly (Kök 2019).

Most often, the successful investigation and prosecution of criminal offenses depend on obtaining reliable information from child victims and/or witnesses. Sometimes information about what is happening comes only from information obtained from the child during the investigative interview. Based on the results of the investigative interview, three decisions are made: decisions on the criminal jurisdiction, decisions on child protection, and decisions on therapeutic and supportive intervention. The purpose of the investigative interview is to obtain information that will help each of these decisions without obtaining false or misleading information. Since reports on children are critical evidence in many cases, it is extremely important to use the best methods when obtaining information from them (Perona et al. 2005).

In cases of child abuse, the interview to be conducted with the child is of great importance, and it is necessary that these interviews are always conducted by experienced and trained professional personnel in this field (Polat 2007). It is important that the interview with the victim child is conducted without traumatizing her/him. However, the child's traumatization is inevitable due to the inability of the specialist in the interview area and the fact that the victim has to tell about the incident over and over again. Similarly, the fact that the expert who is not competent in the interview issue asks the questions in an inappropriate way in the interview may also lead to further traumatization of the child (Erükçü and Akbaş 2013). The ideal thing in the interview is that only one interviewer conducts the interview process with the child victim of abuse (Çelik 2017).

Interviewing children is a task that requires a sincere, but analytical and critical point of view. This point of view is necessary in order to avoid drawing incorrect conclusions. In order to protect innocent people against false accusations and to protect children from future risks, the goal of identifying actual abuse is very important. Both of these goals that are compatible with each other are protected by forensic interview, which follows the practices determined to obtain accurate information from children (Perona et al. 2005).

Conducting competent forensic interviews with children who have been victims of sexual abuse is considered extremely important to ensure that the perpetrators' crimes are proven and that victims and people who have been wrongfully accused are protected (Cronch et al. 2006). It is believed that unsuccessful forensic interviews that are not conducted with the right techniques have a harmful effect on child victims, criminal cases, and the child protection system (Wood and Garven 2000). The effects of forensic interviews that are not conducted with the right techniques are listed below:

1. Interviews that are not conducted with the right techniques can sometimes lead to the wrongful accusation of innocent people.
2. Making untrue claims, such as a child has been exposed to abuse while not being abused, may lead to the child's separation from their parents or caregivers or lead the child to experience traumatic stress due to her/his participation in a

legal investigation or hearings.

3. When an allegation of sexual abuse is put forward based on inappropriate interview techniques, the task of distinguishing the truth from a lie can become much more difficult, and the child's credibility may be compromised.
4. The resources of child protection services, law enforcement, and the legal system can be consumed by investigations and trials. Due to criminal cases conducted with improper interviews, significant money and time losses are experienced.
5. If the limited resources of child protection agencies and legal institutions are consumed for these cases, less money and time will be available to provide support to children who are truly victims of abuse (Wood and Garven 2000).

### **Reliability of a Forensic Interview with Children**

The perception of victim credibility is a critical factor in the decision-making of the jury in the Anglo-Saxon legal system, especially in the context of child sexual abuse cases in which there are often no confirmatory witnesses. Despite the importance of reliability and the growing literature in this field, there is not yet a single understanding of what reliability is, what areas it covers, and how it can be measured comprehensively (Voogt et al. 2017).

When suspects of child abuse are interrogated, they mostly do not accept the allegations. For this reason, statements of victims are valuable; most of the time, there are also no witnesses or evidence of the abuse incident (Şamar 2018). Victim credibility can significantly affect the outcomes of cases involving allegations of child abuse (Cassidy et al. 2020). In light of a report on a child victim, the prosecutor's office is launching an investigation in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Turkish Penal Code if there are any findings of abuse (Kök 2019). The practice of conducting police interviews with children can have an impact on the perceived credibility of the victim, which can lead to serious legal consequences (Cassidy et al. 2020). Nowadays, in many parts of the world, professionals from various fields are specially trained in forensic interviewing which is carried out sensitively to the development of the child. Forensic interviews, by their very nature, are aimed at collecting reliable information that can serve as evidence for the court in order to protect the child and help determine the offender's responsibility (Toth 2011).

### **Forensic Interview Protocols and Reliability**

In many countries, efforts are being made to conduct forensic interviews with children at certain standards, flexible principles are adopted in these standards instead of strict rules, and the reliability of the victim child statement is being tried to be improved with semi-structured interview protocols (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019). Reducing the trauma that victims may experience during interviews, making their statements efficient in terms of quality and quantity without causing false information, and making them suitable for the benefit of other institutions are among the primary goals of forensic interview

protocols (Çelik 2014).

The RATAc protocol, which is one of the forensic interview protocols and was developed by Cornerhouse Child Advocacy Center in Minnesota in 1989, includes the elements of “*relationship building, anatomy identification, inquiry of touches, history of abuse, and closure*” (Toth 2011). The Cornerhouse RATAc interview protocol, which is one of the semi-structured interview protocols, is person-centered and forensically reliable. In this protocol, it is essential that individuals are treated with respect and sensitivity, and it is based on the idea that children are experts in their own experiences and are less likely to be harmed if they have the opportunity to communicate in their own way. The semi-structured nature of the interviews ensures that each interview covers similar topics. In addition, the protocol allows flexibility in how the interviewer will handle the issues. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows interviewers to be sensitive and responsive to the developmental and emotional needs of children. The questioning is designed to reveal the correct narrative. Interviewers using this protocol avoid directive and inculcatory techniques and rely on open-ended questions and an unbiased point of view. In addition to the questions, additional methods including drawings, diagrams, and anatomical dolls can be used if deemed appropriate by a trained interviewer in this regard (Anderson et al., 2010). In the interview standards of Turkish Child Advocacy Centers, the “Cornerhouse RATAc” protocol, which is mostly used in the formation of the American Child Advocacy Center (child advocacy center), has been based on (Bağ and Bilginer 2018).

Another forensic interview protocol, NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Protocol), was developed by a group of researchers led by Michael Lamb at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to encourage the use of open-ended prompts in the oral narrative (Toth 2011, La Rooy 2015). The use of the structured NICHD protocol improves the quality of information obtained from people who are alleged to be victims. The NICHD protocol covers all stages of the investigative interview. At the introductory stage, the interviewer introduces himself, explains the tasks of the child (*explaining events in detail and telling the truth*), and explains the basic rules and expectations (*when appropriate, she/he can correct the interviewer or say “I don’t know”, “I don’t remember”, “I don’t understand”*). The relationship building stage, which follows the introduction stage, consists of two parts. Firstly, creating a comfortable, supportive environment for children and ensuring harmony between the children and interviewers have been designed. In the second part, children are asked to describe in detail a neutral event that they have recently experienced. This application shows the level of specific detail expected from the child, and it has been planned to familiarize the child with the techniques used in the main part and open-ended investigative strategies. In the transition section, which precedes the main part of the forensic interview, the target event or events that are being investigated is tried to be identified not by implication, but by a series of commands and as clear commands as possible. If the child fails to identify only the target event or events, the interviewer uses some carefully worded and increasingly focused commands,

respectively. If the child makes an allegation, it is started with an invitation to the “*free recall*” (e.g., “*tell me everything*”). As soon as the first narration is completed, the interviewer asks the child to indicate whether the incident occurred once or more than once, and then continues to provide event-specific information using following (“*what happened next?*”) and cued prompts (a person/object/action that has already been mentioned). In order to reveal free recalls related to the alleged incident or incidents, the details mentioned by the child are referred to in the form of “*tell me everything about it*”. Only after the free recall commands are completely finished, the interviewer follows the target questions (questions focusing on the details that the child has already mentioned, and aimed at obtaining information in certain categories [e.g.,: time, appearance] such as “when did it happen?” or “what color was the car mentioned?”). If the very important details are still missing, the interviewers ask questions that are limited to options (mostly yes-no questions or mandatory preference questions). Insinuating words that inform the child what kind of response is expected are absolutely not directed (Lamb et al. 2007).

In the RATAc protocol, drawing pictures and similar techniques are used at the stage in which the interviewer establishes relationship with the child. After establishing a relationship with the child, the stage where children under the age of 10 are asked to name their body parts through anatomical drawings and touches are spoken is followed. In approaches based on the NICHD protocol, on the other hand, it is not recommended to use auxiliary methods such as dolls and drawings since it is considered that this may increase the risk of revealing incorrect information (Toth 2011, La Rooy et al. 2015).

Both the RATAc and the NICHD protocol act with the desire to be sensitive to the needs of the child and to improve interview practices. In both protocols, the interview environment should be confidential, free of distractions, child-friendly, and neutral. As far as possible, no one should be present at the interview except the child and the interviewer. In both protocols, video recording of the interview is considered the best and most complete method of making the interview a document. Regardless of the preferred protocol, interviewers should take into account the child’s intellectual, mental, and physical condition, as well as her/his adequacy of providing information (for example, the child may be tired or distracted, or it is sleep time of the child). Both approaches emphasize the interviewer who continues the interview while maintaining his/her objectivity but also has a supportive, warm, and friendly attitude. It is very important to behave in accordance with the development of the child during the interview. Both approaches emphasize that interviewers should pay careful attention to the child’s ability to use and understand the language and should adapt to the child’s developmental level. Both approaches are based on respecting the child by recognizing her/his uniqueness. In addition to adapting to the child’s level of cognitive development, interviewers should take into account the age of the child, the culture in which she/he lives, her/his experiences, whether she/he has a disability, and the level of support, as well as her/his unique characteristics (Toth 2011).

Interviews conducted with child victims of sexual abuse in child advocacy centers in Turkey are semi-structured (Bağ and Bilginer 2018). A semi-structured interview is a type of interview that should be carried out by professionals who are trained in the subject, in which the focus is on the interviewee, that can choose different ways to ask question and access information, and can be flexible in terms of interpreting the answers received (Polat 2007). It is fundamental to start forensic interviews with open-ended questions and use focused techniques in the later stage of the interview (Çelik 2014). Open-ended questions should be used primarily in children and adolescents who are older in age (Cronch et al. 2006).

### **Reliability in the Light of Some Models of Forensic Interviews with the Child**

When the foreign examples of Turkish child advocacy center and forensic interview room models are examined, it is seen that child advocacy centers were started to be established in the United States in 1985 (Goddard et al. 2015). Similar to the Turkish child advocacy center model, child advocacy centers abroad also include the provision of basic services such as medical examinations, psychological support, and advocacy services in a child-friendly structured facility. In addition, they are at the position of the central point for the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional teams that cooperate in the investigation of abuse (Herbert and Bromfield 2016). In these centers, forensic interviews are conducted by specially trained forensic interviewers. In addition to supervision training, forensic interviewers participate in regular feedback and peer support groups. These are seen as a vital part of the process and they contribute to the development of interview skills (Goddard et al. 2015). Similarly, it is known that forensic interview supervision trainings have been started in the Turkish child advocacy center model since 2018, and for this model, it is suggested to repeat supervision trainings with annual periods and to create mandatory in-service training programs (Orhan 2020). Moreover, it is seen in foreign models that forensic interviewers are from various disciplines, educational backgrounds, and institutions. It has been stated that although the interdisciplinary targets differ, effective forensic interviewers use similar skills and techniques (APSAC 2012). In child forensic interview training organized by the USA National Children's Advocacy Center, Children's advocacy centers, law enforcement, child protective services, medical services, and persons connected with legal institutions were included as participants in the past, while since 1998, thousands of professionals working in the armed forces and non-governmental organizations from 50 states and 12 foreign countries have participated in it (Newlin et al. 2015). In the model of the children's advocacy center of Turkey, forensic interviewers consist of physicians, specialist nurses, psychologists, child developers, and social workers who have successfully completed the specialized training program (Ministry of Health General Directorate of Health Services 2017). As for the Belarusian model, the experts who conducted interviews with the child were previously police officers, while today forensic interviews are conducted by psychologists trained specially on the subject. Psychologists, prosecutors, and police

officers have been trained in child psychology and interview techniques (Goddard et al. 2015). In the Icelandic Barnahus (*Children's House*) model, forensic interviewers often have a base in the field of child psychology, and all of the interviewers have been trained in the use of a standardized interview protocol (see NICHHD protocol) (Goddard et al. 2015, La Rooy et al. 2015). Although there are recommendation guidelines for interviews taking place in forensic interview rooms in Turkey, it is known that experts are not subjected to a certain interview protocol training (Sarıca and Coşkun 2000). In a study conducted on the model of the Turkish child advocacy center, it is also stated that interviewers do not use standard protocols in forensic interviews (Üstün Güllü 2020). In Turkey, conducting forensic interviews within the framework of a common protocol will increase the reliability of victim statements and create a roadmap for interviewers (Sarıca and Coşkun 2000, Üstün Güllü 2020).

In the study conducted by Shamar (2018) and in which the employees of the forensic interview room operating in a courthouse in Turkey were included in the sample group, it was stated by the participants that the experts had undergone only one week of forensic interview training and the training program was not sufficient. It was also learned that the child advocacy center model was taught in the training of forensic interview rooms, and some experts participated in supervision training if they requested (Shamar 2018). As a result of the analysis of interviews conducted with experts providing services in forensic interview rooms in Turkey, Kök (2019) found that the participants did not consider their forensic interview training sufficient. In another study conducted with forensic interviewers involved in the formation of the children's advocacy center of Turkey, it was determined that they were satisfied with the training that forensic interviewers had received regarding the task they were carrying out, they felt that the education they received was sufficient, but they indicated that despite receiving a standard education, differences were observed in different cities in terms of application (Üstün Güllü 2020). In a study conducted by Yüksel (2018) in order to evaluate the services provided at a child monitoring center in Turkey, it was determined that all of the forensic interviewers who participated in the study positively evaluated the child monitoring center process, 75.6% of the forensic interviewees found the statements received in this formation sufficient, and 70.7% perceived themselves sufficient in providing support to the victim. In addition, the participants stated that studies on burnout should be carried out in order to increase the quality of the service offered at the child monitoring center, and supervision and standardization studies should be conducted with all stakeholders. In the study conducted by Orhan (2020) and which 106 forensic interviewers working in 26 child monitoring centers operating in Turkey were included in the sample group, it was stated that the participants had requests to take measures for secondary traumatic stress and to provide regular supervision support, in-service training programs and update training. It was stated by Cronch et al. (2006) that forensic interviews should be recorded, and interview records and copies should be regularly audited by supervisors. Videotaping of interviews can be a basic quality control mechanism for

supervisors in detecting poorly conducted interviews (Wood and Garven 2000). Considering the findings of research conducted on Turkish practices (Shamar 2018, Yüksel 2018, Orhan 2020), it can be said that supervision trainings of professionals conducting forensic interviews with children should be tightened and that it is important to make these trainings mandatory in order to increase the quality of forensic interviews.

For professionals serving in the model of forensic interview rooms in Turkey, it has been stated that in addition to the criterion of being participated in the training of forensic interview with children, they should preferably graduate from the fields of psychology, psychological counseling and social work, and have a minimum of three years of experience (Atılğan et al. 2014). In the training standards manual for forensic interviewers who will provide services in child monitoring centers of Turkey (Sağlık Bakanlığı 2017), it is stated that professional staff with the title of “*physician, child developer, psychologist, social worker working in health institutions and organizations and nurses who have completed a master’s degree in child development, psychiatry, psychology, psychological counseling and guidance or social work*” will be accepted into the certified training program. It is seen that in this manual, the minimum length of service is not specified as the criterion for professional staff to participate in the certified training program (Sağlık Bakanlığı 2017).

“It is considered that the inclusion of other professionals (graduates of sociology, child development, teaching, family and consumer sciences, as well as graduates of non-field faculties assigned to the pedagogical staff) defined as social workers in the Child Protection Law in the process as forensic interviewers does not meet international standards and it is an obstacle to conducting an evidence-based and child-benefit interview. When the educational formations of the professionals in question are evaluated, it is known that they do not receive some trainings such as child interview/interview techniques and family and child psycho-social assessment” (Atılğan et al. 2014:11).

From this perspective, it is believed that after evaluating the suitability of the curricula of undergraduate education of professional staff, who are candidates for the training program to work in all formations where forensic interview services are offered in Turkey, for the service that will be offered, ensuring the participation of candidates in this training will be in the best interests of children. In addition, when looking at the practice abroad (APSAC 2012, Newlin et al. 2015), it is seen that the forensic interviewers conducting interviews with children are from various disciplines, educational backgrounds, and institutions. Moreover, it is noted that thousands of professionals working in child advocacy centers, law enforcement agencies, child protection services, medical services, and people associated with legal institutions, the armed forces, and non-governmental organizations have participated in the training programs focusing on forensic interviews with children. Regarding the forensic interview models conducted in Turkey, it is stated that differences in the terms of implementation were encountered between institutions and professionals, and this situation can have a negative effect on the validity of the forensic

interviews, cause the child to be interviewed more than once, and also negatively affect the reliability of the statement of the child eyewitness (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019). In this context, it may be recommended that in the training programs that will be organized for the professionals who will be involved in the formation of the Turkish child monitoring center and forensic interview rooms, the issues of forensic interviews with a child victim of sexual abuse should be standardized, or professionals from both formations should be included as a participant in a training program and a supervision system that can be organized jointly.

In a study, it is proposed to plan mandatory in-service training programs for all stakeholders of the institution participating in the provision of services in the child advocacy center, while in another study, it is proposed to plan seminars and in-service training programs for public prosecutors (Orhan 2020, Üstün Güllü 2020). In this regard, it is believed that in order to allow evaluating the effectiveness and nature of the conducted forensic interviews and to prevent the victim child from being traumatized by repeated forensic interviews, it will be valuable that the public prosecutor, judges, law enforcement officers, and professionals working in the child protection system participate in the forensic interview training programs organized for forensic interviewers or that these topics are included in in-service training modules. In the study conducted by Shamar and Urhan (2020), it is also stated that the preparation of training programs for public prosecutors and judges on the issues of forensic interviews, communication with vulnerable groups, and forensic interview rooms may be important for cooperation between multidisciplinary teams.

### **Reliability of Forensic Interviews with Minors and Vulnerable Children**

It is not surprising that fewer details are obtained in general from much younger children. This situation underlines the need for effective interview techniques to be used on young children (Cronch et al. 2006). During the forensic interview, it is necessary to be able to determine the concepts related to the time and space perception of victim children in young age groups. In the questions to be asked about the concept of time to children of the preschool age group, instead of creating question sentences with the words of history, questions can be asked about the time relationship between the relevant incident and important events (e.g., birthday) that the child can remember (Çelik 2017). If information could not be obtained from the child at an enlightening level, the child’s expressions may be interpreted as confusing, inconsistent, or incorrect, and this may pose a problem in the reliability assessment (Stolzenberg et al. 2020).

The results of the study conducted by Katz and Kosher (2020) showed that forensic interviewers believe that young children have limited ability to give detailed and reliable statement. It should be noted that these perceptions can create an obstacle to the participation of children in forensic interviews. In conditions where it is difficult to conduct interviews with young children, some techniques that can help with the interview can be used. One of these techniques is the focusing technique. The focusing

technique is one of the most effective techniques for obtaining information from young children. This technique includes asking appropriate questions, anatomical drawing, drawing pictures, storytelling, and the use of dollhouses. To be able to obtain information, it may be useful to use not only one of them but also more than one. These methods need to be applied by specialists. Literature studies show that the pictures made by children who have had traumatic experiences are different from other children. For example, in cases of incest relationships, some children draw genital organs or draw the family member who abuses them far from them in the picture. Painting and drawing techniques should be considered as auxiliary tools for the interview, the symbols in the child's paintings should not be approached in the form of absolute truth, and after the drawings of the victim, it is necessary to try to get information by talking to her/him. Another technique is the technique based on game therapy. In this technique, animating the before and after the sexual abuse experience through the game is based on. Due to the nature of the technique, attention should be paid to the possibility of traumatizing the victim. It is important to receive support from games in terms of seeing her/his reactions and the information conveyed by the victim through the roles he portrays. Victimized children with intense and repetitive trauma do not much prefer to play imaginary games, but when they prefer, they choose the most frightening roles. The interviewers should make game assessments by considering the sociodemographic characteristics and life of the victims (Atılğan et al. 2014). In the relevant literature, it is stated that the fact that young children are not fully cognitively mature means that they cannot easily perceive, remember, and that consistent information about abuse cannot be obtained from them. This may be a limitation that interview techniques cannot resist (Cross et al. 2008). In this regard, the question of how many years of age at the lowest a forensic interview can be conducted with a child is investigated as the subject of scientific research. Perona et al. (2005) recommend considering that children in the age group under the age of four may not be able to answer questions about truth and lies correctly, regardless of the way they are asked. It is noted that forensic interviews are usually conducted with children from the age of three and a half in centers operating under the Icelandic Barnahus (*Children's House*) model (Goddard et al. 2015). Moreover, in the relevant literature, it is stated that direct interviews should not be conducted with children aged five and under about sexual abuse due to their limited communication capacity (International Rescue Committee 2012). It is known that in the practice applied in Turkey, forensic interviews can be conducted with two- to five-year-old children who are considered to have a level of verbal ability to express themselves by evaluating their developmental characteristics. It is recommended that when assessing the reliability of interviews with these children, it should be taken into account the fact that even if they can express themselves verbally, this age group may not yet have the ability to distinguish between truth and lie. If it is determined that the victim's knowledge of the concepts of truth and lie is not fully developed, it is necessary to be careful at other stages of the interview since the child may be easily guided (Çelik 2014). The inability to correctly answer questions about truths and lies does not mean that small age

group children will not tell the truth; it should be known that children whose ability to distinguish between truth and lie has not been developed yet will also be unlikely to have the ability to lie (Perona et al. 2005, Steel 2014).

Monitoring the psychosocial characteristics and needs of the interviewee is an important factor that facilitates the interview process. The missing information obtained from the child may be an indicator of a question that cannot be directed correctly or has been forgotten (Erükü and Akbaş 2013). Incorrect information may be obtained from children for various reasons, such as trying to answer the questions asked at the interview in a way that pleases the interviewer, the inability to understand the questions asked, affecting the memory by repeated and guiding questions, the inability to remember events and making guesses, or deliberately misleading the interviewer because of individual gain (Reno et al. 2000).

The reality of the statement increases if the victim child resorts to self-correction when conveying her/his experience of abuse and states that she/he is not sure of the accuracy of what she/he remembers. In fabricated stories, in order to make the statement more realistic, a person will want to reflect specifically that he remembers all the details. In fabricated statements, to be able to appear reliable, the person does not indicate that she/he doubts her/his narrative. Especially in domestic cases, although the child wants the abuse to end, she/he may not want the perpetrator to suffer harm because she/he continues to feel love for the close relative who is the perpetrator. In addition, the fact that the child feels guilty and thinks that the abuse he has been subjected to is caused by his own behavior and tries to act with understanding to forgive the perpetrator also increases the reliability of his statement (Alpar 2017).

It may not be possible to conduct oral interviews with physically or mentally disabled children who have been sexually abused or are suspected of being abused. In such cases, strategies such as receiving information from the caregiver of the child and nonverbal communication methods such as smiling, toys, or pictures can be used (International Rescue Committee 2012). Regarding the interviews to be conducted with refugee children who do not master the Turkish language, the importance of obtaining information from the state authority dealing with the child, if available, before the forensic interviews, the presence of an interpreter in the forensic interview, the fact that the interpreter should convey the interviewer's statements as they are without differentiation and abbreviation, the fact that the child and the forensic interviewer should not interrupt the eye contact is emphasized (Bağ et al. 2017).

The expectations and social status of children in terms of compliance with the authority may make them more sensitive during the interview. Children who have become vulnerable in various ways and, in particular, have ethnic differences can contact the authorities more indirectly in order to avoid possible conflict. Therefore, in the interviews to be conducted with these children, it is necessary to create a reliable and responsive interview atmosphere, avoid an authoritarian approach, and use methods that will allow direct communication (Atılğan et al. 2014).

## Criteria-Based Content Analysis and Reliability

The fact that there is a low probability of finding eyewitnesses in cases of suspected child sexual abuse and the difficulties in establishing causality between the mental symptoms directed at the victim and the story has shed light on the development of techniques for determining the reliability of children's statements (Çelik 2014). In child sexual abuse cases, it is critically important whether the statements are true or not due to the lack of sufficient physical evidence in many of them. For this reason, it is an important aspect to analyze the reality of the statements (Eyüpoğlu 2012). Criteria-based content analysis is an analysis used to examine the validity of the declaration of children who are victims of sexual abuse (Alpar 2017). This analysis is based on the main logic that "The expression of really happened events is qualitatively different from the expression of fabricated events" (Yuille 1992). The criteria-based content analysis includes the following criteria (Yuille 1992, Eyüpoğlu 2012): *"the consistency of the expression (logical structure), unstructured production (spontaneous expression), sufficient quantity of detail, contextual embedding, description of interactions, transfer of mutual dialogues, unexpected breaks, unusual details, peripheral details, accurately reported but misunderstood details, references to external incidents, references to their own psychological state, references to the psychological state of the perpetrator, spontaneous corrections, admitting lack of memory, raising doubts about her/his own testimony, self-blame, pardoning the perpetrator, specific characteristics of the offense"*. It is necessary to evaluate the analysis by a forensic psychologist, criminologist, or forensic linguist who has specialized training in this subject. Two approaches are adopted in the evaluation of the analysis. In the first approach, it is essential to meet the first five criteria and at least two criteria from the other fourteen criteria, while in the other approach, it is essential to meet at least eight criteria out of all criteria. Since it has been found in many theoretical and clinical studies that criteria-based content analysis determines the accuracy of statements by about 90%, it is recommended that this analysis should be requested as an expert report in Turkey (Eyüpoglu 2012). However, the result of the study conducted to present the first data to the relevant literature about the reliability of the statements of children, who have been victims of sexual abuse, among evaluators in Turkey has revealed that there may be differences between the evaluators in terms of the reliability-related content analysis. It is suggested to apply the analysis with multiple blind evaluators (Bilginer et al. 2021).

In determining the reliability of the statement, a multidimensional assessment is required (Bilginer et al. 2021). Raskin and Esplin (1991) suggested that the systematic assessment of the reliability of children depends on three elements: a highly qualified interview, an assessment of the presence or absence of the criteria of the criteria-based content analysis, the completion of the validity checklist. The validity checklist consists of background characteristics (cognitive-emotional limitations, language and knowledge, emotion during the interview, impressionability/ suggestibility), the properties of the interview (interview methods, influence on the content of the statement),

motivational factors (reporting motivation, the context of disclosures, the influence of others) and investigative questions (the lack of realism, inconsistent statements, contradictory evidence, the characteristics of the crime) (Raskin and Esplin 1991, Lamb et al. 1997). After assessing the statements using the criteria-based content analysis system, interviewers should assess all the items on the checklist by taking into account that each positive response should raise a doubt about the reliability of the allegation (Lamb et al. 1997).

One of the institutions where the reliability of children's statements is evaluated in Turkey is child advocacy centers. One of the opportunities provided by the child monitoring center of Turkey is that it is a model that brings professionals together to examine the consistency between the statement, examination, and forensic mental assessment. In this structure, forensic interviewers transmit the content of the interview they have conducted and the report they have prepared on the reliability of the statement to the Public Prosecutor's Office. The relevant Public Prosecutor may request a child and adolescent mental health and diseases specialist to prepare a report as an expert witness on the reliability of the statement. During this assessment, in addition to the detailed history and mental examination records of the victim, it is also important to examine the statement according to the "criteria-based content analysis" (Bağ and Bilginer 2018). In the light of this information, it can be said that in the reliability of the forensic interview, not only the content of the statement, but also many elements such as the motivation of the victim to give an incorrect expression, environmental factors, psychiatric examination, details about the story, past abuse experiences, interview technique used, and physical findings supporting abuse should be assessed together and an opinion should be formed (Bağ and Bilginer 2018).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is necessary to recognize child abuse in order to prevent undesirable consequences of abuse, provide treatment support, and prevent recurrent abuses. In particular, over the past two decades, efforts to prevent child abuse have gained momentum all over the world. For this purpose, educational programs for families and educators have been created and information programs have been organized for health professional groups in many countries and Turkey (Ürer and Kılıç 2019). The most correct way of combating abuse is to prevent the occurrence of abuse (Ürer and Kılıç 2019). There are laws in Turkey explaining the state's obligation to protect children from abuse; however, it is also necessary to create regulations defining the powers that should be used in the implementation of this obligation. Children cannot be protected only by laws; only the punitive element of the law is the weakest and most unfavorable in terms of protection (Bilen and Akbulut 2019).

In order to conduct forensic interviews by taking into account the principle of the high benefit of the child, forensic interview rooms and child advocacy (monitoring) centers have been established in Turkey. However, in these models in Turkey, it is observed that there are differences in terms of implementation

between institutions and professionals. These differences can have a negative impact on the validity of the forensic interviews, as well as cause to conduct interviews multiple times with victim children due to the fact that the necessary information cannot be collected from the interviews. The interviews after the first interview cause secondary traumatization of the victim and also affect the reliability of the statement of the child eyewitness negatively by leading to the occurrence of memory errors related to the incident. It can be said that because of this, there is a contradiction with the goal of preventing secondary traumatization of the child, which is one of the purposes of creating this model (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019).

In this article, considering the fact that their start-up history is older than the forensic interview rooms and that they only offer services to children who have been victims of sexual abuse, the concept of reliability of forensic interviews has been mostly conveyed in the light of the applications in the Turkish child advocacy center model. In order for the child monitoring centers to continue their activities efficiently, the fact that the professionals providing services are well trained and have sufficient knowledge and skills in this field are factors that can affect the quality of the service at a high level. In addition, providing support to professionals who are constantly performing services in this field for mental exposure and burnout that they are likely to experience will be valuable in terms of service providers and interviews to be conducted with children (Kök 2019).

The lack of a forensic interview protocol that brings professionals together in a standard practice despite the current developments in Turkey leads to occurrence differences during practice. These differences may cause professionals conducting forensic interviews to feel uncertainty, the victim to be traumatized repeatedly in the process, and the reliability of the information obtained to be questioned (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019). To be able to avoid negative consequences, existing interview techniques should be constantly reviewed and new revised and edited versions should be published if necessary (Cronch et al. 2006). When considering the positive outcomes of the use of forensic interview techniques, it can be said that that research is needed on the subject (Ersoy 2006).

During the investigation and prosecution processes, it is necessary to take the statements of the children carefully, to avoid the direction as much as possible, and to examine their reliability scientifically (Çelik 2014). In the child protection field, anyone conducting an interview with a child should be aware of the importance of using strategies that prevent child harm and collect accurate information (Reno et al. 2000). In cases of sexual abuse, it is necessary to evaluate the investigation and prosecution process multidisciplinary (Çelik 2014). It should be remembered that in the approach to child sexual abuse cases, each of all intervention approaches offered to the child is of great importance as much as a forensic interview, and any disruption that may occur in one of them may adversely affect all parts at various levels.

In summary, to conduct an interview that does not traumatize the child and has high reliability, the use of forensic interview

protocols that is used in many parts of the world (Brükçü and Akbaş 2013, Çelik 2014, Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019), and to increase the quality of the service provided to the child, providing educational (compulsory supervision, in-service training, etc.) and psychological support services (against burnout and secondary traumatic stress) to professionals conducting forensic interviews with the child will be valuable (Shamar 2018, Yüksel 2018, Orhan 2020). In Turkish models, evaluating the compliance of the undergraduate education curriculum of the personnel, who are considered to be trained to conduct forensic interview with the child, with the task they will be assigned, planning multidisciplinary studies to reduce the practice differences between the institutions conducting forensic interviews and the professionals providing services in these structures (Ermağan Çağlar and Türk 2019), and organizing seminars and in-service trainings for other professionals working in the judicial system are important (Orhan 2020, Shamar and Urhan 2020, Üstün Güllü 2020). Due to the fact that detailed and reliable statement skills may be limited, communication assistance techniques (nonverbal communication, game therapy, painting and drawing techniques, etc.) should be used in interviews to be conducted with children who are younger in age or have physical or mental disabilities (International Rescue Committee 2012, Atılgan et al. 2014, Katz and Kosher 2020). Also, in addition to using criteria-based content analysis in analyzing the reality of the statement, it is considered necessary and important to evaluate many factors together, such as the motivation of the victim to give an incorrect statement, environmental factors, past abuse experience, and physical and mental examination findings (Bağ and Bilginer 2018).

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