



Oficina de Defensoría de los
Derechos de la Infancia a.c.

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Basic Information for Interviews

UNICEF

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INTRODUCTION

This document contains tools that may be useful when interviewing children and adolescents in general, but especially those who are migrating unaccompanied or who have been separated from their significant adults. Most of the suggestions are constructed on the basis of the characteristics of the stage of development of the child or adolescent; in particular, the concrete and egocentric thinking that dominates childhood and adolescence. These characteristics have profound implications for the way in which children and adolescents reason and perceive the situation they are experiencing.

Understanding concrete and egocentric thinking* will allow interviewers to confront one of the most difficult situations when dealing with children and adolescents: leaving behind adult reasoning to “place oneself” in the child and adolescent thought process, and intervene on that basis.

The document also includes suggestions related to the emotional development of children and adolescents, and one of its central characteristics: the difficulties they face in controlling their emotions, and the appearance of psychological defense mechanisms in response to painful emotions. This characteristic requires particular interventions during the interview by the adult who interacts with the child or adolescent.

Other concepts relate to the psychological reality of children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic situations, such as sexual abuse, domestic violence and/or neglect; and also the psychological reality of unaccompanied migrants or those separated from their significant adults.

These are general ideas that the person interviewing children and adolescents can adapt to suit the situation and characteristics identified in each particular case. They are not intended to be strict guidelines to be followed, but ideas to incorporate into the everyday work.

This document is the result of collaboration between the Federal Child Protection Authorities of the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (SNDIF) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Mexico. It is intended as a useful tool for the State Child Protection Authorities (SIPINNA), created by the General Rights of Children and Adolescents Act (LGDNNA), as well as for any institution responsible for conducting specialized interviews with children and adolescents.

Designed to serve as a practical guide for interviewers, it presents brief and general outlines of concepts, with concrete examples of ideas or suggestions. Bibliographical references and a glossary of terms are included for concepts that require examining in greater depth.

It should be noted that the publication is complemented by others developed by UNICEF Mexico. For example, the *Guide for the protection and restitution of rights (procedure and toolbox)*, aimed at the multidisciplinary teams of the Child Protection Authorities, offers step-by-step suggestions for diagnosing the rights situation of children and adolescents and preparing rights restitution plans in accordance with the LGDNNA. All the techniques mentioned in this publication can be used to enhance the interview steps set out in the Guide.

*See glossary of terms.

The suggestions in this publication can also be enhanced by the information contained in the document *Special situations during interviews to diagnose the rights situation of children and adolescents*. That document presents specific techniques for approaching children and establishing trust, essential to carrying out an interview, when there is a suspicion that a child or adolescent has experienced sexual violence, presents suicidal behaviour or self-harm, or there are signs of having been recruited into sexual exploitation networks.

Finally, the publication is complemented by two other documents published by UNICEF: one on monitoring the emotional situation of children and adolescents whose rights have been violated (including those who are housed in social assistance centres) and the training of shelter staff as agents who promote processes of resilience in migrant children and adolescents. The first of the scenarios is contained in the document *Guide for monitoring the emotional state of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in shelters*; and the second in the manuals, *Resilient Migration. Interventions for the reconstruction of the migration experience on the basis of emotional recovery actions* and the *Manual of activities to promote resilience in migrant children and adolescents and refugees housed in social assistance centres*.



Characteristics of the thought process during childhood and adolescence



Why talk about characteristics of childhood and adolescence?

It may seem obvious, but it is necessary to remember that a child cannot think and act in the same way as an adult who has completed all the stages of human development.¹

That is, children are not “small adults”, nor do they “think like an adult, but less so”. They are qualitatively different from adults; the way in which they perceive the world, use reasoning and interact with others on that basis is also different.

The difference between children and adults is a structural one. This means that it is determined by the stage of development. Thinking skills are something that is constructed,² from the simple to the complex.

While the person is in the initial stages of development,³ in which concrete sensory thinking prevails, he or she is not able to perform complex and abstract mental operations, which characterize the final stages of development of human thought (around 24 years old).

That is why children cannot change the way they reason. The type of thought process they have is the only one they can make use of at their present stage of development. It is impossible for children to think like adults, because the neurological structure and characteristics—the areas of the brain that allow complex and abstract thinking—are not yet functional.

We talk about characteristics of children because it is essential that the adult interviewing them understands the way they think and adapts to it. The opposite is impossible; the child could never think and reason like an adult. Ignoring this fact means missing the opportunity to obtain information that will be useful for ensuring proper protection of the rights of the child, as well as offering a beneficial experience during the interview.

The following chart presents an overview of what children or adolescents can and cannot do, from a cognitive point of view.

The central characteristics of child development are concrete thought and egocentric thinking. These appear in the left column of the table, while the lower section summarizes some of their implications for interviews. The column on the right shows the types of reasoning or actions that children and adolescents cannot do yet, due to their stage of development. Finally, under the heading “So what is useful?” a number of techniques that can be applied by the interviewer are described.

¹ *Development* is usually understood to mean the “progressive evolution of the structures of an organism and of the functions performed by them, towards behaviours considered of higher quality or superior.”

² To say that “intelligence is constructed” does not mean that the child possesses the same kind of intelligence as an adult, but in a “lesser amount” (i.e. like a deficit that is resolved as they grow). The way a child reasons is simply different from the way an adult does.

³ According to the psychologist Jean Piaget, the cognitive development of a child develops through stages, in an inalterable order (from the simple to the complex, as stated above). Each stage describes cognitive and intellectual skills, and the way in which children think and solve problems, according to their stage of development.

What they can and cannot do

Due to the structural conditions of childhood

Children and adolescents CAN...

- reason if they manipulate objects.
- describe what happened.
- indicate/show with concrete objects.
- describe the succession of events following the subjective thread of their memory.
- describe what they felt and experienced.
- narrate lived events through snatches of memory and following a subjective thread.

Children and adolescents CANNOT...

- reason with abstract ideas alone.
- explain what happened
- describe variables of place, location etc. with words alone.
- explain the cause that led to an event.
- put themselves in the place of the other; describe what others were doing.
- narrate objectively, structuring a story with a beginning, development and an ending so that the interlocutor understands it.





Important note on the thinking process of adolescents:

It may be assumed that adolescents, because they are older, are at a stage where they are able to reason abstractly. However, this is not always the case for the following reasons:

- If they have not had an optimal development over their lifetime, they will not have achieved, even when they have reached 11 or 12 years of age, the cognitive capacities that would correspond, in theory, to that age. Without optimal development, there is no development of optimal skills. It is even possible that a human being, because of her or his particular life situation, never achieves the capacity for abstract and complex thought.
- In general, the conditions for the optimal development of cognitive abilities include having had, throughout life, sufficient stimuli at the right time, significant adults who are present and emotionally stable, adequate food, and not having been exposed to situations of violence. In general, the adolescents interviewed will not have experienced optimal conditions such as these. On the contrary, they may have histories that involve violence and serious deficiencies, from which it may be deduced that their cognitive development will not be ideal.

- Even when the adolescent has acquired cognitive abilities for abstract thought, if she or he is in a situation that generates stress or anguish, or has recently experienced difficult situations, she or he will not be able to use these tools as she or he would in a familiar, stress-free context. In difficult situations, a defense mechanism called “regression” is activated, which causes the person to “return” to earlier moments of development in order to feel secure. These are always earlier stages of life, because they are familiar and, in most cases, the person already possesses the tools to face the difficulties at that stage. As a result, during an interview that causes stress or recalls distressing situations, a 17-year-old adolescent could actually think like a small child.

- It is impossible for adolescents not to feel overwhelmed by the appearance of strong emotions. The development stage they are going through is constantly challenging them, and the interview is no exception. This means that if, during the interview, strong emotions of fear, confusion, or anxiety arise, together with defense mechanisms to minimize their effects, they will not reason in a calm, objective and precise manner. For example, if they are hurt and worried because they realize that their immigration project will not continue as planned, the pain and anguish will affect the way they think, understand and reason about what happens in the interview. Everything they hear and think at that moment will be coloured by sadness and confusion.

- The ability to reason on the basis of critical judgement is not fully possible until after 23 years of age, when the frontal lobe of the brain completes its development; as such their reasoning, especially if asked to make decisions, cannot consider medium- and long-term consequences, or leave emotions aside when thinking and deciding.

So what is useful?

Given these facts, the most useful way to interview an adolescent is to use techniques, tools and materials that are more focused on children's concrete and egocentric thinking.

Even if in another situation, or in another context without stress or anguish, the adolescent may display an aptitude for abstract thought, we cannot be sure that she or he will be able to do so during the interview. Every situation in which an adult interviews a child or adolescent represents a context in which there is an imbalance of power, and this generates fear and anxiety.

The more closely the techniques used during the interview are in line with children's concrete and egocentric thinking, the more likely it is that the adolescent will understand, reducing the intervention of the interviewer. Interventions are most useful when they make use of materials, and verbalization is very simple and concrete, without technical terms. It is important to establish the best possible conditions so that the adolescent doesn't feel scared during the interview, so they do not resort to defense mechanisms.

It is far more useful to behave as clearly as possible, so as to ensure understanding on the part of the adolescent. The opposite (talking to her or him as if she or he fully understood and used abstract terms) entails greater risks.





What are the implications of the characteristics of child and adolescent thought processes during an interview?

Characteristics of concrete thought and its implications	
Characteristics that determine concrete thought	Implications for the interview
<p>Not comprehending abstract ideas, i.e. thinking “only with ideas”. Their ability to reason is “anchored” in direct observation and information about own experiences.</p>	<p>In order to gather accurate information, it is useful to obtain concrete elements (observable and manipulable), such as making a drawing, so that the child or adolescent can show and describe information, instead of trying to express it only in words.</p>
<p>Intuition prevails over reason and (abstract) logic.</p>	<p>Some answers constructed on the basis of concrete reasoning may seem absurd if the interviewer interprets them using adult (abstract) logic.</p>
<p>Understanding is difficult if information is conveyed only with words (because they are abstract concepts).</p>	<p>It is useful to employ objects to describe or show actions or concepts, and thereby support what is said (for example, dolls or toys).</p>
<p>Can only concentrate on one idea at a time. Not possible to keep several ideas in mind at the same time and combine them to draw a conclusion.</p>	<p>It is not productive to ask questions that contain more than one idea. Nor is using sentences that are too long, because they could easily cause confusion.</p>

They do not understand notions of time, space or conventional abstract measurements. However, they may have learned words that are used in adult conversations, even if they do not understand them in the same way. For example, they might say “yesterday” to refer to “not today.” They might use that word to refer to a month or a year, which are literally “not today.”

They do not understand notions of causality (what is cause and what is effect, what logically occurs before something else, etc.). This requires deductive hypothetical thinking, objective analysis and self-observation, cognitive skills they do not yet have.

What they understand of the world is related to what they already know, or to what they perceive at that moment through the senses. They cannot abstract “beyond” what they see or know, even if other information is offered verbally.

Precise information should not be sought, such as “how long?” “how long did it last?” “how far?” and so on. It can be useful to obtain specific information that may have been directly perceived or experienced, and then deduce the time frame on that basis. For example, was it daytime when it started? And when did it end? Or, to deduce the season of the year, Was it hot or cold? Was it raining?, etc.

Questions beginning with why...? will receive vague answers. They cannot provide the interviewer with an “analysis” of the situation and its causes. Instead, causality must be constructed on the basis of the concrete and directly experienced information that they can offer.

For example, if the interview takes place at the immigration station, they will be unable to conceive that Mexico is more than that place. Their reality is determined by the feeling of confinement, the food or the experiences they are having at the time.



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Characteristics of egocentric thinking and its implications

Characteristics of egocentric thinking	Implications for the interview
<p>Children cannot “put themselves in the shoes of another” and understand the situation from that perspective. All their reasoning is centred on themselves.</p> <p>As a result, they feel guilty or liable for any situation in which they have been involved. They always involve themselves because they are at the centre of any explanation they are able to construct.</p> <p>Children’s stories may seem incoherent or confusing because they respond to a subjective internal order rather than an external, objective order. They juxtapose a succession of small “incoherent” stories, as they remember them.</p> <p>Use of words with subjective meaning. They may use the same words as adults, but they are often trying to convey something different or “beyond” their strictly conventional meaning. For example, a child may use “dog” for all four-legged animals (use of a single word for different concepts).</p> <p>They do not narrate “for the other.” They cannot offer “objective” information, independent of what they are feeling or what they know from lived experiences. Nor can they put themselves in the interviewer’s place and provide the information she or he needs to understand the situation</p>	<p>If they are asked about something external to themselves or about another person, their answer may seem incorrect because they will always respond from their own perspective, from what they directly perceived, their own experiences.</p> <p>They will blame themselves for situations in which, from an objective point of view, it is clear that they are not responsible or culpable, due to their situation of vulnerability; they will assume that they will be punished and may remain silent to avoid reprisals.</p> <p>Such “mixed up” and confused children’s stories are often called into question. Since according to adult logic, stories have an introduction, a beginning and an end, any story that does not meet these conditions may be treated as a lie or a fantasy.</p> <p>It is necessary to corroborate the mutual understanding and the way the child is using certain words. Before assuming a mistake, fantasy or confusion, it is important to test “what do you mean by...” using specific references and not just words; for example, to draw or use objects to show what they meant.</p> <p>It is important not to take for granted that the child understands what the interviewer understands or says, based only on the words used, in the same way as an adult person understands them.</p> <p>The child will never be able to provide the information in the orderly and objective way necessary for the interviewer to be able to understand her or his situation and receive protection. The adult interviewer must construct with the child the information available, and deduce the situation experienced on the basis of the direct and subjective experiences that the child can describe.</p>



Emotional characteristics during childhood and adolescence

During childhood and adolescence it is possible to feel the full range of emotions that we feel as adults. However, it is not yet possible to understand or control them.

Children and adolescents find it hard to differentiate between one type of emotion and another, especially emotions that “feel” similar, such as frustration, impotence and anger. Nor can they name them accurately, or set them aside to analyse them rationally and calm themselves down; egocentric thinking prevents them from doing this.

The reason for this is that, during childhood and adolescence, it is impossible for them to control and diminish the emotions that grip them. Emotion always trumps reason during this stage of development.



What are the implications of the emotional characteristics of children and adolescents during an interview?

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Emotional characteristics and their implications

Emotional characteristics	Implications for the interview
<p>Children cannot appraise and analyse the overall panorama, identify their emotions (anger, fear, distrust, disgust, anxiety, pleasure, etc.), evaluate different ways of expressing them, or anticipate the consequences of how they express them. Much less are they able to control or select a particular emotion, set aside others or refuse to be affected by them, in order to make decisions and adapt to the requirements of the situation.</p> <p>If emotions are present in their psychological situation, they are wholly gripped by them. The fears or anxieties they feel at a given moment may not be real from the objective and adult point of view, but if they are present, the child or adolescent will feel them as real.</p> <p>Concrete thinking and the feeling of vulnerability, confusion and inability to control emotions, mean that children or adolescents will try to please adults in order to survive. They will act on the basis of what they think they should do in order to escape the anxiety as soon as possible. The urgent need to avoid punishment or avoid what they perceive as a problem will take priority at that moment, above any other factor.</p> <p>Since they lack the tools to control their emotions (objective and realistic analysis, planning), they are unable to overcome the emotional impact on their own. In the face of anxiety or fear, psychological defense mechanisms come into play, the purpose of which is to diminish these painful emotions.</p>	<p>Children find it impossible to control their emotions. When they are activated, fear, anguish, anger, rage, pleasure, etc., completely take over their reality. They are fully exposed to the sensory impressions that emotions provoke, without being able to control them.</p> <p>They cannot make complex decisions or understand information while they are in the grip of emotions such as fear, confusion, anxiety or anger.</p> <p>They will try to give the “right answer” according to what they suppose the authority wants from them, to please the adult, even if this information about their history or situation is inaccurate. At that moment, all they want is to escape the anxiety of the interview. Furthermore, they are unable to think objectively about the consequences of giving inaccurate information. To reduce this anxiety, they feel that they need to “get out of there” immediately, and this is uppermost in their mind. They need external support to minimize their fear and anxiety.</p> <p>Because their defense mechanisms are activated, they say things that may seem absurd or incoherent. They may also display specific attitudes and behaviours that can hinder the interview.</p>

b

What are **psychological defense mechanisms**?

Unfiltered anxiety or fear flood the psychological reality of the child or adolescent when they interpret certain situations as threatening; the perception of imminent harm, even if it does not objectively exist, is felt as real. For example, child or adolescent migrants who are unaccompanied or separated from their significant adults will probably feel emotions such as frustration, exhaustion, hopelessness, fear, confusion, fear of losing their project or losing the possibility of finding loved ones, etc.

During the interview, children or adolescents may “connect” with these very painful emotions and their anxiety will increase. If this reaches very high levels, their emotional stability is put at risk. This is when, unconsciously, psychological defense mechanisms are implemented which serve to reduce anxiety to tolerable levels.

The psychological defense mechanisms are not subject to the will of the child. They come into action unconsciously and cannot be halted deliberately. Their appearance



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provokes reactions or discourses that can be interpreted as incoherence, lies or a deliberate attempt to avoid giving information, and so on.

When an unconscious defense mechanism is operating, the following may be noted:

- A significant change in the behaviour of the child or adolescent when the conversation and questions approach the issue that causes anxiety.
- The appearance of statements that seem absurd or incoherent.
- Behaviours that from a common sense perspective could be interpreted as deliberate attempts to change the subject or to lie.
- Behaviours that seek to avoid a given topic; these can range from silence or changing the subject, to aggressive and omnipotent attitudes (“I don’t need you”).

Some unconscious defense mechanisms and their effects on behaviour

Defense mechanism	Effect on the behaviour or attitude of the child or adolescent during the interview
Dissociation	<p>The child or adolescent seems to “be somewhere else,” or disconnects from the topic. He or she is able to recount very painful things in a tone of indifference, as if they had not happened to her/him. Speech may appear “robotic.”</p> <p>This is the most common defense mechanism in children and adolescents subjected to victimization. When it operates, their mind is able to “disconnect” completely while the abuse is occurring, thereby reducing the level of distress to a degree that is tolerable in order to maintain sanity and endure the event. The behaviour as seen “from the outside” is something akin to disdain (“what happened is of no importance”). If someone mentions or asks about what happened, a cold response may be given, with no apparent emotional repercussions. The mechanism causes the anguish to be controlled by disconnecting the emotion from the memory. The child talks about what happened without emotion, as if it had not happened to her or him. This causes confusion and doubt in the person who observes this behaviour (“how is it possible that, if they did suffer the abuse they claim, they don’t even cry about it”).</p>
Avoidance	<p>The child is quiet and nervous; or becomes more active in order to distract, looks away, changes the subject.</p>
Denial	<p>Partially or completely denies events that have already been proven or were previously admitted.</p> <p>While this mechanism is in operation, the child lacks access to the memory of the episode. That is to say, at that moment, for the child it effectively “did not happen.” The child is not lying nor deliberately hiding information. The information is inaccessible, jealously guarded and under double lock in her or his mind.</p>

Reaction formation

Children transform what they are feeling into the contrary, so that it is not so painful. For example, vulnerability into omnipotence, saying things like "I locked him up," "I pushed him," "I killed him," when referring to someone who attacked them. They feel fear and vulnerability, and need support, but do not accept it and transform it into the opposite (especially during adolescence); they push away the adult person interviewing them with attitudes and messages of "I do not need you," "I can do it alone."

The end result of how this mechanism operates is providing made-up information, but these are not lies that the child or adolescent voluntarily or consciously chooses to tell. It is their mind that sets in motion these fantasies to replace the distressing information and to balance and reduce the anguish they feel.

These fantasies, guided by the defense mechanisms, contain the opposite of what happened: if the child or adolescent feels helpless and terrified, the behaviour she or he shows when the psychological defense is in operation is one of omnipotence, power, value.

Minimization

Children narrate only the less serious behaviours they have experienced, or report fewer events than really occurred. If they were subjected to a variety of abuses and violence, they will report only those behaviours that are psychologically less threatening (for example, touching rather than rape).

Displacement

Children displace the responsibility of violent acts suffered onto the figure of another person, distinct from the one who really attacked them. They fear their aggressor so much that they claim that the person who attacked them is another person, because this figure is less threatening.



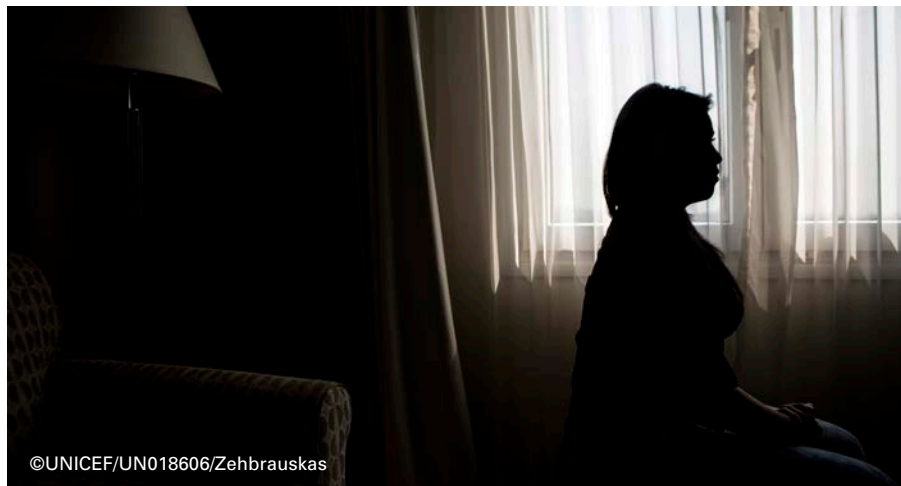
Specific characteristics of adolescence

Regarding adolescents, it is easy to fall into the error of thinking that they behave as adults, because their physical development makes this seem the case. However, in the cognitive and emotional spheres adolescents are even more fragile and vulnerable than young children for a variety of reasons, and these must be taken into account:

Challenges of adolescence and their implications	
Physical development places the adolescents facing the challenge of:	Which means that:
<p>Dealing with powerful hormonal changes that affect their emotions, thinking and behaviour</p>	<p>Hormonal changes cause strong emotions and abrupt and unpredictable changes in behaviour, and they are not able to control themselves voluntarily.</p> <p>These emotions dominate the psychological reality of adolescents and directly influence the decisions they make.</p> <p>Hormones that make them feel good (oxytocin) predominate, which makes it difficult for them to perceive and assess risky situations.</p>
<p>Restructuring their identity</p>	<p>All adolescents go through a process lasting several years during which they have to get to know themselves, learn who they are, what they need and what they want in order to be unique. They are no longer children, but neither are they independent adults. The process is long and painful, and constantly puts them in a state of anxiety, anger, frustration and fear.</p>
<p>Differentiating and separating themselves from known adult figures</p>	<p>The challenge of restructuring their identity involves separating themselves from their significant adults in order to build themselves differently.</p> <p>This is not easy, since they do not yet have enough resources to do it, so they feel fragile and vulnerable because their identity is undefined.</p>

Challenges of adolescence and their implications

Adolescents face the challenge of:	Which means that:
Belonging to a peer group (experienced as essential)	To reconstruct their identity, they need the confirmation of their peers. Belonging to a peer group is vital at this stage and the opinion of the group may have more weight in the psychological reality of adolescents than that of their parents or other significant adults in their life to date. This makes them especially vulnerable to recruitment into exploitation networks or gangs.
Making decisions although the capacity for critical judgement is not yet available	The capacity for critical judgement, that is, for making decisions independently of emotions and considering the consequences in the medium and long term, is only fully achieved after the age of 23, when the frontal lobe of the brain is completely developed and myelinated. This only happens, moreover, if and when the adolescent's development has taken place in appropriate conditions throughout their life, that is, with adequate nourishment and stimulation, without exposure to violence, etc. If this has not been the case, adolescents do not achieve optimal development of their nervous system, nor the possibility of abstracting and taking decisions using critical judgement.



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How do defense mechanisms appear in adolescence?

There are specific considerations about the appearance of defense mechanisms that must be taken into account when interviewing adolescents, in order to properly understand their reactions.

Defense mechanisms and their effects	
Frequent mechanism	Effect on thought process and behaviour of the adolescent
Regression	<p>If we interact with an adolescent who is in a stressful situation, she or he will be functioning at a level lower than her or his chronological age indicates and below her or his potential. This is the regression mechanism, which is frequent in situations of stress. It consists of a psychological shift by which the person “locates” her- or himself at a previous stage of development, one already experienced and known, and which therefore provides a feeling of safety and protection.</p> <p>It is especially important to consider regression among adolescents, because although they “look grown up,” they are experiencing stressful situations that make them think and reason as if they were younger, even if physically or behaviourally they display the opposite.</p>

Defense mechanisms and their effects

Frequent mechanism	Effect on thought process and behaviour of the adolescent
<p>Omnipotence and idealism</p>	<p>In addition to experiencing a regression to the concrete thought typical of childhood, during adolescence there very often appear mechanisms linked to omnipotence and an idealism that is often unrealistic. Furthermore, the consideration of themselves and their abilities as the centre of the world (in an egocentric manner) continues to prevail and this hinders access to objective and impartial reasoning.</p>
<p>Transformation into the opposite (reaction formation)</p>	<p>Another frequent psychological defense mechanism among adolescents is the transformation of weakness into omnipotence and defiance, as attempts to control reality. In this way, they present themselves as strong, when in reality they feel insecure and weak; they need to show forcefulness in their opinions and decisions when, in reality, they are full of doubt; and they do not understand very well what is happening, since they still lack the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to choose objectively (without the emotions taking over), or to fully assume responsibility for their decisions.</p> <p>During interviews, adolescents may react with omnipotence (“I don’t need you,” “I don’t need anything,” “I can do it alone,” “I don’t want help”) or with impulsiveness (unexpected and exaggerated emotional reactions, including aggression) when they feel fear, insecurity and/or vulnerability. These behaviours could be misinterpreted by the interviewer, if the intervention of defense mechanisms is not considered. What the adolescent is conveying with her or his apparent strength and aggression is actually the opposite: she or he feels vulnerable and needs help, but she or he dare not show weakness.</p>

IV

Psycho-emo- tional character- istics of unac- companied or separated migrant children and adolescents

In addition to considering the general characteristics of childhood and adolescence, those who interview unaccompanied or separated migrant children and adolescents need to consider specific information about the particular situation they are experiencing, and the effects that it has on their way of acting and of perceiving the world. Some of these specific characteristics are set out in the following table:



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The situation of unaccompanied migration and its effects

The situation of unaccompanied or separated migration causes:	Implication for their way of understanding the world and acting:
<p>Confusion and disorientation as an effect of distance from place of origin.</p> <p>Lack of knowledge of surroundings. Everything related to daily life that offers support and provides a sense of security, such as culture, food, customs, known areas, rules, language, etc., are unknown and foreign.</p> <p>Increase in the feeling of loneliness, isolation and lack of alternatives, if not travelling in a group.</p> <p>Separation from and lack of contact with significant adult figures, which renews the fear of losing them.</p>	<p>Sensations of confusion and fear will persist as there is no information about the parameters of reality (what can and cannot be done). It may be that in order to feel secure about what is going on around them and about the proper way to behave in this context in order to prevent harm and understand the rules, they are in a state of continuous alert towards the outside world.</p> <p>The lack of a support network increases feelings of anxiety and helplessness, which will probably increase the feeling of vulnerability and the consequent appearance of defense mechanisms to cope with it.</p> <p>Prevalence of feelings of helplessness and distrust that lead to difficulties in establishing links with adults who could act as protectors. It will also be difficult to ask for help and/or to accept it.</p>

The situation of unaccompanied migration and its effects

The situation of unaccompanied or separated migration causes:	Implication for their way of understanding the world and acting:
<p>Their reality is defined by frustration and despair. It is probable they have long been hoping to live in another country as the only opportunity for a better life. They may have invested all their energies, efforts and resources in this plan.</p> <p>They must take on adult roles.</p> <p>They have no possible alternatives. It should not be thought that they undertake the journey because they so choose. Sometimes it is not even because they seek better work and economic possibilities, but because they are essentially forced into it. Migration is the only alternative they see in their reality as a means to achieve an end.</p> <p>They perceive themselves as a failure for not having achieved this goal.</p> <p>A feeling of despair prevails.</p>	<p>Seeing their dream cut short will be at the centre of their experience at the moment of the interview. As a result, it is possible that no option or suggestion for protection is received positively. It is likely that, in the interaction with the interviewer, emotions such as frustration, anger and despair (latent or explicit) arise.</p> <p>In many cases the decision to migrate is linked to achieving a better quality of life for their family. The family, community and social context often places children and adolescents in the role of provider and caregiver prematurely, which leads to an overload when the plan is frustrated.</p> <p>Seeing their project cut short generates a huge sense of failure and hopelessness, which encompasses not only what they perceive as capable of doing (skills), but, more fundamentally, calls their own value into question.</p> <p>They may see themselves in a “no way out” situation, convinced that whatever they do, nothing is enough to make their situation better.</p> <p>Confusion, shame, impotence, loss of self-assurance and deep paralysing fear are likely to prevail.</p>

The situation of unaccompanied migration and its effects

The situation of unaccompanied or separated migration causes:

Appearance of severe effects for their emotional stability, such as depersonalization: migration is not the only choice perceived in their reality as a means to achieve an end, but it is also a way to feel they are a person, someone with desires and values, who has the tools to achieve what they want.

Violent behaviour: they are fleeing situations of serious violence in their place of origin. They have probably witnessed extreme violence, been a direct victim of it, and may also have exercised violence to survive in a context that left them without any other option.

Implication for their way of understanding the world and acting:

Seeing their project at a dead-end has profound effects that are linked to their identity and value as a person.

It may be that the child or adolescent does not know of non-violent ways to deal with conflicts. They probably reproduce the violence they have experienced, since it acts as a learning process, so that violence is unleashed in any difficult or threatening situation, or as a means to obtain something.

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Children
and adolescents
**in particular
situations**

Traumatic experiences suffered during childhood and adolescence give rise to a series of effects that cannot be listed or defined with any certainty. In general, these are situations that go beyond people's coping abilities and, as a result, what is perceived and interpreted as traumatic varies from one individual to another. However, we can mention a number of effects that frequently appear in the situation of children and adolescents who have gone through traumatic experiences.

Some particular situations that may occur are those related to gender identity, the risks of unaccompanied migration or diseases (addictions, for example).

Whoever interviews children and adolescents in any of these scenarios and conditions needs to possess a minimum of specialized information on these issues.



Sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence

Sexual abuse, especially if committed by an adult person close to the child or adolescent, is devastating because it disrupts the order of reality and the perception of the limits of their own body (which is closely linked with identity, that is, with the essence of "being a person"). It generates confusion about the world (who to trust, who protects, who hurts) and about oneself (one's own value, confidence, etc.).

It usually occurs gradually, beginning with approaches that make the child or adolescent feel special and that later, when the abuse occurs, make her or him feel like a participant and therefore responsible and guilty.

The dynamic leads to the involvement of the child or adolescent in a secret that she or he may never reveal.

Children or adolescents who have been victims of sexual abuse often perceive themselves as powerless, vulnerable, dirty, of little value, deserving of punishment and not of being loved or protected. This discourages them from revealing the secret and asking for help.

In many situations, they feel anger towards the person who attacks them, and since they cannot express this directly, due to fear or threats, they direct it against themselves (risky behaviours, self-harm, etc.) or towards other people.

At other times, the confusion, guilt and shame caused by sexual abuse are such that children or adolescents cannot even differentiate what is their own and what is not, what they like and do not like, what scares them or what they want.



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b

Domestic violence

Physical violence and emotional violence experienced directly or as a witness within the family cause great terror. The moment of violence is often unpredictable, so they develop a dynamic of being on the alert all the time and “becoming invisible,” in unsuccessful attempts to avoid being beaten.

When they suffer blows directly, they unleash dynamics that “disconnect” them from the pain. A child who is beaten may seem insensitive, carefree or even provocative, because she or he “doesn’t care” or “nothing hurts” her or him.

Emotional violence (insults, disparagement, etc.) and negligence (abandonment, lack of care, etc.) undermine identity and self-esteem, reinforcing powerlessness and ideas about worthlessness.

c

Recruitment by organized crime networks, sexual exploitation or gangs

The characteristics of adolescence can be combined with those of the environment in which they live and grow up, until a scenario arises in which adolescents are easily recruited into organized crime networks or gangs.

Adolescents have a need to separate from the adults they know in order to define their own identity. At the same time, above all, they prioritize belonging to a peer group, because in this way they support the new identity they are constructing and provide themselves with a basic security that is essential for emotional survival. If a peer group makes them feel they are a valuable part of it, and they value and respect them, they will defend the group without hesitation.

The cognitive capacity to analyse situations objectively, without the intervention of emotions, and considering consequences beyond the immediate ones, is not possible until later in their development (when critical judgement is achieved, at around 23 years of age). In addition, hormonal development makes them vulnerable to strong outbursts of anger, rage, frustration, feelings of inadequacy, etc.



Substance addiction

Any adult or group of adults can easily exploit these needs to recruit adolescents. It is enough to offer them a place in a group, immediate results that they find valuable and a leader to follow. Once recruited, the adolescents defend their place in the group against those who are “outside,” because they perceive that their value and identity depend on belonging to it. Omnipotent defences also grow, which make them feel that “they can do everything” and, therefore, they do not understand the risks of blindly belonging to the group.

Once recruited into a network or gang, adolescents have no alternative but to belong. Even when something happens that allows them to perceive the danger in which they find themselves and consider abandoning it, they will have undoubtedly been warned of reprisals against those who betray the leader.

In many cases, as their identity and sense of survival are closely bound up with the group, they actively seek to return to that place of belonging. Often, gangs are the only group where they feel or have felt accepted

Substance addiction is a disease whose main effect is dependence. This means that, in the same way as when they suffer an illness, the behaviour of children or adolescents is beyond their control. The need to obtain the substance is stronger than any reasoning or possibility of understanding the risk (to physical integrity and health) that is entailed both by its consumption and the contexts in which it is obtained and distributed. Substance dependence is combined with the impossibility of using critical judgement to understand their own situation of risk and to ask for help.

If it is observed that a child or adolescent is addicted to substances, it will be necessary to call upon the available medical services. It is not useful to continue with the interview, since everything she or he says or thinks will be determined by the substance or by withdrawal from it. Only once a basic level of stability has been achieved will it be possible to interview the child or adolescent.



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e

Sexual diversity

The condition of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, transgender and intersex (LGBTTTI) population is strictly linked to identity, and under no circumstance does the child or adolescent need to be investigated, as if it were a situation that could be “prevented, cured or improved.” The condition of gender or sexual diversity is not something that can be questioned. The interviewer must have a gender perspective, take into account the information obtained in this regard, and take the necessary actions to protect the rights of the child or adolescent in these areas.

This has serious consequences for health, and may even prevent them from performing daily tasks. In cases such as the above, or in any case in which children or adolescents felt their life was in danger, the most frequent and immediate reaction is to defend themselves, with the result that they may be labelled as having a personality disorder, or problems of antagonism. In reality, it is not a question of personality disorders but of the effects of violence on the psycho-emotional reality of the child or adolescent.

There are also frequent cases of severe depression, with suicidal thoughts and attempts, where the child or adolescent perceives this option as the only alternative to end the suffering, the conviction that she or he lacks courage, and a sense of despair at not finding alternative options.

f

Impairments to mental health

Research shows that exposure to violence not only causes cognitive impairments (delayed cognitive development and learning difficulties, among others) but that it can trigger serious impairments to mental health. Cases of post-traumatic stress, for example, cause the body and the mind of children or adolescents who were exposed to situations of serious violence to permanently react (although the stimulus that endangered their integrity has disappeared) as if their life, integrity or freedom were at risk.

VI

Techniques for adapting inter- views to the characteristics of children and adolescents

The following table suggests a series of specialized techniques or actions to use before and during interviews with children and adolescents. The techniques or actions have been constructed according to the characteristics of childhood and adolescence presented above: some are linked to the way in which they reason; some are useful to help the interviewer reduce the anxiety and fear that may be gripping the child or adolescent; others are required when interviewing adolescents, especially if they are migrating alone or separated from their significant adult(s); and also if specific situations are identified related to the experience of multiple traumas, or conditions linked to sexual identity or sexual orientation.

As mentioned at the beginning of the document, the list of techniques does not claim to be exhaustive and does not contain everything that could be done when interviewing a child or adolescent. Rather, it serves as an initial guide, to which may be added as many actions as the interviewer considers useful at each step of the interview, based on the characteristics of childhood and adolescence.

What to do?	How to do it?
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<p>1</p> <p>Check that the space for the interview is adequate</p>	<p>As far as possible, look for a private space, without generating feelings of confinement or isolation that could be frightening. The idea is to generate the trust needed to speak freely.</p> <p>It is also important to avoid interruptions, because even if these are due to institutional dynamics that have nothing to do with the child or adolescent, she or he could interpret them egocentrically as “what I say doesn’t matter to them” and hinder the climate of trust necessary for the interview.</p> <p>If a completely private space is not available, alternative measures should be tried, such as placing the chair of the child or adolescent facing a wall or window where she or he will not see situations that could frighten her or him, generate feelings of confinement, or distract her or him (if other people are walking around, for example).</p>
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2

Use appropriate language

Pay attention to the words used by the child or adolescent and use the same or similar ones to ensure understanding. In the case of migrant children or adolescents, adapt language use and take cultural belonging into account if they are indigenous.

Pay attention to the language level of the child or adolescent. For example, if she or he uses short phrases, use them too. If she or he talks slowly, do so too.

Do not use abstract terms, without specific references. When it is necessary to talk about complex ideas, it may be necessary to turn to drawings or manipulating objects to express the idea, instead of only using words.

Do not use technical words. It is important to “translate” and describe complex or specialized terms in the most concrete way possible.

It is difficult to understand abstract concepts such as “shelter” or “help” if only explained in words. For example, the expression “I am here to help you,” only verbalized in this way it is not useful, because the child or adolescent may understand the word “help” egocentrically to mean “they are going to take me out of here and they will take me to the USA,” when in reality that is not what the interviewer is trying to convey. All abstract terms can be specified.

3

Use concrete support materials in the interview

Whenever it is necessary to convey abstract or complex notions, or obtain this type of information from the child or adolescent, it will be useful to incorporate objects that can be manipulated, such as Play-Doh, marker pens and sheets of paper, to show the idea being conveyed with drawings or diagrams. The support of concrete materials is very important, in order to “think with objects” and not only with ideas, which is impossible because of the level of abstraction involved.

In addition to providing concrete elements that allow the child or adolescent to show the information (instead of trying to explain it, something that she or he is not able to do), it can be helpful to construct the information together. A sheet of paper may be used to write out words or diagrams with symbols when constructing the information needed, such as the migration route, the idea of shelter and what it implies, and so on.

Use concrete support materials in the interview

Using concrete elements such as diagrams or drawings makes it possible to verify whether the child or adolescent understands the information offered with actions (not with questions and words) and in a playful way.

Asking if something has been understood is not useful, because the child or adolescent cannot give an objective response that requires them to take into account a lot of information at the same time (due to the concrete and self-centred thought process pertaining to the stage of development). With drawings, diagrams or concrete elements, it is possible to build a scenario through play in which the child or adolescent “shows” what she or he has understood, points out spaces, etc. It is a good idea to include questions or phrases to complete and verify understanding, while relying on objects or models to observe while she or he is thinking or remembering.

The presence of concrete objects to manipulate is useful for the child or adolescent to channel anxiety during the interview. They should be made available so that she or he can draw or manipulate Play-Doh while talking.

Even in the case of an adolescent, it is necessary to adapt the interview to concrete and egocentric thought processes. It is important to remember that, although physically she or he may look like an adult, cognitively she or he functions at a level closer to childhood than adulthood, especially if going through a situation that causes anxiety.

She or he will find it hard to understand complex verbal proposals that are not “anchored” in the present moment, and that require abstract reasoning (only with ideas), or which involves managing multiple variables simultaneously to reach a conclusion or make a decision.

4

Reflect behaviour to build trust

It is possible to reflect what the child or adolescent does, as in a mirror, or the position she or he takes. For example, if she or he is playing with Play-Doh, the interviewer can do so as well. If she or he is sitting leaning forward, so can the interviewer. This reflection unconsciously provokes a perception of harmony that fosters the sense of forming a connection.

5

Anticipate fears at the beginning of the interview

It is essential to anticipate the possible emotions that might take hold of the child or adolescent, and to take concrete actions so that she or he is as calm and at ease as possible during the interview.

Interviewers can anticipate that the child or adolescent will feel fear because of the situation in which she or he finds her- or himself. If they are listed at the beginning of the interview, this conveys a sense of understanding and trust, because the listener “knows what I feel.”

As children or adolescents cannot control the emotions that take hold of them, there is no point in trying to calm them down only with phrases that seek to be reassuring, like “don’t be afraid”. If the emotion is already present, they need the adult person interviewing them to help control it. If what they may be feeling is named, the anxiety decreases.

Once the fears are identified, phrases may be used to express information that can counteract them. The goal is for the child or adolescent to hear the information in order to feel more secure. She or he does not have to answer or comment on the messages heard.

What could frighten them before the interview?	What do they need?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unknown 	Describe what is happening and why it is happening.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a mistake • Doing something wrong and being punished 	Make it clear that the interview is to get to know them and tell them about some things that can be done. It is not an examination or a police interrogation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That they will be returned to their country (in the case of migrant children) 	Interviewers should build spaces of trust, with specialized information on the effects of violence and recruitment into networks or gangs, so that the child or adolescent can recount what she or he has experienced and the reasons why she or he does not want to return.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not fulfilling their goal 	Interviewers must understand the importance of migration to their life and emotional stability, and allow them to start thinking about possible alternatives so that they can reconstruct their identity and life project.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not feeling supported and feeling helpless 	<p>Interviewers should explain their role and how they can offer protection, in a concrete way.</p> <p>Other authorities and their functions should be described, explaining that it is a chain of protection.</p> <p>Interviewers should convey that they understand their pain at not having achieved their goal.</p>

What could frighten them during the interview?	What do they need?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being in front of an authority 	<p>Interviewers should specifically describe their function, what they can do and what they cannot do.</p> <p>Let them decide if they want to be interviewed by a man or a woman.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving the wrong answer 	<p>The interviewer should clarify that it is not an examination or a police interrogation.</p> <p>The objective is to get to know them and to think about what to do next.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying in an institution 	The interviewer should consider together with the child or adolescent the alternatives and reasons for the actions taken.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The questions 	The interviewer should explain that the reason for the questions is not to judge or examine them, but because they need to get to know them and to think about what to do next.

What could frighten them during the interview?	What do they need?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembering their experiences 	<p>Interviewers should say that they have met many other children and adolescents who have experienced similar situations and know that it is very painful.</p> <p>They should make it clear that they know it is very difficult to talk about things that hurt, but sometimes it helps you to feel better. It may be useful to say, “whatever happened, it was not your fault.” This message is key because, as a general rule, they blame themselves (for not having prevented it, for not mentioning it before, etc.) and this causes devastating psychological effects.</p> <p>Interviewers should understand that in any context, every child or adolescent is a victim and requires protection, even if she or he participated in criminal activities.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being judged for addictions, crimes, their actions in general • The consequences of their answers 	<p>Interviewers should explain that they will not be judged or told off for anything they recount. It is about getting to know them and considering what can be done to make them feel better.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That they will not be believed 	<p>Interviewers should clarify that they will believe everything the child or adolescent says. That they also know about defense mechanisms, children’s narratives, the feeling of a lack of alternatives and recruitment into networks of exploitation or gangs, so that they may listen to the child or adolescent from the perspective of protection of their rights.</p> <p>Every child or adolescent who has been a victim or recruited into networks and receives support from those around her or him (she or he is believed and something is done to prevent it from happening again) immediately initiates a process of restoration of their dignity and emotional recovery. The role of the interviewer, as an adult who believes her or him, is essential in the life of someone who has probably been doubted or disbelieved in various ways in their immediate environment. This is a protective factor of enormous importance for emotional recovery.</p>

What could frighten them after the interview?	What do they need?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty (what will happen to them) 	<p>What will happen should be explained, and the alternatives available.</p> <p>Messages of resilience should be conveyed about their own value, and resources that rescue them from uncertainty and from the feeling of failure of not having achieved their goal. For example, "I know you have done a lot of things to get here, you've been very brave."</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not having "said the right thing" 	<p>Remind them that alternatives will be sought to find the best way for them to feel better.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That others find out what they said and they will be rejected (relatives) • Guilt at having talked • Fear of retaliation 	<p>The protection measures that can be made available should be explained.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being separated from their family 	<p>The actions that will be carried out to ensure contact with their significant adults should be explained.</p>



At the beginning of the interview, the fears that the child or adolescent may feel should be mentioned, without expecting an answer. The intention is to generate trust and minimize the appearance of defence mechanisms in the face of anxiety.



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6

Name possible fears during the interview

In addition to what is stated at the beginning of the interview, it is necessary to be alert to the emergence of possible fears throughout the interview, in order to repeat messages of reassurance to calm and normalize the fear or anxiety.

We can confirm and normalize the feelings so that they stop being an obstacle in the relationship with the child, in any situation:

If you notice that they are afraid to speak: *"It's always difficult to talk about things that hurt or are embarrassing, especially if you do not know the person you're talking to well... the good thing is that I've talked with lots of children and I understand that sometimes things happen." "I never tell children off or make fun of them."*

If fear of the questions is noted: *"Sometimes we feel nervous when people are asking us things. Sometimes it makes us feel that they don't believe us. Other times it makes us feel like we are in an exam. Other times, we feel that something bad is going to happen and it is very scary." "...remember that if I ask you questions, it is to get to know you and find out if something happened to you that has to stop."*

If it is noted that some of the interviewer's actions distract or disturb them: *"Everything you say is very important and I don't want to forget it. I'm going to write it down/record it here so I don't forget anything."*

7

Provide concrete information straight away about what is happening and what will happen next

Before asking the child or adolescent to provide information about her or his situation, the interviewer must construct the situation, that is, provide information about what is happening, why it is happening, who they are and what their role is, and what is expected of the child or adolescent.

For example, in an interview with migrant children where there is a need to explain what international protection is, it will be necessary to describe in a concrete way what that means ("if the country where you were born cannot take good care of you, other countries have to do it") and their right to information ("if I don't say something clearly and you don't understand me, you can ask me anything").

The right to confidentiality must also be made clear ("Everything you tell me is very important to see where your path goes. I'm going to pass on what we talk about to other people who can help"). The child or adolescent should never be told that what she or he says will remain secret, because this is not realistic and will generate confusion and a feeling of betrayal later on.

8

Create symmetry in the interaction

Any relationship between an adult person and a child or adolescent is already asymmetric, because the former has more information, experience and power.

It is important for interviewers to avoid reinforcing the asymmetry, and seek an interaction that is as symmetrical as possible. For example, you should avoid starting the interview with questions, and instead say something about yourself, using phrases that reduce fears, and only then ask for information.

Simple examples of this are to first say "My name is..." and then ask, "What is your name?" Or say "I was born in Mexico and I have always lived in Mexico," and then ask, "Which country were you born in?" etc.

Avoid clothing that marks a difference between the condition of authority and the condition of the child or adolescent. If possible, dress in a simple, informal way, avoiding the use of jewellery, makeup, etc., that emphasizes the difference in situations.

"Reflect" what the child or adolescent says. If she or he talks about difficult situations, it can be useful to mention a moment from your own life that has been difficult. If she or he talks about what she or he misses about her or his country, show understanding by mentioning something you would especially miss about your own country if you left.

Speak in first person: "I think I can help you if something happened to you", "I know it's hard to talk about things that have happened", etc. Phrasing things in this way places the adult as someone close, who understands and knows how the child or adolescent feels, increasing trust.

To create symmetry from the outset, when the child or adolescent arrives, interviewers should ask where she or he would like to sit, instead of assigning her or him a place.

9

Take care to ensure congruence between gestures, posture, tone of voice and words used

In addition to words, information is also transmitted through gestures, postures and tone of voice. If these levels contradict each other, the child or adolescent can become anxious and confused. It is possible to state appropriate messages and at the same time express inappropriate gestures and tone of voice, and vice versa, it is possible to express warmth and kindness to a child, while saying things that are harmful.

Children and adolescents are especially sensitive to the body language and gestures that accompany the words. In fact, they are more sensitive and more attentive to this language than to spoken language. For example, if we tell the child that we understand and we are going to help her or him, but involuntarily our facial expressions convey in some sense disapproval, doubt, fear, or annoyance, we are sending two different messages that cause confusion.

To convey trust to the child or adolescent it is helpful to lean forward when you are telling her or him something that is important, showing interest, nodding in understanding, and repeating a word she or he has used.

Arms or legs should not be crossed while listening or talking (this transmits "barrier" signals, which can hinder open and trusting dialogue).

A position higher up than the child or adolescent should also be avoided (a higher chair, for example, or standing while she or he is sitting). It is better to be at the same level as the child when speaking.

Placing a desk between the interviewer and the child or adolescent should also be avoided. If possible, sit beside her or him, or together at a corner of the desk, because in this way greater proximity is transmitted.

10

Observe and record gestures and tones of voice of the child or adolescent

Interviewers can receive information from the gestures, postures and tones of voice of the child or adolescent. Not all information comes from what she or he says in words. In fact, the information that is transmitted by gestures, movements or tones of voice is very important, because it escapes her or his voluntary control. That is, if a gesture of fear is observed in the child or adolescent at some point in the conversation, that feeling cannot have been feigned. In general, paraverbal communication (that which accompanies the words when we speak) is transmitted unconsciously. That is why it is very important to detect and record it.

What is transmitted in a paraverbal way has the same weight (or even more) than what is said in words.

11

Confirm emotions

A very useful technique to help the child or adolescent to manage emotions is what is known in psychology as "confirmation of feelings". The common sense approach used by adults when we perceive that children or adolescents are sad, worried or angry, etc., is to transmit messages like "don't worry", "don't feel sad", "don't be afraid", and to try to comfort them by giving them a reason why they should not be feeling what they feel.

This approach is well intentioned, but it accomplishes the opposite of what it aims to achieve. The truth is that children or adolescents "already feel what they feel"; if we ask them not to do so, we are exerting pressure on them to achieve something impossible, because they cannot stop feeling that way, and they also begin to think that they should not feel this way because an adult has just explained that it is wrong.

It is much more productive to confirm their feelings, that is, to explicitly state that it is normal to feel the way they do. This confirmation conveys to children or adolescents that they are being understood, because what is happening to them has been interpreted. This, more than anything else, is what specifically allows them to properly manage their emotions and reinforces their sense of trust, because we have conveyed to them that we understand how they feel.

An example would be: "You may feel sad/worried/angry... I also feel sad when something happens that I don't like. It's normal to feel that way".

12

Verify understanding

Since concrete and egocentric thinking never cease to operate, it should never be assumed that children or adolescents understand the same thing as the interviewer, when particular words are used or processes are explained. It is necessary to verify that they are understanding what is happening in the interview, and what is transmitted to them verbally.

An important technique is for the interviewer to blame themselves for any lack of understanding or failure to explain. For example: "It's hard for me to say things clearly and I tend to get confused, can you tell me what you understood by...?" And "Thank you very much, now I am reassured that I said it right."

On the contrary, questions like "did you understand?" or "tell me what I said", can make children or adolescents feel judged and examined, since the responsibility for understanding falls on them, which increases their anxiety, instead of lying with the interviewer as the one responsible for making themselves understood.

Whenever possible, it is useful to suggest in a playful way that the child or adolescent offer information about what she or he understood. Make it a game of questions and answers, asking "was what I said...?" in which the child or adolescent acts as the judge who determines the right answer, rather than the other way around.

Another option is to make use of concrete elements such as drawings to show or indicate.



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13

Adjust expectations about children's narratives

No child's story, especially that of a child or adolescent who has gone through difficult situations that cause anxiety or fear to recall, will be orderly and easy to understand.

The task of giving order (beginning, development, end) and making the story understandable from the adult point of view, falls to the interviewer, and not the interviewee. This does not mean changing what the child or adolescent said, but introducing the necessary reasoning and analysis so that the narrative can be understood as characteristic of the child's stage of development.

A specialized form of listening has to be employed that is able to detect the emergence of defense mechanisms that make the contents seem incongruous or fanciful. This must also identify when the child or adolescent is trapped in situations she or he finds it difficult to escape as well as to talk about; situations in which there is fear for personal integrity or shame at her or his past actions.

If the situation is the latter, it is possible for children and adolescents to test interviewers by giving brief and incomplete initial information, or even providing it in a provocative manner, to observe what their reaction is.

If they receive support and understanding, they may continue to provide information. If they note suspicion or reproach, they will continue with resistance and provocation, or with silence.



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14

Allow free narrative

Since memory and narrative are subjective, it is necessary to allow children and adolescents to tell what they remember without interruption, in any way they choose, even if it is mixed up and hard to understand. Interviewers should limit themselves to recording what is said, without “cutting off the subjective thread” of the memory with questions; even when elements appear that seem incomprehensible or fanciful. Once the story has finished, interviewers will be able to go back to those points where clarification is required.

15

Avoid repeating the narration of painful events

Whenever possible, interviewers should avoid asking for details or seeking in-depth narratives about events that are painful to the child or adolescent. The acceptance of having experienced violence, for example, is sufficient to determine the necessary actions for protection, without having to provide all the details. This applies especially, for example, if the child or adolescent subsequently has to take part in a legal process, taking a statement or an interview with the judge.

The repetition of the narrative revictimizes, because it subjects the child or adolescent again and again to the anguish evoked by the memory, and because the information can become distorted in successive interrogations.

16

Handle silences appropriately

If the child or adolescent is silent, it is necessary to respect those moments, and remain calm. In general, it is difficult to maintain tense silences during an interview, so it may be useful to engage in an activity while keeping silent; to do this you may resort to objects such as Play-Doh, drawings or an activity shared with the child or adolescent. This also helps interviewers to channel their own anxiety at the silence.

Tolerating silences is, to a certain extent, a way of transmitting understanding and helping to lower anxiety levels. If they go on too long, interviewers may go back to the initial messages that anticipate fears, as a way of conveying understanding.

If the child or adolescent is very distressed and stays silent, a key technique is not to insist on certain questions, but to “shape” the conversation. That is, the interviewer talks about her- or himself so that the other feels greater trust and little by little may relax and decide to talk.

If the child has not answered a question, do not insist by saying “why don’t you want to talk?” or “do not you want to talk about that?” Instead, wait for another moment, and meanwhile, talk about the issue on the basis of personal experience.

Another option is to briefly switch the conversation to a neutral or pleasant topic. Talking about a neutral topic also conveys the message that the interviewer is interested in the child or adolescent as a person, and not only in the information that she or he can provide.

Every child or adolescent can carry out a conversation about something pleasant if it is proposed in the right way (in a natural manner, not like an interrogation); this helps them feel empowered.

The direct experience will be that they ask for something they can do, which has beneficial effects on self-perception and self-esteem.

Another alternative is to steer the conversation towards topics that can highlight positive aspects of the child or adolescent (preferences, what she or he is capable of doing, what she or he enjoys, etc.). It is better not to ask, “what do you like?” or “what do you know how to do?” because if she or he can’t think of anything, instead of feeling empowered, her or his anxiety will increase. Interviewers can try to identify attitudes, preferences or abilities of any kind, and bring them up during the conversation.

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Handle psychological defense mechanisms appropriately

Any of the defense mechanisms appear when, in the psychological reality of children or adolescents, the anxiety or fear is greater than they can bear. Since these are mechanisms that they do not consciously perceive or control, we cannot expect them to minimize them and control them on their own; therefore, interviewers must take specific actions when they notice their appearance.

Firstly, they should pause and not insist on asking or speaking about the topic at that time. The appearance of the defense mechanism indicates that the child or adolescent cannot deal with the anxiety it causes. Insisting on the topic would only increase the anxiety and, along with this, the unconscious mechanisms that are unleashed to minimize it, so that the child or adolescent will be less likely to talk about it.

Interviewers should record the point of the conversation that triggered the appearance of anxiety and the defense mechanisms, and return to that point later to obtain more information.

Messages should be offered that transmit and reinforce the sense of trust. Talk about a neutral or pleasant topic, bypassing the main topic. After that, and whenever you perceive that the child or adolescent is less anxious, you can return to the questions on the subject, formulating them in a different way.

When adolescent defense mechanisms are unleashed, which make them appear strong and display defiance (“you have nothing to give me,” “I don’t need anything”) or act in a frankly aggressive manner, it is important to remember that this mechanism hides a sensation of helplessness and fragility.

If only the visible behaviour of adolescents is considered, the interviewer will conclude that they are strong and decisive, when the real internal experience is one of confusion, fear and vulnerability. Adolescents rarely accept that they are afraid; on the contrary, they generally act defiantly. It is the specific task of interviewers to maintain their role as a figure of support and protection, even when adolescents’ behaviour displays rejection and self-sufficiency, taking into account that the feelings of frustration, anger and despair provoked by seeing their project cut short appear in interviews as defiance, mocking, evasive attitudes, etc.

18

Ask questions in an appropriate manner

Asking “why?” is not useful. This question can be replaced by “what happened...?” or “what made you...?” if it is necessary to understand causality.

It is not a useful question because it expects children or adolescents to reason on the basis of causality (which is impossible for them) and because they usually interpret this question as judgemental.

Nor are questions that include references or indirect allusions such as “there,” “that,” “he” etc., useful, because it will not be clear if the child or adolescent understands the same thing as the interviewer.

The child or adolescent could easily associate the word “he” with another masculine figure in her or his subjective recollection, even if for the interviewer it is obvious who is being talked about. It is usually more useful to mention the name of the person, place or thing that is being referred to, even if it sounds repetitive.

Questions used as an attempt to confirm information, should be avoided. For example, “Are you sure?” (after something the child said) or “Do you understand?” expecting the child to be objective in responding.

Children and adolescents’ egocentric and concrete thought process means that they will interpret the repetition of the question to mean that they are not believed.

Repeating the same question in an attempt to obtain more information is not useful. Children and adolescents will interpret that this is because they are not believed or because they did not give the “right answer” the first time, and they will modify the second or third response in an attempt to please the adult interviewer.

Proposing questions or phrases that are open rather than closed invites the child to narrate a situation. Closed questions only have “yes or no” as a possible answer. Some examples of open questions are: “And then what happened?” Or “What happened next?”, “Tell me more about...”

Ask questions that contain only one idea. If you have more than one, it is always possible to divide it into two questions.

Do not seek to obtain abstract units of measurement. For example, "How long did it last? How far did you go? How long ago did you leave? How many times?" etc.

Special care must be taken not to ask questions that generate shame or guilt. When trying to understand the reasons for migration, for example, it is not useful to ask, "Don't you miss your mother?", "Don't you feel guilty that they are worried about you?", "Couldn't you do something else instead of migrating?", "Why didn't you try to study or work?", "Wasn't what you had enough?".

19

Actions that minimize the effects of migration

If the pain of the child or adolescent at being separated from her or his significant adults, or the fear of losing them, manifests itself, steps should be taken to help her or him make a phone call or take any relevant action in this regard.

Faced with the feeling of hopelessness and failure, it is necessary to transmit messages about their own resourcefulness (strength and courage) along with information about real and possible alternatives.

Given the feeling of vulnerability, they should be given specific information on the role of authorities that can provide them with protection and the ways they can do so.

In the face of depersonalization, it is necessary to transmit messages that reinforce their value and identity. For example, ask her or him what name she or he wants to be called by and always refer to her or him in that way. Highlight any skills that are observed during the interview, along with the skills and strengths they must possess to have been able to reach the point where they are.

20

Only provide realistic information

It is counter-productive to try to put children or adolescents at ease by telling them things we know will not happen. Their anxiety will be calmed by receiving realistic and concrete information, even when it is not what they want to hear.

This information will always have the effect of removing uncertainty and confusion, and thereby minimizing distress. In addition, it will strengthen the bond of trust, because they will perceive that they are being treated with respect and clarity, without lying. Trying to conceal or “embellish” situations so that children or adolescents do not panic or suffer will leave them defenseless and with a sense of betrayal when the reality proves otherwise.

21

Specific topics

If there are suspicions that children or adolescents have suffered sexual abuse, it is important to repeat messages that free them from blame. If possible, it is best to continue the interview with a person of the same gender in the case of girls (who are usually victimized by men). If the possible victim is a boy, it is useful to repeat messages about the responsibility of the abuser, and not the victim, as well as the importance of asking for help as a sign of courage.

Messages directed at the possibility of feeling shame and fear about speaking out help to reduce anxiety and allow disclosure.

Avoid questioning children and adolescent victims of crimes on details or unnecessary circumstances, beyond what is essential.

Avoid talking about “punishment” of the abuser, and instead talk about “ways to prevent it from happening again.”

If the abuser is a significant adult, children or adolescents may not dare to reveal the abuse, because they do not want the abuser to come to harm or to get them into trouble.

If a transgender child or adolescent is interviewed, they should be asked what their name is (regardless of what any official documents say) and that name should be used throughout the interview. Under no circumstances should you question or attempt to clarify their situation.

22

Ensure that they are believed, without doubts being raised

Comments like: "Are you sure?", "Aren't you confused?", "Isn't that something you've made up?", "But what did you do to him?", "Why didn't you do something to defend yourself?" or "Why did you wait until now to tell someone?", are never useful, because they convey judgement and reproach instead of understanding and trust.

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VII

Common mistakes when interpreting the behaviour of children and adolescents

Finally, here are a number of errors that often hinder interviews with children or adolescents. In general, they arise from the difficulty of abandoning the adult status of the interviewers and interpreting what happens on the basis of the situation and characteristics of children and adolescents.

These are situations that every adult inevitably faces when interviewing children and adolescents, which is why it is essential to take them into account.

Common mistakes in interviews	
Common error	Why is it an error?
<p>Assuming that they can reason and act like an adult</p>	<p>Very often, what is obvious to an adult is not obvious to children or adolescents. For example, the function performed by an authority that comes into contact with them with the intention of protecting and restoring rights.</p> <p>Although you may think “it is obvious that I am here to help,” it may not be so for the child or adolescent, who perceives you as an unknown adult. She or he needs the concrete information in order to understand the situation.</p> <p>All children and adolescents interpret what happens in the present moment on the basis of the concrete and egocentric thinking that their stage of development permits, and there is a huge difference with respect to how an adult person thinks. In addition, they interpret and reason according to previous lived and learned experiences; if they have experienced violence, been uprooted and feel unprotected, they have no reason to or may be unable to feel trust towards an adult person who comes into contact with them.</p> <p>Reasoning on the basis of concrete, egocentric and omnipotent thinking may be absurd or incoherent when interpreted from the adult point of view. It is necessary to adapt your perception and understand the perspective of a child or adolescent’s thought process so as not to fall into error.</p>

Common mistakes in interviews

Common error	Why is it an error?
<p>Assuming that they understand they are not in danger and that they will not be harmed during the interview</p>	<p>If in any event they perceive something, or a feeling takes hold of them, that causes fear or anxiety, they can construct an idea that they are in danger, and they will experience this as real.</p> <p>If they have just arrived at an immigration station or shelter, their experience will be one of frustration at not achieving their goal, and this can easily trigger a sense of being harmed.</p>
<p>Assuming that if they say they do not need help or are hostile to the idea, it is because they do not need it</p>	<p>All children, and especially adolescents, may have difficulty accepting their vulnerability and fear.</p> <p>Whether it is out of an underlying fear and distrust, or the operation of defense mechanisms based on omnipotence and denial, they may not show that they are weak or ask for help.</p> <p>Interviewers must be able to interpret these behaviours in an appropriate manner. Otherwise, they risk obtaining only the obvious, non-specialized information, and involuntarily obstructing the child's or adolescent's access to the protection of their rights.</p>
<p>Assuming that hostile attitudes are personal</p>	<p>Children and adolescents who show hostility do so because it is the only way they know to establish a feeling of control and self-protection. It never has anything to do with the interviewer nor should it be treated as personal. On the contrary, interviewers must interpret this situation as a sign of vulnerability, despair and a need for the restitution of rights.</p>

Common mistakes in interviews

Common error	Why is it an error?
<p>Assuming that if they cannot recount events of violence, it means that they did not experience them</p>	<p>In general, an experience of violence is usually kept secret and kept that way for a long time. It is not easy to reveal victimization, whether due to directly expressed threats, dynamics that lead children and adolescents to feel responsible and not dare to speak, or because of the shame and guilt often entailed.</p> <p>Children or adolescents should not be expected to explicitly state that they have experienced violence in order to suspect or confirm a situation of violence and allow protection mechanisms to be activated.</p>
<p>Assuming that they tend to make things up and lie about being victims of violence</p>	<p>Children and adolescents rarely lie about having been victims of violence. Although they do have a tendency to make up stories, they do so about being a superhero or heroine, achieving major goals, or topics or stories that they enjoy, but not about being a victim.</p> <p>There are characteristic situations and information that child victims mention that they cannot have invented: what they felt, saw, smelled, knew, etc. On the other hand, concrete thinking and the characteristics of children's memories do not allow them to memorize and repeat long lists of details and complex stories that may have been invented or told to them.</p>
<p>Assuming that they are hiding information deliberately</p>	<p>If children or adolescents are unable to verbalize what has happened, or conceal or distort information, they may do so because it is the only way they know how to feel protected. It is important to understand their context and background, which may be one where telling the truth has not proved useful. In addition, their reasoning suggests that telling the truth does not help them achieve their goal, the one on which both their survival and identity depend. From their perspective, sticking to what they have said may be like a life or death situation.</p>

Common mistakes in interviews

Common error	Why is it an error?
<p>Assuming that if they have experienced violence they will always show anxiety, fear and other typical symptoms (and if they do not, it means that they did not experience it)</p>	<p>The absence of immediate or evident manifestations in the behaviour of the child or adolescent does not mean that damage has not occurred, or that she or he has not been affected by the victimization. This effect of victimization in childhood is due to the fact that the mechanisms of defense can conceal anxiety, fear and despair.</p> <p>For example, it may seem impossible that victims do not remember details or even remember the event, that they did not ask for help or tell anyone what happened, or even treat what happened to them as unimportant. Likewise, it may seem impossible that they do not present obvious symptoms and that they continue to perform normally in specific areas of daily life without showing apparent impairments due to being victims. However, from the point of view of emotional health, their safety depends on these strategies to maintain some degree of mental health.</p> <p>During the interview, such a person could describe brutal situations of aggression without displaying any emotion while doing so, using the mechanism of dissociation. The fact that she or he does not display feelings is exactly what proves that she or he did experience something traumatic.</p>
<p>Assuming that the fact that they do not display hatred towards the aggressor nor try to run away from him means that they are not victims and do not require help</p>	<p>Contrary to what common sense may suggest, children or adolescents who are being victimized by someone close to them may hate what they do and love the person at the same time. This is the very definition of ambivalence (loving and hating simultaneously).</p>

Common mistakes in interviews

Common error	Why is it an error?
<p>Assuming that they do not display hatred towards the aggressor nor try to run away from him means that they are not victims and do not require help</p>	<p>The dependence and vulnerability of childhood with respect to the people they love, takes precedence over everything else. During childhood the presence of these people in order to survive is an overwhelming need. The mere idea of losing them, hurting them or causing them problems puts children and adolescents in great difficulties. In fact, one of the most frequent fears during childhood and adolescence is the fear of abandonment and of not being loved. Losing an adult person who is loved is experienced in their emotional reality as equivalent to death: "If I don't have an adult to take care of me, give me food and shelter, then I will die." Although this may not be the case from an objective point of view, it is the case in the emotional reality of children and adolescents, which inevitably affects everything they feel, think and do.</p> <p>This emotional reality, in which preserving the affection and presence of an adult person is more important than anything else, is what makes children or adolescents try to "protect" whoever is abusing them, even when they are suffering abuse, recruitment into networks or any other type of violence. What they are protecting is the possibility of survival (because they depend completely on that person) and therefore, they feel as though they have no options left. Their need to survive is stronger than that of objectively becoming aware of the damage that person is causing them. As adults who are not emotionally connected to the aggressor or group that recruited the child or adolescent, and do not need them to survive, we may find this behaviour incomprehensible. But the reality is that the perception of the child or adolescent that she or he needs the aggressor in order to survive is stronger than the possibility of perceiving him as someone who causes them harm.</p> <p>It must be recalled that what is reprehensible is the behaviour of the aggressor or group of aggressors, and not the feelings of the child or adolescent, which are totally valid, since affection and dependency force her or him to display this loyalty.</p> <p>During interviews, it is not useful to try to convince children or adolescents of the serious danger they are in, or to issue negative judgements to try and make them understand what is happening. This only forces them to defend the aggressor. It is enough to detect the situation of recruitment, and activate the necessary protection. The child or adolescent does not perceive or accept that she or he is a victim in these situations.</p>

Common mistakes in interviews

Common error	Why is it an error?
Assuming that if they retract after having revealed victimization, this means it did not happen and they were lying	Once children or adolescents begin to reveal situations of violence or recruitment, it is very possible that they subsequently retract and state that nothing they said before was true, and that they made it up. The reason for this is that they tend to feel fear after uncovering the fact, especially if the response received from adults was not appropriate and they feel exposed. Retraction is a way of feeling that they are protecting themselves, and is not a deliberate lie.



Abstract thinking: the type of thinking that humans fully master upon reaching the end of their cognitive development (around the age of 25). It is also known as hypothetical-deductive thinking, since it allows humans to think “only with ideas,” to combine them, contrast them, project them into the future and draw conclusions, among other operations.

Challenging behaviour: a manifestation in which children and especially adolescents deny their fear and, on the contrary, “compete” with adults and confront them directly, trying to intimidate them and even acting aggressively.

Concrete thinking: the type of thinking used by children and adolescents, which is why it is impossible for them to think “only with ideas,” without concrete or personal referents (i.e. ones already known and obtained through the senses). Children and adolescents will encounter difficulties, for example, in explaining an event, since this requires them to understand causality and to retain multiple variables in their minds at the same time, combining them, making a hypothesis and drawing a conclusion. On the contrary, they can describe what they know and have experienced, especially if they have concrete elements to do so (drawings, pictures, something to point to or objects to build, etc.).

Depersonalization: one of the most devastating effects of violence when it has been experienced in a sustained manner over time. Successive experiences in which the person is treated as an object or not taken into account by their significant adults undermine their self-perception to such an extent that they may hold the belief that “I am nothing.” This effect has serious consequences for the possibility of developing self-esteem, identity and a life project.

Egocentric thinking: a term coined by Piaget to describe an inability to consider another person’s point of view. Every child can only think and reason from their own perspective: what they know, what they have already learned, what they perceive through their senses. That is why any conclusion or reasoning they make will have her or himself as the centre.

Evasive behaviour: a manifestation in which children or adolescents change the topic of conversation or hinder the interview. This is an involuntary (unconscious) defense mechanism, which is triggered when the subject of conversation or the situation is too distressing. It is not subject to their will, so it becomes the task of interviewers to take specific actions to reduce anxiety.

Frontal lobe: the area of the brain that is responsible for impulse control, judgement, planning and behaviour control, among other functions. When it is not yet fully developed, people have difficulty taking medium- and long-term consequences into consideration, keeping their emotions out of their reasoning, not being influenced by their emotions when making decisions, and controlling their impulses, among other effects.

Impossibility of controlling emotions during childhood and adolescence: during these stages, if an emotion takes hold of their psychological reality (what they think and feel), it is impossible to minimize or neutralize it by reasoning. They lack the right tools to achieve this. It is the task of the adults around them to construct the environment they need to feel as calm as possible, as well as to “deactivate” potential fears if they are seen to appear.

Myelination: the process of coating nerve pathways with a fatty substance called

myelin, which speeds up communication between cells in the brain and makes possible the different abilities of the neurological structure.

Psychological defense

mechanisms: these are tools that the mind sets in motion when anxiety levels exceed a person's coping abilities. When faced with situations of stress or crisis, if the situation they are experiencing or the memories brought to mind cause a higher level of anxiety than they can tolerate, these mechanisms will be deployed without the person being able to control them or even being aware of it. Avoidance, transformation into the opposite and denial are some of these mechanisms.

Stages of development in childhood and adolescence:

these concern the cognitive, emotional and relational abilities of children and adolescents according to the phase of development they are going through, and the resources they have (and have had) available to them throughout their lives. The stages of development are gradual, and are not directly linked to chronological age. Depending on the stage of development, a child or adolescent will possess certain skills and not others. For example, if she or he is 7 years old, she or he will not be able to use abstract and complex concepts. No child or adolescent is able to deploy skills for which, structurally, she or he is not yet fully developed.

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