

Navigating Peer Review Initiatives in Forensic Interviewing:

A COMPREHENSIVE EXPLORATION

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Preferred Citation: Rouse, C. (2024). Navigating Peer Review Initiatives in Forensic Interviewing: A Comprehensive Exploration. Huntsville, AL: Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center.

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 15PJDP-22-GK-03059-JJVO awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice or grant-making component.

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Abstract

Peer review is a critical component of the forensic interviewer profession, as it promotes professional development, accountability, growth, and quality improvement. Peer review is the evaluation of a forensic interviewer's professional work by their colleagues. Accreditation standards for Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) require participation in peer review, underscoring its importance for continuous learning (Haag-Heitman & George, 2011; Lamb et al., 2002a; Lamb et al. 2002b; Patton, 2015). A field analysis by the staff of the Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center revealed significant inconsistency in the structure and facilitation of peer review for forensic interviewers nationwide. Variability was noted in several aspects, including facilitation, level of engagement, participant demographics, session frequency, participant competency, and the use of full interviews versus partial clips. Without the implementation of key recommendations outlined in this report, the efficacy of forensic interview peer review remains variable. This examination synthesizes findings from published research, focus groups, and field analysis to identify themes and key insights for CACs and Chapters seeking to establish an effective peer review program. Through this assessment, key components have been identified that offer valuable insights to help inform best practices.

Keywords: peer review; forensic interviewers; feedback; facilitation; adult learning; guide

Introduction

“Peer review is one of many accepted standards to prevent interviewer drift.”

There is a growing body of literature that underscores the critical role of peer review in the development of forensic interviewers (Brooks et al., 1995; Brubacher et al., 2021; Cederborg et al.; Everson et al., 2020; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2015; Wolfman et al., 2016). Peer review is the evaluation of a forensic interviewer’s professional work via observation of a recorded interview and a facilitated discussion with other interviewers. It is intended to maintain and enhance desirable forensic interview practices (Stewart, Katz, & La Rooy, 2011). However, there is **limited guidance on how peer review should be structured**, and which components are necessary for its success (Brubacher et al., 2022).

High-quality forensic interviewing requires a commitment to deliberate practice in addition to professional peer review. Deliberate practice is central to learning, aiming to improve critical aspects of current performance. It is challenging, effortful, requires repetition and feedback, and may not be inherently enjoyable or immediately rewarding (Coughlan et al., 2014). Deliberate practice and peer review are cornerstones of quality improvement in many fields involved in the multidisciplinary response to child abuse. The American Nurses Association (1988) defines peer review as “the process by which practicing registered nurses systemically assess, monitor, and make judgments about the quality of nursing care provided by peers as measured against professional standards of practice” (American Nurses Association, 1988, as cited in Haag-Heitman & George, 2011, p. 48). According to Everson et al. (2020), peer review offers a highly effective method for providing supportive and targeted feedback to interviewers.

Research on the professional development of forensic interviewers highlights the importance of feedback in the form of skill-based supervision, mentorship, and reflective practice. In a study by Lyon and Stolzenberg, interviewers conducted interviews of five- to ten-year-old children weekly for ten weeks. They transcribed their interviews and participated in self and peer reviews of their practice. Across the ten-week trial, interviewers increased their use of open invitations by 47% and decreased their option-posing questions by 31%. This study emphasizes the importance of consistent self and peer review to incrementally improve performance (Lyon & Stolzenberg, 2015).

Another study put two groups of interviewers through simulated interviews with computer-generated avatars. Half were assigned to a feedback and reflection group and half were assigned to a control group, not receiving any feedback. Only the participants who received feedback showed a reliable change in the proportion of recommended questions (Krause et al., 2017). Research indicates a phenomenon known as “interviewer drift,” in which interviewers tend to revert to their previous methodologies once feedback is no longer given (Lyon & Stolzenberg, 2015). Peer review is one of many accepted standards of practice within the CAC movement to prevent “interviewer drift,” ensure adherence to best practice skills, and engage in deliberate practice.

These studies, along with many others, highlight the necessity of consistent and structured feedback for enhancing interviewing skills. This paper contributes to the field by outlining key components for successful peer review, advocating for its integration as a structured, feedback-driven practice essential to interviewer growth.

Methods

This section outlines the methods employed in our comprehensive exploration of peer review initiatives in forensic interviewing. To navigate this complex landscape, a multi-faceted approach was taken.

This section outlines the methods employed in our comprehensive exploration of peer review initiatives in forensic interviewing. To navigate this complex landscape, a multi-faceted approach was taken.

A field analysis was conducted with fourteen states across the country, which entailed phone interviews with Chapter-level staff (or designated individuals) to inquire about peer review practices in their respective states. The questions explored various aspects of peer review program structure, including facilitation, attendance, meeting frequency, recording sharing methods, feedback processes, and evaluation collection. The information collected highlighted significant differences across peer review programs.

Five focus groups were convened to capture the qualitative dimensions of peer review. This facilitated discussion provided an in-depth exploration of the experience of offering peer review programs, encompassing strengths and identifying potential barriers. Focus group participants shared lessons learned and offered insights for others just beginning a peer review program. This method augments the reader's understanding of the complex dynamics at play within forensic interviewing and peer review.

In addition to the field analysis and focus groups, a comprehensive review of the available literature around peer review was conducted. In partnership with the NCAC CALiO™ librarian, 34 research and literature articles from various professional fields, such as mental health, nursing, and higher education, were selected for their relevance to this topic.

Together, these methodological elements contribute to the robustness of the research design. The methods section serves as the foundation for a thorough exploration, providing a detailed roadmap for understanding the complexities of peer review initiatives within the field of forensic interviewing.

The Problem

Participation in peer review can lead to improved skills for forensic interviewers, but without appropriate structure, peer review risks failing to achieve this important goal.

Participation in peer review can lead to improved skills for forensic interviewers, but without appropriate structure, peer review risks failing to achieve this important goal. Historically, **little to no formal guidance on building peer review programs** existed in the CAC forensic interviewing field. Most peer review programs are developed out of local need, driven by grassroots efforts of individuals seeking to develop a resource within their community. It is perhaps no wonder that a field analysis of 12 states and 2 national programs demonstrated a large spectrum of forensic interview peer review structures in the U.S.

The proliferation of such programs can also be attributed to the requirement of peer review as an essential component of the National Children's Alliance forensic interview accreditation standard. The National Children's Alliance (NCA) standards of accreditation state:

Individuals who conduct forensic interviews must participate in a structured forensic interviewer peer review process a minimum of two times per year. Structured peer review needs to incorporate ongoing opportunities to network with and share learning and challenges with peers, review actual interviews in a professional and confidential setting, discuss current relevant research articles and materials, and provide training opportunities specific to forensic interviewing
(National Children's Alliance, 2022, p. 29).

As a result of this varied development, the differences between peer review programs are vast; some seem to exist only to satisfy the NCA accreditation standard, while other programs are highly robust with dedicated staff and intentional policies and procedures. In a 2009 survey conducted by the National Children's Advocacy Center, Regional Children's Advocacy Centers (RCACs), and the National Children's Alliance (NCA), 247 NCA members were asked how they engage in peer review (National Children's Advocacy Center, 2009).

The data demonstrated a wide range of approaches:

- 40% of respondents said they participate in a statewide peer review program
- Less than 40% conducted peer review within their MDT
- 35.3% conducted peer review with their CAC staff
- Approximately 18% took part in a national peer review program
- 11% reported conducting no peer review whatsoever

When asked how often peer review was conducted:

- 9.8% conduct peer review weekly
- Just under 50% conduct peer review monthly
- 44% conduct peer review quarterly
- 6% conduct peer review annually

The structure and design of peer review programs are crucial. Research indicates that merely increasing the number of peer review sessions does not necessarily improve the quality of interviews. Traditional models of quarterly or even monthly review meetings likely provide insufficient monitoring to address individual needs effectively (Everson et al., 2020). The efficiency of the peer review program, the quality of the feedback, and opportunities to engage in active learning all play an important role (Brubacher et al., 2021; Coughlan et al., 2014). Each component of the program should have relevance and purpose.

Forensic interviewing is moving toward increased professionalism, and peer review is a large part of that progression. However, the extensive variability among peer review programs and the lack of comprehensive guidance offered to the field present clear and powerful barriers to this advancement. Nevertheless, existing literature on peer review shares a strong consensus that specific guidance and training is critical to successful peer review (Tornwall, 2018).

Themes

Upon reviewing the literature, the **limited amount of research** conducted around *forensic interviewer* peer review is immediately evident. Few studies have examined peer review for forensic interviewers, the impacts of various structures, and what elements are most beneficial to practice improvement. Much of the literature around peer review, as a practice in general, comes from the medical, mental health, and higher education fields. These industries have had many years to cultivate their practice, while forensic interviewing is still a relatively new profession, only dating back to the 1980s (Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2011). Despite these gaps, a review of available literature, feedback from focus groups, and a field analysis yielded several common themes. These themes were grouped into four different categories: purpose and orientation, facilitators, participation, and structure. Refer to the Appendix for the structural considerations for peer review programs.

Purpose & Orientation

Simply conducting forensic interviews and participating in peer review does not ensure the development of sound interviewing skills. For peer review programs to be effective, they must offer participants clear goals and a structured orientation. Brubacher et al. (2022b) emphasized that “organizations working to develop their peer review process should explicitly explain to their interviewers how peer review is a learning exercise itself, and how it can foster the professional development of both reviewer and reviewee” (p. 17). Understanding the purpose of peer review can help alleviate participant anxiety and foster openness to critical feedback. Research by Brooks et al. (1995) showed that because peer review can sometimes be seen as intimidating and threatening, participant education was considered an important first step to facilitating the implementation of peer review programs. For peer evaluation to be effective, facilitators need to prepare and explain to participants the who, what, when, how, and why of the collaborative experience so they feel capable of evaluating one another effectively and fairly (Odom et al., 2009). This orientation should extend to leadership and stakeholders to ensure organizational support for peer review as a necessity for ongoing development. A robust orientation can create a psychologically safe environment, which supports participation. Focus group participants indicated that orientation and onboarding processes reduced anxiety and increased engagement. These processes typically included onboarding webinars that provided an overview of the program, participant expectations, and confidentiality guidelines.

Facilitators

Focus group discussions highlighted the importance of having a facilitator lead the peer review program. In many smaller programs, highly experienced or “expert” interviewers serve as facilitators, while larger programs often use Chapter representatives, some of whom may have never conducted interviews. Individuals must develop the underlying content knowledge before they can effectively evaluate another’s forensic interview (Lai, 2016). Experts and researchers have stressed the importance of training for those individuals who provide feedback, emphasizing that they need to be well-trained in the concepts they are evaluating in others (Brubacher et al., 2022b). The accuracy, specificity, and objectivity of the feedback provided in peer review is in many ways dependent on the skill level of group participants and facilitators. The feedback that contradicts what someone has learned in their initial training can be detrimental to their future performance (Cyr et al., 2021).

Given the diversity and geographic distribution of CACs across the country, the ability to have a highly skilled, seasoned forensic interviewer serving as a peer review facilitator is not always possible. During focus group sessions, some professionals shared that their programs will allow any interested interviewers in their state to be a peer review facilitator, while other programs have an application process to identify forensic interviewers who meet certain requirements/prerequisites. Organizations that are constructing their peer review programs would likely benefit from a thoughtful approach to who they are selecting to serve as facilitators.

Along with identifying a qualified facilitator, there must also be attention given to training those individuals on how to give and receive feedback. Giving concrete, actionable, and manageable feedback information is a skill (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Facilitators should have a knowledge base on how feedback is delivered and how to help participants receive that feedback. The rhythm of feedback should find a balance between positive statements (what the interviewer did well) and constructive statements paired with actionable suggestions for improvement (what the interviewer could do better). Most peer review programs utilize the “feedforward” concept, which invites participants to focus on the future and what to do differently the next time, as opposed to what happened in the past. The feedforward approach also focuses feedback to be concentrated on a task rather than the person, so participants are less likely to become defensive when receiving feedback (Sadler, 2010).

In addition to the adoption of a feedforward approach, facilitators can also implement a reflective approach. The use of powerful questions (e.g., “Tell me what you were thinking when you said that.” or “What could you ask if you were to do this interview again?”) invites reflective exploration of one’s practice. That reflection, in turn, can help participants utilize their critical-thinking skills to arrive at alternative questioning tactics and focus on changing future behavior.

Participation

Forensic interviewers should understand that **active learning** is integral to their participation in peer review. Activities such as reading research, evaluating peers’ work, providing feedback, engaging in discussions, and revising one’s work based on feedback are all aspects of participation. Participation can be measured in various ways, including frequency of engagement, quality of feedback provided, and level of contribution to group discussions. If it is to be effective, participants must be motivated to improve practice and not merely show up just to “check a box.” Effort and motivation have been found to be a factor in increasing skill development over time. Research by Li et al. (2010) indicates that “there is value associated with ‘active engagement’ during peer review” (p. 534).

Riese, Samara, and Lillejord (2012) explored the role of peer relationships in peer learning, arguing that effective feedback and assessment depend on a supportive peer learning environment. They suggest that peer learning can help foster a sense of community and shared responsibility for learning among students, which can improve the quality of feedback and assessment. Focus groups strongly supported the idea that psychological safety contributed to participation levels and quality. Focus group participants reported that ensuring a positive culture in peer review was the main objective of the facilitator. A variety of methods exist for creating a program that enhances “active engagement” from participants. Effective approaches include keeping the group size small, establishing a clear shared mission and purpose, ensuring consistency amongst the membership, and grouping participants by skill level.

Powell et al. (2010) highlighted heavy caseloads as a significant barrier to ongoing development, limiting availability for further training and supervision. Focus group attendees named participants not showing up as a significant barrier to the success of the program. Supervisors and leaders need to be onboarded to peer review expectations just as much as participants. Protecting time and giving space so forensic interviewers can participate in peer review is a key component to success.

Structure

Structure in any meeting space needs to be **carefully considered** to ensure the meeting is productive, goals are achieved, and participants feel engaged and valued. In a study by Evans (2015), she identified key elements of effective peer review design based on participant perspectives, including preparation and induction, attention to assessment of feedback, and role clarity. These findings align with insights from focus groups and the field analysis, emphasizing the importance of purpose and orientation.

When asked, “What works well in your program?”, most focus group participants noted that having a clear structure helped them to be successful. One individual stated, “Having a deliberate focus on both the art and science of interviewing was beneficial for the participants.” Feedback during the focus groups also highlighted the importance of “having a thought-out plan of the logistics ahead of time,” including how to share recordings confidentially, a schedule of meetings, topics of discussion, and identification of research articles to be discussed. Having a program that is structured helps to create an environment of consistency that has the potential to increase engaged participation.

As part of a strong foundational structure, peer review programs may benefit from naming explicit learning goals for each session. Boud and Falchikov (2006) emphasize the need for aligning assessment with long-term learning goals, indicating the importance of a structured approach to peer review meetings that encourages reflection on the development trajectory. This can be created with input from the participants or guided by existing program goals. Forms or checklists are examples of how structures can help to guide conversation and direct feedback. Consideration needs to be taken to ensure that such tools have a purpose and bring value to the peer review program. While checklists can help evaluate interview quality, learners who only focus on the checklist items tend to provide simpler reviews with less actionable feedback (Brubacher et al., 2022). Tools like the AIM (Advanced Interview Mapping) developed by Everson et al. (2020) can help codify interviews and provide criteria for appraising performance based on best practice standards (Newlin et al., 2015; Powell & Snow, 2007).

Regular evaluation and oversight are important components of any peer review structure. Evaluation can be accomplished by surveying participants and facilitators regularly and incorporating feedback when changes need to be made. Having supervisors or outside facilitators periodically check in on the quality of peer review sessions could be beneficial (Cyr et al., 2021). Structure in any peer review program must be balanced with flexibility. This is especially important in the field of forensic interviewing, as research is evolving at a rapid pace, and the practice of interviewing is always changing. An informed and adaptable peer review program can stay current with new training and research developments.

Future Considerations

Upon reviewing the literature, feedback from focus groups, and conducting a field analysis, several practice and research considerations emerge that are poised to enhance future peer review programs.

Practice Considerations

The field of forensic interviewing must acknowledge that participation in peer review alone does not automatically lead to improved performance in forensic interviews. Peer review is just **one component** of the ongoing professional development essential for forensic interviewers. To maximize knowledge transfer and skill development, it is crucial to incorporate feedback, continuing education, refresher courses, and skill-based supervision.

CAC leaders and supervisors play a vital role in supporting peer review participation by providing interviewers with the necessary time and space to apply and refine the skills identified for improvement through peer review. Peer review programs should be purpose-driven and structured, with a strong focus on onboarding and orienting participants to the peer review process. Additionally, it is essential to invest time in training and educating both participants and facilitators on effective feedback delivery and reception. These programs should also undergo regular quality assurance evaluations.

Facilitators of peer review would benefit greatly from networking opportunities with other professionals in similar roles. As noted in a recent field analysis, “Building a network and community so that one could connect with other facilitators across the region is invaluable.” Given the complex dynamics that vary across groups and states, such networking would enhance the support available to facilitators in this critical role.

Considerations for Future Research

Many academics have highlighted the need for additional research to support ongoing development of forensic interviewers (Brubacher et al., 2022a; Brubacher et al., 2022b). Given the current lack of research, several pathways can be explored to enhance forensic interviewer peer review programs. **Three specific questions warrant a more robust investigation:**

- 1) How often should an interviewer have their interviews peer-reviewed?
- 2) What should be the ideal size and composition of the participant groups?
- 3) Should the facilitator be a trained, practicing forensic interviewer?

Guidance supported by research on the optimal frequency of peer reviews would aid in the development of structured programs with measurable outcomes for skill enhancement. Does frequent peer review of one's interviews contribute to improved skills? Research has told us that ongoing review is necessary to prevent "interviewer drift", but how often? Are there potential unintended consequences, such as insufficient time or ability to attend? Clarifying these aspects would help determine the workload and capacity of interviewers and could be incorporated into the NCA accreditation standards for peer review.

Future research should also investigate the ideal participant group composition to maximize psychological safety, incorporate quality feedback, and create an optimal learning environment. Focus group attendees have suggested effective approaches, such as keeping group sizes small and grouping participants by skill level. However, empirical evidence is needed to support these practices.

Understanding the critical role of facilitators in peer review raises additional questions that research has yet to address. Does the facilitator's experience as a forensic interviewer impact the effectiveness of the review process? What is the correlation between facilitation by experts versus laypersons?

Answering these questions through future research would provide CACs and Chapters with evidence-based guidance for building their peer review programs.

Conclusion

Over the past several decades, significant groundwork has been laid to support forensic interviewing protocol structures, question typologies, and advanced skill development, ensuring quality forensic interview practices. Envisioning the future of forensic interviewing requires a deliberate focus on enhancing peer review programs, which is an invaluable step in shaping the field's continued growth.

Insights gleaned from the literature, focus groups, and field analysis underscore the pivotal role of peer review in the ongoing development of forensic interviewers. Local CACs and Chapters are well-positioned to evaluate their current peer review practices and elevate their programming to promote quality assurance across their staff and state. This area is ripe for continued focus and attention, not only to support forensic interviewers but also to develop their skills further, thereby enhancing the experiences of clients served at Children's Advocacy Centers.

Appendix

Structural Considerations for Peer Review Programs

Peer Review: Structural Considerations	
Purpose And Orientation (Onboarding)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set clear expectations• Outline the purpose and goals of the review• Develop clear learning objectives• Emphasize individual accountability• Maintain a consistent participant orientation process
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foster a supportive environment that encourages open communication• Encourage reflection and self-assessment throughout the process• Develop expected facilitator qualifications• Create a process for how facilitators are identified
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide guidelines for how feedback should be given and received• Provide training on how to give and receive feedback
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitor and evaluate the program regularly to determine its effectiveness• Measure outcomes (satisfaction, reduction in errors, increase in efficiency, increase in confidence, decrease in feelings of isolation)• Identify key logistics of the program (platform, schedule, who will facilitate, tools used, confidentiality, etc.)

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