Screening Questions for Exposure to Images on the Internet

Disclaimers: Routine screening in forensic interviews can elicit information from children that may be misunderstood. If any of the following questions elicits concerning information, use good follow-up questions with open-ended invitations. This helps ensure that teams do not come to false confirmations based on the wording children may use in their answers. These prompts are taken from the fifth edition revisions to the Michigan Forensic Interviewing protocol and are adapted to meet the needs of inquiring specifically about exposure to images on the internet.

Questioning a child about abuse should be the job of trained professionals (i.e. law enforcement, child protective services, or a forensic interviewer). These questions are intended for use with children ages 6 and older.

When segueing to the internet safety questions for children aged 6-10:

"So [child's name], remember I told you that it was my job to talk to kids and make sure that they were safe. It is also my job to talk to kids about safety on the internet. What do you know about internet safety?"

Asking for the child's knowledge about internet safety may eliminate the need to introduce concepts with the following screening questions. If the child details knowledge of things like pornography or naked images, the child's words can be inserted into some of the following prompts.

For children who do not answer with an affirmative response:

"What types of things do you do on the internet/online? What types of devices do you use?"

"Has anyone ever shown you anything on the TV or [named media device] that you think children your age shouldn't see?" (Ask questions to find out where these devices are located in the house and what the child saw.)

Keep in mind a child may answer yes to this question, which should not be considered sufficient to understand what the child is explaining. Use affirmative follow-up prompts such as "Tell me all about that" or "You said someone has shown you something that you think children your age shouldn't see. Tell me about that."

Assessing for exposure to pornography:

"Sometimes when I talk to kids about internet safety, I talk about pictures or movies of people without clothes on. Have you ever seen images like that?" (If the child responds with an affirmative, use open-ended follow-up questions again.)

Consider that if a child tells you they have seen images or movies, it is not important to get as much detail about the content as it is the exposure and the circumstances surrounding the exposure itself. That being said, details about the content should clarify if the people in the images were children or adults to assess for the potential of witnessing Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). When exploring the circumstances surrounding the exposure, remember to assess for frequency of exposure and attempt to isolate and create a narrative around it.

Assessing for solicitation on the Internet:

"Sometimes I talk to kids about people asking them for naked photos of their body on the internet or showing them naked photos of other people. Has anyone ever done anything like that before?"

Even if the child has only admitted to play games on the internet, any application with chat features could potentially result in online solicitation.