Universidade do Minho
Escola de Psicologia

Delfina Manuela da Silva Fernandes

O Testemunho de Crianças e Adolescentes Vítimas de Crimes Sexuais: Das Práticas Judiciais ao Impacto Psicológico

abril de 2026

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Delfina Fernandes

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Universidade do Minho
Escola de Psicologia

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O Testemunho de Crianças e Adolescentes Vítimas de Crimes Sexuais: Das Práticas Judiciais ao Impacto Psicológico

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Professora Doutora Marlene Matos
e do
Professor Doutor Pedro B. Albuquerque

abril de 2026

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O Testemunho de Crianças e Adolescentes Vítimas de Crimes Sexuais: Das Práticas Judiciais ao Impacto Psicológico

Resumo

O abuso sexual de crianças (ASC) é um problema social e de saúde pública reconhecido globalmente, devido às graves consequências para as vítimas, os seus familiares e para a própria comunidade. Nestes crimes, a escassez de testemunhas e de evidências físicas dos atos abusivos torna o testemunho da vítima um elemento primordial da investigação criminal. Nesse contexto, os procedimentos de recolha do testemunho tornam-se fundamentais para assegurar simultaneamente a qualidade da prova e a proteção das vítimas. Em Portugal, o sistema de justiça atribui particular relevância ao procedimento de Declarações para Memória Futura (DMF). No entanto, persistem lacunas quanto à caracterização do fenómeno do ASC em Portugal e quanto à compreensão do envolvimento da criança ou adolescente no sistema de justiça criminal atual. Esta tese teve como objetivos: (1) analisar a eficácia dos procedimentos internacionais de recolha do testemunho de vítimas de ASC; (2) caracterizar o fenómeno do ASC no contexto português; (3) analisar a qualidade das DMF; e (4) compreender as perceções e experiências de magistrados e técnicos especialmente habilitados relativamente a este procedimento. Os estudos de síntese e análise de eficácia dos procedimentos de recolha do testemunho mostraram que entrevistas conduzidas com base em protocolos de entrevista estão associadas a resultados mais positivos, tanto ao nível do desempenho do entrevistador como da qualidade da informação fornecida pela criança ou adolescente. O estudo de caracterização mostrou que o perfil das vítimas, perpetradores e do crime no contexto português são globalmente consistentes com os padrões descritos pela literatura da especialidade. Relativamente às DMF, os resultados evidenciaram uma predominância de questões de escolha múltipla e sugestivas, em detrimento de questões abertas recomendadas pela literatura, associando-se a menor quantidade e qualidade de informação obtida junto das vítimas. Numa perspetiva qualitativa, os profissionais do sistema de justiça destacaram a relevância das DMF enquanto mecanismo de proteção das vítimas e preservação da prova. No entanto, identificaram igualmente dificuldades e constrangimentos na sua implementação, nomeadamente ao nível da formação especializada, das condições de realização, das práticas de entrevista e da articulação entre intervenientes. Em suma, esta tese contribui para uma compreensão aprofundada das práticas de recolha de testemunho junto de vítimas de ASC, fornecendo evidência empírica relevante para o desenvolvimento de práticas judiciais mais eficazes, consistentes e centradas na proteção e bem-estar das vítimas.

Palavras-chave: abuso sexual de crianças; declarações para memória futura; entrevista forense; sistema de justiça criminal; vitimação secundária

The Testimony of Child and Adolescent Victims of Sexual Crimes: From Judicial Practices to Psychological Impact

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a globally recognized social and public health problem due to its severe consequences for victims, their families, and the broader community. In these cases, the scarcity of witnesses and physical evidence of the abusive acts makes the victim's testimony a central element of the criminal investigation. In this context, procedures for collecting testimony are crucial to ensuring both the quality of evidence and the protection of victims. In Portugal, the justice system places particular emphasis on the Statements for Future Use (SFU) proceeding. However, important gaps remain in the empirical characterization of CSA in Portugal and in the understanding of how children and adolescents are involved in the contemporary criminal justice system. This thesis aimed to: (1) analyze the effectiveness of international procedures used to collect testimony from CSA victims; (2) characterize CSA within the Portuguese context; (3) assess the quality of SFU interviews; and (4) understand the perceptions and experiences of judges and specially qualified professionals involved in this proceeding. Findings from synthesis and effectiveness studies indicated that interviews conducted using standardized interview protocols are associated with more positive outcomes, both in terms of interviewer performance and the quality of information provided by the child or adolescent. The characterization study indicated that the profiles of victims, perpetrators, and crime characteristics in the Portuguese context are broadly consistent with patterns reported in the scientific literature. Regarding SFU interviews, the findings revealed a predominance of option-posing and suggestive prompts, rather than the open-ended questions recommended by the literature, which were associated with a lower quantity and quality of information obtained from victims. From a qualitative perspective, professionals within the justice system emphasized the importance of SFU as a mechanism for protecting victims and preserving evidence. However, they also identified several challenges in its implementation, particularly related to specialized training, interview conditions, questioning practices, and coordination among professionals. In sum, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of testimony collection procedures with CSA victims, providing relevant empirical evidence to inform the development of more effective, consistent, and victim-centered judicial practices that prioritize the protection and well-being of children or adolescents.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; criminal justice system; forensic interview; secondary victimization; statements for future use

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Lista de abreviaturas

ABE	Achieving Best Evidence
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
APSAC	American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children
ASC	Abuso Sexual de Crianças
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CACs	Children's Advocacy Centers
CINEICC	Center for Research in Neuropsychology and Cognitive and Behavioural Intervention
CP	Código Penal
CPP	Código de Processo Penal
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
CSAIP	Child Sexual Abuse Interview Protocol
DD	Developmental Disabilities
DMF	Declarações para Memória Futura
DR	Disclosure Recipient
DRR	Disclosure Recipient Reactions
EAPL	European Association of Psychology and Law
FI	Fator de Impacto
GEE	Generalized Estimating Equations
HFD	Human Figure Diagram
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
IDK	I Don't Know
IDR	I Don't Remember
IDU	I Don't Understand

JCR	Journal Citation Reports
M	Mean
MCR	Mental Context Reinstatement
MMAT	Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool
MoGP	Memorandum of Good Practice
NICHD	National Institute for Child Health and Human Development
NS	No Significant
OMS	Organização Mundial de Saúde
PCR	Physical Context Reinstatement
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis
PRISMA-ScR	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews
PSPT	Perturbação de Stress Pós-Traumático
RATAC	Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch inquiry, Abuse scenario, and Closure;
SA	Sexual Abuse
SACD	Sexually Anatomical Correct Dolls
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SCWI	Specialist Child Witness Interviewing
SD	Standard Deviation
SFU	Statements for Future Use
SI	Sequential Interview
SIM	Standard Interview Method
SJR	Scimago Journal & Country Rank
TF-CSA	Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse

UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

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A justiça só é plena quando se põe ao serviço de quem mais precisa dela: as crianças, os jovens, os vulneráveis.

Álvaro Laborinho Lúcio

Visão Geral da Tese

A participação das crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais no sistema de justiça criminal é frequentemente inevitável e desafiante, particularmente no que respeita à conciliação entre a qualidade da prova e a proteção das vítimas. Nestes casos, a ausência frequente de testemunhas ou evidências físicas torna o testemunho da vítima um elemento essencial da investigação criminal, reforçando a importância de procedimentos de recolha de informação baseados na evidência e sensíveis às necessidades desenvolvimentais das crianças e adolescentes. Neste contexto, o sistema de justiça português atribui especial relevância ao procedimento de Declarações para Memória Futura (DMF), concebido para preservar o depoimento e minimizar o risco de vitimação secundária. Partindo deste enquadramento, a presente tese teve como objetivo analisar os procedimentos de recolha do testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais, com particular enfoque no contexto português e no regime das DMF. Primeiramente, pretendeu-se identificar e analisar a eficácia de procedimentos internacionais de recolha do testemunho. Adicionalmente, procurou-se caracterizar o fenómeno do abuso sexual de crianças (ASC) no contexto português. Por fim, avaliaram-se as Declarações para Memória Futura nestes crimes, incidindo, por um lado, na qualidade do procedimento e, por outro, nas experiências dos profissionais envolvidos.

A presente tese de doutoramento encontra-se organizada em três partes distintas. Na primeira parte, a Introdução Geral, é abordado o enquadramento teórico do fenómeno do ASC e da participação das vítimas no sistema de justiça, culminando na descrição do racional subjacente a este trabalho. Na segunda parte, são apresentados os estudos empíricos desenvolvidos, organizados em três capítulos: o Capítulo 1 (Procedimentos de Recolha do Testemunho) integra dois estudos empíricos; o Capítulo 2 (Caracterização da Violência Sexual Contra Crianças e Adolescentes) inclui um estudo empírico; e, por fim, o Capítulo 3 (Declarações para Memória Futura) engloba três estudos empíricos. Nesta parte, será ainda apresentada informação sobre as revistas onde os estudos empíricos foram submetidos (i.e., quartis, fatores de impacto), incluindo as comunicações em eventos científicos para cada um dos estudos. Na terceira parte desta tese, correspondente à Discussão Integrativa, são sintetizados e discutidos os principais resultados à luz da literatura, sendo ainda apresentadas as limitações do trabalho, recomendações para investigação futura e implicações práticas e políticas.

PARTE I

INTRODUÇÃO GERAL

Introdução

Abuso Sexual de Crianças

O abuso sexual de crianças (ASC) é definido pela Organização Mundial de Saúde (OMS) como o envolvimento de uma criança ou adolescente até aos 17 anos de idade numa atividade sexual que não compreende completamente, para a qual não é capaz de dar consentimento e para a qual não está preparada em termos desenvolvimentais (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). O perpetrador pode ser qualquer pessoa numa posição de confiança ou poder sobre a vítima. Adicionalmente, o conceito de ASC abrange um espectro alargado de comportamentos, desde atos com contacto físico entre o perpetrador e a vítima (ex., toques, penetração oral, anal e/ou vaginal) até atos sem contacto entre ambos (ex., atos exibicionistas, produção e/ou divulgação de conteúdos íntimos; WHO, 2017, 2022). No âmbito da presente tese, adota-se uma definição abrangente de ASC, que inclui tanto comportamentos com contacto físico como atos sem contacto dirigidos a pessoas até aos 17 anos de idade, em consonância com a concetualização proposta pela OMS e com a literatura científica na área, com o objetivo de promover a uniformização de conceitos e a clareza na utilização da terminologia ao longo do trabalho.

A concretização jurídica do ASC varia entre sistemas legais, sendo enquadrada em diferentes tipologias criminais. No contexto português, o ASC encontra-se tipificado no Código Penal (CP), integrando o conjunto dos crimes contra a autodeterminação sexual. Este enquadramento legal distingue diferentes formas de abuso em função da idade da vítima, da natureza dos atos praticados e da relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador, incluindo o ASC até aos 14 anos (artigo 171.º), o abuso sexual de menores dependentes ou em situação particularmente vulnerável, entre os 14 e 18 anos (artigo 172.º), atos sexuais com adolescentes entre os 14 e 16 anos (artigo 173.º), recurso à prostituição de menores entre os 14 e 18 anos (artigo 174.º), lenocínio de menores (artigo 175.º), pornografia de menores (artigo 176.º), aliciamento de menores para fins sexuais (artigo 176.º-A), organização de viagens para fins de turismo sexual com menores (artigo 176.º-B) e atos contrários à orientação sexual, identidade ou expressão de género (artigo 176.º-C). Estas tipologias refletem a diversidade de comportamentos abrangidos pelo conceito de ASC, permitindo uma resposta penal diferenciada em função da gravidade e das circunstâncias específicas de cada caso.

A prevalência elevada do ASC encontra-se amplamente documentada em estatísticas internacionais, sendo corroborada pela evidência empírica reportada na literatura. Dados internacionais recentes sugerem que aproximadamente uma em cada cinco raparigas e um em cada sete rapazes experienciam comportamentos sexualmente abusivos durante a sua infância e adolescência (United

Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2025). Da mesma forma, as taxas de prevalência têm sido estudadas através de diversas revisões sistemáticas e meta-análises, apresentando resultados heterogéneos, o que pode ser explicado por diferenças metodológicas, nomeadamente a utilização de medidas de autorrelato, bem como pela diversidade de contextos geográficos e culturais das amostras analisadas. As estimativas de prevalência variam entre valores de aproximadamente 8% e 31% nas raparigas e entre 3% e 17% nos rapazes (Barth et al., 2013; Moody et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2021; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Em Portugal, os dados oficiais referentes ao ano de 2025 mostram a existência de 1419 crimes sexuais contra crianças e adolescentes (i.e., do artigo 171.º ao artigo 176.º do CP) registados pelas autoridades policiais, tendo os crimes de lenocínio e pornografia de menores aumentado, aproximadamente, 25% em relação ao ano anterior (Estatísticas da Justiça, 2026). Em conjunto, estes dados evidenciam a magnitude e complexidade do fenómeno do ASC, assumindo-se como uma problemática que levanta preocupações significativas a nível social, científico e político. Ainda assim, importa salientar que as estimativas disponíveis poderão subestimar a dimensão real do fenómeno, em virtude da sua natureza frequentemente oculta e dos elevados níveis de subnotificação que o caracterizam. Neste sentido, a interpretação dos dados estatísticos deve ser enquadrada à luz das dinâmicas específicas do ASC, que influenciam não só a sua ocorrência, mas também os processos de deteção e revelação.

Dinâmicas do ASC

A compreensão do ASC requer, assim, uma análise das dinâmicas que lhe estão subjacentes, particularmente no que respeita aos fatores que condicionam os processos de revelação. A literatura tem identificado um conjunto de dinâmicas relacionais, emocionais e contextuais que podem contribuir para a dificuldade na revelação dos comportamentos abusivos ou para a sua ocorrência tardia. Estes fatores refletem a natureza complexa do processo de revelação, que não é determinado por um conjunto único e linear de variáveis, mas antes pela interação dinâmica de múltiplos elementos, incluindo características da vítima, do abuso, da relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador, bem como fatores emocionais e contextuais da criança ou adolescente.

Relativamente às características individuais da vítima, a evidência empírica sugere que a idade - quer no momento do primeiro incidente, quer no momento da entrevista formal sobre os alegados factos - desempenha um papel relevante nos processos de revelação. Especificamente, o aumento da idade associa-se a uma maior probabilidade de revelação das experiências de vitimação e a uma redução do atraso na sua comunicação. Este padrão pode dever-se ao facto de crianças mais novas apresentarem uma compreensão mais limitada da natureza sexualmente abusiva das experiências, comprometendo a

capacidade de reconhecer e nomear o abuso, assim como menores competências linguísticas para o descrever. De igual forma, o sexo da vítima parece influenciar estes processos, sendo que crianças e adolescentes do sexo feminino apresentam maior probabilidade de revelar os comportamentos abusivos de que são vítimas, enquanto os do sexo masculino tendem a revelar menos, possivelmente devido à influência de normas de masculinidade, sentimentos de vergonha e receio de estigmatização (Alaggia et al., 2019; Azzopardi et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020, 2021).

O nível de desenvolvimento cognitivo e intelectual revela-se igualmente determinante. Um maior nível de funcionamento cognitivo, incluindo quociente de inteligência mais elevado, tem sido associado a uma maior capacidade de compreensão e comunicação do abuso, constituindo um facilitador da revelação. Em contraste, a presença de défices intelectuais pode dificultar o reconhecimento, a interpretação e comunicação da experiência abusiva, funcionando como uma barreira significativa à revelação (Latiff et al., 2024).

Adicionalmente, as características do próprio abuso constituem-se como fatores relevantes na compreensão dos processos de revelação. A literatura indica que situações de abuso mais severo (ex., presença de penetração ou coocorrência com abusos físicos), prolongado ou frequente tendem a associar-se a maiores dificuldades na revelação ou a atrasos significativos na mesma (Latiff et al., 2024; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020, 2021).

A natureza da relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador assume também um papel central na revelação dos comportamentos abusivos. Relações de proximidade, confiança, dependência ou afeto com o perpetrador têm sido consistentemente associadas a maiores dificuldades na revelação. Nestes contextos, podem emergir sentimentos de lealdade, ambivalência ou conflito emocional, que contribuem para o silêncio da vítima. Estas dinâmicas são frequentemente reforçadas por assimetrias de poder, que colocam a criança ou adolescente numa posição de particular vulnerabilidade, dificultando o reconhecimento e a revelação da experiência abusiva (Alaggia et al., 2019; Alberto, 2022; Latiff et al., 2024; McGinn et al., 2026; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020).

Neste contexto, uma das dinâmicas mais frequentemente descritas na literatura sobre o ASC é o segredo, habitualmente mantido através de estratégias de manipulação, coação e controlo por parte do perpetrador. Estas estratégias são frequentemente concetualizadas no âmbito do *grooming* (ou aliciamento), entendido como um processo gradual através do qual o perpetrador estabelece uma relação de confiança e proximidade com a criança ou adolescente, com o objetivo de garantir o silêncio e a continuidade do abuso. Este processo pode incluir a utilização de recompensas, a normalização

progressiva dos comportamentos abusivos e, em alguns casos, o recurso a ameaças. A presença de ameaças, quer dirigidas à própria criança ou adolescente, quer a pessoas significativas para esta, contribui para sentimentos de medo e insegurança, constituindo uma barreira importante à revelação. Paralelamente, a manipulação emocional pode promover o desenvolvimento de sentimentos ambivalentes em relação ao perpetrador, dificultando o reconhecimento e a revelação da experiência abusiva (Alberto, 2022; McGinn et al., 2026; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020, 2021).

Desta forma, os fatores emocionais e psicológicos são também fundamentais na compreensão das dinâmicas do ASC. Sentimentos de vergonha, culpa e responsabilidade são consistentemente identificados como barreiras à revelação. Adicionalmente, o medo de que não acreditem no seu relato, bem como o receio das consequências da revelação – quer para si, quer para a família – podem inibir a comunicação dos abusos. Estratégias de evitamento, enquanto mecanismo de defesa para lidar com as experiências abusivas, podem igualmente dificultar a revelação ou contribuir para a sua ocorrência tardia (Alaggia et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McGinn et al., 2026; Morrison et al., 2018).

Por fim, importa considerar o contexto familiar e social da criança ou adolescente. A existência de apoio por parte de um cuidador não abusador, a validação da experiência relatada e a presença de relações de confiança constituem importantes facilitadores da revelação. Em contraste, contextos familiares marcados por disfunção, presença de outros comportamentos criminais ou ausência de comunicação sobre temas relacionados com a sexualidade podem dificultar a deteção e revelação do ASC. A existência de oportunidades para revelar, nomeadamente em contextos percecionados como seguros, privados e de confiança, emerge igualmente como um fator facilitador da revelação (Alaggia et al., 2019; Alberto, 2022; Latiff et al., 2024; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McGinn et al., 2026; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021).

Assim, a complexidade e interação destas dinâmicas não só condicionam os processos de revelação das experiências abusivas, como também influenciam a forma como a experiência é vivida e integrada pela criança ou adolescente, com implicações significativas para o seu desenvolvimento e bem-estar a curto e longo prazo.

Impacto nas Vítimas

O ASC é amplamente concetualizado como uma experiência potencialmente traumática, atendendo às dinâmicas inerentes que o caracterizam e ao facto de ocorrer em períodos desenvolvimentais de particular vulnerabilidade (Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019). A evidência empírica tem demonstrado que a exposição a este tipo de vitimação está associada a um amplo conjunto de

consequências adversas, que se manifestam em diferentes domínios do funcionamento das vítimas ao longo do ciclo de vida.

Durante a infância e adolescência, estas consequências podem manifestar-se em diferentes áreas do funcionamento, nomeadamente ao nível físico (ex., alterações do sono, alterações do apetite, dores de cabeça, dores no estômago), psicológico (ex., perturbação de stress pós-traumático [PSPT], sintomas de ansiedade, depressão, medo, baixa autoestima) e ao nível de problemas de comportamento (ex., comportamento agressivo, conduta antissocial). Estas manifestações podem comprometer processos desenvolvimentais, bem como o funcionamento académico e as relações interpessoais, tendendo a persistir ou a evoluir ao longo do tempo (Alberto, 2022; Alves et al., 2024; Langevin et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2016; Maniglio, 2012).

Na idade adulta, o impacto do ASC pode manifestar-se em diversos domínios, incluindo ao nível psicológico (ex., PSPT, perturbação de personalidade *borderline*, tentativas de suicídio, comportamentos autolesivos, perturbações do comportamento alimentar), saúde física (ex., fibromialgia, vírus da imunodeficiência humana), disfunções sexuais (ex., dificuldades de interesse e excitação, dor genital), menor qualidade de vida relacionada com a saúde, bem como diversas consequências adversas ao nível comportamental e interpessoal (ex., abuso de substâncias, experiências de revitimização; Alves et al., 2024; Downing et al., 2021; Hailes et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023).

Importa, contudo, salientar que a exposição ao ASC não conduz inevitavelmente ao desenvolvimento de sintomatologia ou a trajetórias de desajustamento. A literatura científica tem evidenciado uma considerável variabilidade nas respostas das vítimas, estimando que entre 10% e 53% das crianças ou adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais apresentam um funcionamento adaptativo e/ou a ausência de perturbações psicológicas após a situação abusiva (Domhardt et al., 2015).

Esta heterogeneidade nos efeitos do ASC tem sido explicada pela influência de múltiplos fatores moderadores do impacto. Entre estes, destacam-se características individuais da vítima, como o sexo, sendo que a evidência sugere diferenças sobretudo nas formas de expressão e perceção das consequências, mais do que na sua magnitude (Hillberg et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2023), bem como a idade no momento inicial das experiências abusivas, sendo que quanto mais precoce tiver sido o seu início, mais profundo e prolongado tende a ser o seu impacto (Alves et al., 2024). Para além destas variáveis sociodemográficas, a literatura científica tem também evidenciado o papel de características psicológicas, como a resiliência, o otimismo, atribuição de responsabilidade ao perpetrador e estratégias de *coping* adequadas, no funcionamento adaptativo e/ou ausência de perturbações psicológicas (Domhardt et al., 2015).

Adicionalmente, as características do próprio ato abusivo têm sido identificadas como fatores importantes na compreensão da variabilidade do seu impacto, nomeadamente a sua severidade, duração e frequência. Formas de abuso mais severas (ex., presença de penetração ou coocorrência com outras formas de violência), frequentes e prolongadas estão associadas a níveis mais elevados de sintomatologia e a trajetórias de maior desajustamento ao longo do tempo (Alves et al., 2024; Downing et al., 2021; Hillberg et al., 2011).

Os fatores relacionais e contextuais desempenham igualmente um papel central na moderação do impacto do ASC. A relação de proximidade entre a vítima e o perpetrador tende a reforçar sentimentos de culpa, ambivalência e lealdade e está associada a um impacto prolongado no tempo (Alves et al., 2024; Hillberg et al., 2011). Paralelamente, a qualidade do apoio informal - incluindo o apoio familiar e da rede social alargada - bem como a presença de vínculos seguros constituem fatores protetores importantes face aos efeitos adversos das experiências abusivas (Domhardt et al., 2015; Hillberg et al., 2011; Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019).

Por fim, a intervenção psicológica tem sido identificada como um elemento fundamental na mitigação das consequências do abuso, nomeadamente na redução de sintomatologia e promoção do ajustamento psicológico em crianças e adolescentes vítimas de abuso sexual (Tichelaar et al., 2020).

A Interação das Crianças e Adolescentes com o Sistema de Justiça

Em Portugal, quando existe uma denúncia de ASC, a criança ou adolescente pode ter de interagir com duas abordagens distintas do sistema de justiça: o sistema de proteção, quando se trata de ASC no contexto intrafamiliar, que visa proteger crianças e jovens em perigo, garantindo o seu desenvolvimento integral; e o sistema criminal, responsável pela investigação e julgamento dos factos denunciados. O presente trabalho centra-se exclusivamente no sistema de justiça criminal, uma vez que é neste contexto que se desenvolvem os procedimentos de recolha de prova e interações formais com a criança, com implicações diretas para a qualidade do testemunho e para a experiência da vítima no sistema.

Tal como tem sido consistentemente salientado na literatura científica, o ASC ocorre frequentemente em contextos privados e de secretismo, sem testemunhas ou evidências físicas e/ou biológicas dos atos sexualmente abusivos. Consequentemente, o testemunho da vítima configura-se como um elemento fundamental da investigação criminal, assumindo um papel central na descoberta da verdade e, em última instância, na decisão judicial (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Laney & Loftus, 2016). Neste sentido, o envolvimento da criança ou adolescente no sistema de justiça criminal torna-se necessário e, na maioria das situações, incontornável, podendo ocorrer em diferentes momentos e contextos, designadamente na entrevista investigativa conduzida pelos órgãos de polícia criminal ou na

avaliação pericial. É neste enquadramento que a entrevista forense assume particular relevância, sendo definida como um procedimento de recolha de informação acerca das experiências abusivas e do testemunho da vítima (Laney & Loftus, 2016; Steele, 2012).

A investigação científica tem ainda identificado a interação com o sistema de justiça como um potencial fator moderador do impacto das experiências abusivas nas vítimas, podendo conduzir à vitimação secundária. A vitimação secundária refere-se aos danos adicionais infligidos à vítima pela resposta inadequada das instituições, neste caso, do sistema judicial (Alberto, 2022; Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Classen & Clark, 2017; Elmi et al., 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). No entanto, quando o sistema de justiça interage de forma adequada com as crianças ou adolescentes, esse envolvimento pode ter um efeito terapêutico, ajudando a restaurar o sentido de justiça na vítima (Daignault et al., 2017; Quas & Goodman, 2012; Ribeiro, 2009). Adicionalmente, a investigação tem demonstrado que o sentido de justiça percecionado pela vítima não é determinado apenas pelas consequências punitivas aplicadas ao perpetrador, mas também pela forma como são tratadas no sistema judicial, incluindo experiências de reconhecimento, validação e de serem acreditadas pelos intervenientes judiciais (Sumalla & Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018).

Atendendo à elevada prevalência do ASC, à importância da participação da criança ou adolescente no sistema de justiça e às preocupações relativas ao seu bem-estar e ao risco de vitimação secundária, têm sido desenvolvidas diversas diretrizes baseadas na evidência que orientam uma abordagem informada pelo trauma e centrada na vítima na investigação destes crimes. Neste âmbito, a literatura tem identificado um conjunto de fatores relacionados com a condução da entrevista forense, as características do entrevistador e o contexto em que a entrevista decorre que devem ser considerados.

No que se refere aos fatores relacionados com a entrevista, destaca-se a necessidade de assegurar a participação da criança segundo o princípio da intervenção mínima, ou seja, reduzir ao mínimo necessário a participação da criança no sistema de justiça (Haldorsson, 2025; Lamb et al., 2018). Adicionalmente, as entrevistas forenses devem ocorrer o mais próximo possível dos alegados factos, dado que a memória humana é um processo dinâmico, suscetível a influências internas e externas. Assim, atrasos prolongados podem comprometer a clareza e a precisão das recordações, aumentar a suscetibilidade à sugestão e intensificar preocupações da criança relativamente às consequências da revelação (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2018).

Neste contexto, a investigação tem também enfatizado a importância da utilização de protocolos de entrevista forense baseados na evidência, que fornecem orientações claras sobre a forma de conduzir a entrevista, promovendo o uso de questões abertas, não sugestivas e centradas na obtenção de um

relato livre (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). A utilização destes protocolos tem sido associada a relatos mais completos, precisos e fiáveis. Da mesma forma, é fundamental a entrevista ajustar-se às características desenvolvimentais e idiossincrasias da criança, incluindo a idade, competências linguísticas, capacidade cognitiva e eventuais perturbações do desenvolvimento (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

Relativamente aos fatores associados ao entrevistador, a literatura sublinha a necessidade de este possuir formação especializada, conhecimento técnico-científico e supervisão contínua, nomeadamente em protocolos de entrevista forense baseados na evidência e de abordagens informadas pelo trauma (Classen & Clark, 2017; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). Para além disso, a postura ao longo da entrevista revela-se determinante, devendo ser de apoio, sensível e responsiva às necessidades da criança (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz et al., 2011).

Por fim, os fatores relacionados com o contexto físico da entrevista têm também sido amplamente destacados. A realização de entrevistas em ambientes formais, como tribunais, e na presença de múltiplos adultos, mesmo que estes não intervenham diretamente, tem sido associada a níveis mais elevados de stress e a menor qualidade do testemunho, incluindo maior número de erros e menor quantidade de informação correta relatada (Ferra et al., 2022; Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Ribeiro, 2009; Santtila et al., 2004; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). Assim, as diretrizes internacionais recomendam que a entrevista decorra em ambientes adaptados à criança, com a presença exclusiva do entrevistador, sendo os restantes profissionais envolvidos através de observação indireta, nomeadamente por espelho unidirecional ou por meios remotos (Korkman et al., 2024).

Assim, entrevistas forenses junto de crianças e adolescentes que não considerem as características mencionadas e sejam caracterizadas por práticas inadequadas podem ter consequências negativas significativas para a quantidade e qualidade da informação fornecida, para a credibilidade do testemunho, para a colaboração da vítima e para o risco de vitimação secundária (Classen & Clark, 2017; Ettinger, 2022; Johnson & Shelley, 2014; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Ribeiro, 2009; SAMHSA, 2014).

Em consonância com as boas práticas evidenciadas pela investigação científica, estes princípios têm sido progressivamente incorporados em instrumentos legais e políticos. A nível europeu, foram inicialmente articulados na Convenção do Conselho da Europa para a Proteção das Crianças Contra a Exploração e os Abusos Sexuais (2007), amplamente conhecida como a Convenção de Lanzarote. Esta Convenção teve como objetivo prevenir e combater o ASC, proteger as vítimas e reforçar a cooperação internacional. Neste enquadramento, as Diretrizes do Comité de Ministros do Conselho da Europa sobre

uma Justiça Amiga das Crianças (2010) vieram reforçar a importância de adaptação dos sistemas de justiça às necessidades das crianças, enfatizando princípios como a realização de entrevistas em ambientes não intimidatórios, o uso de linguagem ajustada ao nível desenvolvimental da criança, a limitação do número de entrevistas e a formação especializada dos profissionais envolvidos. Com base neste enquadramento, o Parlamento Europeu e do Conselho adotaram posteriormente a Diretiva 2012/29/UE, que estabeleceu normas mínimas relativas aos direitos, ao apoio e à proteção das vítimas nos Estados-Membros da União Europeia. Em linha com estes enquadramentos, Portugal tem vindo a implementar reformas legislativas, incluindo o Estatuto da Vítima em Processo Penal (Lei n.º 130/2015, de 04 de setembro) e a Lei de Proteção de Testemunhas (Lei n.º 93/99, de 14 de julho), com vista a melhorar a proteção das crianças vítimas que interagem com o sistema de justiça, prevendo mecanismos processuais destinados a assegurar a recolha de prova em condições adequadas às necessidades e vulnerabilidades das crianças ou adolescentes.

Declarações para Memória Futura

Entre estes mecanismos, destacam-se as Declarações para Memória Futura (DMF). Ao longo das últimas décadas, as DMF têm vindo a assumir uma relevância crescente, evoluindo de um instrumento de natureza puramente cautelar - orientado apenas para a antecipação da produção de prova - para um procedimento que visa preservar o depoimento para utilização em fases posteriores do processo, procurando simultaneamente proteger a vítima e assegurar a genuinidade das suas declarações, nomeadamente através da sua recolha em condições mais informais e num momento temporal próximo dos alegados factos (Carmo, 2013; Gouveia et al., 2020). Neste contexto, o sistema judiciário português concedeu especial relevância às DMF nos casos de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais, encontrando-se este mecanismo consagrado no Código de Processo Penal (CPP). A revisão introduzida pela Lei n.º 48/2007, de 29 de agosto, alterou de forma significativa o regime das DMF, passando o artigo 271.º a ter a seguinte redação, atualmente aplicável:

Artigo 271.º

(DMF)

1. Em caso de doença grave ou de deslocação para o estrangeiro de uma testemunha, que previsivelmente a impeça de ser ouvida em julgamento, bem como nos casos de vítima de crime de tráfico de órgãos humanos, tráfico de pessoas ou contra a liberdade e autodeterminação sexual, o juiz de instrução, a requerimento do Ministério Público, do arguido, do assistente ou das partes civis, pode proceder à sua inquirição no decurso do inquérito, a fim de que o depoimento possa, se necessário, ser tomado em conta no julgamento.

2. No caso de processo por crime contra a liberdade e autodeterminação sexual de menor, procede-se sempre à inquirição do ofendido no decurso do inquérito, desde que a vítima não seja ainda maior.
3. Ao Ministério Público, ao arguido, ao defensor e aos advogados do assistente e das partes civis são comunicados o dia, a hora e o local da prestação do depoimento para que possam estar presentes, sendo obrigatória a comparência do Ministério Público e do defensor.
4. Nos casos previstos no n.º 2, a tomada de declarações é realizada em ambiente informal e reservado, com vista a garantir, nomeadamente, a espontaneidade e a sinceridade das respostas, devendo o menor ser assistido no decurso do ato processual por um técnico especialmente habilitado para o seu acompanhamento, previamente designado para o efeito.
5. A inquirição é feita pelo juiz, podendo em seguida o Ministério Público, os advogados do assistente e das partes civis e o defensor, por esta ordem, formular perguntas adicionais.
6. É correspondentemente aplicável o disposto nos artigos 352.º, 356.º, 363.º e 364.º.
7. O disposto nos números anteriores é correspondentemente aplicável a declarações do assistente e das partes civis, de peritos e de consultores técnicos e a acareações.
8. A tomada de declarações nos termos dos números anteriores não prejudica a prestação de depoimento em audiência de julgamento, sempre que ela for possível e não puser em causa a saúde física ou psíquica de pessoa que o deva prestar.

Na definição legal do procedimento, encontra-se prevista a assistência da criança ou adolescente por um técnico especialmente habilitado. Contudo, esta previsão assume um carácter relativamente genérico, limitando-se essencialmente a consagrar a presença deste profissional durante a diligência, sem delimitar de forma clara a extensão e a natureza da sua intervenção. Consequentemente, permanece indefinido o contributo específico deste profissional. Ainda assim, a literatura nacional tem vindo a propor um conjunto de recomendações destinadas a orientar a atuação destes profissionais neste contexto (Alberto, 2020; Caridade et al., 2011; Mendes et al., 2024).

Apesar da relevância das DMF no crime de ASC, tanto para as crianças e adolescentes, como para o processo judicial, a literatura tem mostrado que este mecanismo apresenta algumas limitações na sua implementação. Desde logo, a reduzida qualidade das questões elaboradas, a ocorrência de sucessivos momentos de relato sobre a experiência abusiva para além das DMF, mantendo a possibilidade de ocorrência de vitimação secundária e a realização frequentemente tardia destas entrevistas, comprometendo a qualidade e fiabilidade da informação recolhida (Peixoto et al., 2017; Peixoto & Ribeiro, 2020).

Em resposta à preocupação sobre a qualidade das questões elaboradas no decorrer das DMF, o protocolo de entrevista do *National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)* foi traduzido e adaptado para o contexto português. Posteriormente, foi testada a sua implementação em casos forenses reais, tendo os resultados mostrado que as entrevistas guiadas pelo protocolo aumentavam substancialmente a quantidade de questões abertas e, consequentemente, a fiabilidade dos relatos das vítimas, reforçando a importância da sua adoção nas entrevistas de DMF (Peixoto et al., 2013; Peixoto et al., 2016; La Rooy et al., 2015).

O Presente Trabalho

O testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais assume um papel central no sistema de justiça, sendo frequentemente o principal meio de prova dos factos denunciados. Paralelamente, a sua participação em contextos judiciais levanta preocupações significativas, nomeadamente ao nível do bem-estar, do risco de vitimação secundária e da qualidade e fiabilidade da prova obtida. Em resposta a estas preocupações, o sistema judicial português atribuiu particular relevância ao procedimento das DMF, configurando-o como um mecanismo obrigatório de recolha antecipada de prova nos crimes de ASC.

Não obstante, a investigação tem evidenciado discrepâncias entre as recomendações internacionais baseadas na evidência e as práticas efetivamente implementadas no contexto das DMF, apontando limitações na concretização dos seus objetivos, sendo recomendadas diversas melhorias ao procedimento. Contudo, sabe-se que a existência de recomendações de boas práticas não assegura, por si só, a sua implementação efetiva (Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). Neste sentido, subsistia uma lacuna relevante no conhecimento empírico acerca do funcionamento atual deste mecanismo nos crimes sexuais contra crianças ou adolescentes, particularmente no que respeita à qualidade da sua aplicação e à experiência dos profissionais envolvidos.

Paralelamente, permanecia escasso o conhecimento empírico sobre a forma como o fenómeno do ASC se manifesta no contexto português com base em processos judiciais reais, bem como sobre a articulação entre a proteção da vítima e a qualidade da prova. Adicionalmente, a literatura carecia de abordagens integradas que permitissem analisar, de forma conjunta, a evidência internacional, as práticas reais, a qualidade das entrevistas e as perceções dos profissionais envolvidos.

Face a estas lacunas, e atendendo à prevalência do ASC, à inevitabilidade do envolvimento das crianças ou adolescentes no sistema de justiça e aos riscos associados a essa participação, tornou-se fundamental desenvolver uma investigação abrangente e empiricamente sustentada sobre esta temática. Assim, o presente trabalho tem como objetivo geral analisar, de forma integrada, os procedimentos de

recolha do testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais, com particular enfoque no contexto português e no regime das DMF, procurando compreender em que medida estes procedimentos asseguram simultaneamente a proteção da vítima e a qualidade da prova.

Para responder a este objetivo geral, foi adotada uma abordagem integrada e multimétodo, estruturada em quatro objetivos específicos: (1) identificar e analisar a eficácia dos procedimentos de recolha do testemunho de vítimas de ASC; (2) caracterizar o fenómeno do ASC no contexto português; (3) analisar a qualidade das DMF em casos de ASC; e (4) compreender as perceções e experiências dos profissionais envolvidos neste procedimento, nomeadamente magistrados e técnicos especialmente habilitados.

A concretização destes objetivos assentou em decisões metodológicas complementares e sequenciais, que visaram assegurar uma análise integrada do fenómeno. O primeiro objetivo foi operacionalizado através de dois estudos empíricos: uma *scoping review*, com o propósito de mapear e sistematizar os procedimentos internacionais de recolha do testemunho de vítimas de ASC (Estudo 1) e, posteriormente, uma revisão sistemática com uma síntese quantitativa desses procedimentos, orientando para a avaliação da sua eficácia com base na evidência disponível (Estudo 2). Esta opção metodológica permitiu estabelecer um referencial teórico-empírico sólido para enquadrar os estudos subsequentes.

O segundo objetivo foi concretizado através de um estudo empírico de natureza quantitativa, baseado na análise de processos judiciais e dados relativos a casos de ASC em Portugal, permitindo caracterizar o fenómeno no plano nacional e contextualizar os procedimentos de recolha de prova no seu enquadramento real (Estudo 3).

O terceiro objetivo do presente trabalho foi operacionalizado através de um estudo empírico centrado na análise da qualidade das DMF, com base no tipo de questões colocadas pelo entrevistador, segundo categorias previamente definidas e sustentadas na literatura, bem como na quantidade e qualidade da informação providenciada pela criança ou adolescente (Estudo 4).

Por fim, o quarto objetivo integrou dois estudos qualitativos, baseados em entrevistas a magistrados (Estudo 5) e técnicos especialmente habilitados envolvidos nas DMF (Estudo 6). Esta opção metodológica visou compreender as experiências, perceções e constrangimentos sentidos pelos profissionais que participam nas DMF, permitindo complementar a análise dos dados objetivos com uma compreensão aprofundada dos processos e dinâmicas institucionais subjacentes.

A integração de diferentes abordagens metodológicas, incluindo revisões da literatura, análise de processos judiciais e análise quantitativa e qualitativa de dados, permitiu uma compreensão abrangente

e multidimensional do fenómeno. Todos os procedimentos realizados no âmbito do presente trabalho foram aprovados pela Comissão de Ética para a Investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade do Minho (ver Anexo A).

Esta tese pretende, assim, contribuir para o avanço do conhecimento em várias dimensões. Em primeiro lugar, fornece uma caracterização empírica do fenómeno do ASC em Portugal com base em processos judiciais reais. Em segundo lugar, aprofunda a compreensão das práticas atuais de recolha de testemunho em vítimas de ASC e das suas implicações, identificando eventuais divergências entre a evidência científica e a prática judicial. Em última instância, visa produzir conhecimento que possa informar o desenvolvimento de práticas judiciais mais consistentes, baseadas na evidência empírica e centradas na proteção e bem-estar das vítimas, promovendo simultaneamente a melhoria da qualidade da prova no sistema de justiça.

Após este enquadramento concetual e empírico dos temas em investigação e uma apresentação geral dos estudos que compõem o presente trabalho, apresenta-se, de seguida, cada estudo de forma detalhada, organizados de acordo com os objetivos definidos (Parte II). São igualmente apresentadas as comunicações científicas realizadas no âmbito de cada estudo. Por fim, é desenvolvida uma discussão integrada dos resultados, incluindo não só as limitações do trabalho, mas também recomendações para investigação futura e implicações práticas e políticas (Parte III).

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PARTE II

ESTUDOS EMPÍRICOS

Capítulo 1 | Procedimentos de Recolha do Testemunho

Estudo 1 | Forensic Interview Techniques in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Scoping Review

O presente artigo encontra-se publicado na revista *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* (*SJR* 2023: Q1, 2,778; *JCR* 2023: Q1, FI = 5,4), contando, à data de entrega da presente tese, com 19 citações na *Web of Science*, 23 na *Scopus* e 56 no *Google Scholar*.

Os resultados deste estudo foram apresentados em formato poster no *17th International Symposium of the World Society of Victimology* (San Sebastián, Espanha) e no XI Simpósio Nacional de Investigação em Psicologia (Vila Real, Portugal). Adicionalmente, foram apresentados em formato de apresentação oral no *IV International Congress of CINEICC* (Coimbra, Portugal) e no XI Congresso Iberoamericano de Avaliação Psicológica (Faro, Portugal).

Os materiais suplementares do presente artigo podem ser consultados online em https://osf.io/ex39u/overview?view_only=8eb8ff3d138046e28f7a134509537f6c.

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Fernandes, D., Gomes, J. P., Albuquerque, P. B., & Matos, M. (2024). Forensic interview techniques in child sexual abuse cases: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse.* https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231177317

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Fernandes, D., Gomes, J. P., Albuquerque, P. B., & Matos, M. (2023, March 30-April 1). *Forensic interview techniques in child sexual abuse cases: A scoping review* [Oral presentation]. IV International Congress of CINEICC, Coimbra, Portugal.

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is widely recognized as a global public health problem with negative consequences for victims, their families, and society. The child's testimony is essential to the case outcome, given the frequent absence of physical or biological evidence of the abusive acts. Thus, the child forensic interview plays a decisive role in criminal investigation. Objective: The present scoping review aims to identify and describe the judicial procedures for collecting child sexual abuse victims' testimony using an evidence-based approach and a structured methodology. Method: The review followed PRISMA-ScR guidelines. Studies were identified through manual reference checking and in four electronic databases: PsycARTICLES, PubMed, SCOPUS, and Web of Science. One hundred forty-six studies were identified according to the defined inclusion criteria, i.e., empirical studies identifying judicial procedures to collect child sexual abuse victims' testimony, published in English or Portuguese. Results: Thirty different forensic interview procedures to collect the child victim's testimony were found. The National Institute for Child Health and Human Development investigative interview protocol was the most frequently mentioned. Despite the variety of protocols, it was possible to conclude that they have a similar general structure. This review also identified gaps in interviewing practices with child sexual abuse victims. Conclusion: The scoping review corroborates the importance of forensic interviews with child sexual abuse victims, stating its implications for criminal investigation, the legal system, and the child's recovery process.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; forensic interview; scoping review; testimony; victims

Forensic Interview Techniques in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Scoping Review

Child sexual abuse (CSA)[1] is a global public health problem that devastates victims, their families, and society (Goodyear-Brown et al., 2012; Hailes et al., 2019). CSA involves various types of criminal behavior operationalized in different crime typologies depending on the legal system of each country. A common definition characterizes CSA as the involvement of any person under the age of 18 years in sexual activity for which he or she is not developmentally prepared and is unable to give consent. The abuser can be any person in a position of trust or power over the child victim. Furthermore, CSA ranges from acts with contact between the abuser and the victim (i.e., with or without sexual intercourse) to acts without contact between them (e.g., exhibitionist acts; World Health Organization [WHO], 2017; WHO, 2022a). Therefore, CSA can be conceptualized as a traumatic experience not only because of the behaviors and dynamics it involves but also because it occurs at a developmental level of particular vulnerability, which can negatively affect several domains of the child's functioning (Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019).

According to global victimization prevalence data between 1980 and 2008, the number of CSA victims was about 180 girls and 76 boys out of 1000 (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Currently, data from the WHO show that one out of five women and one out of 13 men report having been sexually abused under the age of 17 years (WHO, 2022b). These data suggest that the prevalence of CSA victimization has increased. This growth is due to people's increased awareness of this problem and the greater ease with which children have access to Information and Communication Technologies, most likely enhancing online sexual victimization, which can later expand to the offline world. Thus, the increasing prevalence of CSA victimization causes deep social concern and, consequently, more scientific research on this topic is needed.

In CSA cases, children's testimony is vital because of the frequent absence of physical or biological evidence of the abusive acts, making them the only witnesses of the crime (Lamb et al., 2018). Such evidence is rare, given the usual lengthy temporal gap between the victimization experience and its disclosure. Additionally, children's reluctance to disclose sexual abuse results from different factors, namely, their relationship with the abuser, abuse severity, their age at the onset of abuse and at the time of the interview, and the quality of support provided by the caregiver (Lamb et al., 2018; Lippert et al., 2009; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020, 2021). Since the testimony of CSA victims is fundamental to the case outcome, the forensic interview plays a decisive role in the criminal investigation.

[1] In the present manuscript, the concept of "child", for the sake of language simplification, will be used in the broad sense i.e., children or adolescents up to 18 years.

A forensic interview aims to elicit details about the victimization experience that are unique to the child, which can be important in the decision-making of different judicial entities (Bracewell, 2018; Steele, 2012). The information gathered from the forensic interviews usually refers to a particular type of memory – episodic memory – which refers to the memory for information that occurred in a specific time and space (Tulving, 2002). Several aspects should be addressed in the forensic interview to maximize the quality of the child's information and mitigate the victims' adverse consequences. First, the forensic interview needs to be sensitive to the child's developmental characteristics and idiosyncrasies, such as the child's age at the moment of the interview, language proficiency, intellectual ability, information-processing skills, and the existence of a developmental disorder (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). Second, there are factors associated with the forensic interview that should also be considered, such as the delay between the victimization experience and the interview, the number of interviews that the child has done, and the type of questions asked, where open-ended and non-suggestive questions should be used (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). Finally, the interviewer's characteristics involved when conducting forensic interviews. For this purpose, interviewers must have adequate technical-scientific knowledge, training, and supervision (e.g., in evidence-based best interviewing practices and trauma-informed care; Classen & Clark, 2017; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018), and ensure a supportive and responsive attitude for children, attending to their developmental level (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz et al., 2011).

Forensic interviews that do not consider the above-mentioned characteristics and are characterized by inappropriate practices can lead to negative consequences for the criminal investigation and the victims, namely, reluctance to disclose the abusive experience (Ettinger, 2022), reduced credibility of the child's testimony (Johnson & Shelley, 2014; Lamb et al., 2018), increased risk of harm (Lamb et al., 2011) and risk of secondary victimization (i.e., suffering inflicted on the victim by the justice system's response; Classen & Clark, 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Whereas previous research has highlighted the importance of forensic interviewing in collecting testimony from CSA victims, the weaknesses of this population, and the best practices that interviewers should follow to overcome these challenges, identified real-world judicial procedures for collecting CSA victims' testimony through an evidence-based approach and a structured methodology remains unknown. For this purpose, we conducted a scoping review, representing the first direct demonstration to fill this research gap.

A scoping review is useful for mapping the available evidence on a specific topic and answering much broader questions than a systematic review, usually undertaken to answer a specific question (Munn et al., 2018). Therefore, this scoping review examines the following research question: Which judicial procedures are used to collect the testimony of CSA victims? Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify and summarize the judicial procedures to collect the testimony of CSA victims; (2) reflect on the evolution of procedures used; (3) recognize and reflect on the gaps still existing in the daily practices of real-world forensic interviews.

Method

Protocol and Registration

The scoping review protocol follows the Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) methodology and its extensions for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). This scoping review was registered on OSF REGISTRIES (reference: https://osf.io/ex39u/?view_only=3113f0fb4bb64786bdca12d3ec2fac2b).

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were considered for inclusion if they: (a) report findings from an empirical study (i.e., not literature reviews, theoretical articles, and commentaries or letters to editors); (b) were written in English or Portuguese; (c) identify the type of approach used in judicial procedures to collect the testimony of CSA victims. Grey literature was also considered for inclusion, namely, unpublished master's or doctoral theses, or chapters of books presenting empirical studies. No restrictions regarding the year of publication, publication status, research design, or methodology were used.

For a study to be excluded, one or more of the following criteria need to be presented: (a) studies addressing clinical interviews to assess the impact of alleged abusive experiences; (b) studies addressing tools to assess the credibility of the child's testimony; (c) studies addressing the collection of child testimony in trials since in these cases the questions of attorneys and prosecutors are intended to assess mainly the credibility of the child testimony focusing on option-posing and suggestive questions.

Information Sources and Search Process

MeSH and other terms combined with Boolean Operators (OR and AND) were used to create the following search equation: (interview* OR "forensic interview*" OR "interview guidelines" OR "judicial proce*" OR "criminal proce*" OR "investigati* proce*" OR "investigative interview*" OR "court proce*" OR statement* OR protocol* OR inquir* OR testify* OR testimon*) AND (child* OR adolescen* OR juvenile*

OR youth* OR teen* OR young OR minor* OR toddler* OR infan*) AND ("sexual abuse" victim* OR "sexual assault" victim* OR porn* victim* OR molest* victim* OR "internet sex* offend" victim* OR "sexual act*" victim* OR "sexually offensive conduct" victim* OR "sexual exploitation" victim* OR incest victim* OR rape victim* OR "sexual maltreatment" victim* OR sexting victim*). In April 2022, the equation was run by two reviewers with an MSc in Applied Psychology into four electronic databases searching by title, abstract, and keywords: PsycARTICLES, PubMed, SCOPUS, and Web of Science. Additionally, we checked the reference lists of several studies and specialized interdisciplinary journals.

Study Selection

Identified studies were imported into Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and the duplicates were deleted. Afterwards, the two reviewers independently read the titles and abstracts, and the papers were selected for full-text analysis. All possible reviewer's disagreements were discussed between them until a consensus was reached.

Data Charting Process

The two reviewers independently charted data from the included studies using a standardized data extraction sheet in Excel to collect the following topics: (a) study identification (i.e., title, author(s), year of publication, and journal); (b) victims sample characteristics (i.e., sample size, gender, age, ethnicity, and disabilities); (c) victimization characterization (i.e., type of victimization, reported incident(s), victim-abuser relationship, setting of occurrence and frequency of violence); (d) interviewer characteristics (i.e., sample size, gender, age, ethnicity, profession, training, and number of interviewers per interview); (e) forensic interview procedures (i.e., setting of the interview, type of interview, the delay between the incidents and interview, number of sessions, duration, and record); (f) measures; (g) type of outcome; and (h) main findings.

After the data charting process, the frequency count and respective percentage of each forensic interview procedure identified were calculated. Subsequently, the description of each type of interview was noted and extracted. One reviewer extracted these topics, and the other reviewer verified the process and information. All reviewer's disagreements were solved after discussion and consensus.

Synthesis of Results

Included studies were reviewed in a qualitative synthesis presented in the Results section. Findings were presented in a narrative and table format. However, the description of each forensic interview procedure was shown only in a table format, and the number of sessions or interviews was described only in a narrative format. Key findings were summarized and highlighted their significance.

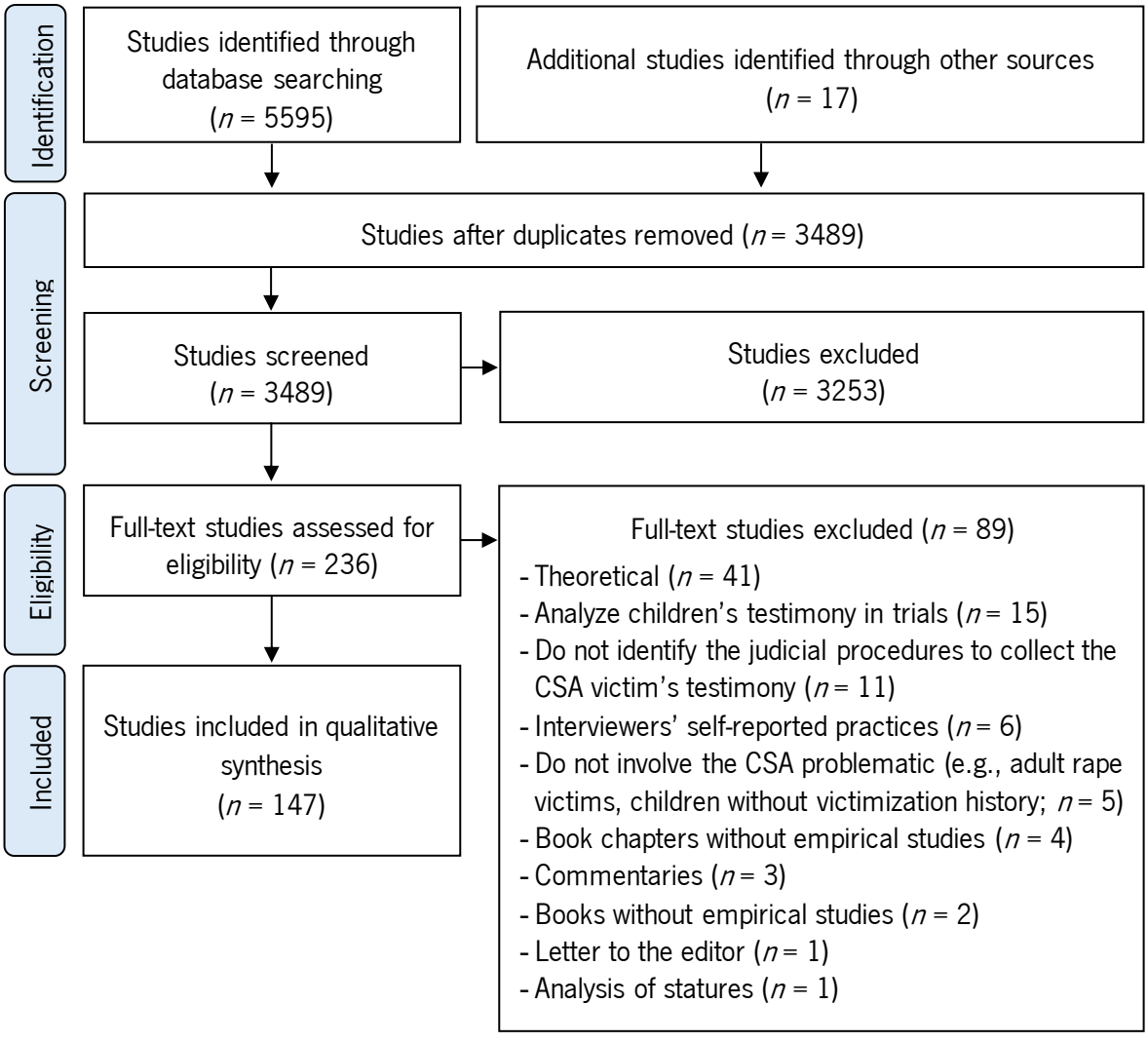
Results

Selection of Evidence Sources

A total of 5595 studies were identified from the database search, and 17 other studies were located from manual reference checking. After removing duplicates, 3489 were screened based on title and abstract. From this analysis, 3253 did not meet the eligibility criteria and were therefore excluded. The full text of 236 studies was assessed for eligibility according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the final process, 147 studies were included in this scoping review, and data were extracted from each. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the number of included studies in each of the selection processes and the rationale for the studies' inclusion or exclusion. References of identified studies are included in Appendix A.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram of search strategy for scoping review



Characteristics of Evidence Sources

The characteristics of included studies (i.e., author(s), year of publication, type of victimization, sample characteristics, interviewer profession, and forensic interview description) are illustrated in Appendix B.

Study identification.

The publication year range of included studies varied between 1986 and 2022. The studies were conducted in 18 different countries, with the most significant part of them being conducted in Israel (n = 43).

Victims sample characteristics.

The sample size across all the included studies ranged from one (Orbach & Lamb, 1999, 2001) to 40 430 (Hershkowitz et al., 2007b). Five studies address the interviewers' training to collect the CSA victims' testimony, and therefore a sample size of victims was not applied (Cheung, 1997; Cheung & Boutté-Queen, 2010; Lafontaine & Cyr, 2016; Smith et al., 2009; Yi & Lamb, 2017).

The victims' age in the included studies varied between 2 and 50 years old. Five studies only reported the average age that ranged between 5.83-year-old and 11.94-year-old (Duron, 2018a, 2018b; Korkman et al., 2006; Lippert et al., 2009; Santtila et al., 2004) and eight studies report neither the range nor the average age of the sample (Bracewell, 2018; Cheung, 1997; Cheung & Boutté-Queen, 2010; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Lafontaine & Cyr, 2016a; Smith et al., 2009; Westcott et al., 2006; Yi et al., 2017).

Eleven selected studies analyzed sexual victimization in children and adults with a mental health diagnosis: intellectual disabilities (ID), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental disabilities (DD), anxiety, depression, cognitive impairment and/ or an unspecific disability (Åker & Johnson, 2020; Anderson et al., 2014; Cantlon et al., 1996; Cederborg et al., 2011; Cederborg et al., 2008; Cederborg & Lamb, 2008; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Hlavka et al., 2010; Lee & Kim, 2020; Melkman et al., 2017; Westcott et al., 2006). Two of the included studies analyzed the forensic interview in a specific ethnic group (Aboriginal children; Hamilton et al., 2016a, 2016b).

Victimization characterization.

Of the 147 included studies, 106 addressed only CSA victimization. In these cases, the reported incidents involved sexual exposure (exhibitionism/ voyeurism), fondling of sexual organs over the clothes, fondling of sexual organs under the clothes, and oral, anal, and/or vaginal penetration. Additionally, 34

addressed CSA, physical abuse, and/or other types of victimization as neglect. Physical abuse was characterized by physical harm from being hit with and/or without an object. Of the remaining studies, two addressed sexual assault (e.g., rape, indecent image crimes), two human trafficking for sexual exploitations, one internet-related CSA, and in two cases the predominant type of victimization was CSA. However, no information on all incidents was reported (Feltis et al., 2010; Henderson & Lyon, 2020).

Interviewer profession.

From all the studies, the interviews were collected by police officers (n = 74), youth investigators[2] (n = 42), social workers (n = 18), psychologists (n = 11), forensic interviewers (n = 10), child protective service workers (n = 6), Children's Advocacy Centers professionals (n = 4), psychiatrists (n = 3), clinical mental health care professionals (n = 2), judges (n = 2), criminologist (n = 1), registered nurses with experience in pediatrics or mental health (n = 1) or a sheriff (n = 1). In three studies, the interviewers' profession was not reported. In one of the included studies, the authors specified that the interview was conducted jointly by a police officer and a social worker.

Forensic Interview Procedures

The delay between the abusive incident (or last abusive incident in multiple incident cases) as reported by the child and the first interview was indicated in 31 studies and ranged from 0 days (Cederborg et al., 2000; Hershkowitz et al., 2001; Hershkowitz et al., 2002; Hershkowitz et al., 1998; Orbach et al., 2000) to 10 years (Leander, 2010). However, one included study investigated the amount of time between the first alleged abusive experiences and the first time an adult found out about the abuse, which ranged from 1 month up to several years (Malloy et al., 2011). Most studies defined this delay as the time necessary for the child to disclose the alleged abusive experiences to someone.

Frequency of forensic interview procedures.

In the review were identified 30 different forensic interview procedures with CSA victims. The main aim of some included studies was to test the effectiveness of an interview protocol training and therefore compare interviews conducted before and after training on that protocol. In these cases, we consider the pre-training interviews as forensic interview procedures in which no protocols or guidelines were followed. The frequency count and percentage of the forensic interview procedures are presented in Table 1.

[2] Youth's investigators are a specific case from the Israeli Ministry of Welfare and Social Services who have a degree in social work and are the only professionals authorized to conduct forensic interviews with children in Israel.

Table 1

Frequency count and percent frequency of the interview types

Interview types	Frequency count	% frequency
NICHD investigative interview protocol	70	37.43
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	41	21.93
MoGP	12	6.42
Revised NICHD investigative interview protocol	9	4.81
No specific protocols were followed - Stepwise procedures through progressive broad stages	8	4.28
SIM framework	6	3.21
ABE investigative interview protocol	3	1.60
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol	3	1.60
CSAIP	3	1.60
SACD	3	1.60
NICHD investigative interview protocol and HFD with structured questions	2	1.07
NICHD investigative interview protocol with MCR techniques	2	1.07
NICHD investigative interview protocol with the drawing of the alleged abusive experiences	2	1.07
APSAC protocol	2	1.07
SI model	2	1.07
CACs of Texas protocol	2	1.07
Structured interview protocol with an interview at the office and a follow-up interview at the scene of the alleged crime	2	1.07
A scripted protocol for rapport building: Direct	2	1.07
A scripted protocol for rapport building: Open-ended	2	1.07
NICHD investigative interview protocol with modifications adapting to the developmental and emotional needs of the child	1	0.53
NICHD investigative interview protocol with PCR techniques	1	0.53

Table 1 *(continued)*

Interview types	Frequency count	% frequency
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with narrative event practice rapport techniques	1	0.53
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with SACD	1	0.53
CSAIP with SACD and/or HFD	1	0.53
10-Step protocol	1	0.53
SCWI model	1	0.53
Guidance on joint investigative interviewing of child witnesses	1	0.53
Child interview protocol guide of the Children's House	1	0.53
Allegation-blind interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions	1	0.53
Allegation-informed interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions	1	0.53
Total	**187**	**100.00**

Notes. ABE = Achieving Best Evidence; APSAC = American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children; CACs = Children's Advocacy Centers; CSAIP = Child Sexual Abuse Interview Protocol; HFD = Human Figure Diagram; MCR = Mental Context Reinstatement; MoGP = Memorandum of Good Practice; NICHD = National Institute for Child Health and Human Development; PCR = Physical Context Reinstatement; RATAC = Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch inquiry, Abuse scenario, and Closure; SACD = Sexually Anatomical Correct Dolls; SCWI = Specialist Child Witness Interviewing; SI = Sequential Interview; SIM = Standard Interview Method.

National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol was the most frequent interview for collecting the CSA victims' testimony (frequency count = 70; 37.43%). The other methods of collecting the CSA victims' testimony were the absence of specific guidelines or protocols to conduct forensic interviews (frequency count = 41; 21.93%), Memorandum of Good Practice (MoGP; frequency count = 12; 6.42%), revised NICHD investigative interview protocol (frequency count = 9; 4.81%), absence of specific protocols to conduct the interview, however stepwise procedures were followed through progressive broad stages (frequency count = 8; 4.28%), Standard Interview Method (SIM) framework (frequency count = 6; 3.21%), Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) investigative interview protocol (frequency count = 3; 1.60%), CornerHouse Rapport, Anatomy identification, Touch inquiry, Abuse scenario, and Closure (RATAC) semi-structured forensic interview protocol (frequency count = 3; 1.60%), Child Sexual Abuse Interview Protocol (CSAIP; frequency count = 3; 1.60%), Sexually Anatomical Correct Dolls (SACD; frequency count = 3; 1.60%), NICHD investigative interview protocol using also the Human Figure Diagrams (HFD) with structured questions (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), NICHD investigative interview protocol with Mental Context Reinstatement (MCR) techniques (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), NICHD investigative interview protocol with the drawing of the alleged abusive experiences (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) protocol (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), Sequential Interview (SI) model (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), CACs of Texas protocol (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), structured interview protocol with an interview at the office and a follow-up interview at the scene of the alleged crime (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), a scripted protocol to rapport building: direct (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), a scripted protocol to rapport building: open-ended (frequency count = 2; 1.07%), NICHD investigative interview protocol with modifications adapting to the developmental and emotional needs of the child (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), NICHD investigative interview protocol with Physical Context Reinstatement (PCR) techniques (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with narrative event practice rapport techniques (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with SACD (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), CSAIP with SACD (frequency count = 1; 0.54%), 10-Step protocol (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), Specialist Child Witness Interviewing (SCWI) model (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), guidance on joint investigative interviewing of child witnesses (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), child interview protocol guide of the Children's House (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), allegation blind interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions (frequency count = 1; 0.53%), and allegation informed interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions (frequency count = 1; 0.53%).

Description of forensic interview procedures.

The description of each forensic interview procedure is shown in Table 2.

The number of sessions or interviews was also analyzed in this review. Of the included studies, 126 analyzed a single interview per child. Regarding the remaining studies, six analyzed single interviews with multiple sessions with breaks between them, i.e., multiphase interviews (Baugerud et al., 2020; Hershkowitz et al., 1998; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010, 2013; Orbach et al., 2000). In the Hershkowitz et al. (1998) and Orbach et al. (2000) studies, there is no information about the break time between the two sessions. In the study of Baugerud et al. (2020), 52.2% of the children had one session, 45.4% had two sessions, 1.4% had three sessions, and 1% had four sessions with two to three breaks between the sessions. In this case, the first break lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and the final break lasted from 5 to 10 minutes for legal representatives to have the chance to suggest any remaining questions. In the Hershkowitz and Terner (2007) study, the interviewer paused the interview for 30 minutes, and in the remaining studies, the break lasted between 7 to 10 minutes (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010, 2013).

In the remaining 15 included studies, some children had more than one interview to collect the testimony about their victimization experiences. The number of interviews ranged from one to two (M = 1.1, SD = 0.3; Sumampouw et al., 2019), one to three (M = 2.0, SD = 0.9; Leander, 2010), one to four (Åker & Johnson, 2020), one to six (M = 2.3, SD = 1.6; Korkman et al., 2006), one to six (M = 3.4, SD = 1.5; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001), one to six (M = 2.3, SD = 1.6; Santtila et al., 2004), one to seven (M = 3.2, SD = 1.4; Azzopardi et al., 2014), two to five (M = 2.52; Waterhouse et al., 2016), more than one (Alves et al., 2019; Cederborg et al., 2008), two for all children in the study (Blasbalg et al., 2021; Hershkowitz et al., 2021; Katz, 2014; Waterhouse et al., 2018), and three for all children in the study (Patterson & Pipe, 2009). In two of the studies, the repeated interviews with the child were conducted by the same interviewer as the previous one (Azzopardi et al., 2014; Waterhouse et al., 2018). In Waterhouse et al. (2016) study, 60% of the repeated interviews were also conducted by the same interviewer. The interval between interviews across all these studies ranged from 1 day (Azzopardi et al., 2014; Blasbalg et al., 2021; Cederborg et al., 2008; Waterhouse et al., 2016) to 368 days (Waterhouse et al., 2016).

Table 2

Description of the interview types

Interview types	Description
NICHD investigative interview protocol	This protocol is structured in 10 phases: (1) introduction (e.g., interviewer presentation, interview purpose explanation); (2) ground rules (e.g., truth and lies; transfer of control); (3) rapport building; (4) episodic memory training (i.e., narrative event practice); (5) transition to substantive phase; (6) investigative incidents through free recall; option to take a break; (7) focused questions about information not already mentioned followed by open-ended prompts; (8) disclosure information; (9) closure; and (10) neutral topic.
Revised NICHD investigative interview protocol	The revised version covers the same phases of the standard version (i.e., NICHD protocol) however was designed to increase children's emotional comfort and reduce children's reluctance during investigative interviews. For this, in the revised version the rapport building is done before explaining ground rules and the episodic memory training and encourages continuous rapport building and supportive interviewing, even if necessary multiple sessions.
NICHD investigative interview protocol and HFD with structured questions	In this case, the NICHD protocol is followed by structured questions in which reference is made to an unclothed (frontal and dorsal), gender-neutral outline drawing. The questioning starts with a directive recall prompt that is followed by alternating yes-no questions. Open-ended free-recall prompts were used to elicit further information that had not yet been mentioned.
NICHD investigative interview protocol with modifications adapting to the developmental and emotional needs of the child	NICHD protocol with the following modifications: (1) pre-substantive and substantive phases spread across more than one interview for reluctant children, with psychological distress, or reporting multiple incidents requiring more time to recall greater amounts of information; (2) free drawing for reluctant or distressed children (no symbolic interpretation); (3) in the absence of disclosure, the touch survey should be used.
NICHD investigative interview protocol with MCR techniques	The NICHD protocol includes MCR techniques in the pre-substantive and substantive phases. The first MCR technique is provided in episodic memory training. In the substantive phase, the same instruction is given before the child is asked to "tell everything" about the abusive experience. When the child reported multiple incidents, the MCR instruction is repeated for each one.

Table 2 *(continued)*

Interview types	Description
NICHD investigative interview protocol with PCR techniques	The pre-substantive phase of NICHD protocol is completed in the interviewer's office, but soon as the children made an allegation, they are invited to accompany the interviewer to the scene of the alleged crime, where they are interviewed about substantive issues.
NICHD investigative interview protocol with the drawing of the alleged abusive experiences	In this case, the NICHD protocol is followed, however, after the interviewer had probed the children's memory of the alleged event using open-ended questions, he gave the children a blank sheet of paper, a pencil, and a rubber eraser and ask the child to draw what happened to her during 7 to 10 minutes. Then the interviewer moved from open-ended to focused questions. The drawings were not interpreted.
MoGP	The MoGP is a general comprehensive guidance (without specific examples) that describes in detail what should be done before, during, and after investigative interviews of children. The MoGP indicates that forensic interviews should include five phases: (1) rapport building (i.e., explaining the ground rules; truth, and lies); (2) free narrative; (3) open-ended questions; (4) closed questions; and (5) closure.
ABE investigative interview protocol	The ABE protocol is a successor of MoGP and is guidance with recommendations to identify the needs of vulnerable witnesses or victims, to plan, and prepare for the interview, to conduct the interview, and to prepare victims for the court process. The interview is typically structured in two major phases: (1) rapport building; (2) free recall followed by open-ended questioning.
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol	This protocol follows three guiding principles: interviews should be person-centered; interviews should be semi-structured; and interviewers should use open-ended prompts, avoid leading and suggestive questioning, and must be unbiased. The protocol is structured in four phases: (1) rapport building; (2) seek information; (3) explore statements, and (4) end respectfully.
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with narrative event practice rapport techniques	This protocol is different from the traditional version of CornerHouse RATAC protocol in that in this case the children are questioned more thoroughly about a specific event to narrative event practice (i.e., episodic memory training), with more open-ended prompts.

Table 2 *(continued)*

Interview types	Description
CornerHouse RATAC semi-structured forensic interview protocol with SACD	The CornerHouse RATAC protocol is used in the traditional manner and following a child's verbal disclosure, an interviewer could choose the introduce anatomical dolls to the child to show and descript their victimization experiences.
APSAC protocol	This protocol is structured in seven phases: (1) introduction (e.g., interviewer presentation, interview purpose explanation); (2) ground rules (e.g., truth, lies, and oath; transfer of control); (3) episodic memory training (i.e., narrative event practice); (4) introduction of the topic of concern; (5) substantive questions; (6) if necessary, physical evidence can be presented to the child; and (7) closure.
SI model	SI splits the interview into more than one session, follows a funnel approach, and uses multiple interviews. This interview is structured in four phases: (1) introduction (e.g., interviewer presentation; explanation of ground rules); (2) rapport building; (3) free narrative account with open-ended questions at the start and directive questions when the first narrative is completed; and (4) closure.
CACs of Texas protocol	This protocol is structured in six phases: (1) preparation (e.g., interviewer presentation, showing the child the interviewer room); (2) rapport building; (3) ground rules (e.g., truth, lies, and oath); (4) introduction of the topic of concern; (5) detail gathering (i.e., fact-finding through free recall and the exploration of alternative hypotheses); and (6) closure.
SIM framework	The SIM framework closely resembles the NICHD protocol. The interview is divided into six phases: (1) introduction; (2) ground rules; (2) rapport building; (3) introduction of the topic of concern; (4) free narrative account; and (5) questioning exhausting the information provided.
10-Step protocol	The 10-Step protocol is a revision of NICHD protocol and is outlined in four phases: (1) instructions (i.e., do not know instruction; do not understand instruction; you are wrong instruction; ignorant interviewer; truth instruction); (2) rapport building with narrative practice; (3) allegation; and (4) closing.

Table 2 *(continued)*

Interview types	Description
CSAIP	A protocol for videotaped interviews with four main stages: (1) rapport-building (e.g., introduction, explanation of ground rules); (2) free narrative (i.e., encouraging the child to provide an account in their own words); (3) questioning (i.e., follow-up questions to clarify details using wh-questions); and (3) closure (e.g., returning to neutral topics, providing emotional support).
CSAIP with SACD and/or HFD	The CSAIP protocol supplemented with SACD and/or HFD
SACD	In interviews with SACD the interviewer ensured the general rules for an investigative interview with children in a stepwise manner. The SACD is introduced in the substantive phase in which the interviewer prompted children to disclosures of abuse. The dolls are used as demonstration aids or in a playful manner to elicit details of the alleged abuse
SCWI model	The SCWI model follows the PEACE framework (i.e., Planning and Preparation, Engage and Explain, Account, Closure, and Evaluation of the Interview) and is closely modeled on NICHD protocol. The SCWI is structured in three phases: (1) engage and explain (e.g., introduction; explanation of ground rules; narrative event practice); (2) account (starting with open-ended prompts); and (3) closure.
Structured interview protocol with an interview at the office and a follow-up interview at the scene of the alleged crime	The interview starts in the office with an introduction (e.g., the importance of telling the truth), then the phases of rapport building and episodic memory training are followed. After this, the interviewer introduces the substantive issues, and following the children had made an allegation, they were asked to accompany the interviewer to the scene of the alleged crime. There the interviewer asks the children to tell everything they remember about the alleged crime. The interviewer starts with open-ended invitations, then open-ended prompts, cue questions and focused, non-suggestive questions were asked only if some crucial information is missing. In the end, interview closure is assured.
Guidance on joint investigative interviewing of child witnesses	This guidance was developed by Scottish Executive, and it is structured in five phases: (1) introduction; (2) rapport building; (3) practice narrative interview; (4) free recall and questioning with funnel-shaped hierarchical structure; and (5) closure.

Table 2 *(continued)*

Interview types	Description
Child interview protocol guide of the Children's House	This guide is broadly based on the NICHD protocol, and it is applied in Iceland. The interview phases in the Children's House guide are the follows: (1) introduction (e.g., interviewer presentation; interview purpose explanation); (2) ground rules (e.g., do not understand instruction); (3) child's development and understanding of basic concepts (e.g., days, months, body parts names); (4) truth/lies; (5) practice interview; (6) introduction the topic under investigation; (7) free narrative; (8) questioning and clarification; and (9) closure.
A scripted protocol for rapport building: Direct	This interview starts with an introduction by the interviewer. In the rapport building phase that followed, interviewers followed a direct script. In this script, the interviewer uses focused prompts to elicit information about the child's family, school, and celebration of a recent holiday (e.g., "Did you turn your books in on the last day of school?"). Then the interviewer focuses on substantive issues under investigation, starting with an invitation to elicit a free recall from the child, then moving on to non-suggestive questioning.
A scripted protocol to rapport building: Open-ended	This interview starts with an introduction by the interviewer. In the rapport building phase that followed, interviewers followed an open-ended script. In this script, the interviewer uses open-ended prompts to elicit information about the child's family, school, and celebration of a recent holiday (e.g., "tell me everything you did on the last day of school"). Then the interviewer focuses on substantive issues under investigation, starting with an invitation to elicit a free recall from the child, then moving on to non-suggestive questioning.
Allegation-blind interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions	In this interview technique, before interviewing, the interviewer had knowledge only of the child's names for their body parts and the names of family members. The allegation blind concept parallels asking interview questions on a progression from open-ended to leading questions. This technique is favorable for cases in which the files contain erroneous information.

Table 2 *(continued)*

Interview types	Description
Allegation-informed interview technique with progression from open-ended to leading questions	In this interview technique, interviewers knew allegation information from having interviewed siblings, comments made by parents, agencies, or other sources. The allegation-informed concept parallels asking interview questions on a progression from open-ended to leading questions.
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	In these interview types, no specific guidelines or protocols were followed.
No specific protocols were followed - Stepwise procedures through progressive broad stages	In these interview types, no specific guidelines or protocols were followed, however, the interviewers were knowledgeable about the recommendations on how to conduct investigative interviews with children and used stepwise procedures through progressive broad stages, such as introduction, rapport building, free narrative, questioning, and closure.

Notes. ABE = Achieving Best Evidence; APSAC = American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children; CACs = Children's Advocacy Centers; CSAIP = Child Sexual Abuse Interview Protocol; HFD = Human Figure Diagram; MCR = Mental Context Reinstatement; MoGP = Memorandum of Good Practice; NICHD = National Institute for Child Health and Human Development; PCR = Physical Context Reinstatement; RATAC = Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch inquiry, Abuse scenario, and Closure; SACD = Sexually Anatomical Correct Dolls; SCWI = Specialist Child Witness Interviewing; SI = Sequential Interview; SIM = Standard Interview Method.

Discussion

The main objective of this scoping review was to identify and summarize real-world judicial procedures for collecting the testimony of CSA victims using an evidence-based approach and a structured methodology.

The review identified 30 different forensic interview procedures with CSA victims. However, it should be noted that some protocols were used in a large proportion of studies developed by the same authors, with different outcomes analyzed. As a result, those protocols present a higher frequency, but it is not so frequent in terms of their use by different authors.

Although the review indicates a broad spectrum of guidelines or protocols for collecting the CSA victims' testimony, we conclude that their general structure is similar. Specifically, forensic interviews have a semi-structured format, that is, each interview is adapted to the developmental needs of the child. Furthermore, forensic interviews are generally structured in six phases: (1) introduction, where, for example, the interviewer introduces himself and other persons who may be in the room, explain the interview purpose, and explain the ground rules (i.e., truth and lies; transfer of control); (2) rapport building, in which the interviewer elicits information about the child's family, school, and personal preferences; (3) episodic memory training, where the purpose is for the interviewer to assess the child's development and understanding of basic concepts and to prepare the child to narrate an event; (4) free recall, only if victimization was first verbalized by the child, where the interviewer starts with an open-ended invitation demanding the child to recall information about the alleged abusive experience(s); (5) questioning, in which the interviewer progresses to focused questions to clarify or elicit more information about the alleged abusive experience(s); and (6) closure, where, for example, the child has the opportunity to ask questions to the interviewer and the interview is closed on a neutral topic. These stages can be modified or eliminated according to the child's developmental needs and can be complemented by strategies such as HFD, SACD, touch survey, and drawings.

Even though most of the studies used a standardized approach, this review concluded that there are still professionals in certain countries who use non-evidence-based practices. This is one of the most serious problems in forensic interviewing, with implications for the quantity and quality of the information provided by the child (Alonzo-Proulx & Cyr, 2016; Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2016), assessment of child's credibility (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Johnson & Shelley, 2014), case outcomes (Pipe et al., 2013), and the possibility of revictimization (SAMHSA, 2014).

The included studies also used a different number of sessions or interviews to collect the CSA victims' testimony. Regarding the number of sessions, studies analyzed the collection of testimony in a

single interview with several sessions on the same day. The purposes of multiphase interviews were to: (a) enable the child to relax and feel safe; (b) assess the immediate re-interviewing on the quantity or quality of details provided by the child; (c) determine whether environmental contextual cues provided by visits to the scenes of alleged abusive experiences would facilitate the recall of information by CSA victims; or (d) analyze the effect of drawing on the amount of information reported later by the child and feelings of self-efficacy. In the latter, the interviewer does not interpret what is elaborated in the pauses.

Concerning the repetition of interviews on different days, this happens for three main reasons: (a) when the child did not disclose the alleged abusive experiences on the first interview; (b) when the child did not provide critical abuse-related information during the previous session(s); or (c) to analyze how the child recounted the alleged facts. Overall, the included studies addressing re-interviewing concluded that an additional interview seems to be effective in disclosing new information relevant to the criminal investigation, mainly about other events than those mentioned or denied in the previous session(s) (Azzopardi et al., 2014; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Waterhouse et al., 2016). Furthermore, these studies reported the utility of the multiple interviews model for children due to developmental (e.g., ID) or motivational limitations (e.g., reluctant children), requiring more time to build rapport with the interviewer and more than one opportunity to report their experiences (Cederborg et al., 2008; Hershkowitz et al., 2021; Katz, 2014; Leander, 2010; Patterson & Pipe, 2009). Thus, the studies highlighted the importance of adjusting the number of forensic interviews or sessions and the retention interval between them based on the child's individual needs and the contextual circumstances of the abusive events, maintaining the best practices recommendations of question format in all interviews (i.e., free memory recall and open-ended questions), avoiding duplicative interviews (La Rooy et al., 2010).

Additionally, the included studies mentioned that the initial training and the use of guidelines and protocols are insufficient to increase the quality of information collected from the child. Ongoing training and supervision of interviewers are critical aspects of a successful forensic interview. This training should include components such as developmental characteristics of children (e.g., memory, suggestibility), conceptual and empirical support for all the phases of an interview, and behaviors throughout the interview (Lamb et al., 2002). Moreover, role-playing and individual, detailed, written feedback are also important aspects (Cyr et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2002; Price & Roberts, 2011).

Furthermore, the training of interviewer professionals in trauma-informed care approach is essential since they can have a significant impact on the recovery and mental well-being of CSA victims. Thus, it is expected that the justice system professionals reveal knowledge, attitudes, and practices based on trauma-informed care to avoid retraumatizing CSA victims namely, how to deal with children's

victimization issues in respectful and equitable ways, understand the impact of trauma on different domains of functioning, and how this affects the way that children engage with the justice system (Classen & Clark, 2017; SAMHSA, 2022).Finally, it was possible to conclude that the same procedures used to collect the testimony of CSA victims can be generalized to vulnerable groups such as preschool children, children with a mental health diagnosis (e.g., ID, ASD, ADHD, anxiety, depression), and to adults with IDs. Similarly, two studies examined a procedure for collecting CSA victims' testimony on a specific ethnic group, discussing the implications for this group. Additionally, forensic interview procedures developed for collecting CSA victims' testimony have become widespread, showing that they can be applied to other types of child maltreatment and CSA witnesses. These results indicated that investigating CSA victims has revealed cultural sensitivity and attention to intersectionality.

Despite the promising results of this review, it is appropriate to recognize some potential limitations. First, data collection only included studies written in English or Portuguese, so we cannot be sure if all the studies on this topic have been included. However, as a broad spectrum of forensic interview procedures was obtained in this review, we consider that we identified all the possibilities to collect the CSA victims' testimony. In future research, it would be helpful to extend the current findings by examining each procedure's effectiveness, empirical validity, and reliability in collecting the CSA victims' testimony.

Conclusion and Implications

The scientific literature has shown that children have developmental difficulties that may hinder their ability to describe abusive experiences. It is also known that these limitations can be overcome by best practices followed by interviewers, for example, the use of interview techniques and protocols. This is not only important for the legal process and criminal investigation but also a significant step for the child's recovery process (Katz et al., 2014).

However, the identification of real-world judicial procedures for collecting CSA victims' testimony through an evidence-based approach and a structured methodology remains unknown. For this purpose, we conducted the scoping review, representing the first direct demonstration to fill this research gap. Thus, the review allows a comprehensive and descriptive approach to CSA victims' testimony collection procedures.

The review identified a broad spectrum of forensic interview procedures to collect the CSA victims' testimony. However, we conclude that their basic structure is similar. Specifically, the included studies highlight the importance of starting with an introduction where the interviewer provides some explanations. Then, it is necessary to rapport building with the child and practice the child's narrative of events. Subsequently, the interviewer should allow the child to freely recall the alleged abusive

experiences progressing to questioning through a funnel approach. Finally, the interview should be ended neutrally. These stages should be adapted according to the child's individual needs. The review also revealed that forensic interviews identified are culturally sensitive and attend to intersectionality. Thus, the results of this review can be generalized to different samples.

Finally, although some countries adhere to best practices evidenced by the scientific literature, this review also identified gaps in interviewing practices with CSA victims. The lack of adherence in some settings to standardized and evidence-based guidelines or protocols, the lack of sensitivity to children's capacity level, and the lack of interviewer ongoing training and supervision are leading to inadequate forensic interview practices. As we have already mentioned, this has consequences for the child and the criminal investigation, but it also has additional economic costs to the justice system. These constraints could be offset by institutional efforts to prevent this serious problem, such as investment in training and ongoing supervision of evidence-based best practices among professionals who collect CSA victims' testimony in criminal investigative procedures (e.g., police officers, psychologists, judges, prosecutors; Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3

Critical findings

- The review identified 30 different forensic interview procedures with CSA victims.
- NICHD investigative interview protocol was the most frequent interview for collecting the CSA victims' testimony.
- Forensic interviews are generally structured in six phases: (1) introduction; (2) rapport building; (3) episodic memory training; (4) free recall; (5) questioning; and (6) closure. These stages can be modified or eliminated according to the child's developmental needs and can be complemented by strategies such as HFD, SACD, touch survey, and drawings.
- Forensic interviews identified revealed cultural sensitivity and attended to intersectionality. Thus, the research data can be generalized to different samples.
- Gaps in interviewing practices with CSA victims were identified.

Table 4

Summary of implications for practice, policy, and research

- Professionals conducting forensic interviews should use evidence-based practices to collect the CSA victims' testimony.
- Inadequate forensic interviewing practices have consequences for the child and the criminal investigation. This could be mitigated by training and ongoing supervision among professionals who collect CSA victims' testimony in criminal investigative procedures and trauma-informed care approach.
- The constraints arising from inadequate forensic interviewing practices also have additional economic costs to the justice system. Thus, institutional efforts should be undertaken to prevent these problems.
- Research examining each procedure's effectiveness, empirical validity, and reliability in collecting the CSA victims' testimony is needed.

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Estudo 2 | The Effectiveness of Forensic Interview Procedures in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Systematic Review

O presente artigo encontra-se no prelo no *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* (*SJR* 2024: Q1, 0,694; *JCR* 2024: Q2, FI = 1,4).

Os resultados deste estudo empírico foram apresentados em formato poster na *23rd Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology* (Florença, Itália) e em formato de apresentação oral no 3º Simpósio Doutoral em Psicologia UNorte (Vila Real, Portugal) e na *European Association of Psychology and Law [EAPL] Annual Conference 2024* (Lisboa, Portugal).

Os materiais suplementares do presente artigo podem ser consultados online em https://osf.io/htae5/overview?view_only=fabe987a807448fc8f6ba8398233b365.

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Fernandes, D., Gomes, J. P., Matos, M., & Albuquerque, P. B. (2024, Junho 6-7). A eficácia dos procedimentos de entrevista forense em crimes sexuais contra crianças e adolescentes: Uma revisão sistemática [Apresentação oral]. 3º Simpósio Doutoral Psicologia U.Norte, Vila Real, Portugal.

Fernandes, D., Gomes, J. P., Matos, M., & Albuquerque, P. B. (2023, September 6-9). *The effectiveness of forensic interview techniques in child sexual abuse cases: A systematic review* [Poster presentation]. 23rd Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology, Florence, Italy.

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a globally recognized public health problem with severe consequences for victims, families, and society. In such cases, victims interact frequently with the justice system, often serving as the primary witnesses to the crime and contributing significantly to case outcomes. Consequently, forensic interviews are essential in criminal investigations, providing invaluable information. However, questions remain regarding the most effective procedure for conducting forensic interviews with CSA victims. This systematic review analyzes the effectiveness of forensic interview procedures used with CSA victims. Following PRISMA guidelines, articles were identified through manual reference checks and searches in four electronic databases, yielding 93 articles that met the inclusion criteria. Twenty-seven distinct forensic interview procedures were identified, with the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol being the most extensively studied. Procedures adhering to standardized protocols demonstrated greater use of recommended best practices than those that did not follow any guidelines. The NICHD protocol, particularly its revised version, showed the strongest evidence of efficacy, with interviewers employing more open-ended questions and fewer suggestive prompts. This approach resulted in more detailed and reliable disclosures from children. This review highlights the critical role of standardized protocols in enhancing the quality and reliability of child testimony while avoiding unnecessary or prolonged involvement in the justice system. The NICHD protocol, especially its revised version, is strongly recommended for global adoption. Additional best practices are also discussed to inform policies and practices to enhance forensic interviews with CSA victims.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; forensic interview; systematic review; testimony; victims

The Effectiveness of Forensic Interview Procedures in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Systematic Review

Child[3] sexual abuse (CSA) is a globally recognized public health problem that is becoming increasingly widespread. Recent data from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2025) reveals that one out of five women and one out of seven men experienced sexual violence during childhood. Along with this alarming prevalence, CSA is associated with numerous adverse short- and long-term consequences for victims, their families, and society (Goodyear-Brown et al., 2012; Hailes et al., 2019). Consequently, this problem generates profound social, legal, economic, and scientific concerns.

In CSA-reported cases, victims frequently interact with the justice system, often serving as the primary witnesses to the crime and contributing significantly to case outcomes. Consequently, forensic interviews, designed to elicit details about the victimization experience, emerge as crucial elements in the criminal investigation and as invaluable sources of information (Lamb et al., 2018; Powell & Earhart, 2018; Steele, 2012).

Additionally, the literature has identified forensic interviewing as a factor that can moderate the impact of abusive experiences on victims. Specifically, if the interview is conducted inappropriately (e.g., repetition of questions due to disbelief in the child's account), it can aggravate the consequences, leading to secondary victimization (i.e., suffering inflicted on the victim by the justice system's response; Classen & Clark, 2017; Lamb et al., 2011; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014) and may simultaneously compromise the reliability of the information collected. Therefore, to maximize the information provided by the child and ensure its reliability while mitigating the risk of secondary victimization, interviews must consider three key aspects. First, the child's developmental characteristics (e.g., age, language proficiency, possible developmental disorders; Lamb et al., 2011). Second, interview-related factors (e.g., timing, question type; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). Third, the interviewer's characteristics, including technical and scientific knowledge, training, and supervision (Classen & Clark, 2017; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In light of these considerations, the scientific community has developed various forensic interview protocols that integrate these factors. However, as a previous scoping review found, not all interviewers adhere to established protocols or guidelines (Fernandes et al., 2024). This presents a serious problem in forensic interviewing, with implications for both the quantity and quality of information collected (Lamb et al., 2018), credibility assessments (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Johnson & Shelley, 2014), case outcomes

[3] In this article, the term "child" follows the definitions provided by the World Health Organization and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing both children and adolescents under 18.

(Pipe et al., 2013), and risk of revictimization (SAMHSA, 2014). The scoping review identified 30 forensic interview procedures, with the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol most frequently mentioned. Nevertheless, among the identified protocols and guidelines, interviews were divided into three main phases: (1) the introduction or rapport-building phase; (2) the substantive phase (i.e., addressing the abusive experience); and (3) the closure phase. Variations across protocols generally included: (1) the degree of standardization of interview steps; (2) features intended to enhance interview quality (e.g., explaining ground rules, episodic memory training); and (3) the use of complementary strategies (e.g., Human Figure Diagram [HFD], drawings; Fernandes et al., 2024).

In forensic interviewing, effectiveness refers to the extent to which interview procedures enable the collection of accurate, detailed, and reliable information from the child while minimizing potential harm. Despite the existence of several interview guidelines and protocols, their relative effectiveness has not been analyzed, leaving the question of which procedures are most effective for interviewing CSA victims unanswered. Clarifying this issue is crucial for informing policies and practices in forensic interviewing. Evidence-based recommendations can strengthen the quality and consistency of interviews conducted in legal or investigative settings, ensuring that practitioners adhere to the most effective and reliable procedures. Although previous research has often focused on individual protocols or isolated outcome measures, no study to date has systematically compared multiple forensic interview procedures and their outcomes within a single study. To address this gap, we conducted a systematic review to answer the research question: What is the effectiveness of forensic interview procedures in CSA cases? Employing a systematic approach, a robust and valuable method in research, ensures that all relevant studies, regardless of their results, are considered, thereby reducing the risk of publication bias. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of forensic interview procedures with CSA abuse victims.

Method

Protocol and Registration

The present systematic review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). It was registered on PROSPERO (registration number CRD42023395903).

Eligibility criteria

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (a) empirical studies; (b) describing

forensic procedures for collecting CSA victims' testimony with at least one outcome to analyze their effectiveness; and (c) published articles written in English or Portuguese. The effectiveness measures were categorized into two groups: those related to interviewers (e.g., adherence to protocol, frequency of each question type) and those related to children (e.g., total number of details, number of central and peripheral details, with central details referring to information crucial for understanding the incident, and peripheral details referring to aspects not essential to the plot, such as the victim's clothing). These measures were operationalized according to the outcome variables reported in the included studies. A detailed description of the outcome measures is available in Supplementary Material A.

An article was excluded if it: (a) analyzed multiple forensic procedures without separate statistical analyses for each; (b) included multiple types of maltreatment but did not present data specific to CSA; (c) included victims and witnesses but did not analyze them independently; (d) focused on clinical interviews assessing abuse impact; (e) addressed tools for assessing the credibility of testimony; (f) examined the testimony at trials, primarily involving questions posed by legal professionals using option-posing and suggestive techniques; or (g) relied on subjective measures (e.g., interviewers' perceptions).

Information sources and search strategy

Initially, we defined keywords and their combination, resulting the following search equation: (interview* OR "forensic interview*" OR "interview guidelines" OR "judicial proce*" OR "criminal proce*" OR "investigati* proce*" OR "investigative interview*" OR "court proce*" OR statement* OR protocol* OR inquir* OR testify* OR testimon*) AND (child* OR adolescen* OR juvenile* OR youth* OR teen* OR young OR minor* OR toddler* OR infan*) AND ("sexual abuse" victim* OR "sexual assault" victim* OR porn* victim* OR molest* victim* OR "internet sex* offend" victim* OR "sexual act*" victim* OR "sexually offensive conduct" victim* OR "sexual exploitation" victim* OR incest victim* OR rape victim* OR "sexual maltreatment" victim* OR sexting victim*). In April 2024, this search was independently conducted by two reviewers across four electronic databases: PsycARTICLES, PubMed, SCOPUS, and Web of Science. In addition, we checked the reference lists of several articles and specialized interdisciplinary journals.

Selection process

Identified articles were imported into the software Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and duplicates were removed. Afterward, the two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts, selecting articles for full-text analyses based on the inclusion criteria. Any disagreements in these stages were resolved by consensus, and if a decision could not be made, a third independent reviewer could be consulted.

Data collection process

The two reviewers independently collected data from the included articles using a standardized data extraction sheet in Microsoft Excel. The topics collected were: (a) study identification (i.e., title, author(s), year of publication, journal, and aim(s)); (b) victim sample characteristics (i.e., sample size, gender, age, ethnicity, and disabilities); (c) victimization type; (d) interviewer characteristics (i.e., profession and training); (e) forensic interview procedures (i.e., setting, duration, type, delay since incident, number of sessions, language); (f) outcome measures; (g) main results; (h) additional analyses; and (i) conclusions.

Study risk of bias assessment

None of the included articles involved any members of the review team, minimizing authorship bias. Two reviewers independently assessed the risk of bias using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT – Version 2018; Hong et al., 2018), which includes two screening questions and five design-specific criteria rated as "yes", "no", or "can't tell" (see Supplementary Material B). The MMAT assesses methodological rigor rather than study eligibility, discouraging exclusion based on low methodological quality. Interrater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient (κ; McHugh, 2012).

Data synthesis

In studies where an outcome was analyzed both individually (e.g., correlations) and in the presence of additional outcomes (e.g., logistic regression), we extracted only the information assessed in the presence of these additional factors. This decision was made to ensure greater analytical precision and to minimize potential bias in the reported results.

Key findings were qualitatively synthesized into distinct, non-overlapping categories, where results were summarized, and their significance emphasized.

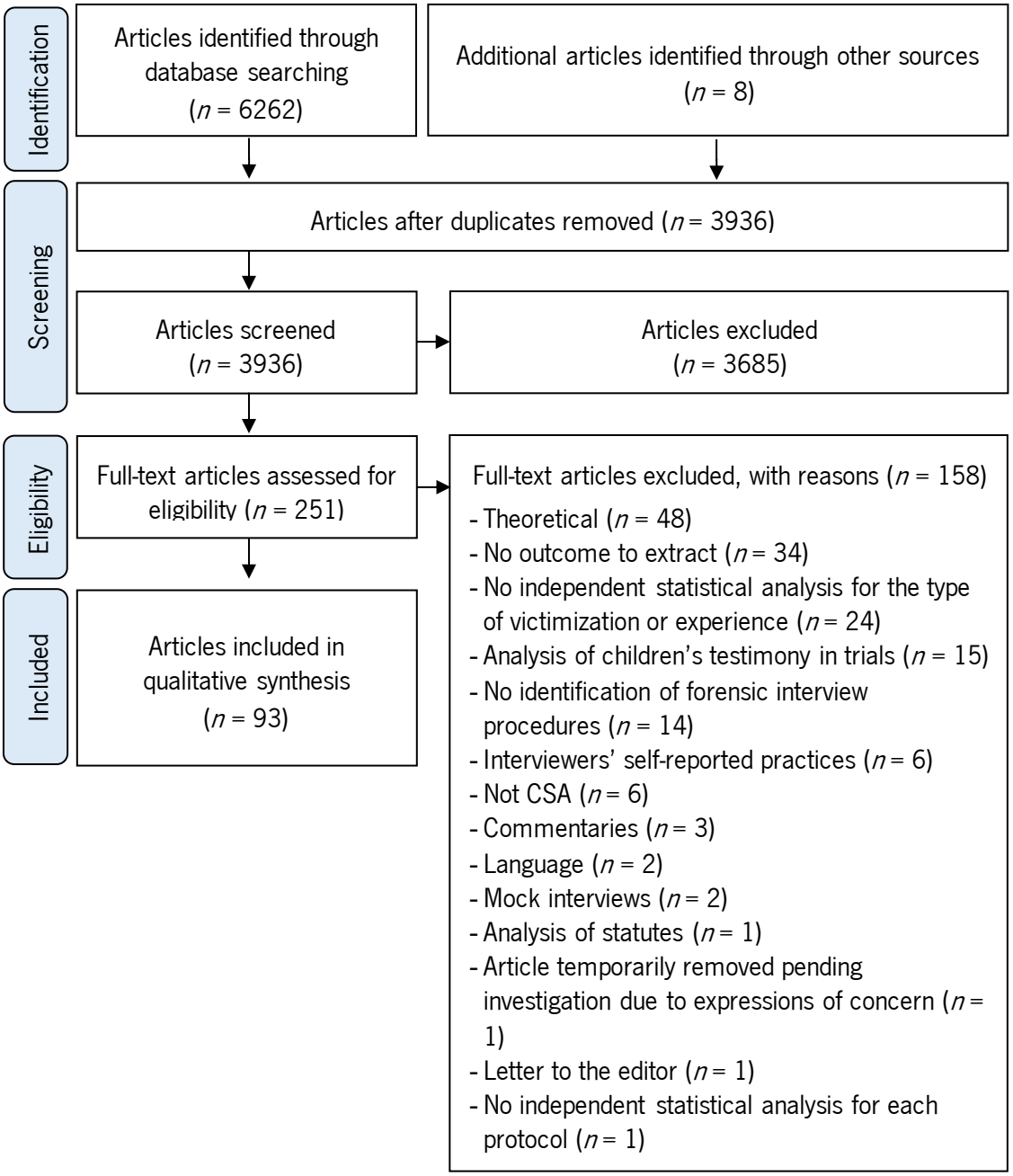
Results

Study selection

A total of 6262 articles were identified through database searches, and eight more through manual reference checks. After removing duplicates, 3936 articles were screened by title and abstract, excluding 3685 that did not meet the eligibility criteria. The full texts of 251 articles were then assessed, and 93 were included in the systematic review. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, which summarizes the selection process and reasons for exclusion. References of the included articles are presented in Supplementary Material C.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram of search strategy for systematic review



Risk of bias in articles

Regarding the assessment of risk of bias, most included articles met at least 60% of the quality criteria (k = 64, 68.82%), with detailed results presented in Supplementary Material B. Factors contributing to lower quality scores included: (a) lack of representativeness (e.g., small sample size, lack of information on whether participants reflected the target population) and (b) insufficient reporting of confounding factors in study design and analysis. Cohen's kappa indicated substantial interrater agreement, κ = .78, 95% CI [.60, .96].

Characteristics of the included articles

The article identification, victim sample characteristics, and victimization characterization are described in Supplementary Material D.

Article identification

The included articles were published between 1986 and 2024, covering research conducted in 16 different countries. Most articles were conducted in Israel (k = 24, 25.81%).

Victim sample characteristics

The sample size of CSA victims in the included articles ranged from one to 11162. Victims' gender was reported in 84 articles (90.32%). Of these, four (4.76%) included only girls, one (1.19%) had equal numbers of both genders, and 79 (94.05%) included both genders, but they were predominantly composed of girls. Victims' age at the time of the interview ranged from 2 to 21 years old.

Fifteen articles (16.13%) reported the nationality and/or ethnicity of the victims. Among these, nine (60%) included children of different nationalities/ethnicities, whereas the remaining focused on specific groups, such as Aboriginal, Israeli, or Malay children.

Finally, disabilities were reported in 14 articles (15.05%). Of these, nine (64.29%) included only children without documented developmental or linguistic disabilities, four (28.57%) included samples with some children presenting disabilities or mental disorders, and one article (7.14%) included only children with disabilities.

Victimization characterization

Regarding victimization, 83 articles (89.25%) analyzed only CSA, reporting behaviors such as sexual exposure (e.g., exhibitionism, voyeurism), fondling over or under the clothes, coerced touching or masturbation, sexualized kissing, and oral, anal, or genital penetration (with hands, genitals, or objects). Eight articles (8.60%) included children who experienced sexual or other forms of abuse, but only CSA-related data were analyzed in this review. One article (1.08%) focused on technology-facilitated CSA (TF-CSA), describing online grooming leading to offline abuse, and another (1.08%) examined victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Forensic interview procedures

The characteristics of interviewers and forensic interview procedures are described in Supplementary Material E.

Interviewers' profession was reported in 91 articles (97.85%). Forensic interviews were conducted

by professionals from diverse backgrounds, but most were done by police officers (*k* = 48, 52.75%), followed by youth investigators[4] (*k* = 22, 24.17%).

Concerning the number of sessions, in most articles, children's testimonies were collected in a single session (*k* = 82, 88.17%). In the remaining (*k* = 11, 11.83%), interviews spanned multiple sessions, ranging from one to seven. In these cases, five articles (45.46%) reported that the same interviewer conducted all sessions (e.g., Azzopardi et al., 2014; Hershkowitz et al., 1998; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010, 2013). The interval between sessions was reported in five articles (45.46%): three indicated breaks of 7 to 30 minutes, one reported gaps from 1 day to 1 week, and another described an average interval of 5 months.

Information about the language used during interviews was inconsistently reported, with most articles not specifying it (*k* = 58, 62.37%). Among those that did (*k* = 35, 37.63%), 13 (37.14%) reported that interviewers and children spoke the same language, although their native language was not specified. Ten articles (28.57%) identified the language spoken by either the child or interviewer, without indicating their native languages, and eight (22.86%) specified the native language of the child or both, indicating that the interviews were conducted in the child's native language. Finally, four articles (11.43%) reported that some interviews were mediated by an interpreter.

Regarding interviewer training, three articles (3.23%) reported that none or only some interviewers had received investigative interview training. Nineteen (20.43%) mentioned training without describing its type or structure, and 28 articles (30.11%) indicated training in a specific protocol, but its structure was not described. In the remaining articles (*k* = 43, 46.24%), six types of training were described: (1) 5-day training program with theoretical sessions on interview phases, video examples of (in)appropriate practices, role-plays, and written feedback; (2) a shorter, 2-day version with similar structure; (3) 1-week training course covering legal issues, memory, child development, interview phases, and feedback on role-played and recorded interviews; (4) week-long training including sessions on memory, suggestibility, child development, the NICHD protocol, transcript analysis, and group role-plays with discussion; (5) California Forensic Interview Training 4-day course focused on responsibilities, models and techniques with video examples and experiential activities; or (6) 3-day seminar reviewing research and expert-recommended interviewing techniques. Of these, 16 articles (37.21%) reported follow-up supervision and feedback sessions.

Regarding forensic interview procedures, 27 different procedures were identified. These

[4] Youth investigators held social work degrees and were employed by the Israeli Ministry of Welfare and Social Services. They are the only professionals authorized to conduct forensic interviews with children under the age of 14.

procedures are described in Supplementary Material F.

Main findings of the analyzed studies

For a detailed description of the measured outcomes and results, see Supplementary Material G. Table 1 summarizes these findings by forensic interview procedure.

Analysis of studies examining a single forensic interview procedure

A total of 65 articles (69.89%) analyzed a single procedure for collecting testimonies from CSA victims. Among these, the NICHD protocol (k = 25, 38.46%) consistently showed a higher use of invitations and fewer directive or suggestive questions. It also led children to provide long responses containing more central details about the abusive events. Moreover, it was also associated with a high number of SA disclosures, use of time- and emotion-related language, and a strong adherence to recommended interviewing practices, such as rapport-building and clarifying the interviewer's role. In addition, the supervision of interviewers helped to sustain these practices.

The second most frequently studied procedure involved interviews conducted without the use of any guidelines or protocols (k = 16, 24.62%). In these cases, interviewers employed significantly fewer invitations and more directive, option-posing, and suggestive prompts, which resulted in shorter and less informative child responses.

Regarding less frequently studied procedures (e.g., 10-Step, APSAC, CSAIP, SCWI, SIM), analyses usually focused on specific rather than multiple outcomes, providing a narrower understanding than that of the more extensively examined procedures. Nevertheless, across all procedures, a consistent finding was that invitations elicited longer and more detailed responses from children than other question types.

Finally, studies examining complementary tools, such as HFD, found that their use increased the number of option-posing questions. Although new details were elicited, more central details emerged before the drawing. The use of SACD reduced the number of interviewer questions, did not enhance children's details, and led to SA reports from previously unreferred children.

Table 1.

Main results by forensic interview procedures

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
10-Step protocol	1	IDK and "correct the interviewer" instructions	93% provided the IDK and 82% the "correct the interviewer" instruction (Nogalska et al., 2023).	1	SA disclosure percentage	8% did not disclose, despite 50% having disclosed previously; No association between reluctance and IDK responses (Nogalska et al., 2023).
ABE protocol	1	Percentage of prompts of each type	30.84% directive, 27.24% option-posing, 12.03% facilitators, 6.86% open, and 1.69% suggestive (NS differences between them; Phillips et al., 2012).	1	Mean number of details	Increased with appropriate (p = .036; Phillips et al., 2012).
"Allegation-blind" vs "allegation-informed" interview technique	-	-	-	1	SA disclosure rate	Higher in "allegation-blind" than in "allegation-informed" technique (p = .0378; Cantlon et al., 1996).
APSAC protocol	-	-	-	1	SA disclosure percentage	73% fully disclosed, 12% partially, 10% did not disclose, and 5% denied it (Lippert et al., 2009).
Child interview protocol guide of the Children's House	-	-	-	1	SA disclosure percentage	75% (Gudjonsson et al., 2010).
CornerHouse RATAC protocol with vs without narrative event practice rapport techniques	1	Ratio of open-ended utterances and facilitators	Higher in narrative than in traditional interviews, with an average of 15 facilitators (Anderson et al., 2014).	1	Total number of details	More in narrative than in traditional interviews (p < .05). Number of details increased with facilitators (p < .05; Anderson et al., 2014).
CSAIP	1	Differences in prompts of each type	"What" and "how" questions are more frequent in disclosure cases, while closing questions are more frequent in nondisclosure cases (p < .001; Cheung, 2008)	-	-	-
MoGP	3	Pre-substantive practices	98% discussed truth importance; 49% IDK instruction, and 8% children's account importance (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).	3	SA disclosure percentage	52.8% (Welbourne, 2002)
		Percentage of invitations	2% (Davies et al., 2000) and 6.4% (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).		Frequency of "IDK" responses	NS impact of IDK instruction; IDK responses marginally positively correlated with the number of details (p = .06; Earhart et al., 2014).
		Percentage of directive	95% (Davies et al., 2000) and 47% (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).			

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
MoGP	3	Percentage of option-posing	28.7% (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).	3	Number of details elicited by prompt types	46% by directive, 30% by option-posing, 4% by invitations, and 9% by suggestive prompts. Invitations elicited more details than other types combined ($p < .001$; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).
		Percentage of suggestive	3% (Davies et al., 2000) and 5.3% (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).		Number of IDK responses to different prompt types	IDK responses were more elicited by directive and option-posing questions ($p < .001$; Earhart et al., 2014).
		Percentage of facilitators	12.6% (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001).			
MoGP vs NICHD protocol	4	Total number of utterances	Fewer in the NICHD protocol than in the MoGP interviews ($p < .05$; Lamb et al., 2009).	4	Total number of details or labels	NS differences between NICHD and MoGP interviews (Lamb et al., 2009; Brubacher et al., 2013).
		Proportion of prompts of each type	NICHD protocol interviews had more invitations and fewer directives, option-posing and suggestive prompts than MoGP interviews (all $p < .001$; Lamb et al., 2009; Price et al., 2016).		Proportion of details in response to different prompt types	The NICHD group reported more details to invitations ($p < .001$) and fewer to directive, option-posing, and suggestive prompts (all $p < .05$) than the MoGP group (Lamb et al., 2009).
		Proportion of episodic prompts	Higher in the NICHD protocol than in MoGP interviews ($p = .005$; Brubacher et al., 2013).		Total number of central details	NS differences between NICHD and MoGP interviews (Lamb et al., 2009).
		Elicitation of children's reports of DR reactions	NICHD interviewers elicited more by invitations than MoGP interviewers, who elicited more by option-posing ($p = .05$; Ahern & Lamb, 2017).		Proportion of central details in response to different prompt types	The NICHD group reported more central details to invitations ($p < .001$) and fewer to directives ($p < .01$), option-posing and suggestive prompts (both $p < .05$) than the MoGP group (Lamb et al., 2009).
		Number of shifts	With the NICHD protocol, interviewers shifted less often than with MoGP ($p = .001$; Brubacher et al., 2013).		Proportion of episodic details	Higher in the NICHD group than in the MoGP group ($p = .003$; Brubacher et al., 2013).
					Number of shifts	NS differences between NICHD protocol and MoGP interviews (Brubacher et al., 2013).
					Number of DRs reports	1.32 times more likely in NICHD interviews than in MoGP interviews ($p < .001$; Ahern & Lamb, 2017).
					Number of time and emotion words	More used by the NICHD than by the MoGP group ($p = .04$ and $p = .001$, resp.; Sim & Lamb, 2013).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
NICHD protocol	17	Percentage of invitations	21.4% (Hershkowitz, 2001); 31.1% (Hindi et al., 2022); 35.10% (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al., 2003); 10% (Lee & Kim, 2020); 30% (Malloy et al., 2016); 55% and 72.5% (Orbach & Lamb, 2000); 48% (Peixoto et al., 2016); and 3.7% (Yi et al., 2015).	22	Number of details in response to the interviewer's support	Interviewer's support did not predict the child's details production (p = .06). However, more supportive comments resulted in more details following open-ended prompts (p < .05; Hershkowitz, 2009).
		Percentage of directive	32.8% (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al., 2003); 22% (Malloy et al., 2016); 12% (Peixoto et al., 2016); and 36.8% (Yi et al., 2015).		SA disclosure percentage	71.1% (Hershkowitz et al., 2005); 72.3% (Hershkowitz et al., 2007); 60% (Katz, 2013); 100% (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al., 2003).
		Percentage of option-posing	25.6% (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al., 2003); 30% (Malloy et al., 2016); 38% (Peixoto et al., 2016); and 39% (Yi et al., 2015).		Number of words in response to different prompt types	The main invitation elicited most words (p = .000), with no differences among other prompts (Hershkowitz, 2001). Facilitators preceded 16.24% of words, with those following invitations eliciting proportionally more than after other prompts (p = .005; NS differences among the others; Hershkowitz, 2002). No effect of prompt types (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2012). 66% of words elicited by open-ended prompts, 25% by option-posing, 8% by directive, and 1% by suggestive (Peixoto et al., 2016).
		Percentage of suggestive	6.4% (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin et al., 2003); 10% (Malloy et al., 2016); no suggestive questions (Orbach & Lamb, 2000); 2% (Peixoto et al., 2016); and 14.4% (Yi et al., 2015).			
		Percentage of focused prompts (directive, option-posing, or suggestive)	61.3% (Hershkowitz, 2001).		Percentage of details elicited by invitations	26% (Lee & Kim, 2020); 37.7% (Malloy et al., 2016); 5-year-old: 81.7%; 15-year-old: 91.9%; Orbach & Lamb, 2000); and 24.2% (Yi et al., 2015).
					Percentage of details elicited by directives	49% of the children provided no details in response to How/Why prompts (Malloy et al., 2016); 5-year-old: 2.9%; 15-year-old: 6.1% (Orbach & Lamb, 2000); and 42.5% (Yi et al., 2015).
		Percentage of facilitators/ summaries	13.39% (Hershkowitz, 2002); 8% (Malloy et al., 2016); and 6.1% (Yi et al., 2015).		Percentage of details elicited by option-posing	5-year-old: 2.9%; 15-year-old: 1.4% (Orbach & Lamb, 2000); and 21% (Yi et al., 2015).
					Percentage of details elicited by suggestive	9.1% (Yi et al., 2015).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
NICHD protocol	17	Differences in prompts of each type	Suggestive prompts were the least frequent (all $p < .001$). Fewer option-posing than directive ($p = 0.008$; Gagnon and Cyr, 2017). Facilitators occurred more often after responses to directives than to other types, and more to invitations than to suggestive prompts (all $p < .05$; Hershkowitz, 2002). Open-ended prompts were most frequent, followed by directive, option-posing, and suggestive ($p < .001$; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007).	22	Percentage of details elicited by facilitators	15.89% (Hershkowitz, 2002) and 3.3% (Yi et al., 2015).
					Differences in the proportion of details elicited by prompt types	Facilitators following invitations elicited more details ($p = .024$) than after other prompts (NS differences among the others; Hershkowitz, 2002).
		Interviewer's support	Absent in 9.9% of the interviews (Hershkowitz, 2009). In the substantive phase, 8.89% of utterances included a supportive comment (Hershkowitz, 2009).		Differences in the number of details elicited by prompt types	Invitations yielded more details than directives ($p = .001$; Gagnon & Cyr, 2017), option-posing and suggestive (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017: both $p < .001$; Lamb et al., 2007: all $p < .003$). Directives yielded more details than option-posing and suggestive (all $p < .001$; Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Lamb et al., 2007), with NS differences between the latter two (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Lamb et al., 2007). Open-ended yielded more details than focused prompts (Hershkowitz, 2001: $p = .000$; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007: $p < .001$). The main invitation yielded more details than other types ($p = .000$), with NS differences between the others (Hershkowitz, 2001). Higher proportions of invitations and shorter rapport-building phases increased details (both $p < .01$; Hershkowitz, 2009). More details elicited by directive prompts, followed by invitations, option-posing, suggestive, and facilitators/ summaries ($p = .000$; Yi et al., 2015).
		Adherence to the components of the introductory, breaks, and closure phases	Introductory: 60% introduced themselves/others; 28.9% explained their role; explanation of ground rules (2.2% - 17.8%); 31.1% rapport-building; and no episodic memory training and explanation of the need for detail. Break: 13.3%; Closure: 62.2% closing comments; 48.9% requested more information; 17.8% thanked children; 6.7% neutral topic (Yi et al., 2015).			
		Percentage of temporal requests	18.6% (Orbach & Lamb, 2007).			
		Number of "touch" reports	NS differences using recall and recognition prompts (Teoh et al., 2014).			
		Percentage of multipart prompts	91.5%, with NS for recall and recognition prompts (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2012).		Total number of central/peripheral details	More central than peripheral details ($p < .001$: Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; $p < .000$: Katz & Hershkowitz, 2012).
		Number of invitations in the interview phases	More in the 1st quarter than in any other parts ($p < .05$) and more in the 2nd and 3rdquarters than in the 4thquarter (Hershkowitz, 2001).		Number of central/peripheral details in response to different prompt types	Invitations elicited more central details than other types (all $p < .01$; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; Lamb et al., 2007). Directive elicited more central details than option-posing and suggestive (all $p < .001$), with NS differences between the latter two (Lamb et al., 2007). Cued invitations elicited proportionally more central details than general ones (Orbach & Lamb, 2000).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
NICHD protocol	17	Number and percentage of prompts of each type in multiple interviews	The 2nd interview had more open-ended and fewer directive and non-substantive utterances than the 1st (p < .01; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007). In the 1st interview, all prompts were open-ended. In the 2nd interview, 45.49% were open-ended, 46.45% directive, and 7.68% option-posing, with no suggestive prompts. NS differences in the number of open-ended prompts between interviews (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2013).	22	Number of details in response to multipart prompts	Fewer words (p < .013) and details (p < .001) to multipart prompts than to simple prompts, with NS differences based on prompt type (recall vs recognition). Simple prompts elicited more central than peripheral details (p < .006), while multipart prompts yielded similar amounts of both (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2012).
					Number and proportion of details in multiple interviews	More details in the 1st than in the 2nd interview (Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007: p < .001; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2013: p < .01), with a greater decline for focused than open-ended prompts (p < .01). In the 2nd interview, 25% of the details were new, and central details were proportionally higher than in the 1st (p < .01; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007). The 2nd interview also had more omitted and new details than repeated ones (p < .001), with no contradictions found. Although the 1st interview yielded more central details (p < .001), the 2nd still produced more central than peripheral details (p < .001; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2013).
		Supervision effects	After supervision ended, invitations declined (p < .0001), while option-posing and suggestive prompts increased (p < .05), with NS differences between them (Lamb et al., 2002).		Number and proportion of "touch" reports	It was predicted by the number of "touch" reports by the interviewer (p = .00) and explained part of their variance (p < .001). Children reported "touch" more often after recall than recognition prompts (p < .001; Teoh et al., 2014).
					Number of DRs reports	80.4% mentioned one or more DRs (Malloy et al., 2016).
					Number of time and emotion words	Emotional language was used by 63.9% of children, with more overall and negative emotions during the substantive phase than the pre-substantive phase (both p < .000; Katz et al., 2016). Temporal references were positively correlated with both the number of details (p < .001) and the temporal prompts (p < .001; Orbach & Lamb, 2007).
					Supervision effects	After supervision ended, details from open-ended prompts declined (p < .0001), while those from option-posing prompts increased (p < .001), with NS differences among details from directive, option-posing, and suggestive prompts (Lamb et al., 2002).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
NICHD protocol vs Revised NICHD protocol	-	-	-	2	SA disclosure percentage	Higher for revised NICHD protocol interviews than for standard interviews (RP: 46.8% and 66.7%; SP: 26.5% and 33.3%; Hershkowitz & Lamb, 2020; Hershkowitz et al., 2014, resp.).
NICHD protocol followed by HFD with structured questions	1	Total number of utterances	More before than after the drawing (all $p < .001$; Aldridge et al., 2004).	2	Total number of details	The HFD elicited 18% of the total number of details obtained (Aldridge et al., 2004).
		Differences in prompts of each type	The proportion of invitations, directives, and suggestive prompts decreased after the drawing (all $p < .001$), while option-posing prompts increased ($p < .001$; Aldridge et al., 2004).		Proportion of details in response to different prompt types	More details were obtained by invitations ($p < .001$), directives ($p = .05$), and suggestive prompts ($p = .09$) before the drawing, while option-posing prompts elicited more details after the drawing ($p < .001$; Aldridge et al., 2004)
					Number of central details in response to different prompt types	More central details were elicited by invitations, directives, and suggestive utterances before the drawing (all $p < .001$; Aldridge et al., 2004).
					Number of "touch" details	Fewer new details and elaborations about the nature of touch after introducing the HFDs ($p < .05$). NS differences in elaborations about body parts before and after the HFDs. Children reported fewer details about both (un)clear touches after the HFDs ($p < .05$), and provided more details in response to recall than recognition prompts, especially before the HFDs ($p < .05$; Teoh et al., 2010).
NICHD protocol vs Three Houses Method	-	-	-	1	Percentage of denials and avoidances	Denials were more frequent in control interviews (28%) than in NICHD interviews (13%), whereas avoidance was more common in NICHD (16%) than in control interviews (8%; Bücken et al., 2024).
NICHD protocol with MCR vs PCR vs non-context reinstatement instructions	1	Differences in prompts of each type	NS differences among the three groups, except for invitations, which were more frequent in the PCR condition than in the control or MCR conditions ($p < .06$; Hershkowitz et al., 2002).	1	Total number of words and details	NS differences among the three groups (Hershkowitz et al., 2002).
					Proportion of words in response to different prompt types	Invitations in the MCR condition elicited more words than in the other two conditions ($p < .05$; Hershkowitz et al., 2002).
					Proportion of details in response to different prompt types	MCR open-ended prompts elicited more details and directive prompts fewer details than PCR prompts (all $p < .05$; Hershkowitz et al., 2002).
NICHD protocol with modifications adapting to the developmental and emotional needs of the child	1	-	-	1	SA disclosure percentage	45% (Azzopardi et al., 2014).
					SA disclosure percentage on multiple interviews	43% in the 1st interview; 19% in the 2nd; 24% in the 3rd; and 14% in the 4th to 7th interview (Azzopardi et al., 2014).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
NICHD protocol with vs without MCR techniques	1	Percentage of prompts of each type	Interviewers used similar numbers and types of utterances: MCR (43% directives, 32% invitations, 17% option-posing, 8% suggestive) and Comparison (45% directive, 30% invitations, 17% option-posing, 7% suggestive; Hershkowitz et al., 2001).	1	Total number of words	NS differences between groups (Hershkowitz et al., 2001).
					Proportion of words in response to different prompt types	In MCR interviews, higher proportions were elicited by invitations (p < .02) and lower proportions by focused prompts (p < .04; Hershkowitz et al., 2001)
					Total number of details	NS differences between groups (Hershkowitz et al., 2001).
					Proportion of details in response to different prompt types	In the MCR interviews, higher proportions were elicited by invitations (p < .02; Hershkowitz et al., 2001).
NICHD protocol with vs without the alleged crime drawing	1	Percentage of prompts of each type	In the 1st retrieval, both groups used 87% invitations, 10% directive, less than 7% option-posing, and less than 0.30% suggestive. In the 2nd retrieval, invitations exceeded 50%, directive 42%, with less than 7% option-posing, and less than 0.30% suggestive (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010).	1	Proportion of total details	More details in the drawing than in the non-drawing condition (p < .000; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010).
					Proportion of details in response to different prompt types	After invitations, children in the drawing condition provided more new details than those in the non-drawing condition, with NS differences for closed questions (p < .000; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010).
					Proportion of central/peripheral details	More central and peripheral details in the drawing than in the non-drawing condition (both p < .001; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010).
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	14	Pre-substantive practices	7.9% prepared for the interview, 1.3% explained the rules, 2.3% explained the interview's objective (Alves et al., 2019), and 11.7% gave instructions (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010).	15	SA disclosure frequency	Disclosures were 4.76 times more frequent than non-disclosures overall, occurring 3.12 times more often with open questions, 6.52 times with focused questions, and 5.24 times with other types (Lindholm et al., 2015).
		Interviewer's support	Present in 12.2%. Rapport-building did not correlate with other interviewer utterances (Alves et al., 2019).		Effects of prompts of each type on avoidances	More WH questions and multiple-choice questions were associated with greater avoidance of SA disclosures (both p < .02; Alves et al., 2019).
					Total number of words	Child responses ranged from 0 to 44 words (M = 3.99, SD = 5.01; Korkman et al., 2008a).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	14	Percentage of invitations	1% (Alves et al., 2019); 6% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 6.2% (Hershkowitz et al., 1997); 2% (Korkman et al., 2006); 6.4% (Korkman et al., 2008b); 3% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000); 6.5% (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010); and 8.38% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001).	15	Proportion of words in response to different prompt types	Invitations elicited longer responses than directive or suggestive prompts (p = .05; Hershkowitz et al., 1997) and seemed to differ from specific suggestive prompts (p < .054; Korkman et al., 2006). Option-posing questions elicited the shortest responses, while facilitators and invitations yielded the longest (p < .05; Korkman et al., 2008b). Open questions produced longer responses than instructions, yes-no, selection, identification, and facilitators (all p < .001; Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010).
		Percentage of directive	9.3% (Alves et al., 2019); 41% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 31.2% (Hershkowitz et al., 1997); 24% (Korkman et al., 2006); 31.2% (Korkman et al., 2008b); 41% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001); 31% (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000); 23.6% (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010); 16.75% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001).		Effects of pre-substantive practices and the interviewer's support on the number of details	Greater interviewer preparation was associated with less disclosure about SA (p < .03), while rapport-building did not correlate with the SA information (Alves et al., 2019).
		Percentage of option-posing	18.7% (Alves et al., 2019); 39% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 31% (Korkman et al., 2006); 32.6% (Korkman et al., 2008b); 34% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001); 31% (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000); 45.6% (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010); 43.98% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001). Children who disclosed the abuse were questioned with more multiple-choice prompts (p < .030) than those with unclear disclosures or those who did not disclose (p < .001; Alves et al., 2019).		Total number of details	Longer utterances were associated with fewer details (p < .021; Korkman et al., 2008a).
					Number of details elicited by invitations	8% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 93.7% (Orbach & Lamb, 1999); 9.43% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001); 7% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001); 5% (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000)
					Number of details elicited by directives	35% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 3.2% (Orbach & Lamb, 1999); 14.89% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001); and 43% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001). The use of WH questions was associated with fewer details (p < .05; Alves et al., 2019).
		Percentage of suggestive	0.3% (Alves et al., 2019); 14% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 47.5% (Hershkowitz et al., 1997); 26% (Korkman et al., 2006); 14.7% (Korkman et al., 2008b); 6% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001); 5% (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000); and 30.89% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001).		Number of details elicited by option-posing	41% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 37.96% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001); 40% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001). Greater use of yes-no questions was associated with more uninformative responses (p < .03) and less new information (p < .01; Alves et al., 2019).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	14	Percentage of facilitators	10.9% (Alves et al., 2019); 6.3% (Hershkowitz et al., 1997); 12% (Korkman et al., 2006); 14.6% (Korkman et al., 2008b); 16% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001); 17% (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000); and 12.7% (Myklebust & Bjørklund, 2010). More used to children who disclosed the SA ($p < .05$) and less to those who avoided discussing it ($p < .01$; Alves et al., 2019).	15	Number of details elicited by suggestive	14% (Cederborg et al., 2000); 3.2% (Orbach & Lamb, 1999); 35.73% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001); 10% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001). No correlation (Alves et al., 2019).
		Differences in prompts of each type	More directive and option-posing prompts than suggestive and invitations, with suggestive prompts being more frequent than invitations (all $p \leq .001$; Cederborg et al., 2000). Option-posing questions were the most frequent, followed by directives and summaries, which were used more often than social pressure, social support, and invitations (Lindholm et al., 2015).		Differences in the number of details elicited by prompt types	Invitations elicited more details than all other types (Hershkowitz et al., 1997: all $p < .05$; Thoresen et al., 2009: all $p < .001$). Directive prompts elicited more details than all other types ($p < .001$), except for invitations (Korkman et al., 2006). Facilitators, invitations, and directive questions produced more descriptive responses while option-posing and suggestive prompts yielded more "no" responses ($p < .001$; Korkman et al., 2008b). Option-posing and suggestive prompts elicited more new details than invitations, facilitators, or directive prompts ($p < .05$; Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 2000).
		Temporal evolution	From 1990 to 2012, directive questions and facilitators increased, while option-posing questions decreased. Open-ended and suggestive prompts showed NS change (Johnson et al., 2015). Compared across periods, 1999-2002 saw more directives ($p < .01$) and fewer option-posing questions ($p = .05$) than 1995-1999, while suggestive prompts were more common in 1990-1994 tihan 1999-2002 ($p < .01$). Facilitators increased from 1990 to 2002 ($p < .001$), and comments were more frequent in 1999-2002 than 1990-1994 ($p < .05$; Thoresen et al., 2009).		Percentage of central/ peripheral details	82.5% central, 16.9% peripheral, and 0.5% negative detail (Orbach & Lamb, 1999).
					Effects of rapid switches of topic	More rapid switches of topics led to fewer new details ($p < .05$; Korkman et al., 2008a).
					Type of responses to repeated questions	54.1% repeated answers, 31.5% elaborated, 10.8% contradicted themselves, 1.2% digressed, and 2.4% no answer (Andrews & Lamb, 2014).
		Number of multipart prompts	Several questions were posed consecutively, including more specific suggestive utterances ($p < 0.001$) and fewer facilitators ($p < 0.001$; Korkman et al., 2006).		Type of responses to repeated questions of each type	Children were more likely to elaborate with repeated directive prompts ($p < .001$) and less with option-posing ($p < .01$), while repetition was more likely with option-posing ($p < .05$) and less with directive prompts ($p < .05$). Contradictions occurred more with suggestive prompts ($p < .05$; Andrews & Lamb, 2014).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed	14	Percentage of repeated questions	4.3% (Andrews & Lamb, 2014).	15	Effects of multipart prompts	Children responded with fewer judicial details ($p < .03$: Korkman et al., 2008a; $p < .009$: Korkman et al., 2006) or with no response ($p < .001$; Korkman et al., 2006).
		Percentage of repeated questions of each type	61.3% option-posing, 24.9% directive, 8.4% suggestive, and 5.4% invitations (Andrews & Lamb, 2014).		Effects of multiple interviews	80% (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001) or 34% (Orbach & Lamb, 2001) of contradictions occurred in the same interview. Invitations elicited none (Orbach & Lamb, 2001) or fewer contradictions ($p < .001$), while suggestive prompts led to more ($p < .001$; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001). Directive prompts were more likely to elicit repeated details (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001). Across three interviews, there were NS differences in sexual, sensitive, and informative details, although sensitive information increased in the 2nd interview. Avoidances decreased in the 3rd interview compared to the first two (all $p < .05$), with NS differences between the 1st and the 2nd interviews. Denials were slightly more frequent in the 1st interview than in the 2nd ($p = .06$; Leander, 2010).
		Total number of words	Utterance ranged from one to 397 words ($M = 10.76$, $SD = 17.50$; Korkman et al., 2008a). Interviewers produced 73% of all words (Korkman et al., 2006).			
		Number of words of each utterance type	Facilitators (shorter) and suggestive questions (longest) differed from all other types and from each other ($p < .001$; Korkman et al., 2008b).			
		Number of rapid switches of topic	39.5% with no rapid switch of topic, 44.2% with one to three, and 16.3% with more than three (Korkman et al., 2008a).			
No specific guidelines or interview protocols were followed vs a scripted protocol for rapport-building: direct or open-ended	1	Pre-substantive practices	Baseline interviews used 6 of the 9 recommended techniques less often than scripted interviews - presentation, rapport-building, neutral topic discussion, "IDK/IDU" rules, interviewer correction, and substantive topic introduction (all $p < .002$; Sternberg et al., 1999).	1	Total number of words	Children in the open-ended condition gave longer responses than in the other two conditions ($p < .05$), with NS differences between the latter (Sternberg et al., 1999).
		Differences in the prompts of each type	The open-ended procedure had more invitations than the other two conditions ($p < .01$). Both the open-ended ($p < .05$) and direct ($p < .001$) procedures used fewer direct and leading questions than baseline, with NS differences in facilitators and suggestive prompts (Sternberg et al., 1999).		Total number of details	Children in the open-ended condition gave more detailed responses than in the other two conditions ($p < .01$), with NS differences between the latter (Sternberg et al., 1999).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
No specific guidelines or protocols were followed with vs without SACD	2	Differences in prompts of each type	NS differences between groups were found: 45.1% suggestive, 33.3% direct, 12.7% facilitators, and 2.2% of invitations (Lamb et al., 1996). SACD prompts were associated with longer questions ($p < .001$) and fewer facilitators but more suggestive prompts ($p < .001$; Santtila et al., 2004).	2	Total number of words	Longer responses when SACD were not used ($p < .001$) and to invitations than focused prompts (all $p < .006$; Lamb et al., 1996). Shorter responses in the presence of SACD ($p < .001$; Santtila et al., 2004).
					Total number of details	More details when SACD were not used ($p < .001$) and to invitations than focused prompts (all $p < .006$; Lamb et al., 1996). Fewer details in the presence of SACD ($p < .001$; Santtila et al., 2004).
Pre- vs post-training in NICHD protocol	8	Pre-substantive practices	Protocol interviewers were more likely to introduce themselves (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .004$), explain their role (Yi et al., 2016: $p = .000$), rapport-building (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$), explain ground rules (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$; Yi et al., 2016: $p < .01$), conduct episodic memory training (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .002$), and shift to abuse topics non-suggestively (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$). Non-protocol interviewers gathered more family information (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .01$). NS differences in explaining the interview's purpose (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001) or rapport-building techniques (Yi et al., 2016).	9	Pre-substantive practices	More details from memories of neutral events in protocol interviews ($p < .001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000)
					Children's reluctance and cooperation	Use of the NICHD protocol did not affect cooperation or resistance (Lewy et al., 2015)
					Total number of details	More details in protocol than in non-protocol interviews (Cyr & Lamb, 2009: $p < .001$; Dion & Cyr, 2008: $p < .001$; Lewy et al., 2015: $p > .05$). Children with LVA gave more details in the protocol condition than AVA children in the non-protocol condition (Dion & Cyr, 2008). NS differences between groups (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001; Yi et al., 2016).
		Differences in prompts of each type	Protocol interviews had more invitations (Cyr & Lamb, 2009: $p < .01$; Dion & Cyr, 2008: $p < .001$) and fewer directive, option-posing (Cyr & Lamb, 2009: both $p < .01$) and suggestive prompts (Cyr & Lamb, 2009: $p < .01$; Dion & Cyr, 2008: $p < .01$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .001$). NS differences between directive and option-posing prompts (Dion & Cyr, 2008), and the reduction in suggestive utterances was NS (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000).		Differences in the number of details elicited by prompt types	In NICHD protocol interviews, more details were elicited by invitations (Cyr & Lamb, 2009: $p < .001$). NS differences in the number of details elicited by directive, option-posing, and suggestive utterances (Cyr & Lamb, 2009).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcomes**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
Pre- vs post-training in NICHD protocol	8	Differences in the proportion of prompts of each type	Protocol interviews had more invitations (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .0001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .001$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .003$) and facilitators (Yi et al., 2016: $p = .05$) and fewer directive (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .031$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$), option-posing (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .0001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$) and suggestive prompts (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$). NS differences between directives, option-posing, and suggestive prompts, but suggestive prompts tended to decrease after protocol training (Yi et al., 2016).	9	Differences in the proportion of details elicited by prompt types	NICHD protocol elicited more details from invitations (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .001$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .007$) and fewer from directive (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .034$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .02$), option-posing (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .001$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .001$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$), suggestive (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000: $p < .01$; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach et al., 2000: $p < .032$; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001: $p < .001$) and summaries (Cyr et al., 2012: $p < .01$). NS differences for suggestive (Cyr et al., 2012; Yi et al., 2016: $p = .07$), option-posing, or facilitators (Yi et al., 2016: $p = .31$ and $p = .08$, resp.).
		Breaks and closure practices	NS differences between groups in the number of breaks ($p = .289$), frequency of thanking children ($p = .070$), or asking more questions ($p = .250$). NICHD protocol interviews contained more neutral discussion topics in the closure phase ($p = .004$; Yi et al., 2016).		Total number of central details	More central details in protocol than in non-protocol interviews (Alonzo-Proulx & Cyr, 2016: $p < .001$; Cyr & Lamb, 2009: $p < .001$).
		Support provided	The use of the NICHD Protocol did not influence interviewers' support or non-supportive demeanors (Lewy et al., 2015)		Total proportion of central details	NS differences between groups (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin & Horowitz, 2000).
					Differences in the number of central details elicited by prompt types	More central details elicited by invitations in protocol than in non-protocol interviews ($p < .01$). NS differences in central details elicited by directive, option-posing, and suggestive utterances (Cyr & Lamb, 2009).
		Effects of feedback	The feedback group used more invitations ($p < .001$) and fewer summaries than the non-feedback group. NS differences in the proportion of directives, option-posing, and suggestive utterances (Cyr et al., 2012).		Differences in the proportion of details elicited by prompt types	NICHD protocol led to more central details from invitations ($p < .001$) and fewer details from directive ($p < .001$), option-posing ($p < .001$), and summary ($p < .05$). NS differences from suggestive questions (Cyr et al., 2012).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcome**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
Revised NICHD protocol	-	-	-	1	SA disclosure rate	100% (n = 3; Katz, 2015).
Scripted protocol for rapport building: direct vs open-ended	1	Number of prompts of each type	NS differences in the number of open-ended prompts between groups (Sternberg et al., 1997).	1	Total number of words	Open-ended protocol produced longer responses to the 1st substantive question than the Direct protocol (p < .005; Sternberg et al., 1997).
					Differences between the number of details elicited by prompt types	Open-ended protocol produced more details in the 1st substantive question (p < .006) and subsequent open-ended questions (p < .029) than the Direct protocol. NS differences to direct and suggestive prompts (Sternberg et al., 1997).
SCWI model	1	Percentage of prompts of each type	57.1% directive, 20.5% option-posing, 12.6% cued-invitations, 9.4% invitations, and 0.5% suggestive (Wolfman et al., 2016).	-	-	-
		Adherence to the scripted components of the SCWI model	All components of the Engage and Explain phase were followed. In the Account phase, 84.1% transferred control to the child, 78.3% explained ground rules, and 80.5% requested detailed account. In Closure, 93.4% discussed a neutral topic, 98.9% mentioned the end time, 79.1% allowed questions, and 43.5% thanked the child (Wolfman et al., 2016).			
SIM framework	2	Ground rules delivered	98.29% truth, 58.57% IDU, 54.28% IDK, 47.15% IDR, and 45.54% mistake (Hamilton et al., 2016a).	4	Number of ground rules used	Greater delivery and practice of ground rules by interviewers led to more use by children (p = .002 and p = .03, resp.; Hamilton et al., 2016a).
		Percentage of prompts of each type	36.64% open-ended, 31.60% specific cued-recall, 20.72% option-posing, and 11.04% suggestive (Hamilton et al., 2016a).		SA disclosure	More to open-ended (p < .001) than to suggestive (p = 1.36) or a specific prompt (p < .001; Hamilton et al., 2016a). 81% disclosed and 19% did not disclose or refused the interview (Leach et al., 2017).
		Effects of child's expressions of shame	More utterances with children who expressed shame than those who did not (p = .02; Hamilton et al., 2016b).		Differences in the number of words elicited by prompt types	Children spoke more during the substantive phase when the interviewer included a practice narrative (p = .02) and produced the most words to suggestive prompts, followed by open-ended and specific prompts (all p < .01; Hamilton et al., 2016a). NS differences between children who expressed shame and those who did not (Hamilton, 2016b).

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcome**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
SIM framework	2	-	-	4	Informativeness of responses to transition prompts	*What* prompts were 60% more likely than *Why* prompts to elicit informative responses ($p < .001$). *Do You Know* questions reduced the likelihood of immediate responses by 91% compared to direct prompts ($p < .001$). NS differences between direct and indirect *Can you* prompts (Garcia et al., 2022).
Stepwise procedure through explicit and progressive broad stages	3	Pre-substantive practices	More rapport-building than instructions and evaluation prompts ($p < .001$; Teoh & Lamb, 2010).	2	Total number of words	The interviewer's authoritarianism did not correlate with the number of words (Teoh & Lamb, 2013).
		Proportion of supportive and authoritarian statements	More talkative interviewers before and during the substantive phase were less supportive during that phase ($p < .01$). Authoritarianism was not correlated to word count or support level (Teoh & Lamb, 2013).		Total number of details	Children provided fewer details when interviewers spoke more in the pre-substantive ($p < .01$) and substantive phases ($p = .00$), but greater interviewer support in the substantive phase increased informativeness ($p = .00$; Teoh & Lamb, 2013).
		Percentage of prompts of each type	50% option-posing, 43.6% directive, 3.9% open-ended, and 2.4% suggestive (Sumampouw et al., 2019).		Proportion of informative responses	The type and length of the interviewers' pre-substantive prompts were NS related to the proportion of children's informative responses in the substantive phase (Teoh & Lamb, 2010)
		Differences in prompts of each type	More directive than open-ended, more option-posing than open-prompts, more directive than suggestive, and more option-posing than suggestive prompts were used (all $p < .001$), with NS differences among the others (Sumampouw et al., 2019).			
Stepwise procedure through explicit and progressive broad stages vs non-training vs mixed group	1	Differences between prompts of each type	NS differences between groups. However, interviewers asked more specific-leading questions than the other question types ($p = .00$; Aldridge & Cameron, 1999).	-	-	-
		Free recall requests	57.9% (Aldridge & Cameron, 1999).			

Table 1. *(continued)*

Procedure	Interviewer			Child		
	Number of articles	**Outcome**	**Main results**	**Number of articles**	**Outcomes**	**Main results**
Structured interview protocol in the office vs structured interview protocol in the office and a follow-up interview at the scene of the alleged crime	1	Total number of utterances	NS differences between groups (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg & Horowitz, 2000).	1	Total number of details	NS differences between groups, although children interviewed in the office provided more details in their 1st narrative than those in the scene group ($p < .05$; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg & Horowitz, 2000).
Structured interview protocol with an interview in the office and a follow-up interview at the scene of the alleged crime	-	-	-	1	Total number of details	At the scene, children provided 23% of the total details, 86% new and 14% contextualizing previous details. The number of details in the office interview was correlated with total, new (both $p < .01$) and location-specific details provided at the scene ($p < .001$; Hershkowitz et al., 1998).
The general rules of forensic interviewing in a stepwise manner were ensured with SACD	1	Differences between prompts of each type	Interviewers asked more questions when they were not using dolls than when they were using them ($p < .0001$; Thierry et al., 2005).	2	Differences between the number of details elicited by prompt types	Children provided similar amounts of details in response to invitations, directives, and option-posing questions, whether dolls were used or not. More "no doll-no doll" details were reported than "doll-doll", "doll-no doll", and "no doll-doll" details ($p < 001$; Thierry et al., 2005).
					Child behavior during the interview with SACD	The referral group revealed more unusual behaviors during the SACD interview than did the non-referred children ($p < .0001$; White et al., 1986).

Note. When included studies reported both absolute values and proportions for the same outcome, only the proportions were extracted for this table. Proportions account for sample size differences, ensuring consistency across studies and providing clearer, more comparable measures of outcomes. ABE = Achieving Best Evidence; APSAC = American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children; CSAIP = Child Sexual Abuse Interview Protocol; DR = Disclosure Recipient; HFD = Human Figure Diagram; IDK = "I Don't Know"; IDR = "I Don't Remember"; IDU = "I Don't Understand"; MCR = Mental Context Reinstatement; MoGP = Memorandum of Good Practice; NICHD = National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; NS = No Significant; PCR = Physical Context Reinstatement; RATAC = Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch Inquiry, Abuse scenario, and Closure; SA = Sexual Abuse; SACD = Sexually Anatomical Correct Dolls; SCWI = Specialist Child Witness Interviewing; SIM = Standard Interview Method.

Analysis of studies comparing forensic interview procedures

A total of 28 articles (30.11%) compared two or three procedures for collecting testimonies from CSA victims. The most frequently studied comparison involved interviews conducted without any protocol or guidelines and those conducted using the NICHD protocol (k = 9, 32.14%). Overall, protocol-based interviews showed stronger adherence to both pre- and post-substantive practices (e.g., interviewer introduction and role explanation, rapport-building, thanking children, and neutral closure). They also demonstrated a greater use of invitations and fewer focused questions. Moreover, incorporating feedback during training further increased the use of invitations. Children interviewed under protocol conditions provided a higher number of total and central details.

Additional comparisons were made between the MoGP and the NICHD protocol (k = 5, 17.86%). Findings indicated that NICHD interviewers produced fewer utterances, topic shifts, and focused questions while using more invitations. Likewise, children in the NICHD group provided more total and central details, more episodic and temporal information, and more disclosure recipient reports. Studies comparing the standard and revised NICHD protocols (k = 2, 7.14%) also found higher rates of SA disclosures in the revised version.

Several studies also examined the use of complementary tools. Regarding context reinstatement strategies in extra-familial cases, these techniques did not increase the number of words or details provided by children. Nevertheless, one study found that the PCR method increased the use of invitations, while another found no significant differences. The MCR approach elicited longer responses and details following invitations. Additionally, incorporating the alleged crime drawing technique into the interview increased the number of details provided by children. In contrast, the use of SACD tended to elicit shorter, less detailed responses and a higher proportion of suggestive prompts.

Finally, across studies comparing different procedures, the most consistent finding was that invitations elicited longer and more detailed responses than any other question type.

Discussion

This systematic review analyzed the effectiveness of forensic interview procedures in CSA cases, focusing on interviewers and child outcomes. A total of 27 different forensic interview procedures were identified, including some outdated methods (e.g., SACD, rapport-building scripts) that are no longer in use, illustrating the evolution of best practices in the field. Some articles still reported interviews conducted without protocols or guidelines, highlighting persistent gaps in practice.

Among standardized procedures, common elements and protocol-specific features outlined earlier were consistently observed. Moreover, although some protocols are specific to certain countries,

many closely follow the well-established NICHD protocol. For example, the SCWI model (New Zealand), the Child Interview Protocol Guide of Children's House (Iceland), and the SIM framework (Australia) are all based on or resemble the NICHD protocol. Similarly, the 10-Step protocol (U.S.A.) is a revision of it, while both the APSAC and CSAIP protocols (U.S.A.) share its main phases, with APSAC adding only a stage for presenting physical evidence. Despite these structural similarities, differing terminology across countries fragments research efforts and hinders cross-study comparisons. Nevertheless, the NICHD protocol remains the most recognized and empirically supported model for CSA interviews.

The findings underscore the importance of standardized protocols in improving interview quality. On the one hand, we conclude that protocol-based interviews showed more pre- and post-substantive practices (e.g., purpose explanation, ground rules, rapport-building, neutral closure; thanking the child) than non-protocol interviews. Moreover, protocol-based interviews involved more open-ended questions and fewer closure questions (directive, option-posing, and suggestive), with some studies reporting up to three times more open-ended questions and three times fewer closure questions than non-protocol interviews (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach et al., 2001). On the other hand, these interviews elicited more details in response to invitations and fewer responses to directive, option-posing, or suggestive prompts, thereby enhancing the reliability of the information obtained. In addition, children in protocol-based interviews provided a higher proportion of central to peripheral details compared with non-protocol interviews. Central details, crucial for understanding the abuse incident, are particularly important because they directly contribute to the progress of the investigation.

Despite the importance of standardized protocols for collecting testimony from CSA victims, it is crucial to evaluate which protocol most effectively facilitates appropriate questioning and elicits detailed, reliable responses from children. This review identified the NICHD protocol as the most extensively studied and consistently associated with positive outcomes. Interviews using the NICHD protocol more frequently included pre-substantive practices and elicited more detailed child responses with fewer overall utterances, suggesting more spontaneous narratives. The NICHD protocol also led to a higher proportion of invitations and facilitators and a lower proportion of directive, option-posing, and suggestive prompts. Children provided higher rates of SA disclosures, more central (than peripheral) details, more detailed responses to appropriate questions (e.g., invitations, facilitators), and fewer details in response to inappropriate questions (e.g., directives, option-posing, and suggestive prompts), enhancing the relevance and reliability of testimony. Additionally, interviewers using the NICHD protocol employed more episodic prompts, shifted topics less often, and provided greater support during the interview. For children, the NICHD protocol also promotes the collection of more episodic details, more reports of DRs,

greater use of time and emotion words, and fewer denials of abuse.

Although the NICHD protocol consistently yields positive outcomes, few studies have examined its revised version (Lamb et al., 2018). Key modifications include a greater emphasis on rapport-building and greater sensitivity to the children's developmental and emotional needs. Evidence from the studies included in this review suggests that these modifications are associated with higher rates of SA disclosures. The limited number of studies likely reflects its recent development and its application to diverse samples of victims and witnesses, which often lack independent analyses, an exclusion criterion in this review. Nevertheless, the substantial improvements support strong recommendations for its use.

This review also examined additional outcomes relevant to the testimony of CSA victims. Regarding simple or multipart prompts, results indicated that children provided more details and central (than peripheral) details in response to simple prompts, underscoring the recommendation to prioritize simple over multipart prompts. Concerning repeated questions, findings revealed that these were primarily option-posing or suggestive prompts. In these cases, children tended to repeat their answers, contradict themselves, digress, or give no response rather than elaborate on their initial answers. Therefore, when repetition is necessary, interviewers should use open-ended prompts and explain the reason for repetition. Regarding multiple interviews, additional sessions proved valuable for reluctant children. While the first interview typically yields more disclosures and details, subsequent interviews can elicit previously undisclosed information and additional central details. Moreover, no significant differences in denials were observed across interviews, although children were slightly more likely to deny in the first session. Avoidance behaviors also appeared more frequently in the first interview than in the second. These findings suggest that rapport-building may reduce children's reluctance, underscoring the value of multiple sessions, which should ideally be conducted by the same interviewer.

Additionally, regarding complementary tools (e.g., SACD, drawings), findings suggest that these aids may inadvertently reduce interviewer utterances and increase suggestive and option-posing prompts. For children, these tools did not improve the quantity or centrality of information provided. Only one study found the crime scene drawing could elicit new information, although it was not central to the event. Notably, SACD used in non-referred children elicited sexually related behaviors, raising reliability concerns (White et al., 1986). Therefore, caution is recommended when using such tools, given that the gains obtained emerge in response to closed or suggestive questions, raising concerns about the reliability of the resulting information.

This review also underscores the importance of ongoing supervision and feedback. Studies indicate that without continuous oversight, the use of invitations and summaries declines, while option-

posing and suggestive prompts increase, reducing the quality and reliability of information collected. Thus, although initial training in a standardized protocol is valuable, maintaining best practices requires ongoing training and supervision.

In an increasingly multicultural world, language and cultural adaptation are vital. With this in mind, some studies highlighted the importance of adapting and translating protocols. Nevertheless, such adaptations may be insufficient, as multiple cultures often coexist within the same geographical or social environment. Research has shown that interviews conducted in a child's first language elicit more detailed accounts (Anderson et al., 2014; Hu & Naka, 2022). The use of interpreters, as adopted in some included studies, may help address this challenge, however, it also introduces risks, including mistranslations, slower interview pace, and shorter child responses due to translation demands (Goodman-Delahunty & Martschuk, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that children recount their abusive experiences in their first language whenever possible, even if this requires an interpreter. In such cases, the interview should be jointly prepared by the interviewer and the interpreter, both adequately trained in forensic interviewing (Korkman et al., 2024). Further research is needed to assess how language and interpreter use affect the accuracy and completeness of CSA testimonies.

Finally, to ensure adherence to evidence-based practices, interviews should be videotaped and, whenever possible, conducted by a single interviewer (Ferra et al., 2022; Korkman et al., 2024).

Despite this review's valuable insights, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, some protocols have been primarily evaluated by their developers or colleagues, which may introduce bias. Second, not all studies controlled external factors such as children's developmental levels or the interviewer's training. Third, the child's age-related analyses were not performed, potentially explaining some outcome variability. Future research should analyze results by age groups to clarify developmental differences. Furthermore, it would be relevant to examine how culture, language, and interpreter use affect the quality and accuracy of child testimony. Finally, longitudinal studies are also needed to evaluate the long-term impact of different forensic interview practices on child well-being.

Conclusions and Implications

This systematic review fills an important gap in the literature by synthesizing a broad body of research on forensic interview procedures and outcomes in CSA cases. By integrating evidence across multiple approaches, it provides a comprehensive overview of current knowledge and key insights into the effectiveness of these procedures. The findings highlight the advantages of standardized, child-centered approaches tailored to each child's needs, which enhance interview quality and testimony while

minimizing potential harm.

Although 27 procedures were identified, the NICHD protocol has emerged as the most consistently supported model, demonstrating positive outcomes for interviewer practices and child responsiveness. Therefore, a strong recommendation is made for adopting the revised NICHD protocol when collecting testimonies from CSA victims.

This review also highlights the benefits of conducting multiple sessions for reluctant children and recommends caution when using complementary tools, which may compromise the reliability of the child's testimony. Furthermore, culturally sensitive interviews are essential, beginning with the adaptation and translation of protocols to align with the country's language and culture. When this is insufficient in multicultural contexts, interviews should be jointly prepared by the interviewer and a trained forensic interpreter.

Finally, ongoing training, supervision, and feedback are crucial to maintaining best practices over time. Regular oversight supports effective questioning and prevents the use of less reliable prompts that may compromise the accuracy and completeness of child testimony.

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Capítulo 2 | Caracterização da Violência Sexual Contra Crianças e Adolescentes

Estudo 3 | Characterizing Child Sexual Abuse and Child Victims' Participation in the Portuguese Criminal Justice System

O presente artigo encontra-se em revisão na revista *Child, Abuse & Neglect* (*SJR* 2025: Q1, 1,421; *JCR* 2024: Q1, FI = 3,4), tendo já sido sujeito a uma primeira ronda de revisão por pares.

Adicionalmente, os resultados deste estudo empírico foram apresentados em formato de apresentação oral no Congresso Internacional "Vulnerabilidade e Exclusão social: Proteção das Mulheres e das Crianças Vítimas de Violência Sexual" (Braga, Portugal) e na 2ª Conferência de Trauma e Resiliência (Maia, Portugal).

Referência:

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Abstract

Background: Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a widespread global problem with societal, legal, and scientific implications. In Portugal, despite increasing reporting rates, empirical knowledge about CSA characteristics and children's involvement in criminal proceedings remains limited.

Objective: This study aimed to characterize CSA cases in Portugal, describe children's involvement in the criminal justice system, and examine predictors of abuse patterns and legal outcomes.

Participants and Setting: The sample comprised 319 criminal case files related to CSA, filed between 2014 and 2022, drawn from five courts across Portugal.

Methods: A quantitative retrospective design was used. Data were extracted from case files and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) to examine predictors of abuse characteristics and legal outcomes.

Results: CSA cases were predominantly characterized by female victims and male perpetrators known to the child. Intrafamilial abuse was associated with younger victims, contact forms, repeated episodes, and co-occurring victimization. Children were involved in multiple procedural acts (M = 3.10). GEE analyses indicated that victim age and the victim-perpetrator relationship were key predictors of abuse patterns. Procedural factors, particularly the presence of Statements for Future Use, were associated with legal outcomes, with their absence linked to a lower likelihood of conviction. Delays and repeated testimonies may increase the risk of secondary victimization.

Conclusions: Findings highlight the complexity of CSA cases in Portugal and the central role of child testimony in legal outcomes. Strengthening trauma-informed, child-sensitive justice practices, ensuring timely evidence collection, and reducing procedural delays may improve justice responses and minimize revictimization.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; child victims; criminal justice system; forensic interview; secondary victimization; testimony

Characterizing Child Sexual Abuse and Child Victims' Participation in the Portuguese Criminal Justice System

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is internationally defined as any form of sexual activity imposed on a person under 17 years old by an adult or an individual in a position of power or trust over the child, who is not developmentally equipped to understand or consent to the act. Such acts may be completed or attempted and include both non-contact and contact behaviors (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2025; World Health Organization, 2017)[5].

Recent global data from UNICEF indicate that approximately one out of five women and one out of seven men experienced some form of sexual violence before the age of 18, including both contact and non-contact acts (UNICEF, 2025). This high prevalence underscores the widespread nature of the issue and raises significant concerns regarding its social, legal, economic, and scientific implications.

Beyond prevalence, international literature has consistently identified several recurring patterns in CSA cases. Victims are more frequently female, perpetrators are predominantly male and often known to the child, and abuse tends to involve repeated episodes and multiple forms of victimization (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015; Ventus et al., 2017). Additionally, both contact and non-contact forms of abuse have been documented, with increasing attention to technology-facilitated sexual violence in recent years (Patel & Roesch, 2022). These patterns are observed across different contexts, although the legal classification and operationalization of CSA may vary across countries.

In the Portuguese Penal Code (PPC), sexual crimes are divided into two main categories. On the one hand, crimes against sexual freedom (Articles 163 to 170) encompass all sexual acts committed without the victim's consent, regardless of age (e.g., sexual assault, rape). On the other hand, crimes against sexual self-determination (Articles 171 to 176-C) specifically criminalize sexual activities involving children under the age of 17. This legal distinction is grounded in the understanding that children lack the developmental capacity to fully comprehend the nature and consequences of such acts and, therefore, cannot provide valid consent. Accordingly, this legal framework aims to protect the child's free and healthy sexual development. The present study focuses on crimes against sexual self-determination, which constitute the primary legal framework for understanding CSA in Portugal.

Under the PPC, crimes against sexual self-determination include a range of offenses targeting children. These include direct sexual abuse of children under 14, sexual abuse of minors in dependent

[5] In this article, the term "child" follows the definitions provided by the World Health Organization and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing both children and adolescents under 18.

or vulnerable situations, sexual acts involving adolescents (ages 14-16), exploitation through prostitution, child pimping, child pornography and grooming, organization of sexual tourism, and acts targeting a child's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. In short, these typologies cover a spectrum ranging from non-contact to contact acts, committed directly by a perpetrator against a child or through exploitation mediated by third parties.

In 2025, law enforcement agencies in Portugal officially registered 1418 crimes against self-determination, a 10% increase from the previous year (DGPJ, 2025). The rise in reported cases is attributed mainly to increased societal awareness and a growing willingness to report such offenses, reflecting decreased tolerance for these acts. However, despite this upward trend, empirical knowledge about the characteristics of CSA cases and the involvement of child victims in the Portuguese criminal justice system remains limited. This gap contrasts with the extensive international literature and highlights the need to better understand how these crimes manifest nationally and how the justice system responds to them.

A central aspect of this response concerns the role of the child victims within the justice system. In CSA cases, the involvement of the child in the criminal justice system is often unavoidable. As consistently highkighted in scientific literatura these abusive acts typically occur in private, secretive contexts, without eyewitnesses or physical/biological evidence. As a result, the victim's testimony becomes a critical elemento in the criminal investigation and plays a crucial role in determining legal outcomes (Lamb et al., 2018; Powell & Earhart, 2018; Steele, 2012).

Given this centrality, scientific research has identified four main groups of interrelated factors that influence the quality and reliability of their testimony. First, victim-related factors include feelings of shame, fear of potential consequences, limited understanding of the abuse, and the child's age at the onset of abuse and at the forensic interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Second, factors related to the child's support system, such as the quality of caregiving and the reactions received following informal disclosure (Latiff et al., 2024; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021). Third, incident- and perpetrator-related factors, including threats by the perpetrator, the type of sexual abuse, and the nature or closeness of the relationship between victim and perpetrator (Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Finally, factors related to formal investigative procedures, such as the quality of support during forensic interviews, the time elapsed since the abuse, and the quality of the questions asked during the interview (Blasbalg et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2024; Latiff et al., 2024). These formal disclosure factors not only affect testimony reliability but also influence the risk of secondary victimization (i.e., additional harm

inflicted on the victim by the justice system's response), potentially mitigating or intensifying it (Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Classen & Clark, 2017; Elmi et al., 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). When the criminal justice system handles interactions with the child appropriately (e.g., adapting interview rooms to children, asking open-ended questions without judgment), it can have a healing effect, helping to restore the child's sense of justice (Daignault et al., 2017; Quas & Goodman, 2012). Overall, understanding these interrelated factors is essential for designing child-sensitive procedures that maximize the reliability of testimony while minimizing further harm.

In response to these challenges, European directives have guided the implementation of protective measures for child victims (e.g., Directive 2012/29/EU, 2012, Council of Europe, 2010). In this context, Portugal established the Victim Statute, which recognizes CSA victims as particularly vulnerable and entitles them to specific protective measures within the criminal justice system. These include conducting interviews in child-sensitive environments, preferably by the same professional, limiting public access to hearings, and ensuring that testimony is recorded early in the process through a procedure known as *Declarações para Memória Futura* (Statements for Future Use [SFU]). This procedure aims to both preserve evidentiary quality and reduce the need for repeated testimony by allowing the child's statement to be used later in court.

Despite these protective measures, the involvement and progression of CSA victims through the Portuguese criminal justice system remains largely unknown, including the number and type of procedures they undergo and how these processes unfold over time.

Given the limited empirical evidence on CSA in Portugal, the present study aims to: (1) characterize patterns of CSA victimization in Portugal (i.e., victim, perpetrator, and crime characteristics); (2) describe and analyze the involvement of child victims in the criminal justice system, with particular focus on procedural trajectories; (3) examine predictors of abuse patterns and legal outcomes. By analyzing past practices through the review of criminal case files, this study seeks to generate empirical evidence essential to inform more child-sensitive intervention strategies, guide legal and procedural improvements, and foster innovation in criminal justice system responses. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance the effectiveness of criminal procedures and minimize the risk of revictimization, even while acknowledging that these procedures may be demanding for children.

Method

Sampling

This is a quantitative retrospective study analyzing files from the Portuguese criminal justice system since 2014. This year was chosen because a comprehensive reform of the judicial map was implemented, reorganizing the country into larger and more centralized judicial districts and introducing a model based on functional specialization and management by objectives. This reform aimed to improve efficiency, consistency, and quality in the administration of justice by concentrating resources, standardizing procedures, and promoting specialization within courts. As part of this restructuring, specialized courts were reinforced, including criminal courts with jurisdiction over serious offenses, as well as Family and Juvenile Courts responsible for civil and protective matters involving children. These structural changes enhanced the organization and comparability of judicial data across regions, facilitating more consistent record-keeping and enabling more robust analysis of case files across different courts.

Case files were included in the study if they involved a criminal proceeding of CSA, the victim was under 18 at the onset of abuse, the case was officially filed after 2014, and a final decision had already been made. Files were excluded if they involved juvenile protection proceedings in which the alleged perpetrator was between 12 and 16 years old.

A total of 319 case files from the criminal justice system were reviewed, with filing dates ranging from 2014 to 2022. The files originated from five courts located in five distinct regions throughout Portugal. The review and data extraction were carried out between February 2023 and August 2024.

Procedures

The Ethics Committee approved this study for Social and Human Sciences from a Portuguese university (CEICSH 079/2022) and by the High Council for the Judiciary in Portugal (2022/GAVPM/1858). Subsequently, the courts were requested to provide the case numbers matching the eligibility criteria. Following the lists sent, their collaboration was sought to make the case files available for on-site consultation.

During the review of the files, ethical and confidentiality principles were strictly adhered to. All data were anonymized, and only information essential to the study was collected. The data were manually extracted into a structured Excel grid, which included the following categories: (a) criminal case characteristics (e.g., court region, type of crime, legal outcome, sentence imposed, date of case registration, date of final decision); (b) characteristics of the victims and perpetrators (e.g., gender,

nationality, age at the moment of crime(s), occupation); (c) crime characteristics (e.g., victim-perpetrator relationship, reported acts, convicted acts, frequency, context); and (d) statements for future use characteristics (e.g., presence or absence, date, number of sessions in different days, presence or absence of breaks, number of testimonial collection procedures before and after).

Data extraction was conducted by one researcher, who reviewed all case files and collected the variables of interest. To ensure accuracy of the extraction process, a second researcher independently reviewed a random 10% subset of the files and found no discrepancies in the extracted information. Because all extracted variables were objective and factual rather than interpretative, no interrater reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen's kappa coefficient) were calculated.

Data analysis

As previously mentioned, a total of 319 case files were reviewed and included in this study. However, some case files involved more than one victim, more than one perpetrator, or multiple crime typologies. For this reason, the data were disaggregated into independent analytical units. Each analytical unit corresponded to a unique combination of victim, perpetrator, and crime typology, ensuring no duplication of information. For example, if a case involved two victims (A and B) and a single perpetrator, this would constitute one case file but two analytical units: one comprising victim A and the perpetrator, and the other comprising victim B and the perpetrator. Nevertheless, in this instance, information regarding the perpetrator was not duplicated. This approach allowed for a more detailed examination of the interactions between individuals involved and the specific characteristics of each incident. Consequently, this procedure resulted in a total of up to 580 analytical units.

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0). Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses were first performed to summarize the main characteristics of the sample.

To identify predictors of key outcomes, Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) were employed. GEE models are particularly suited for this study as they provide robust parameter estimates while accounting for the potential correlation within clusters (e.g., cases associated with the same perpetrator or victim characteristics). Three binary logistic GEE models were conducted to examine predictors of: (a) victim-perpetrator relationship (extrafamilial vs intrafamilial); (b) type of abuse (non-contact vs contact); and (c) the frequency of abuse (single vs multiple episodes). Additionally, a multinomial GEE model was developed to analyze predictors of legal outcomes (no charges, acquittal, or conviction). Independent variables included victim gender, victim age (continuous), victim-perpetrator relationship, abuse frequency, type of abuse, presence of other forms of victimization, and the presence of SFU, depending

on the model. Results are presented as Odds Ratios (ORs) with their respective 95% Confidence Intervals (CI). Statistical significance was set at $p \leq .05$.

Results

Criminal case characteristics

Although all the cases involved sexual offenses against children, some were legally classified as crimes against sexual freedom rather than crimes against sexual self-determination. This distinction stems from the legal interpretation of the abusive behaviors and the contextual factors considered by the judges. Accordingly, among 580 analytical units, 305 (52.59%) corresponded to direct sexual abuse of children under 14, 170 (29.31%) to child pornography, 31 (5.34%) to the sexual abuse of minors in dependent or vulnerable situations, 14 (2.41%) to sexual acts involving adolescents, 11 (1.90%) to sexual harassment (PPC, Article 170), 11 (1.90%) to sexual assault by coercion, 10 (1.72%) to rape, 9 (1.55%) to child pimping, 7 (1.21%) to grooming of minors for sexual purposes, and 6 (1.03%) to exploitation through prostitution. Considering the same sample of sexual offenses, 131 cases (22.82%) involved the co-occurrence of two or more sexual crime typologies committed by the same perpetrator against the same victim. Additionally, in six cases (1.03%), sexual crimes occurred alongside physical crimes.

Of the 580 analytical units, 540 (93.10%) resulted in prosecution by the Public Prosecutor's Office and proceeded to trial. Among the remaining cases, 25 (4.31%) were dismissed, 10 (1.72%) were provisionally suspended subject to compliance with specific conditions, and five (0.86%) were terminated due to the perpetrator's death or consolidation with another case. Among the cases that proceeded to trial, 451 (83.52%) resulted in convictions and 89 (16.48%) in acquittals.

Regarding the time elapsed between the earliest (or single) abusive event and the first criminal procedure, the analysis was based on the dates documented in the physical case files consulted (i.e., 319 files). In addition, only cases that resulted in convictions, and therefore included substantiated abusive events, were included in this analysis, yielding a total of 245 analytical units. Accordingly, the elapsed time could be precisely calculated in 96 cases (39.18%), ranging from 0 to 4713 days (approximately 13 years), with a mean of 161.85 days (approximately 5 months; SD = 576.20, approximately 18 months). In the remaining cases, only approximate or no temporal information was available. Specifically, three cases (1.22%) indicated that only a few days had passed, and 70 (28.57%) reported that several months had elapsed (range: 1 – 138 months, approximately 11.5 years). In 76 cases (31.02%), the interval could not be determined at all due to the absence of any exact or reasonably specific approximate date (e.g., when it was only known that the incident occurred sometime in 2016).

Regarding the time elapsed between the first criminal procedure in the file and the first-instance court decision (i.e., conviction or acquittal), the data recorded in the physical case files consulted (i.e., 319 files) were used, resulting in 291 analytical units. Among these, this period could be precisely determined in 285 cases (97.94%), ranging from 200 to 4561 days (approximately 6 months to 12 years; M = 853.94, SD = 455.80), with longer durations observed in cases that did not involve a direct and identifiable victim. Information regarding this period was unavailable in six files (2.06%).

Among the 291 analytical units, the first-instance court decision was appealed in 94 cases (32.30%). Among the appealed cases, the initial decision was modified in 28 (29.79%). In 15 of these cases (53.57%), modifications involved a reduction in the severity of the sentence or in the amount of compensation initially imposed. In the remaining cases (n = 13, 46.43%), modifications included the introduction or increase of compensation to the victim, the imposition of compensation as a condition of sentence suspension, or an increase in the severity of the sentence. Regarding the time elapsed between the first and final decision, this information was unavailable in five cases (5.32%). In the remaining, it ranged from 72 to 961 days (approximately 2 months to 2 years; M = 270.33 days, SD = 162.17 days).

Victim sample characteristics

Regarding the characteristics of victims, only cases that resulted in convictions, and therefore included substantiated abusive events, were considered, resulting in a total of 373 analytical units. Of these, 314 (84.18%) were identifiable victims. The remaining 59 cases (15.82%) did not include identifiable direct victims, such as cases involving the possession of CSA material, and were therefore excluded from these analyses.

Among the 314 identifiable victims, the ages at the onset of abuse range from 3 to 17 years old (M = 11.14, SD = 3.37). In one case, it was only reported that the child was at least 14 years old at the onset of abuse. Additionally, among the 314 victims, nine were abused by multiple perpetrators. A detailed description of the victims' characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Victim sample characteristics

	Victim sample (*n* = 314)		
	Female *n* **(%)**	**Male** *n* **(%)**	**Total** *n* **(%)**
Age			
3 – 6 years old	32 (12.80)	6 (9.38)	38 (12.10)
7 – 10 years old	63 (25.20)	13 (20.31)	76 (24.20)
11 – 14 years old	120 (48.00)	31 (48.44)	151 (48.09)
15 – 17 years old	35 (14.00)	13 (20.31)	48 (15.29)
Not younger than 14 years old	-	1 (1.56)	1 (0.32)
Total	250 (79.62)	64 (20.38)	-
Nationality			
Portuguese	-	-	302 (96.18)
Other[a]	-	-	11 (3.51)
No information	-	-	1 (0.32)
Occupation			
School or kindergarten	-	-	310 (98.73)
No information	-	-	4 (1.27)
Intellectual/cognitive disability			
Presence	-	-	14 (4.46)
Absence	-	-	138 (43.95)
No information[b]	-	-	162 (51.59)

Note. All characteristics refer to the time of the first (or single) abusive event. [a] A detailed description of the nationality of the victims is available in Supplementary Material A. [b] Case files in which no formal assessment or conclusion regarding the presence or absence of intellectual/cognitive disabilities was reported.

Perpetrator sample characteristics

Concerning the characteristics of perpetrators, only cases that resulted in convictions, and therefore included substantiated abusive events were considered, resulting in 257 analytical units.

A total of 257 perpetrators were identifiable, with ages at the onset of abuse ranging from 16 to 82 years old (M = 40.08, SD = 15.38). Of these, 206 (80.16%) committed offenses against at least one victim, whereas the remaining cases (n = 51, 19.84%) involved possession of CSA material. Additionally, among the 257 perpetrators, 41 abused multiple victims. A detailed description of the perpetrators' characteristics is shown in Table 2.

Regarding the final sentence imposed on the perpetrator, the most common was a suspended prison sentence, with or without probation and/or conditional upon fulfilling specific obligations (n = 152, 59.14%). This was followed by effective imprisonment (n = 79, 30.74%), community service (n = 10, 3.89%), security measures involving institutionalization, either enforced or with suspended execution (n = 8, 3.11%), monetary penalty (n = 7, 2.72%), and home confinement (n = 1, 0.39%). Ancillary penalties were imposed in 49 cases (19.07%), including prohibitions on engaging in professions involving contact with children or suspending parental responsibilities. In 115 cases (55.83%) involving identifiable victims

who actively participated in the criminal justice process, the sentence also included compensation to those victims. It is important to emphasize that in nine cases (3.50%), the initial sentence was modified due to the perpetrator's non-compliance (for statistical purposes, only the final sentence effectively served was considered).

Table 2

Perpetrator sample characteristics

	Perpetrators sample (*n* = 257)		
	Female ***n*** **(%)**	**Male** ***n*** **(%)**	**Total** ***n*** **(%)**
Age			
16 – 20 years old	1 (0.39)	29 (11.28)	30 (11.67)
21 – 30 years old	-	53 (20.62)	53 (20.62)
31 – 40 years old	4 (1.56)	46 (17.90)	50 (19.46)
41 – 50 years old	3 (1.17)	56 (21.79)	59 (22.96)
51 – 60 years old	1 (0.39)	35 (13.62)	36 (14.01)
61 – 70 years old	-	23 (8.95)	23 (8.95)
> 70 years old	-	6 (2.33)	6 (2.33)
Total	9 (3.51)	248 (96.49)	-
Nationality			
Portuguese	-	-	236 (91.83)
Other[a]	-	-	18 (7.02)
No information	-	-	3 (1.17)
Professional status			
Employed[a]	-	-	173 (67.32)
Unemployed	-	-	51 (19.84)
Retired	-	-	33 (12.84)
Intellectual/cognitive disability and/or diagnosed mental disorder (e.g., psychotic disorder, schizoaffective disorder)			
Presence	-	-	15 (5.84)
Absence	-	-	27 (10.51)
No information[b]	-	-	215 (83.66)
Recidivism			
No documented history of similar offenses	-	-	217 (84.44)
More than one criminal proceeding related to sexual offenses	-	-	40 (15.56)

Note. All characteristics refer to the time of the first (or single) abusive event. [a] A detailed description of the nationality and professions of perpetrators is available in Supplementary Material B. [b] Case files in which no formal assessment or conclusion regarding the presence or absence of intellectual/cognitive disabilities was reported.

Crime characteristics

For the descriptive analysis of the crime characteristics, only cases that resulted in convictions, and therefore included substantiated abusive events, were considered.

Regarding the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, only cases with an identifiable direct victim were considered, totaling 327 analytical units. Among these, 221 (67.58%) had a known relationship, whereas 106 (32.42%) involved an unknown person. The characteristics of the specific

relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, as well as those of the reporting person, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Crime characteristics

	N (%)	Victim's age at onset of abuse				
		3-6 *n*	7-10 *n*	11-14 *n*	15-17 *n*	Not younger than 14 *n*
Victim-perpetrator relationship[a]						
Unknown	106 (32.42)	6	21	64	15	-
Known:	221 (67.58)	34	55	96	35	1
Stepfather	33 (10.09)	5	8	17	3	-
Neighbor	25 (7.65)	2	8	14	1	-
Boyfriend	24 (7.34)	-	-	19	5	-
Professor	24 (7.34)	-	2	5	16	1
Biological father	22 (6.73)	5	9	5	3	-
Grandfather	19 (5.81)	7	5	7	-	-
Family friend	18 (5.50)	1	10	6	1	-
Uncle	16 (4.89)	6	4	6	-	-
Other family members (e.g., grandmother, cousin)	10 (3.06)	4	3	3	-	-
Friend/schoolmate	6 (1.83)	-	-	5	1	-
Biological mother	5 (1.53)	1	-	3	1	-
Other acquaintances (e.g., sister's boyfriend, friend's father)	19 (5.81)	3	6	6	4	-
Reporting person (*n* = 245)[b]						
Family member	101 (41.22)					
International organizations combating child exploitation	47 (19.18)					
Agencies dedicated to the promotion and protection of children	28 (11.43)					
Victims themselves	21 (8.57)					
School entities	15 (6.12)					
Anonymous	10 (4.08)					
Hospital	6 (2.45)					
Acquaintance	5 (2.04)					
Following searches of the perpetrator's residence	4 (1.63)					
Victim support institutions	3 (1.22)					
Scout leadership	2 (0.82)					
Missing child's police report	1 (0.41)					
No information	2 (0.82)					

Note. IT = Information Technology; [a] Only cases involving a direct and identifiable victim; [b] All cases, including those involving the possession of CSA material.

A wide range of abusive experiences was reported, including the storage and/or sharing of files containing CSA material in cases where there was no direct and identifiable victim. Additionally, the behaviors reported by the children included explicitly sexual conversations or comments, non-genital body kissing, sexual exposure (e.g., pornographic videos/images, exhibitionism, voyeurism), fondling over or

under the clothes, coerced touching or masturbation, oral, anal, or genital penetration (with hands or genitals), and facilitating sexual contact with the child.

For the subsequent analyses of the types of abusive behaviors, their frequency, duration, and setting, we considered only cases involving a direct and identifiable victim (n = 327). Thus, in 87 (26.61%) cases, victims experienced one of the aforementioned sexually abusive behaviors, whereas in 239 (73.09%) cases, each child reported experiencing multiple forms of sexual abuse. There was no information regarding this in one case (0.31%). Additionally, beyond the sexually abusive behaviors, 34 cases (10.40%) involved simultaneous experiences of other maltreatment behaviors, such as physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., insulting), or psychological (e.g., threats) abuse.

Regarding the frequency of the abuse, in 221 cases (67.58%), children reported multiple events, whereas in 106 (32.42%) reported single events. In cases where children reported multiple events, the exact duration of the abuse could be calculated in 33 cases (14.93%), ranging from 2 to 1460 days (approximately 4 years; M = 66.48, SD = 249.03). In the remaining cases, the duration could not be determined in 115 cases (52.04%) because children were unable to provide an exact temporal reference for the abusive events, and in 73 cases (33.03%), only an approximate duration was known, ranging from 1 month to 11 years. Although the exact abuse duration could not be determined in most cases, victims' statements allowed approximate estimation. Overall, the data showed that longer durations (≥ 1 year, up to 11 years) were more frequent with intra-familial contexts (e.g., father, stepfather, uncle), while shorter durations were more frequent in cases involving strangers (predominantly online offenses) or more distant acquaintances.

Abusive events occurred across a range of settings, including online environments, the shared residence of the victim and perpetrator, the victim's home, the perpetrator's home, the home of relatives, motels, educational institutions, perpetrator's car, churches, forests, supermarkets, public roads, or parks. In 59 cases (18.04%), the abuse took place across multiple settings.

Child involvement in the criminal justice system

For the characterization of the child's involvement with the criminal justice system, all consulted files with identifiable and direct victims were included, regardless of the final decision, resulting in a total of 403 children.

Accordingly, a child was involved, on average, in 3.10 (SD = 1.31) formal procedures as mandated by the criminal justice system (e.g., police interrogation; forensic psychological assessment; SFU). Descriptive statistics regarding the number of criminal proceedings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Frequency of children by the number of different criminal proceedings

	N **(%)**
0	1 (0.25)
1	20 (4.96)
2	128 (31.76)
3	118 (29.28)
4	88 (21.84)
5	25 (6.20)
6	11 (2.73)
7	7 (1.74)
8	1 (0.25)
10	1 (0.25)
No information	3 (0.74)
Total	403 (100)

In cases where a psychological assessment was conducted, multiple sessions may have occurred (*Min* = 1, *Max* = 4; *M* = 1.76, *SD* = 0.76). Additionally, forensic medical examinations were conducted with 77 victims (19.11%). Among these, 27.27% (*n* = 21) were conducted within 72 hours, while 72.73% (*n* = 56) occurred after this timeframe.

In the files consulted, the mandatory SFU procedure was conducted in 331 cases (82.13%), representing one of the criminal proceedings in which the victim was involved. Conversely, it was absent in 72 cases (17.87%). This was typically observed when the child was unavailable at the time of the procedure, when no party formally requested it, or when the report was made after the child had reached adulthood, leading judges to determine that the person had sufficient capacity to provide testimony at trial, and that the early preservation of testimony was therefore not necessary.

In cases where this procedure was present, 321 (96.98%) were conducted in a single session, while six (1.81%) required two sessions. Concerning the time from filing to the date of the SFU, the range was from 1 to 1158 days (approximately 3 years), with a mean of 340.23 days (approximately 11 months; *SD* = 244.20 days, approximately 8 months).

Among children who testified in SFU, 38 (11.48%) still had to testify at trial. Of the children who did not attend the SFU procedure, the majority (*n* = 44, 61.11%) were required to testify at trial.

Predictors of abuse characteristics and legal outcomes

Table 5 presents the results of GEE models developed to examine predictors of abuse characteristics (Models 1 to 3) and legal outcomes (Model 4) while accounting for clustering within perpetrators. For analyses of Models 1 to 3, only cases with identifiable victims that resulted in convictions, and therefore included substantiated abusive events, were considered. For analyses of Model 4, all cases consulted with identifiable victims were used.

Perpetrator gender was excluded from the regression models due to the very small number of female perpetrators in the sample, which could compromise the stability and reliability of parameter estimates. Descriptive analyses indicated that the small number of female perpetrators were primarily involved in offenses related to pimping and child pornography.

Table 5

Summary of GEE models predicting abuse characteristics and legal outcomes

Predictor	Model 1: Intrafamilial abuse OR [95% CI]	Model 2: Contact abuse OR [95% CI]	Model 3: Multiple episodes OR [95% CI]	Model 4: Legal outcomes OR [95% CI]
Victim gender	2.51* [1.02, 6.17]	1.67 [0.75, 3.72]	0.98 [0.57, 1.69]	1.18 [0.63, 2.20]
Victim age	0.83*** [0.75, 0.93]	0.88* [0.79, 0.98]	1.10** [1.03, 1.18]	1.05 [0.96, 1.15]
Victim-perpetrator relationship				
Unknown		0.06*** [0.02, 0.15]	0.19*** [0.08, 0.47]	1.00 [0.40, 2.48]
Acquaintance		1.06 [0.47, 2.40]	0.18*** [0.09, 0.37]	1.13 [0.56, 2.30]
Type of abuse	0.14*** [0.06, 0.36]		0.99 [0.49, 2.00]	0.87 [0.42, 1.81]
Frequency	0.22*** [0.11, 0.45]	0.87 [0.41, 1.88]		1.10 [0.61, 1.96]
Other victimization	0.31* [0.10, 1.00]			0.20* [0.05, 0.79]
SFU				0.49* [0.26, 0.95]

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; OR = Odds Ratio. Reference categories of predictors: male victims, intrafamilial relationship, contact abuse, multiple episodes, presence of other forms of victimization, and presence of SFU.

*$p \leq .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

In Model 1, several factors significantly predicted intrafamilial abuse. Victim age was negatively associated with intrafamilial abuse (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 10.52$, $p < .001$), indicating that younger victims were more likely to be involved in intrafamilial cases (OR = 0.83, 95% CI [0.75, 0.93]).

Non-contact abuse was significantly less likely to occur in intrafamilial contexts (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 17.11$, $p < .001$; OR = 0.14, 95% CI [0.06, 0.36]). Similarly, single-episode cases were also less likely to be intrafamilial (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 16.78$, $p < .001$; OR = 0.22, 95% CI [0.11, 0.45]). Victim gender was also a significant predictor (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.00$, $p < .05$), with female victims more likely to be involved in intrafamilial abuse (OR = 2.51, 95% CI [1.02, 6.17]). Other forms of victimization showed a significant effect (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.83$, $p = .05$), indicating that cases not involving multiple forms of victimization were less likely to occur in intrafamilial contexts (OR = 0.31, 95% CI [0.10, 1.00]).

Model 2 examined the predictors of physical contact. The victim-perpetrator relationship emerged as a significant predictor of abuse type (Wald $\chi^2(2) = 42.01$, $p < .001$). Compared to intrafamilial cases,

abuse involving unknown perpetrators was significantly less likely to involve contact (OR = 0.06, 95% CI [0.02, 0.15]), whereas no significant differences were observed between known and intrafamilial perpetrators.

Additionally, victim age was also a significant predictor (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.48$, $p < .05$), with increasing age associated with a lower likelihood of contact abuse (OR = 0.88, 95% CI [0.79, 0.98]).

Regarding Model 3, the victim-perpetrator relationship was a strong predictor of abuse frequency (Wald $\chi^2(2) = 24.84$, $p < .001$). Compared to intrafamilial abuse, both unknown (OR = 0.19, 95% CI [0.08, 0.47]) and acquaintance perpetrators (OR = 0.18, 95% CI [0.09, 0.37]) were significantly less likely to be associated with multiple episodes of abuse.

Furthermore, victim age was also significantly associated with abuse frequency (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 7.62$, $p < .01$), with increasing age associated with a higher likelihood of multiple episodes (OR = 1.10, 95% CI [1.03, 1.18]).

The multinomial GEE (Model 4) indicated that legal outcomes were primarily associated with contextual and procedural variables. Specifically, the absence of other forms of victimization was significantly associated with a lower likelihood of more severe legal outcomes (i.e., progressing towards conviction; Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.28$, $p < .05$; OR = 0.20, 95% CI [0.05, 0.79]. Similarly, the absence of SFU was significantly associated with a reduced likelihood of more severe legal outcomes (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.46$, $p < .05$; OR = 0.49, 95% CI [0.26, 0.95]).

Discussion

This study examined the phenomenon of CSA in Portugal integrating descriptive and regression analyses, focusing on (i) victim, perpetrator, and crime characteristics; and (ii) children's involvement in the criminal justice system. While the findings largely align with patterns documented in the international literature, this study extends existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence on how these dynamics manifest within the Portuguese legal context.

Consistent with global prevalence data, most victims in this study were female, and most perpetrators were male (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Moody et al., 2018; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Additionally, most offenses were committed by individuals known to the victim (e.g., family members, acquaintances). The offenses predominantly involved physical contact, repeated incidents, and multiple forms of victimization experienced by the child. These patterns are consistent with those reported in international research (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Ventus et al., 2015).

The present findings further indicate that intrafamilial abuse was more likely to involve younger

victims, repeated episodes, contact forms of abuse, and co-occurring victimization (e.g., threats, insults, hitting), as well as longer duration (up to 11 years) compared to extrafamilial abuse. These patterns align with international evidence showing that intrafamilial CSA is associated with earlier onset, greater frequency and chronicity, and increased severity, likely facilitated by sustained access to the child and relationships characterized by proximity, power, and trust (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Ventus et al., 2017). The younger age of victims in these contexts may reflect both increased opportunities, given continuous proximity to the child, and developmental vulnerability, as younger children may be less able to recognize, interpret, or resist abusive behaviors (Ventus et al., 2017). Moreover, intrafamilial abuse often unfolds over extended periods, which may delay disclosure through multiple, coexisting mechanisms. On the one hand, the higher prevalence of threats or violence may inhibit disclosure due to fear and coercion. On the other hand, emotional closeness and dependency inherent to these relationships may lead children to hesitate to disclose to protect the offender, preserve the relationship, and maintain family stability (Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that CSA patterns are strongly associated with two central dimensions: the victim-perpetrator relationship and victim age, which jointly shape the form, frequency, and context of abuse.

Building on this pattern, the results further show that both the type and frequency of abuse varied as a function of the victim-perpetrator relationship and victim age. Contact abuse was more likely in intrafamilial and known-perpetrators contexts, particularly among younger children, and these contexts were also strongly associated with repeated episodes. In contrast, abuse involving unknown or acquaintance perpetrators tended to be more episodic. As previously discussed, this pattern may reflect the combined effects of relational proximity, sustained access to the child, and emotional dynamics that may delay disclosure (Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Ventus et al., 2017; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020).

In addition, abuse frequency was positively associated with age, with older children more likely to report multiple episodes. This association may reflect both cumulative exposure over time and disclosure processes, as children often delay reporting abusive experiences due to fear, shame, or ambivalence, and may only disclose after repeated victimization has occurred, resulting in the reporting of multiple incidents at the time of disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Lemaigre et al., 2017).

Alongside these patterns, age was also associated with changes in the nature and context of victimization. As children grow older, they were less likely to experience contact abuse and more likely to

be involved in online forms of victimization. This pattern may reflect developmental changes in autonomy, daily routines, and social environments, particularly the increased use of digital technologies and social media (Statista, 2025). Consistent with this interpretation, international evidence shows that adolescents report high levels of internet use and interaction with unknown individuals, which increases exposure to technology-facilitated sexual abuse (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Patel & Roesch, 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest a developmental shift in CSA risk contexts, from predominantly contact-based abuse within close relational environments in early childhood to more technology-mediated and extrafamilial forms of victimization in later developmental stages.

Victim gender also emerged as a significant predictor, with female victims being more likely to be involved in intrafamilial abuse, which is in turn associated with a higher likelihood of contact abuse. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that female victims are more often associated with contact and intrafamilial contexts, whereas male victims are more frequently linked to non-contact forms of abuse and less familiar or unknown perpetrators (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Junco et al., 2022). Two main explanations may account for these differences. First, exposure to pornographic material has been identified as a prevalent form of victimization among male samples (Ferragut et al., 2022; Flood, 2009). Second, stigma and sociocultural factors may influence both victimization patterns and disclosure, as concerns about masculinity and fear of negative labeling may shape how abuse occurs, potentially leading to more indirect, technology-mediated forms of abuse and is reported (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Moody et al., 2018).

Although the overall number of female perpetrators was very small, they were disproportionately represented in child pimping cases. Specifically, these cases involved mothers or grandmothers facilitating sexual encounters or enabling the production or sharing of pornographic material involving the child. These findings are consistent with scientific research. On the one hand, previous research has shown that female perpetrators often co-offend alongside male accomplices and rarely initiate the abuse independently (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). On the other hand, it suggests that the motivations behind sexual offenses committed by women may not have sexual purposes. Specifically, financial gain can be a driving factor, as reflected in our data. Moreover, some offenses perpetrated by women occur in the context of online adult relationships, where women experiencing multiple vulnerabilities are coerced into facilitating the sexual victimization of children by adult partners. This may occur to gratify their male partner or due to a perception that the virtual element is less harmful to the child (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; García-Montoliu et al., 2024).

Beyond abuse characteristics, the present findings provide important insights into how children

are involved in the criminal justice process and how procedural practices may shape both testimony quality and legal outcomes. The first criminal procedure may extend up to 13 years after the earliest (or single) proven abusive event, reflecting known barriers to disclosure, including fear, shame, relationship dynamics, and developmental factors (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020).

Throughout the justice process, children participated, on average, in three different procedural acts, a number that may reach up to 10. Nevertheless, approximately 33% of children recounted their abusive experiences four or more times. Since Portugal lacks a model similar to the Barnahus in Europe or the Children's Advocacy Centers in the United States – models that bring together multidisciplinary teams in a single, child-friendly setting to conduct coordinated interviews and assessments, reducing the need for repeated questioning - these repeated accounts occur across different settings, involving different professionals with diverse backgrounds and training in interviewing children. Therefore, this may have an impact on the quality and reliability of children's testimony, as well as on the child's well-being, because it becomes a highly demanding experience for the child. Moreover, research has shown that repeated questioning, lengthy procedures, and exposure to formal judicial environments have been associated with increased emotional distress and risk factors for secondary victimization (Elmi et al., 2018).

One of these procedures often included a forensic medical examination. Most of these examinations were conducted beyond the recommended 72-hour period, reducing the likelihood of detecting physical evidence (Magalhães et al., 2013; Magalhães et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2007). Moreover, even when children are not directly questioned about the alleged abuse, the examination itself remains an intrusive procedure that may increase the child's distress (O'Keeffe & McElvaney, 2021).

Additionally, the SFU procedure, a Portuguese protective measure for victims and an important form of testimonial evidence, was conducted in 82.13% of cases, while the remaining cases failed to comply with the mandatory requirements for these crimes. The reasons identified in this study for the absence of this procedure relate to contextual and procedural factors, as well as discretionary decision-making within the justice system. Consequently, in most of these cases, children were subsequently required to testify at trial, increasing the risk of secondary victimization and the potential contamination of memory through internal or external influences, which may compromise the quality and reliability of the testimony (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2018).

The findings also provide empirical support for the role of this proceeding in shaping legal outcomes. Cases in which SFU was not conducted were less likely to result in more severe legal

outcomes, including conviction, suggesting that early, formally recorded testimony may contribute to strengthening the evidentiary basis of CSA cases, as described by the literature (Lamb et al., 2018; Powell & Earhart, 2018; Steele, 2012). However, in the present sample, SFUs were conducted, on average, nearly 1 year after the case was filed. Thus, beyond the time it takes for the child to disclose the abusive experiences, there is an additional delay within the justice system before this mandatory testimony-collecting procedure is carried out. On the one hand, this delay may heighten the risk of memory decay, resulting in less detailed reports from children. On the other hand, it may increase the risk of the child not disclosing when formally interviewed, as time can increase feelings of fear, shame, and stigma (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2018). Moreover, when children provide few or no details during the interview, judges may be compelled to use closed or suggestive questions to obtain additional information, a practice considered inappropriate and that poses risks to the reliability of the testimony (Fernandes et al., 2024).

Although the SFU was established by the Portuguese criminal justice system to preserve evidentiary elements early in the investigative process and to reduce the number of times children are required to repeatedly recount abusive events in formal settings, it did not consistently achieve this goal. Overall, 11.48% of children who testified in SFU still had to testify at trial. This occurred for several reasons, including technical issues such as unreadable recordings, the emergence of new evidence during the investigation, and unanswered questions deemed essential by the court, as observed through the review of court case files and existing literature on the topic (Fernandes et al., 2026). These instances expose children to additional and often avoidable procedures, with potential implications for the quality and reliability of the evidence, as well as for the child's well-being (Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Elmi et al., 2018; Sumalla & Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018).

This study provides empirical support for the importance of the victim's testimony in the analyzed cases, since it played a central role in the criminal investigation and was closely associated with case outcomes. Overall, these findings highlight that, although the Portuguese criminal justice system incorporates child-sensitive legal frameworks, their implementation is not always consistently achieved in practice. Firstly, implementing such practices often depends on the specific court and the professionals involved in the case. Secondly, some moments of testimony collection are treated as merely procedural, rather than carefully tailored to each case's individual needs and context. Thirdly, children are frequently required to recount their experiences multiple times throughout the criminal justice process, often in succession, which can lead to fatigue and emotional distress. This has consequences for the child, as it may increase the risk of secondary victimization, and for the criminal process itself, as it may reduce the

child's ability to provide effective testimony. The issue is not whether the child should testify or not, but rather how they can be supported in ways that minimize the negative consequences of doing so. It is therefore imperative that judicial actors carefully assess the necessity of each procedural step and limit the number of times the child is required to testify to only what is strictly necessary and legally and scientifically appropriate.

In addition to the child's involvement in the formal investigation by the criminal justice system, it was observed that children may also be subject to parallel processes. These include informal investigative processes conducted outside the formal frameworks (e.g., by parents, teachers, psychologists, or educational institutions), as well as interventions within the child protection system (e.g., Family and Juvenile courts or child protection services). As mentioned above, both informal and protective systems can play a crucial role in facilitating disclosure of abuse, interrupting victimization, and promoting the child's engagement with formal investigation (Azzopardi et al., 2019; McTavish et al., 2019; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021). However, these processes are often initiated prior to or alongside criminal proceedings and may involve multiple interviews or inquiries conducted by different actors and institutions. In the present study, it was observed that such parallel processes may expose children to repeated recounting of abusive experiences across different contexts, increasing the risk of revictimization. This highlights the need for greater coordination between informal, protective, and criminal justice systems. Therefore, it is essential to critically reflect on the necessity, timing, and sequencing of these interventions, ensuring that they are conducted within a child-centered and trauma-informed framework.

Despite the promising findings of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the information recorded in the case files was manually entered by court staff, making it susceptible to potential errors. Second, some data were missing or incomplete, which limits the interpretation of findings. Finally, the sample was drawn from five courts in distinct regions, which may not fully represent the national context and may limit the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the findings underscore that CSA is a widespread global problem, affecting children across different countries and cultures. Despite the global nature of the phenomenon, research on CSA in Portugal is relatively recent, and many of its dimensions remain to be examined.

Implications for practice, policy, and research

This study provides valuable implications for practice, policy, and research by linking empirical findings on CSA in Portugal with areas requiring improvement in prevention and criminal justice responses.

First, prevention efforts should be more targeted and evidence-informed. The findings showed that abuse patterns varied systematically with age, with younger children more likely to experience intrafamilial, contact, and repeated abuse, whereas older children were more frequently involved in extrafamilial and non-contact forms of victimization, including online contexts. These results highlight the urgent need for differentiated prevention strategies: early childhood interventions should focus on family-based risk contexts and caregiver awareness, while prevention efforts targeting adolescents should prioritize digital literacy, online safety, and interactions with unknown individuals. Additionally, given gender differences in abuse patterns, prevention programs should address stigma and barriers to disclosure among male victims.

Second, response policies should prioritize the timeliness of investigative procedures. The study identified substantial delays, both between the occurrence of abuse and its reporting, and within the justice system itself, particularly in the implementation of SFU, which occurred on average approximately one year after case initiation. These delays may increase the risk of memory decay and hinder disclosure. Therefore, policies aimed at accelerating early evidence collection, especially the timely implementation of SFU, are essential to improve both the quality of testimony and legal outcomes.

Third, the findings highlight the need to strengthen trauma-informed practices within the justice system. Children in this study were frequently required to recount their experiences multiple times, across different contexts and conditions, and to different professionals, and in some cases, SFU procedures were not implemented or did not prevent subsequent testimony at trial. These patterns increase emotional distress and may compromise the quality of testimony. Standardizing trauma-informed practices such as limiting repeated interviews, ensuring child-friendly environments, and promoting coordinated multidisciplinary responses should be a priority across the justice system. In this regard, multidisciplinary models such as Barnahus and Child Advocacy Centers provide relevant examples, as they reduce repeated questioning by ensuring coordinated, child-friendly interviews.

Fourth, these findings highlight the need for potential legal and procedural reforms. In particular, the variability in the implementation of SFU procedures and the delays observed suggest the need to reinforce compliance with existing legal provisions, clarify the conditions under which additional testimony is required, and ensure more consistent application of child-protective measures.

Fifth, the findings highlight the need to regulate and better integrate informal investigative processes. Clearer guidelines defining the roles and limits of informal actors, as well as improved coordination with the formal investigative process, may help reduce unnecessary duplication of procedures and better protect children from repeated exposure to potentially distressing situations.

Finally, future research should expand and deepen the current findings. Further studies are needed to examine regional variations within Portugal, explore longitudinal outcomes for child victims involved in the justice system, and assess the effectiveness of specific procedural reforms and child-centered models.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive characterization of CSA cases in Portugal, integrating abuse characteristics with children's trajectories within the criminal justice system. Moving beyond descriptive patterns, the findings highlight the central role of victim age and the victim-perpetrator relationship in structuring abuse dynamics, while also demonstrating the importance of procedural factors, particularly the timing and implementation of SFU, in shaping legal outcomes.

Additionally, the findings show that, despite the existence of child-sensitive legal frameworks, their implementation remains uneven, with delays and repeated testimonies continuing to pose risks for both evidentiary quality and secondary victimization. These findings underscore that procedural practices are not neutral, but actively influence both children's experiences within the justice system and case trajectories.

Although grounded in the Portuguese context, the challenges identified reflect broader issues observed across jurisdictions, particularly the tension between evidentiary demands and the need to protect child victims. Addressing these challenges requires not only strengthening existing measures but ensuring their timely, consistent, and coordinated application within a trauma-informed framework.

Overall, this study contributes to the field by linking abuse dynamics, procedural practices, and legal outcomes, offering empirical evidence to inform more effective and child-sensitive justice responses.

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Capítulo 3 | Declarações para Memória Futura

Estudo 4 | Bridging Guidelines and Practice: Questioning Styles in Judicial Interviews With Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal

O presente artigo encontra-se em revisão na revista *Child, Abuse & Neglect* (*SJR* 2025: Q1, 1,421; *JCR* 2024: Q1, FI = 3,4).

Ademais, os resultados deste estudo empírico foram apresentados em formato de apresentação oral na 2ª Conferência de Trauma e Resiliência (Maia, Portugal).

Referência:

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Abstract

Background: The Statements for Future Use (SFU) proceeding is a judicial pre-trial testimony procedure and a central evidentiary mechanism in child sexual abuse (CSA) cases in Portugal. This procedure aims to prevent children from testifying at trial and to collect their accounts closer in time to the alleged events. Despite scientific guidance on evidence-based interviewing, little is known about current practices in Portugal.

Objective: This study examined questioning styles and children's responses in SFU interviews to assess alignment with best practice recommendations.

Participants and Setting: The sample comprised 128 SFU interviews conducted between 2014 and 2024 with CSA victims aged 4 to 19 years.

Methods: Interviews were coded for interviewer utterance types and children's responses. Descriptive statistics and linear mixed-effects models were conducted.

Results: Judges played a leading role, asking most questions. Option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than all other utterance types. Focused-recognition prompts were approximately twice as frequent as open or recall-based prompts. Invitations accounted for only 6% of utterances. As a result of the high frequency of focused-recognition prompts, more than half of the children's details were elicited through them. Although rarely used, invitations were the most productive utterance type, eliciting the greatest number of details per utterance.

Conclusions: Despite international guidelines supporting child-centered, open-ended interviewing, Portuguese justice interviews rely heavily on recognition-based questioning. Children's responses may therefore be more vulnerable to error and contamination, potentially compromising testimonial reliability. Findings highlight the need to strengthen adherence to evidence-based interviewing protocols and institutional commitment to child-sensitive justice practices.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; criminal justice system; forensic interviews; interviewer utterances; testimony

Bridging Guidelines and Practice: Questioning Styles in Judicial Interviews with Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal

Over the past decades, the scientific community has increasingly focused on identifying practices that improve the effectiveness of forensic interviews with victims of child sexual abuse (CSA)[6] aiming to maximize both the amount and reliability of the information obtained while minimizing the risk of secondary victimization. In this context, research using a range of methodological approaches has consistently identified specific interviewing strategies that facilitate children's reporting and improve the quality of the information obtained.

A large body of research has shown that prompts encouraging free-recall narratives, requiring children to rely on recall memory processes are the questioning approach most likely to achieve these aims. Specifically, invitations (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened") are associated with a greater amount of information provided by the child, a higher proportion of forensically relevant details, and fewer contradictions. Focused-recall prompts, such as directive utterances (e.g., "What color was his car?" when a "car" was mentioned), are used to explore additional details previously disclosed by the child and therefore tend to elicit less extensive responses (Brown et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In contrast, recognition-focused prompts rely on recognition memory processes, requiring children to select, confirm, or reject information introduced by interviewers. As a result, the interaction becomes interviewer-led rather than child-led. For example, option-posing utterances tend to elicit shorter responses and are more susceptible to error and contamination. For this reason, international best practice guidelines recommend that such utterances be used sparingly and primarily toward the end of the interview, when the aim is to clarify or obtain crucial details that have not yet emerged from the child's narrative. Suggestive prompts go further by introducing information not previously disclosed by the child and imply an expected response. Statements elicited through such prompts are among the least reliable and most prone to contradiction, and their use is therefore strongly discouraged throughout the interview (Brown et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In addition, research has also shown that supportive interviewer behavior, aimed at enhancing children's emotional comfort and cooperation, is associated with increased disclosure among reluctant children and may help reduce the potential harm associated with recounting abusive experiences

[6] In this article, the term "child sexual abuse" follows the definitions established by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing the involvement of children and adolescents under the age of 18 in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to provide informed consent, or for which they are not developmentally prepared and therefore cannot consent.

(Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In light of these considerations, inadequately conducted interviews may compromise the quality and reliability of the information obtained from child victims. Moreover, such limitations may also affect credibility assessments, case outcomes, and increase the risk of secondary victimization (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Johnson & Shelley, 2014; Lamb et al., 2018; Pipe et al., 2013; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). In response to these concerns, a substantial body of research has led to the development of standardized forensic interview protocols designed to guide interviews with CSA victims (Fernandes et al., 2024).

Although several forensic interview protocols have been developed, research consistently shows that forensic interviews conducted with standardized protocols are of higher quality than those conducted without guidance. Specifically, protocol-based interviews are associated with greater adherence to recommended practices throughout the interview process, including explaining the interview's purpose, establishing ground rules, building rapport, and closing the interview in a neutral and supportive manner. They are also characterized by greater reliance on open-ended prompts, reduced use of closed or suggestive utterances, and the elicitation of more extensive information in response to open-ended prompts, thereby enhancing the reliability of the information collected. Moreover, protocol-guided interviews tend to yield a higher proportion of central, forensically relevant details (e.g., sexually abusive behaviors) relative to peripheral information that is not central to the event (e.g., the victim's clothing). For these reasons, the use of evidence-based interview protocols is widely recommended when conducting investigative interviews with CSA victims (Fernandes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024).

In recent years, scientific interest in children's participation in the Portuguese criminal justice system and in forensic interviewing practices in CSA cases has increased. Recent research indicates that children participate, on average, in three different procedural acts, a number that in some cases may reach up to 10. These interviews and assessments take place in different settings and are conducted by professionals with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of training in interviewing children (e.g., police interview, forensic psychological assessment; Fernandes et al., 2026).

Under Portuguese law, only statements provided before a judge are admissible as evidence in court. Accordingly, since 2007, children's testimony in these cases has been mandatorily recorded during the investigation phase, through a pre-trial proceeding known as *Declarações para Memória Futura* (Statements for Future Use [SFU]). This proceeding serves two main purposes: preventing the child from having to testify at trial and ensuring that the child's account is collected as early as possible in the investigative process, thereby minimizing the interval between the alleged abusive incident (or its

disclosure) and the interview.

In SFU proceedings in Portugal, several professionals are required to be present during the interview, including the judge, the prosecutor, the defense, and, if requested, the victim's attorneys, a specially qualified professional, and a court clerk. The judge is formally responsible for interviewing the child, while prosecutors and attorneys may propose questions to be asked through the judge. In practice, however, judges often allow prosecutors and attorneys to address questions directly to the child.

In addition, the presence of a specially qualified professional to assist the child during the hearing is mandatory. Nevertheless, the law does not specify this professional's precise role, functions, or level of involvement. As a result, the extent of their participation depends largely on the presiding judge's discretion and may range from explaining the procedure to the child and managing emotional distress during the hearing to conducting the interview directly with the child (Portuguese Penal Code, art. 271).

Prior Portuguese research examined how SFU interviews were conducted in practice across several criminal courts. The findings indicated that interviewers did not follow any standardized protocol or specific guidelines when interviewing CSA victims. Most questions were option-posing, and only 3% were open-ended prompts. Consequently, the majority of the details reported by children were elicited through recognition-based prompts, which are associated with greater risks of contamination, reduced informativeness, and lower reliability (Peixoto et al., 2017). These findings underscore important limitations in interviewing practices and the urgent need to address these problems.

In response to these concerns, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol was translated and adapted to the Portuguese context. Subsequent studies examining its implementation in real forensic cases found that interviews conducted under this framework relied largely on open-ended prompts (48%), consistent with the international literature on best practices in child forensic interviewing (Peixoto et al., 2016).

Furthermore, several guidelines have been incorporated into Portuguese legislation following the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2007) and subsequent European Union directives (e.g., Directive 2012/29/EU, 2012). These provisions emphasize obtaining children's testimony as early as possible in developmentally appropriate settings, ensuring that interviews are conducted by specifically trained professionals, limiting the number of interviews to those strictly necessary for criminal proceedings, and audiovisual recording of the interviews.

In recent years, the European Union's policies, legislative reforms, and best practice guidelines have sought to improve the investigation of CSA. At the same time, widespread scientific knowledge has

accumulated on evidence-based approaches to interviewing child victims. An important question, therefore, remains: to what extent have these developments translated into changes in practice in Portugal? Although these reforms and guidelines emphasize the importance of evidence-based interviewing practices, little is known about how these recommendations are reflected in real-world interviewing practices.

The present study addresses this gap by examining questioning practices in SFU interviews, a key proceeding within the Portuguese criminal justice system for investigating CSA cases. By analyzing real-world interviews, this study aims to characterize the types of questions used by interviewers and the nature of children's responses during these proceedings. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) what types of questions are most frequently used in SFU interviews in CSA cases; (2) to what extent do interviewers rely on recall-based prompts (e.g., invitations and directive questions) compared to recognition-based or suggestive prompts; and (3) how do different utterance types relate to the amount and type of information provided by children.

Method

Sample

A total of 128 interviews conducted in SFU proceedings between 2014 and 2024 were analyzed. These interviews took place in 25 courts across Portugal: 82 (64.06%) in the North, 36 (28.13%) in the South, 9 (7.03%) in the Centre and Lisbon area, and one (0.78%) on a Portuguese island.

The interviews involved CSA victims aged 4 to 19 years (M = 11.88, SD = 3.13, Mdn = 12). Most alleged victims were girls (n = 105, 82.03%). Six children (4.69%) had an intellectual or cognitive disability. Multiple perpetrators were involved in seven cases (5.47%). In approximately 87 cases (62.14%), the alleged perpetrators were known to the child. Of these, 34 (24.29%) were acquaintances (e.g., a neighbor, a family friend) and 53 (38.86%) were family members (e.g., biological parents, the stepfather, grandparents). The abusive behaviors reported by the children included explicitly sexual conversations or comments, non-genital body kissing, sexual exposure (e.g., pornographic videos/images, exhibitionism, voyeurism), fondling over or under the clothes, coerced touching or masturbation, oral, anal, or genital penetration (with hands or genitals), and facilitating sexual contact with the child. In most cases (n = 109 cases, 85.16%), victims experienced multiple forms of these sexually abusive behaviors. In 16 cases (12.50%), sexually abusive behaviors co-occurred with other forms of maltreatment, such as physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., insulting), or psychological abuse (e.g., threats). Regarding frequency, 57 children (44.53%) reported single abusive events, and 71

(55.47%) reported repeated events.

The delay between the earliest (or single) abusive event and the first criminal proceeding could be precisely calculated in 62 cases (48.44%). The mean delay was approximately 6 months (*M* = 192.61 days, *SD* = 423.44 days). In the remaining cases, the timing could only be estimated (e.g., when it was only known that the incident occurred sometime in 2016). It was known either that only a few days had passed (*n* = 3, 2.34%) or that several months had elapsed (*n* = 30, 25.78%), ranging from 1 to 138 months (approximately 11.5 years).

The delay between case filing and the SFU interview ranged from 0 to 1230 days (more than 3 years; *M* = 412.40, *SD* = 350.38). Interview duration ranged from approximately 5 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes. Most of the interviews (*n* = 120, 93.75%) took place in courthouse rooms, whereas a small number (*n* = 8, 6.25%) were conducted in a specialized room outside the courthouse equipped with a one-way mirror, with the child and the specially qualified professional on one side and the remaining professionals (judge, prosecutor, attorney, court clerk) on the other. Similarly, most interviews were audio-recorded (*n* = 121, 94.53%), while only seven interviews (5.47%) were video-recorded. Thirteen children (10.16%) who participated in an SFU interview were later required to testify at trial.

Among the cases of perpetrators that proceeded to trial (*n* = 135; 96.43%), 109 (80.74%) were convicted and 26 (19.26%) acquitted. Among convictions, the most common outcome was a suspended prison sentence (*n* = 67, 61.47%), followed by effective imprisonment (*n* = 37, 33.94%), security measures involving institutionalization (*n* = 3, 2.75%), and community service (*n* = 2, 1.83%). Ancillary penalties were imposed in 12 cases (11.01%), including prohibitions on engaging in professions involving contact with children or suspending parental responsibilities.

Procedure

This study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho and authorization from the High Council for the Judiciary in Portugal. Subsequently, on-site reviews of CSA case files were conducted in several Portuguese courts. During the file review process, strict ethical and confidentiality procedures were followed. Only information relevant to the aims of the study was collected. Audio or audiovisual recordings and written transcripts of the interviews were formally extracted from the case files.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio or audiovisual recordings. When transcripts were already available in the case files, they were systematically reviewed by the first author to ensure completeness and accuracy. The coding process was then carried out.

Data coding

The present study examined the types of utterances used by interviewers and the quantity and quality of information provided by children regarding the alleged sexually abusive incident. Accordingly, only the substantive phase of the interviews was coded and analyzed. This phase included all utterances referring to the investigated incident, its immediate context, and the disclosure of the event.

Interviews were coded using a coding scheme developed by Lamb and colleagues (Lamb et al., 1996; Lamb et al., 2018), which has been widely used in research on child forensic interviewing. The coding manual was translated into Portuguese for the purposes of the present study.

Interviewer utterances

Interviewer's utterances were coded into the following categories: invitations, directives, option-posing, suggestive, summaries, and facilitators.

Invitations were defined as questions or statements that prompt free-recall responses (e.g., "Tell me everything you can remember"). Directives were recall-based prompts that refocused on allegation-related details previously mentioned by the child, often using "wh" questions (e.g., "When did this happen?"). Option-posing questions were focused-recognition prompts that may introduce undisclosed details, without implying that a specific response is expected. These included yes/no questions or forced-choice questions (e.g., "Did anyone see what happened?"). Suggestive utterances were defined as questions or statements that introduce undisclosed details, imply an expected response, misquote the child, or repeat the same option-posing question for the third time (e.g., "He touched you, didn't he?"). Summaries were statements that repeated what the child had previously said without requesting additional information (e.g., "You said he touched you" [After the child said "he touched me"]).

In the original coding scheme, facilitators (e.g., "Uh-huh", "Yes", "Ok") were not considered independent utterances, and any details elicited were attributed to the preceding information-seeking prompt (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb et al., 2009). However, previous research has shown that facilitators may vary in their functions depending on placement and context and sometimes increase children's narrative productivity (Hershkowitz, 1999, 2002; Yi et al., 2016). Accordingly, facilitators were divided into two categories based on their functional role. Facilitators accompanying another utterance type (e.g., "Uh-huh. Tell me more about that"), which could interrupt the child's narrative or serve to validate the child's account without independently eliciting new information, were still counted; however, they were not coded as independent utterances, and any details provided were attributed to the associated utterance type. In contrast, facilitators functioning as standalone prompts that encouraged additional elaboration were coded as independent utterances (e.g., when a child pauses during their narrative and

looks toward the interviewer as if awaiting further guidance or encouragement; "The room had the desk here, there was a wardrobe here, and the bed was on this side like this. [Uh-huh]. And then he pulled me away from the desk and pushed me onto the bed"). This refinement was introduced to enhance mutual exclusivity across categories and more accurately capture facilitators' contributions to children's narrative productivity.

Children's responses

Children's responses were classified into the following categories: responsive, unresponsive, omissions, resistance, and denials.

Responsive answers included verbal or behavioral responses related to the utterance posed, including responses that did not contain informative details or whose meaning was unclear. Unresponsive answers referred to responses unrelated to the interviewer's utterance but still provided incident-related information. Omissions included responses such as "I don't remember" or "I don't know", as well as the absence of a response. Resistance referred to explicit refusals to answer (e.g., "I do not want to talk"), and denials referred to statements rejecting the occurrence of the alleged abuse (e.g., "nothing happened" when the child had previously indicated otherwise). Because omissions, resistance, and denials occurred infrequently and distinguishing among them was not central to the aims of the study, these responses were combined into a single category labelled reluctance, consistent with previous studies (Ahern et al., 2014).

Subsequently, the number of words and the number of central and peripheral details provided by the child were counted. Details were defined as discrete units of information related to the investigated incident, identifying or describing people, objects, actions, locations, emotions, thoughts, and sensory experiences. Details were counted only when they were reported for the first time. Details were classified as central (information crucial for understanding the abuse incident, such as sexual acts) or peripheral (contextual information not central to the incident, such as the victim's clothing).

Inter-rater reliability

Two independent coders (DF and JPG) were trained by a researcher with expertise in the coding scheme used (TSA). Prior to coding the study transcripts, both coders were trained using an independent set of transcripts until they reached at least 90% agreement in identifying interviewer utterances and children's details. Subsequently, the two coders independently coded 30% of the transcripts (n = 38) randomly selected from the database. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated to assess agreement in the classification of interviewer utterance types, as well as in the total number of details and

the number of central and peripheral details reported by the children. High agreement was obtained across all measures, with ICC values ranging from 0.960 to 1.000.

Results

Interviewer utterances

Across all interviews, 12611 interviewer utterances were produced during the substantive phase, corresponding to an average of 98.52 utterances per interview (*SD* = 72.04). Interviews involved direct questioning by judges, prosecutors, attorneys, and specially qualified professionals. Of the total number of utterances, 78.59% were produced by judges, 12.58% by prosecutors, 7.50% by the specially qualified professional present, and 1.32% by attorneys. Table 1 presents the distribution of utterance types by each interviewer.

Before conducting the inferential analyses, the frequency of each utterance type was transformed into proportions by dividing the number of utterances of each type by the total number of utterances within each interview. This procedure controlled for variation in interview length and overall questioning frequency across cases. A linear mixed-effects model was used to examine differences in the proportion of utterance types. Utterance type was treated as a within-interview factor, and the interview was included as a random effect to account for the non-independence of observations within interviews and variation in the number of utterances across interviews.

Table 1

Percentage of different utterance types by each interviewer

	N	Option-posing	Directive	Suggestive	Summaries	Invitations	Facilitators
Judge	9911	46.48%	15.34%	17.67%	10.20%	5.52%	4.79%
Prosecutor	1587	45.12%	13.55%	20.10%	14.05%	4.41%	2.77%
Specially qualified professional	946	39.43%	19.13%	3.28%	13.53%	12.47%	12.16%
Attorney	167	46.71%	9.58%	27.54%	13.77%	0%	2.40%

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of utterance type, $F(5, 127.00) = 279.21$, $p < .001$. Table 2 presents the proportion of each utterance type. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction showed that option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than all the other utterance types (all *ps* < .001). No significant differences were observed between directives and suggestive utterances; both were significantly more frequent than invitations, facilitators, and summaries (all *ps* < .001). Summaries were significantly more frequent than invitations ($p < .01$) and facilitators ($p < .001$), whereas no significant differences were found between invitations and facilitators. Overall,

focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were approximately twice as common as utterance types more closely aligned with best practice recommendations (i.e., invitations, directives, summaries, and facilitators).

Table 2

Mean proportions of each utterance type

	M (SD)
Option-posing	.47[a] (.11)
Directive	.16[b] (.08)
Suggestive	.16[b] (.11)
Summaries	.10[c] (.08)
Invitations	.06[d] (.05)
Facilitators	.05[d] (.06)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

To examine differences in the proportion of utterance types and potential changes over time, a generalized linear mixed model was conducted. Utterance type and interview year were included as fixed effects, with interview included as a random effect to account for the non-independence of observations within interviews. The interview year was entered as a continuous predictor representing the period from 2014 to 2024. Results revealed a significant effect of utterance types, $Z(5,761) = 340.88$, $p < .001$, indicating that the proportion of utterance types differed significantly. In contrast, interview year was not significantly associated with the distribution of utterance types, $Z(1,761) = 0.02$, $p = .90$, suggesting that questioning practices remained largely unchanged between 2014 and 2024. The distribution of utterance types continued to be dominated by focused-recognition prompts, whereas open-ended prompts remained infrequent.

Children's responses

Overall, 91.90% of children's responses were coded as responsive, 7.95% as reluctant, and 0.15% as unresponsive. Children produced a mean of 778.29 (SD = 922.65) words per interview. Across all interviews, children provided a total of 35193 details (M = 274.95, SD = 346.38). Of these, 60.72% were classified as central details (M = 166.95, SD = 222.07), whereas 39.28% were peripheral details (M = 107.99, SD = 136.69). The distribution of details elicited by each utterance is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Percentage of details by each utterance type

	Total details	Central details	Peripheral details
Option-posing	38.71%	39.04%	38.19%
Directive	20.22%	21.46%	18.32%
Invitations	16.93%	15.86%	18.57%
Suggestive	9.72%	9.98%	9.30%
Facilitators	9.38%	8.78%	10.30%
Summaries	3.78%	3.83%	3.70%
Non-substantive utterances[a]	1.27%	1.04%	1.62%
Total	35193	21370	13823

Note. [a] Children's responses to interviewer utterances that were not focused on the investigated incident, but in which the child nevertheless provided incident-related details.

Prior to inferential analyses, the number of details elicited by each utterance type was converted into proportions relative to the total number of details provided within each interview. This transformation was applied to control differences in overall productivity across children. Linear mixed-effects models were then used to examine differences between utterance types in the proportion of total, central, and peripheral details elicited from children, while accounting for the non-independence of observations within interviews and variation in the number of utterances across interviews.

Analyses examining the proportion of total details revealed a significant effect of utterance type, $F(5,118.94) = 323.57$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more details than the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). They were followed by directive utterances, which elicited significantly more details than invitations ($p < .01$) and the other utterance types (all $ps < .01$). No significant differences were observed between details elicited by invitations and suggestive utterances. Facilitators and summaries elicited significantly fewer details than suggestive utterances ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively). Both categories also yielded significantly fewer details than all remaining utterance types (all $ps < .001$).

Table 4

Mean proportion of total details elicited by different utterance types

	M (SD)
Option-posing	.41[a] (.16)
Directive	.22[b] (.13)
Invitations	.16[c] (.14)
Suggestive	.13[c] (.13)
Facilitators	.09[d] (.11)
Summaries	.03[e] (.04)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

Analyses examining the proportion of central details revealed a significant main effect of utterance type, $F(5,122.76) = 214.57$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5), following a pattern similar to that observed for total details. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more central details than the other utterance types (all *ps* < .001). Directive utterances elicited significantly more central details than the other utterance types (all *ps* < .001). No significant differences were observed between central details elicited by invitations and suggestive utterances. Facilitators and summaries elicited significantly fewer details than suggestive utterances ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively). Both categories yielded significantly fewer central details than all other utterance types (all *ps* < .001).

Analyses examining the proportion of peripheral details revealed a significant main effect of utterance types, $F(5,125.94) = 178.01$, $p < .001$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more peripheral details than the other utterance types (all *ps* < .001). Directive utterances elicited significantly more peripheral details than suggestive utterances ($p < .01$), facilitators and summaries ($p < .001$), but did not differ significantly from invitations. Invitations elicited significantly more peripheral details than facilitators ($p = .01$) and summaries ($p < .001$).

Given that utterance types were not equally distributed across interviews, the proportion of details associated with each utterance type may primarily reflect differences in usage frequency. Accordingly, the rate of details elicited per utterance was analyzed to examine the productivity of each utterance type independent of its frequency of use. This distinction is important because, although option-posing utterances elicited the largest proportion of total details (see Table 3-5), this result likely reflects their high frequency of use rather than their productivity.

Table 5

Mean proportion of central and peripheral details elicited by each utterance type

	Central details	Peripheral details
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Option-posing	.41[a] (.17)	.41[a] (.23)
Directive	.23[b] (.14)	.21[b] (.18)
Invitations	.15[c] (.14)	.16[bc] (.18)
Suggestive	.13[c] (.13)	.12[cd] (.17)
Facilitators	.09[d] (.13)	.10[d] (.13)
Summaries	.03[d] (.06)	.03[e] (.05)

Note. Proportions are calculated separately for central and peripheral details relative to the total number of central and peripheral details reported in each interview; therefore, values sum approximately to 1 within each column. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

To examine differences in productivity across utterance types, a linear mixed model was estimated with the number of details elicited per utterance as the dependent variable. Utterance type was included as a fixed effect and interview as a random effect to account for the non-independence of utterances within interviews and the unequal distribution of utterance types across interviews. The analysis revealed a significant effect of utterance type on the number of details elicited per utterance, $F(5, 120.59) = 37.16$, $p < .001$, indicating that the effectiveness of eliciting details differed across utterance types (see Table 6). Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction showed that invitations elicited significantly more details per utterance than directives, option-posing, suggestive, and summaries (all *ps* ≤ .05), but did not differ significantly from facilitators. Facilitators elicited significantly more details than option-posing and summary utterances (both *ps* < .01), but did not differ significantly from directives and suggestive utterances. Directives elicited significantly more details than option-posing, suggestive, and summaries (all *ps* ≤ .05). Option-posing and suggestive utterances did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .930$), but both elicited significantly more details than summaries (*ps* ≤ .05). Summaries elicited significantly fewer details than all other utterance types (all *ps* ≤ .05).

Table 6

Mean number of details elicited per utterance type

	M (SD)
Invitations	10.71[a] (26.09)
Facilitators	4.67[ab] (5.69)
Directives	3.85[b] (2.80)
Option-posing	2.38[c] (2.04)
Suggestive	2.37[bc] (5.46)
Summaries	0.83[d] (1.48)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

Discussion

The present study examined forensic interviews conducted in the Portuguese criminal justice system. Under Portuguese law, statements must, as a rule, be produced or reproduced at trial in order to be admissible as evidence. In CSA cases, this requirement has led to the institutionalization of pre-trial proceedings such as SFU, which allow testimony to be formally collected in advance and later used in court. As a result, SFU interviews play a central role in criminal investigations and may substantially influence case outcomes. Despite their central evidentiary role, empirical research on how these interviews are conducted in practice in Portugal remains scarce. The present findings, therefore, provide important insights into current forensic interviewing practices and their alignment with evidence-based recommendations.

The findings indicate that, in most cases, disclosure of CSA did not occur immediately after the abusive incident, with delays ranging from a few days to approximately 11 years. In cases where the interval could be determined precisely (48.44%), the average delay between the first abusive incident and disclosure was approximately 6 months. Previous research suggests that disclosure timing may be influenced by several factors, including the relationship between the child and the perpetrator, abuse severity, threats, and the child's age at the onset of abuse (Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Such delays are particularly relevant in the context of investigative interviewing, as longer intervals between the abusive event and the interview may affect children's ability to retrieve and organize their memories of the events.

Additionally, after CSA was reported, the time to SFU interview ranged from 0 to approximately 3 years, with an average delay of about 1 year. Thus, in addition to the delay between the abusive incident and disclosure, there is often a further prolonged interval before the key procedural interview takes place,

largely imposed by the justice system. Human memory is a dynamic set of processes that are susceptible to both internal and external influences, and long delays may amplify these effects, particularly in children. These influences include memory deterioration, as recollections tend to lose clarity over time, as well as interference from new experiences or information acquired after the event. Delays may also increase children's susceptibility to external suggestions and heighten their awareness of the potential consequences of disclosure for themselves, their family, or the perpetrator, which may further inhibit reporting (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2018). Accordingly, SFU interviews should be conducted as promptly as possible to minimize delays that may compromise the accuracy and completeness of children's recall of the events.

Most interviews were conducted inside the courthouse, with at least five adults present in the room where the child was interviewed (judge, prosecutor, attorney, a specially qualified professional, and a court clerk). This raises two distinct concerns: the environment in which the testimony is collected and the number of adults present at the interview. With respect to the environment, research has shown that testimony in court settings, compared to testimony obtained in child-friendly environments, tends to contain less correct information about the target event, more errors, and higher levels of perceived stress (Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). The potential harmful effects of formal court settings on children's memory and testimony have been recognized for several decades. Research has also shown that the number of adults present during the interview can affect both the quantity and quality of information provided by children, even when those adults do not directly question the child. Studies indicate that children interviewed by a single interviewer provide longer and more accurate accounts than children interviewed in the presence of additional adults (Ferra et al., 2022; Santtila et al., 2004). In light of these findings, current guidelines recommend that only the child and the interviewer should be present in the interview room, while other professionals monitor the interview remotely (Korkman et al., 2024). However, this practice occurred in only 6% of the interviews analyzed in the present study. This discrepancy highlights the gap between evidence-based recommendations and current investigative practices within the Portuguese judicial context.

Regarding the interview, the findings indicate that judges played a leading role in the interviews, asking most of the questions posed to the child. Additionally, option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than other utterance types. Focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were approximately twice as common as invitations, directives, summaries, and facilitators. Notably, invitations – the prompt type most strongly recommended in evidence-based interviewing guidelines – were the second least used category, representing only 6% of all utterances. These findings may partly

reflect the fact that interviewers had prior access to case files and information about the alleged incident, which may lead them to use the interview to confirm or disconfirm previously obtained evidence. Prior access to case information may also lead interviewers to form preliminary beliefs about the case and, wittingly or unwittingly, guide their questioning in ways that align with these beliefs, a phenomenon widely documented in the literature as confirmation bias (Rohrabaugh et al., 2016; Lamb et al., 2011). Such bias may inadvertently increase reliance on recognition-based prompts while limiting opportunities for children to provide free narrative accounts.

Because focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were used so frequently, more than half of the total details reported by children were elicited by these utterance types. This pattern raises concerns, as research has consistently shown that such prompts do not encourage children to retrieve information using their own memory cues or to report events in their own words. Instead, children are typically required only to confirm or reject the information suggested by the interviewer, which often leads to shorter responses. This interpretation is consistent with the present findings showing that focused-recognition prompts elicited substantially fewer details per utterance than invitations. Responses obtained through such prompts are more vulnerable to errors, inconsistencies, and contamination (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2018). Consequently, heavy reliance on such questioning strategies may compromise the reliability and evidentiary value of children's testimony, raising serious concerns for both victims and the criminal justice process.

Across the interviews, children predominantly provided central details describing the abusive events, which are critical for advancing criminal investigations. Peripheral details, although less frequent, may also be relevant for contextualizing events and evaluating the coherence of the child's account. Nevertheless, analysis of questioning styles showed that both central and peripheral details were more frequently associated with focused-recognition prompts. This pattern largely reflects the high frequency with which these prompts were used during interviews, reinforcing the concerns discussed earlier.

One of the most striking findings of the present study concerns the productivity of invitations. Although invitations were used relatively infrequently, being the second least common utterance type, they emerged as the most effective in eliciting details per utterance. This finding highlights the efficiency of invitations in maximizing children's informativeness despite their limited use. In the present study, invitations generated substantially more details per prompt than other utterance types. This pattern is consistent with extensive research showing that open-ended prompts elicited the richest and most informative accounts from children (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

This finding suggests that increasing the use of invitations may represent one of the most effective ways to improve the informativeness of children's testimony in judicial interviews.

Despite growing awareness of best practices in the investigation of CSA cases, the present findings suggest that these practices remain inconsistently implemented. This is evident in several aspects of the interviews, including the courthouse setting in which they were conducted, the presence of multiple adults in the room, the limited use of video recording across courts, and the predominance of recognition-based questioning strategies. For these reasons, interviews with child victims should be conducted by professionals with specialized training in evidence-based forensic interviewing protocols and solid knowledge across multiple relevant domains, including victimology, child development, and memory processes. Evidence suggests that initial protocol training alone is insufficient to ensure the sustained implementation of best practices over time. Ongoing training, regular supervision, and structured feedback are therefore essential to sustain effective questioning practices and reduce reliance on less reliable prompts that may compromise the accuracy and informativeness of children's testimony (Fernandes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024).

Importantly, analyses examining changes over time indicated that these questioning patterns remained largely unchanged across the 2014-2024 period. The proportion of utterance types did not vary significantly as a function of interview year. This suggests that the predominance of focused-recognition prompts and the limited use of invitations are not confined to earlier practices but continue to characterize most recent interviews. This stability over time may indicate that these practices reflect systematic features of the investigative framework rather than temporary variations in interviewing practices.

These findings are consistent with previous Portuguese research examining SFU interviews conducted between 2009 and 2014, which reported that the majority of questions were option-posing and that only 3% were open-ended. Nevertheless, despite European directives, robust scientific knowledge of interviewing CSA victims, and specific best practice recommendations to improve investigations of CSA crimes, the findings suggest that forensic interviewing practices within the Portuguese criminal justice system have remained largely unchanged over the past decades. This persistence is particularly concerning given the extensive body of international research demonstrating the advantages of open-ended interviewing strategies in improving the accuracy and completeness of children's reports.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, although the sample included interviews from multiple courts across Portugal, it may not fully capture all regional variations

in investigative practices, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analyses focused primarily on questioning styles and the details elicited from children. Other potentially relevant contextual factors were not examined, such as interviewer training, children's age and developmental characteristics, or socio-emotional dynamics during the interview. Future research should therefore examine how interviewer characteristics and children's individual differences influence both questioning practices and children's narrative productivity. Future studies could also examine supportive and inappropriate interviewing behaviors, children's subjective experiences of participating in SFU interviews, as well as the longitudinal association between interview quality and judicial outcomes. Finally, given the relatively high productivity observed for facilitators, future research should examine the sequential context in which these utterances occur within interviews. Additionally, because the analyses relied on transcripts of the interviews, nonverbal behaviors and interactional dynamics between the interviewer and the child could not be examined. Moreover, the observational design of the study does not allow causal conclusions about the effects of specific questioning strategies on children's responses.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides empirical insight into current interviewing practices in SFU interviews in Portugal. The findings reveal several gaps between current practices and evidence-based recommendations for interviewing child victims. In particular, interviews should be conducted as promptly as possible, with careful consideration of children's developmental and emotional needs. Whenever possible, SFU interviews should be conducted in child-friendly environments outside the courtroom and systematically audio- and video-recorded. Ideally, the child should be interviewed by a single trained interviewer. Other professionals should observe the interview from an adjacent room via video link and communicate with the interviewer in real time when necessary (e.g., through an earpiece). Additionally, interviews should be conducted by professionals with specialized technical and scientific knowledge in relevant areas such as victimology, child development, and memory processes. Ongoing training, supervision, and feedback are essential to ensure the sustained implementation of best practices over time.

Addressing these challenges will require sustained institutional commitment to the implementation of evidence-based interviewing practices. Models such as the Barnahus framework implemented in several European countries and the Children's Advocacy Center model widely used in the United States provide examples of integrated approaches designed to improve investigative quality while protecting child victims. Strengthening the implementation of evidence-based interviewing practices represents a crucial step toward improving both the quality of evidence and the protection of child victims within the criminal justice system.

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Estudo 5 | "Still a Long way to go": Judicial Perspectives on Interviewing Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal

O presente artigo encontra-se em revisão na revista *Law and Human Behavior* (*SJR* 2025: Q1, 1,010; *JCR* 2024: Q1, FI = 3,2).

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) victims often engage with the criminal justice system, making institutional responses a critical child protection concern. This study examined judges' and prosecutors' perceptions of interviews with CSA victims conducted within a Portuguese pre-trial proceeding, Statements for Future Use (SFU). Semi-structured interviews with 43 judicial actors were analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants emphasized the protective and evidentiary value of SFU interviews. However, findings revealed a gap between knowledge of evidence-based interviewing practices and their implementation. Structural constraints, including formal courtroom settings, multiple people present, and limited audiovisual recording, were identified as key barriers. Participants also reported variability in questioning practices, reliance on non-recommended techniques, and difficulties adapting interviews to children's developmental characteristics. Limited and theoretical training contributed to these discrepancies. Findings highlight the need for child-friendly settings, evidence-based interviewing protocols, practice-oriented training, and clearer interprofessional coordination to reduce the risk of secondary victimization and promote child-friendly justice.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; child-friendly justice; criminal justice system; forensic interviewing; secondary victimization

"Still a Long way to go": Judicial Perspectives on Interviewing Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal

Child sexual abuse (CSA)[7] is a complex phenomenon with long-lasting consequences for victims, their families, and society (Goodyear-Brown, 2012). Accordingly, CSA has become a central concern for both scientific research and public policy aimed at identifying effective responses.

These abusive acts typically occur in private, secretive, and coercive contexts, often without eyewitness or physical/biological evidence. Consequently, victims' testimony frequently becomes a critical element in criminal investigation, rendering children's involvement in the criminal justice system largely unavoidable (Goodyear-Brown, 2012; Lamb et al., 2018; Powell & Earhart, 2018). Institutional responses can either support children's protection and recovery or contribute to further harm, including the risk of secondary victimization (Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Elmi et al., 2018; Quas & Goodman, 2012).

Given the central role of children's testimony in such cases, several best practice guidelines for forensic interviewing have been developed to promote child-sensitive procedures that maximize evidentiary reliability while minimizing harm. These guidelines emphasize both the conditions under which testimony is collected and the manner in which interviews are conducted. In terms of context, interviews should occur in child-friendly environments outside the courthouse, with minimal distractions, in the presence of a single interviewer, and be video recorded with equipment positioned outside the child's field of view. In terms of procedure, interviews should follow evidence-based forensic interviewing protocols. Accordingly, interviewers should receive specialized training in both such protocols and child development to adapt the interview to the child's characteristics, with competencies maintained through ongoing training, supervision, and feedback (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; O'Donohue & M. Fanetti, 2016).

However, the existence of procedural safeguards and international recommendations does not guarantee their effective implementation in practice. Across jurisdictions, a growing body of research highlights a persistent gap between normative standards and everyday practice, including a continued reliance on recognition-focused prompts rather than those that encourage free-recall narratives (Gomes et al., in press; Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). These discrepancies are particularly concerning in CSA cases, where interview quality directly affects both evidentiary reliability and the child's experience within the justice system.

[7] In this article, the term "child sexual abuse" follows the definitions established by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing the involvement of children and adolescents under the age of 18 in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to provide informed consent, or for which they are not developmentally prepared and therefore cannot consent.

The Portuguese criminal justice system provides a relevant illustration of these challenges. Children may be required to provide testimony across multiple settings and to professionals with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of training in interviewing children (e.g., police interview, forensic psychological assessment). Recent findings indicate that their participation may reach up to 10 procedural contacts, with an average of three (Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026). Despite this repeated involvement, under Portuguese law, statements must, as a rule, be produced or reproduced at trial to be admissible as evidence.

In response to this evidentiary requirement, and to avoid requiring children to testify again in court, the Portuguese criminal justice system established a mandatory pre-trial proceeding in CSA cases known as *Declarações para Memória Futura* (Statements for Future Use [SFU]; Code of Criminal Procedure, art. 271). This mandatory pre-trial proceeding allows the child to be heard by a judge during the investigation phase, with the testimony recorded so that it may later be admitted as evidence during trial. Accordingly, the SFU proceeding aims to protect the child from the demands of testifying at trial while ensuring that the child's account is obtained at an early stage of the investigative process, thereby minimizing the time elapsed since the alleged abusive incident. However, SFU proceedings involve multiple actors, including the judge, the prosecutor, attorneys, a specially qualified professional, and a court clerk.

Moreover, although a specially qualified professional is legally required to support the child, the legislation does not clearly define the professional's specific roles and scope of intervention. As a result, the nature and extent of their participation are largely determined by the presiding judge's discretion and may range from providing procedural explanations and managing emotional distress during the hearing to conducting the interview directly with the child (Fernandes, Gomes, Almeida et al., 2026; Peixoto et al., 2017; Code of Criminal Procedure, art. 271).

Previous studies conducted in Portugal have shown that, despite increased awareness of best practices in CSA investigations and some initial, largely theoretical training, recommended standards are not consistently implemented. First, in terms of the interview setting, children are frequently interviewed within the courthouse facilities – often in a courtroom environment - with multiple adults present in the same room, each potentially posing questions directly to the child. Second, regarding the conduct of the interview itself, questioning is not guided by an evidence-based forensic interview protocol and therefore tends to rely heavily on recognition-based questioning rather than open-ended interviewing (Peixoto et al., 2017). More recent findings point to a similar pattern, suggesting that these practices remained largely unchanged over time (Fernandes, Gomes, Almeida et al., 2026), raising concerns regarding both

evidentiary quality and the risk of secondary victimization.

Although prior research has examined questioning practices, empirical work remains scarce regarding the perceptions and experiences of key legal actors, namely judges and prosecutors, who hold substantial discretionary power within the SFU proceedings. Understanding how these professionals conceptualize the purpose, benefits, and challenges of the SFU interview is essential, as their interpretations and everyday practices directly shape the child's experience within the justice system and, consequently, may contribute to either mitigating or exacerbating the risk of secondary victimization, as well as influence the extent to which evidence-based guidelines are implemented.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining judges' and prosecutors' perceptions of SFU interviews involving CSA victims. Specifically, we focused on these judicial actors because they play a central role in shaping how child-friendly justice principles are operationalized in practice. We aimed to explore professionals' reported practices within these proceedings, as well as their perceived benefits, constraints, and identified needs for improvement. Although situated within the Portuguese legal context, the challenges identified may reflect broader tensions between evidentiary requirements and child-sensitive justice principles observed across adversarial systems. By providing empirically grounded insights into judicial actors' perspectives, this study aims to inform procedural refinement and strengthen the implementation of evidence-based, child-friendly practices in CSA cases.

Method

Participants

This sample comprised 43 participants, including 21 judges (48.84%) and 22 prosecutors (51.16%) from five courts across Portugal: 26 (60.47%) in the North, 11 (25.58%) in the South, and six (13.95%) in the Centre and Lisbon region. Participants' age ranged from 32 to 64 years (M = 47.40, SD = 6.81), and most were women (n = 26; 60.47%). All participants were of Portuguese nationality.

Concerning educational background, all participants held degrees in Law, with 34 (79.07%) holding a bachelor's degree and nine (20.93%) holding a master's degree. Regarding professional experience in the role, at the time of the interview, two participants (4.65%) had between 1 and 5 years of experience, four (9.30%) between 6 and 10 years, 12 (27.91%) between 11 and 15 years, 11 (25.58%) between 16 and 20 years, and 14 (32.56%) more than 21 years of experience.

Regarding training in child interviewing, none of the participants reported prior training in evidence-based standardized forensic interview protocols. Nevertheless, 32 participants (74.42%) indicated having some training addressing best practice interviewing principles (e.g., beginning interviews

with open-ended questions), although this was described as limited in scope and predominantly theoretical. All remaining participants reported that they had not received any training or did not recall receiving any.

With respect to CSA-related topics, most participants (n = 25, 58.14%) reported having attended training covering these issues (e.g., the presence of secrecy dynamics). However, similar to the training in interviewing, these sessions were described as brief and largely theoretical. The remaining participants indicated they had not received any training or did not recall participating in such training.

Measures

Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview conducted individually with each participant. The semi-structured interview protocol began with questions addressing sociodemographic information (e.g., age, nationality, education, professional experience, and training). Subsequently, questions were developed to explore participants' practices in SFU interviews with CSA victims, as well as their perceived advantages, difficulties, constraints, and identified needs.

The interview guide included open-ended questions organized into domains, ensuring consistency across interviews while simultaneously allowing flexibility to explore individual narratives in depth.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho and authorization from the High Council for the Judiciary and the Public Prosecution Service.

Participants were approached in person at the court where they were working at the time of the interview and invited to take part in the study. For those who agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. Thirty-nine (90.70%) interviews were conducted in person, and four (9.30%) were conducted online via Zoom.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed about the aims and nature of the study, the conditions of their participation, and provided with informed consent. The interviews were conducted individually by the first author. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interview lengths ranged from 27 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes. Data collection was concluded once thematic saturation was reached (i.e., when additional data fails to generate new information; Braun & Clarke, 2012), consequently, no additional interviews were conducted with judicial actors.

Data analysis

All qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 14 software. We followed an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012), in which professionals' narratives allowed for the identification of emergent themes and nuances not explicitly captured in the initial coding framework. The analysis process adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach: (1) familiarization with the data through their in-depth reading, noting initial ideas; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) clustering of excerpts and identification of emerging patterns; (4) review and refinement of preliminary themes and subthemes; (5) definition of final themes; (6) synthesis and interpretation of thematic findings according to the study's purposes. The unit of analysis was the *idea unit*, corresponding to the smallest segment of text that captures a complete and self-contained idea relevant to the research question.

Two trained researchers (DF and JPG) independently read and coded the interview material to ensure analytical depth and reliability. Then, researchers coded a subset of transcripts and generated a preliminary codebook through consensus. This codebook was reviewed and refined by another researcher (MM), an expert in qualitative analysis, resulting in the final analytical framework. The main author fully coded all interviews, and inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient on a subset of 10 interviews (5 of judges' interviews and 5 of prosecutors' interviews; 27.03% of the total sample). Cohen's kappa yielded a value of 0.84, indicating an almost perfect agreement.

Results

The thematic analysis generated six themes describing how judges and prosecutors understand and implement SFU proceedings in CSA cases: (1) grounds, (2) inside the interview, (3) perceived value, (4) constraints, (5) needs, (6) the role of the specially qualified professional. These themes capture both procedural aspects of how SFU interviews are conducted and participants' evaluations of their purpose, value, and limitations. Each theme comprises several subthemes. Table 1 presents the themes, subthemes, and the number of participants and coded references associated with each.

Theme 1: Grounds

The theme "grounds" captures how judicial actors justified and framed the use of SFU interviews in CSA cases. Participants described who typically promotes these proceedings, the purposes attributed to them, and how decisions are made regarding their implementation.

Table 1

Distribution of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	*N* Participants[a]	*N* Statements[b]	Total Statements
Grounds				335
	Referral initiators	43	62	
	Perceived purpose	43	128	
	Mandatory use considerations	42	145	
Inside the interview				573
	Timing	27	53	
	Participants	42	188	
	Setting	31	70	
	Material and technical conditions	32	47	
	Questioning practices	41	215	
Perceived value				276
	Reduced exposure and repetition	42	152	
	Enhanced evidentiary quality	36	124	
Constraints				751
	Not perceived	6	17	
	Timing	29	122	
	Material and environmental	35	158	
	Questioning and child engagement	42	422	
	Judicial immediacy	16	32	
Needs				689
	Perceived sufficiency	5	12	
	Celerity	21	50	
	Child-friendly setting	37	155	
	Material and technical conditions	27	89	
	Interviewers' sensitivity	24	71	
	Questioning practices and training	41	312	
The role of the specially qualified professional				525
	Pre-interview tasks	39	141	
	In-interview tasks	43	242	
	Post-interview tasks	27	64	
	Perceived relevance	33	78	

Note. [a] Number of participants who mentioned the subtheme; [b] Number of references codified in each sub-theme.

1.1. Referral initiators

Across interviews, prosecutors were consistently identified as the actors who most frequently initiate requests for SFU interviews with CSA victims, reflecting their central role in promoting the use of this procedural mechanism.

1.2. Perceived purpose

Participants identified several reasons underlying the use of SFU interviews. These included the mandatory nature of the proceeding in CSA cases, the evidentiary value of children's testimony, and the protective function of minimizing children's exposure to the criminal justice process.

First, the mandatory legal framework governing CSA cases was frequently mentioned as a key justification for conducting SFU interviews (n = 28). As one participant explained, "*since it's mandatory,*

the issue doesn't even arise. We request it because we have to (P12)".

Beyond this legal requirement, participants emphasized the importance of SFU interviews as a means of capturing and preserving children's testimony for evidentiary purposes. Given that CSA offenses typically occur in private and without witnesses, the child's account was often described as the primary source of evidence available to the court. In this context, interviewing during the investigation phase was seen as particularly valuable, as it allows testimony to be recorded closer in time to the alleged events, thereby reducing memory decay and enhancing the accuracy of the information provided (n = 24). As participants described, "*sexual offenses are not crimes that happen in public. They usually happen in private, without anyone else present. So, in those situations, the child is often the only one who can tell us what actually happened* (P14)", and "*we do it to keep the testimony fresh, as close as possible to when everything happened* (P38)".

Finally, participants stressed the protective function of SFU interviews. According to their accounts, the proceeding helps avoid exposing children to the formal and potentially intimidating environment of a criminal trial (n = 21). For example, "*so they don't have to go to the trial... A trial is much more formal. There are often three judges on the bench, and it becomes a much more austere environment where a child is likely to feel intimidated* (P34)".

1.3. Mandatory use considerations

Participants expressed diverging views regarding the mandatory nature of SFU interviews in CSA cases. Most participants supported maintaining the mandatory requirement, arguing that it ensures the proceeding is consistently implemented and prevents situations in which interviews might be omitted despite being necessary (n = 31). As one participant observed, *"taking the word «mandatory» out can also be risky, because there may be situations where, if it's not stated as mandatory, someone might think that «if it's not mandatory then it doesn't need to be done», and then it ends up not being done in a situation where it actually should have been (P12)"*.

However, other participants questioned whether a strictly mandatory approach is always appropriate. These participants argued that the decision to conduct an SFU interview should sometimes be assessed on a case-by-case basis, particularly when the proceeding may not serve the child's best interests (n = 15). Examples mentioned included cases in which the investigation is likely to be dismissed early, situations involving very young children, children with severe developmental disabilities, or adolescents whose accounts might still be reliably provided at trial. As one participant explained, "*if we see there's really nothing there and the case is going to be dismissed, we just dismiss it, and we don't hear the child. I think that would be a real ordeal for her* (P42)". These perspectives highlight a tension

between ensuring procedural safeguards through mandatory rules and maintaining flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances of each case.

Theme 2: Inside the interview

The theme "inside the interview" describes how SFU interviews are organized and conducted in practice. Participants discussed several aspects of the proceeding, including the timing of the interview, the professionals involved, the physical environment, the technical conditions available, and the questioning practices used during the interaction with the child.

2.1. Timing

Participants consistently identified SFU interviews as occurring within the investigation phase of criminal proceedings ($n = 20$). In many cases, the interview was described as occurring following an initial police interview. However, participants described different practices regarding how the interview is positioned relative to other procedural steps, particularly psychological assessments. While some participants indicated requesting the SFU interview before a psychological assessment ($n = 10$), others indicated relying on these assessments to evaluate the child's credibility or developmental capacity to testify in the proceeding ($n = 6$).

Two participants highlighted scheduling the interview, even though no defendant had yet been formally designated, given that it is not necessary to delay the proceeding, as the suspect would still be represented by a defense lawyer.

2.2. Participants

Participants described SFU interviews as involving several actors within the criminal justice system. According to their accounts, the interviews they were involved in were presided over by a judge, with the prosecutor, a defense lawyer representing the suspect, and a court clerk typically present. Many participants also highlighted the presence of a specially qualified professional ($n = 41$). Several participants also emphasized that the perpetrator is generally not present in the room during the interview ($n = 7$).

2.3. Setting

Participants described SFU interviews as usually taking place within the courthouse, typically in courtrooms or other rooms within the court building ($n = 19$). At the same time, many participants reported efforts to reduce the formality of the environment and make the setting more comfortable for children. These strategies included avoiding the use of judicial robes ($n = 19$), rearranging seating to

create a more informal configuration (e.g., sitting in a circle; *n* = 11), and, in two cases, limiting the number of professionals physically present in the room. However, views on these practices were not entirely uniform. One participant, for example, emphasized the symbolic importance of maintaining judicial attire, "*I don't feel the need to take off my robe, because I think my robe is important and I think children understand that as well* (P15)".

Two participants also described conducting interviews outside the courthouse, in specially designed facilities equipped with observation rooms and one-way mirrors. In these situations, the child interacted with only a limited number of professionals in the interview room, with other legal actors observed remotely.

2.4. Material and technical conditions

Participants also discussed the technical and material conditions under which SFU interviews are conducted. Most reported that interviews are audio-recorded (*n* = 25), while a smaller number indicated that video recording is also used (*n* = 10).

2.5. Questioning practices

Participants described questioning practices as typically led by the judge, who presides over the interview and asks the primary questions, while prosecutors and defense lawyers may suggest additional questions afterwards. In a small number of cases, particularly when interviews were conducted in specialized facilities outside the courthouse, questioning was reported to be conducted primarily by the specially qualified professional.

Several participants highlighted the importance of adapting language to the child's developmental level, avoiding technical or legal terminology (*n* = 2). In some accounts, participants approached the conversation as they would with their own children, aiming to create a more natural and less intimidating interaction (*n* = 9).

Participants also described the interview as beginning with rapport-building strategies, including informal conversation about the child's daily life, school, or hobbies (*n* = 14). This initial phase was intended to reduce formality and help the child feel more comfortable before discussing the alleged events. Participants further described introducing the professionals present, explaining the purpose of the interview, informing the child that the interview would be recorded, and emphasizing the importance of telling the truth (*n* = 6).

During the substantive phase of the interview, questioning was generally described as focusing on open-ended questions designed to elicit a free narrative, followed by more focused questions aimed

at clarifying relevant details while avoiding suggestive wording (n = 16). Some participants also reported relying on the previously outlined alleged facts to guide the interview (n = 5), whereas others described using questioning strategies and guides developed through professional experience (n = 11). In contrast, one participant reported confronting the child with available evidence, such as digital material, during the interview. Some participants described using supportive techniques to facilitate communication, particularly with younger children, such as drawing or dolls (n = 4).

Finally, a small number of participants referred to closing practices such as reinforcing the child's participation and thanking them for their contribution at the end of the interview (n = 3).

Theme 3: Perceived value

The theme "perceived value" captures how participants appraised the benefits of SFU interviews. Overall, participants framed the proceeding as serving two main functions: protecting children from repeated exposure to judicial proceedings and strengthening the evidentiary basis of criminal investigations.

3.1. Reduced exposure and repetition

Participants consistently described SFU interviews as a mechanism that helps reduce children's exposure to repeated questioning during criminal proceedings. By obtaining the child's testimony during the investigation phase and allowing it to be used later at trial, the procedure was seen as minimizing the need for children to recount their experiences multiple times (n = 24). In addition, participants emphasized that this mechanism helps avoid exposing children to the formal, potentially intimidating environment of a trial (n = 31). As one participant explained, "*the main advantage is avoiding having the child come to court later on the day of the trial, where they'll be around other witnesses and in a courtroom. And even if the defendant is removed, it's still a courtroom... It's still different, and it's always worse* (P29)".

3.2. Enhanced evidentiary quality

In addition to their protective function, SFU interviews were also perceived as enhancing evidentiary quality. Conducting interviews closer in time to the alleged events was described as facilitating the preservation of children's memories, increasing the likelihood of obtaining more detailed and reliable accounts, and reducing the risk of external influences or memory contamination over time. As one participant described, "*from a procedural standpoint, it has the added value of capturing the child's account closer to when the events occurred, so it's more likely to be a more truthful, genuine, and detailed account* (P28)".

Theme 4: Constraints

While participants generally recognized the value of SFU interviews, they also identified several constraints affecting their implementation. These include challenges related to the timing of interviews, limitations associated with judicial immediacy, material and environmental shortcomings, and difficulties related to questioning and engaging child victims.

4.1. Not perceived

Five participants reported not perceiving significant constraints in the SFU interview process, describing it as well-established, functioning effectively in practice, and already incorporating safeguards to protect the child. As one participant stated, "*I think that the way SFUs are set up already safeguards against anything that could be disturbing for the victim* (P38)".

4.2. Timing

Timing emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned challenges. On the one hand, several noted that interviews are often conducted at a very early stage of the investigation, when limited information about the case is available, potentially restricting the scope of questioning (n = 27). On the other hand, some participants reported situations in which interviews took place long after the alleged events, raising concerns about memory decay and the quality of children's accounts (n = 7). Participants, therefore, described the timing of SFU interviews as requiring a difficult balance between preserving memory and ensuring sufficient investigative information is available.

Four participants also highlighted practical constraints related to time and workload, noting that preparation and conduct of these interviews often exceed the time professionals can realistically dedicate due to heavy caseloads.

4.3. Judicial immediacy

Participants also raised concerns regarding judicial immediacy. Because the judge who decides the case is often not the one who conducted the interview, trial judges frequently rely on recorded testimony rather than direct interaction with the child. Some participants perceived this as limiting the assessment of non-verbal cues and credibility. As one participant stated, "*I think the evidence should be produced at trial, because the judge's perception, hearing the child directly, is fundamental for forming their conviction*" (JP28).

4.4. Material and environmental

Participants also identified material and environmental shortcomings that may affect the conduct of SFU interviews. Many reported that these interviews are frequently conducted in standard courtrooms or other institutional spaces that were not designed for children. Participants noted that the formal layout of courtrooms, that is, elevated benches, large spaces, and the presence of multiple professionals, may create distance and intimidation for child victims (n = 33). One participant explicitly mentioned, "*this idea of avoiding the child being questioned at trial... I don't think it makes much difference for the child, because they still have to come to the same courthouse, with almost the same formalities* (P1)".

In addition, participants pointed to practical limitations including: (a) recordings are still conducted using audio only (n = 15); (b) the quality of audio recordings may be poor or partially unintelligible (n = 10); (c) the positioning of cameras directly facing the child which may create additional discomfort (n = 5); (d) the continued use of judicial robes by some professionals during the interview (n = 2).

4.5. Questioning and child engagement

This subtheme relates to challenges in questioning practices and interaction with child victims during SFU interviews. First, almost all participants acknowledged professional uncertainty when interviewing children, often linking it to a lack of specialized training. Specifically, participants reported incomplete interviews, in which not all potentially relevant questions were asked, as well as reliance on yes/no and suggestive questions (n = 42). Second, participants reported difficulties in adapting interviewing practices to children's individual characteristics. These challenges were attributed to multiple factors, including limited recall abilities, reduced understanding of the seriousness of the events, lower levels of cooperation, and difficulties evaluating the reliability of accounts, particularly regarding potential external influences or confabulation (n = 29). Third, some participants also reported difficulties addressing the CSA topic (n = 21).

Theme 5: Needs

Beyond the constraints identified, participants also identified several areas where the current system could be improved. These needs were captured across six subthemes: perceived sufficiency, celerity, child-friendly setting, material and technical conditions, interviewers' sensitivity, and questioning practices and training.

5.1. Perceived sufficiency

A minority of participants considered the current framework for conducting SFU interviews adequate, indicating that existing procedures and experience gained through routine practice are sufficient (*n* = 5).

5.2. Celerity

Most participants emphasized the need for SFU interviews to be conducted as early as possible to preserve memory and evidentiary value, ideally soon after the report of the crime (*n* = 19). One participant highlighted, "*they should be carried out as soon as possible, but first we need to make sure that the victim is stabilized* (P21)*"*.

5.3. Child-friendly setting

Many participants emphasized the importance of conducting SFU interviews in child-friendly settings, suggesting informal and welcoming environments, such as rooms adapted for children with comfortable furniture or playful elements (*n* = 28). Conversely, some participants suggested that interviews should be conducted outside the courthouse, with judicial actors going to meet the child and observing from separate rooms with one-way mirrors. This arrangement would allow the child to interact with only a limited number of professionals, while other participants observe remotely (*n* = 22). For example, as one participant described, "*I think we could consider the possibility of interviewing in a way that's even more protective of the child... Like in a more playful room with a one-way mirror. Imagine: the judge, prosecutor, court clerk, and lawyers on one side of the glass, and the child with a psychologist on the other* (P12)".

5.4. Material and technical conditions

Regarding the importance of adequate material and technical conditions, many participants emphasized the need to extend the practice to video recording, underscoring the importance of capturing the victim's nonverbal communication and noting that this could also help mitigate the limitations of judicial immediacy (*n* = 27).

Moreover, some participants emphasized the importance of positioning the recording equipment discreetly, avoiding placement directly in front of the child, as this may cause intimidation or discomfort (*n* = 6). Due to previous difficulties experienced with interview recordings, two participants also highlighted the importance of professionals ensuring that the recording equipment is functioning properly and that both audio and video are being captured correctly. For example, "*SFU in CSA cases is essential, so the recordings really need to be absolutely free of errors* (P40)".

5.5. Questioning practices and training

Participants highlighted a set of practices they considered essential for conducting interviews with child victims, while also emphasizing the need for improved training and professional support to ensure these practices are implemented effectively.

First, several participants stressed that interviews should be conducted with sufficient time, allowing children to speak at their own pace and avoiding rushed questioning that could compromise the quality of the account (n = 8). Two participants also suggested that during the criminal justice process, children should be interviewed once, combining SFU interviews with other proceedings (e.g., police interviews), reducing the need for children to repeat their accounts.

Participants further emphasized the importance of adapting language to the child's developmental level, ensuring that questions are understandable and appropriate (n = 14).

Regarding the interview structure, participants highlighted several needs related to the organization and the conduct of questioning. The study included the need to implement pre-substantive practices, such as introducing the interviewer and other individuals present, and discussing neutral topics to establish rapport and help the child feel more comfortable before addressing the alleged events (n = 6). During the substantive phase, participants highlighted the need to begin with open-ended questions to elicit a free narrative, followed by a gradual transition to more focused questions to clarify relevant details, while avoiding suggestive utterances (n = 27). Conversely, two participants expressed a need for prior access to information about the alleged facts outlined by the Public Prosecutor's Office, to guide the interview (n = 2). Two participants also highlighted the need for appropriate tools and strategies (e.g., human figure diagrams or dolls) to facilitate disclosures when necessary. Finally, some participants underscore the need for post-substantive practices, particularly ensuring an appropriate and supportive closure of the interview (n = 4).

Finally, a recurring theme across participants' accounts was the need for specialized training in child interviewing (n = 38). As one participant mentioned, "*There really should be a lot more training on how these interviews should be conducted. Also, to help challenge and break down some of the pre-existing assumptions magistrates have"*. However, as two participants suggested, training should be less theory-based and more focused on developing practical skills. For example, as one participant suggested, "*training yes, but not in the way professional training is usually delivered, which is a bit like being back at university, with someone talking and everyone else just listening (...). I think this kind of training should be more like a workshop, something more interactive, more personal, so it's easier to share ideas and for people to ask questions* (P29)". Some participants suggested that professionals could also benefit

from support and supervision from forensic interviewing experts (n = 5).

5.6. Interviewers' sensitivity

In addition to technical skills, participants noted the importance of interviewers' interpersonal skills when conducting child interviews. They emphasized that empathy and patience are essential for establishing rapport and facilitating disclosure.

Theme 6: Specially qualified professional role

Participants also discussed the role of the specially qualified professional, describing their potential contributions before, during, and after the interview.

6.1. Pre-interview tasks

Participants emphasized the importance of the professional's role before the interview, particularly in preparing the child for the procedure. Although participants noted that the specially qualified professional should determine the specific tasks, they identified several tasks that may be important during the preparation, including explaining what will happen, who will be present, and the purpose of the interview. Above all, participants emphasized the importance of establishing a trusting relationship with the child to reduce anxiety and help the child feel more comfortable, allowing the professional to serve as a source of support during the interview (n = 38). Some participants also noted that a specially qualified professional could inform judicial actors about relevant aspects of the child that may affect the interview (e.g., developmental characteristics; n = 9).

6.2. In-interview tasks

Participants expressed diverging views regarding the extent of the professional's involvement during the interview. A small number of participants (n = 3) argued that professionals should play no active role in the interview, remaining silent throughout. As one participant stated, "*But in terms of having a specific role during the proceeding, I don't really think so* (P1)".

However, most participants emphasized the importance of the professional's role in monitoring and supporting the child's emotional state during the interview. In particular, they highlighted the need for the professional to assess the child's emotional well-being and intervene, when necessary, for example by suggesting a pause if the child becomes distressed (n = 28).

Participants also expressed divergent views regarding the professional's role in questioning. Some participants described the current model in which the judge conducts the questioning, while the professional plays a supportive role, assisting the judge when the child does not understand a question

or when the judge has difficulty formulating it (*n* = 34). While some participants considered this arrangement appropriate, others noted that although this is how the procedure currently operates, they do not necessarily agree with this model. Specifically, some participants argued that "*the fact that the judge presides over the proceeding doesn't mean they have to be the one asking the questions* (P44)" and that the interview should be conducted directly by a specially qualified professional. These participants suggest that the interview could be conducted by the professional alone with the child, with judicial actors observing and having the opportunity to propose additional questions at the end of the interview (*n* = 16). Nevertheless, some participants also emphasized that this role should not be performed by just any professional, but rather by professionals with specific expertise in child interviewing. As one participant stated, "*all of this also depends on who the expert is, what they're like, and how they carry out their role* (P43)". Additionally, some participants suggested that communication between the professional conducting the interview and the other judicial actors could occur through devices such as an earpiece (*n* = 5). Finally, one participant compared the role of that expert to that of an interpreter, mediating communication between the child and the judge when it is necessary. As one participant highlighted, "*it's really more about a change in mindset* (P19)".

6.3. Post-interview tasks

Participants emphasized the technician's role in supporting the child immediately after the interview and in the longer term. On the one hand, participants highlighted the need for the professional to acknowledge the child's effort, clarify any potential doubts, and help alleviate feelings of stress, confusion, or guilt (*n* = 19). On the other hand, they identified the importance of providing longer-term follow-up to assess any subsequent needs (*n* = 10).

In addition, four participants referred to the role the professional may play in providing feedback to judicial actors regarding the interview.

6.4. Perceived relevance

Participants generally viewed the presence of specially qualified professionals as valuable, particularly in providing emotional support to the child and understanding their needs. However, several participants noted that the impact of their role depends largely on whether a prior relationship exists between the technician and the child. As one participant explained, "... *but I think that if the professional is someone the child only met 5 minutes earlier, when they walked into the room, I'm not sure it really makes any difference whether they're there or not* (P12)". Participants also noted that professionals permanently based in the court facilitate communication and provide feedback to magistrates, with this

closer interaction helping to reinforce and consolidate recommended interviewing practices.

Discussion

This study examined judges' and prosecutors' perceptions of SFU interviews with CSA victims within the Portuguese criminal justice system. The findings highlight how procedural, organizational, and contextual factors jointly shape both professionals' understandings of SFU proceedings and the extent to which evidence-based interviewing practices are implemented, resulting in variability in how these interviews are conceptualized and conducted.

Overall, participants acknowledged the value of SFU proceedings in protecting children from repeated testimony, avoiding exposure to the formalities of trial, and preserving early evidence. In particular, SFU interviews were often framed as a means of preventing secondary victimization. However, this conceptualization may be somewhat reductive. Although limited repeated testimony and exposure to court are important, existing literature suggests that secondary victimization is not solely determined by the number of interviews or procedural exposure, but also by the nature and quality of institutional responses (Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Classen & Clark, 2017; Elmi et al., 2018). When conducted in a developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed manner, such interactions may even have reparative effects, helping to restore the child's sense of justice (Daignault et al., 2017; Quas & Goodman, 2012; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest that the conditions under which children recount their experiences, rather than the mere act of testifying, are central to shaping their experience within the justice system.

A central finding concerns the discrepancy between participants' knowledge of best practices and their reported practices. Most participants expressed awareness of key principles of child forensic interviewing, including the importance of conducting interviews in child-friendly settings, the use of audiovisual recording given the evidentiary value of nonverbal communication, and the need to position recording equipment outside the child's direct field of view. However, this knowledge was not consistently reflected in practice. Structural constraints appeared to play a central role in shaping this gap. Participants repeatedly described interview contexts as judicialized, often conducted in formal settings, with multiple professionals present, and with limited use of video recording or its implementation in ways that may be intimidating for children.

Within these structural constraints, participants' accounts suggest that individual characteristics and professional attitudes may influence how magistrates adapt their practices. Some reported adopting more child-friendly approaches despite systematic limitations, consistent with literature highlighting the role of interviewer behavior in shaping the quality of children's accounts (Lamb et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, such individual adaptations appear insufficient to ensure consistent adherence to evidence-based practices.

These findings are consistent with international research, which highlights the negative impact of formal court settings and the presence of multiple adults on children's memory and testimony (Ferra et al., 2022; Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). Accordingly, best practice guidelines recommend that interviews with CSA victims should be conducted in child-friendly environments outside the courtroom, with minimal distractions, audiovisual recording, and single-interviewer formats to reduce stress and enhance the child's communication (Gomes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018).

A similar discrepancy emerges in relation to questioning practices. Most of the judges and prosecutors described approaches broadly aligned with recommended interviewing strategies, such as rapport-building, using open-ended questions to elicit a free narrative followed by more focused questions to clarify relevant details, avoiding suggestive utterances, and adapting communication to the child's developmental level. Nevertheless, these accounts were not entirely consistent among participants. Several also reported practices that diverged from these principles, including the reliance on predefined factual accounts to guide questioning, the absence of standardized interviewing protocols, confronting children with evidence, and the use of other techniques not consistently supported by the literature (e.g., using drawings for disclosures, speaking to child victims as they speak to their own children; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018). Evidence from prior research examining how SFU interviews are conducted in practice aligns with this latter pattern, demonstrating that justice interviews often rely heavily on recognition-based questioning (option-posing and suggestive) and provide limited opportunities for recall-based prompts (Fernandes, Gomes, Almeida et al., 2026; Peixoto et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest a consistent discrepancy between some professionals' reported knowledge and actual interview practices.

Participants also identified challenges associated with interviewing children across different developmental stages, including difficulties adapting questioning strategies, assessing credibility, and managing children's engagement. These difficulties are consistent with the literature on age-related differences in memory, suggestibility, communication abilities, and willingness to engage in interviews (Lamb et al., 2018; Magnussen et al., 2020). Such findings further reinforce the need for developmentally informed interviewing approaches.

In this context, training emerged as a key factor underlying these difficulties. Although many participants reported some exposure to training in child interviewing and CSA-related topics, this training

was generally described as limited, fragmented, and predominantly theoretical. As a result, many participants indicated that their practices rely heavily on professional experience and empirical knowledge. This pattern is consistent with previous research indicating that legal professionals often have limited knowledge of eyewitness testimony and CSA-related issues, with experience and self-perceived expertise not reliably associated with greater accuracy (Jiang & Luo, 2016; Korkman et al., 2014; Magnussen et al., 2008; Magnussen et al., 2010). These findings suggest that improving practice requires not only increasing knowledge but also promoting its effective translation into applied skills, a process that may be hindered by difficulties in applying best practice guidelines and persistent misunderstandings about how to effectively elicit children´s accounts (Henderson et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2013; Yi & Lamb, 2018).

Accordingly, participants emphasized the need for more comprehensive and practice-oriented training. This aligns with research demonstrating that initial or traditional intensive training alone is insufficient to produce sustained improvements in interviewing practices (Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). Thus, effective training requires multiple modules, with ongoing opportunities to practice, feedback, and supervision, as well as a focus on translating theoretical knowledge into applied skills (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb, 2016).

Beyond these findings, participants highlighted additional points of divergence within the SFU framework. One of them concerns the mandatory nature of the proceeding in CSA cases. While many participants viewed the mandatory nature as a safeguard ensuring consistent use, others argued for greater flexibility, suggesting that decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, some participants highlighted that removing the mandatory requirement could increase reliance on judicial discretion, potentially allowing decisions to be shaped by individual beliefs and assumptions. Such variability may have important implications for both the child and the integrity of the judicial process (e.g., by delaying the collection of testimony), highlighting the need for careful consideration when determining its use.

Similarly, the timing of SFU interviews emerged as a complex and contested issue. While early testimony collection was valued for preserving memory and avoiding later testimony at trial, participants noted that conducting SFU interviews at early stages of the investigation may limit the information available to guide questioning. Conversely, when more information is available, there may be a greater reliance on predefined narratives, leading to more confirmatory questioning. This dual dynamic presents the challenge of balancing timely evidence collection with the need for open and exploratory interviewing practices. Nevertheless, research supports the importance of early interviewing, as delays particularly

beyond 1 month are associated with memory deterioration and reduced information reported, especially when questioning is more focused (Jones & Pipe, 2002; Lamb et al., 2000).

The role of the specially qualified professional also emerged as an area of considerable variability. Although widely recognized as important for supporting the child and facilitating communication, participants reported divergent views regarding the extent of this professional's involvement, particularly during the interview itself. Some participants favored a more active role, including conducting the SFU interview, whereas others emphasized procedural validity concerns. These differences appear to reflect the absence of clear legislative guidance, alongside variability in participants' familiarity with the professional's competencies and the level of interprofessional collaboration. Clarifying this role in the legal framework and promoting closer coordination between professionals may enhance consistency and support more child-sensitive practices.

Beyond the Portuguese context, this study contributes to the international literature by providing rare empirical insights into the perspectives of judicial actors, a group that remains underrepresented in research on child forensic interviewing. By examining how judges and prosecutors conceptualize and implement interviews with child victims, the findings shed light on broader systemic dynamics that are likely to extend beyond a single legal system. In particular, the discrepancy identified between knowledge of best practices and their implementation, as well as the influence of structural and organizational constraints, reflects challenges reported across different jurisdictions. As such, this study contributes to a growing body of research highlighting that the effective implementation of child-friendly justice principles depends not only on the existence of guidelines but also on how they are interpreted and operationalized by key decision-makers within the justice system.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for greater alignment between legal frameworks and evidence-based interviewing practices. Several practical implications emerge from participants' accounts: (a) the need for greater use of child-friendly environments and audiovisual recording**;** (b) the implementation of standardized evidence-based forensic interviewing protocols to conduct SFU interviews and solid knowledge across multiple relevant domains, including victimology, child development, and memory processes to address pre-existing misconceptions; (c) the development of practice-oriented training modules with ongoing supervision and feedback on the quality of the interviews they conduct; (d) the clearer definition of the role of specially qualified professionals; and (e) a greater coordination between legal actors and specially qualified professional before, during, and after SFU interviews. Addressing these issues may help reduce the gap between the current practices and the implementation of child-friendly justice and child forensic interviewing best practices.

Despite the contributions of this study, some limitations should be acknowledged. Although the sample included participants from across Portugal, the findings may not be generalizable to all judicial contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may not fully reflect actual practices and may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research should analyze children's subjective experiences of participating in SFU interviews. Additionally, pilot studies implementing integrated models, such as Barnahus in Europe or Children's Advocacy Centers in the United States, may provide valuable insights into alternative approaches within the Portuguese context.

In conclusion, although SFU proceedings represent a significant effort to protect child victims within the Portuguese criminal justice system, the findings indicate that important structural and procedural challenges remain. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of early testimony procedures depends not only on their existence, but on the conditions under which they are conducted. When interviews with CSA victims continue to take place in formalized settings, without consistent adherence to evidence-based and developmentally appropriate practices, their potential to both protect children and ensure high-quality evidence may be compromised. By highlighting the perspectives of judges and prosecutors, this study shows that improving institutional responses to child victims requires moving beyond legal provisions toward the consistent operationalization of child-sensitive practices in everyday judicial contexts.

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Estudo 6 | Supporting Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Pre-Trial Testimony: Practices, Challenges, and Needs

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse cases frequently rely on children's testimony, raising challenges in balancing evidentiary demands with child protection. In Portugal, *Statements for Future Use* (SFU) is a judicial pre-trial testimony designed to preserve victims' testimony during the investigative phase, aiming to reduce repeated questioning and secondary victimization. A specially qualified professional is mandated to support the child during this process; however, their role remains underexplored. This qualitative study examined how these professionals conceptualize and enact their role within SFU interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 professionals from diverse institutional backgrounds, and data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (1) the interview continuum (pre-, during, and post-interview practices), (2) perceived value, (3) constraints, and (4) identified needs. Participants viewed SFU as a valuable mechanism for minimizing children's exposure to the justice system and enhancing evidentiary quality, particularly when conducted promptly. However, significant challenges were identified, including procedural delays, limited access to case information, inadequate physical and technical conditions, and variability in judicial actors' practices. A key finding was the absence of a clearly defined role for specially qualified professionals, resulting in heterogeneous practices ranging from non-intervention to active involvement in interviewing. The results highlight a gap between legal frameworks and their implementation in practice. Participants emphasized the need for clearer role definitions, specialized training in evidence-based forensic interviewing, improved child-friendly conditions, and greater procedural celerity. Strengthening these domains may enhance both the quality of children's testimony and the child-centered approach in the justice system.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; child-friendly justice; forensic interviewing; professional roles; secondary victimization

Supporting Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Pre-Trial Testimony: Practices, Challenges, and Needs

Child sexual abuse (CSA)[8] is a complex and pervasive phenomenon affecting millions of children worldwide, regardless of gender, setting, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. Its high prevalence is well documented, with current estimates indicating that approximately one in five girls and one in seven boys experience sexually abusive behaviors during childhood, underscoring the magnitude of the problem and its significant social, scientific, and political implications (Blakemore et al., 2017; Moody et al., 2018; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2025).

Among the various forms of childhood maltreatment, CSA is widely recognized as one of the most harmful due to its profound and enduring impact on development. Exposure to CSA has been associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes across psychological, physical, and interpersonal domains, often persisting into adulthood (Alves et al., 2024; Hailes et al., 2019; Langevin et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2023). These impacts are heterogeneous and may be moderated by factors such as the severity and duration of abuse, the victim-perpetrator relationship, and responses to disclosure (Alves et al., 2024; Domhardt et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2016).

In many cases, CSA occurs in private contexts without witnesses or corroborating physical or biological evidence, making children's testimony a central element of the investigative process and a key determinant of judicial outcomes (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; O'Donohue & Fanetti, 2016). As a result, children's involvement in the justice system is often unavoidable. At the same time, such involvement raises concerns regarding well-being and the risk of secondary victimization. Research has shown that children's sense of justice is not solely shaped by the punitive outcomes for the perpetrator, but also by how they are treated within the system, including experiences of recognition, validation, and being believed by institutional actors (Sumalla & Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018). These concerns have driven the development of child-friendly justice frameworks aimed at balancing evidentiary requirements with the protection of child victims.

At the European level, these principles are reflected in key legal and policy instruments, including the Lanzarote Convention (Council of Europe, 2007), the Guidelines on child-friendly justice (Council of Europe, 2010), and Directive 2012/29/EU. Together, these frameworks emphasize the need to ensure that child victims are adequately supported and protected throughout criminal proceedings, particularly

[8] In this article, the term "child sexual abuse" follows the definitions established by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing the involvement of children and adolescents under the age of 18 in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to provide informed consent, or for which they are not developmentally prepared and therefore cannot consent.

in ways that prevent secondary victimization and promote meaningful participation. Additionally, Directive 2012/29/EU emphasizes both the provision of accessible, free, and confidential victim support services, including emotional, psychological, and informational support, delivered by trained professionals and the appointment of a special representative for child victims in situations where parental responsibility cannot be exercised due to conflicts of interest or the absence of caregivers. In line with these frameworks, Portugal has implemented legislative reforms, including the Victim Statute, to strengthen the protection of child victims within the justice system.

In parallel with these legal and policy developments, evidence-based forensic interviewing practices have been studied to promote developmentally appropriate, non-suggestive, and narrative-based questioning, with the dual aim of maximizing the quality of evidence while safeguarding the child's well-being (Fernandes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024). These practices are embedded within broader child-friendly justice principles, which emphasize that children's interactions with the justice system should occur in safe, supportive, and non-intimidating environments that promote trust, reduce anxiety, and facilitate communication and disclosure (Gomes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024).

Within this broader legal and policy landscape, specific procedural mechanisms have been developed to address the challenges associated with children's participation in judicial processes. Under Portuguese law, statements must, as a rule, be produced or at least reproduced at trial in order to be admissible as evidence. Accordingly, in cases of CSA, children's testimony must be recorded during the investigative phase through a pre-trial procedure known as *Declarações para Memória Futura* (Statements for Future Use [SFU]; Code of Criminal Procedure, art. 271). This mechanism seeks to reconcile evidentiary requirements with child protection principles by formally preserving the child's testimony for use at trial, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for repeated testimony and limiting exposure to formal courtroom settings. Additionally, SFU aims to ensure that testimony is collected as close as possible to the alleged events or their disclosure, minimizing memory decay and the risk of contamination.

Furthermore, the legal framework mandates the presence of a specially qualified professional during the proceedings to support the child, without specifying their qualifications, scope of practice, or concrete responsibilities. These professionals may come from diverse institutional and professional backgrounds, including victim support services, child protection agencies, educational settings, residential care institutions, or clinical psychology. In practice, this role is generally enacted across three stages of the process: prior to the interview by preparing the child and explaining the process; during the interview, by remaining with the child and providing support; and following the interview, by addressing the child's immediate emotional needs. However, the extent and nature of their involvement, particularly during the

interview itself, remain variable, ranging from primarily supportive presence to more active participation in the questioning process. This lack of specification creates space for divergent interpretations and practices, often shaped by judicial discretion, positioning the role as inherently ambiguous within the proceeding.

Previous research has identified significant discrepancies between evidence-based recommendations for interviewing child victims and the Portuguese current practices. Specifically, children are often required to provide testimony across an average of three procedural stages, commonly including a police interview, a forensic psychological assessment, and the SFU interview. Approximately 33% of children are involved in four or more proceedings. Additionally, the time elapsed between formal disclosure and the SFU interview is frequently prolonged, approximately 11 months on average, potentially compromising memory accuracy and reliability. Moreover, interviews are commonly conducted in formal courtroom settings, often involving multiple adults and limited use of audiovisual recording. Questioning practices often rely heavily on recognition-based prompts rather than open-ended approaches, which may reduce the richness of children's accounts and increase the risk of error and contamination (Fernandes, Gomes, Almeida et al., 2026; Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026a; Peixoto et al., 2017). These findings suggest that the intended aims of SFU proceedings may not be fully achieved due to a combination of procedural, organizational, and contextual constraints.

Consistent with these findings, recent research examining the perspectives of judges and prosecutors highlighted substantial challenges in the implementation of SFU proceedings, particularly regarding timing, interview conditions, questioning practices, and limited specialized training (Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026b). These challenges align with international literature documenting difficulties in applying evidence-based interviewing techniques, adapting communication to children's developmental levels, and having limited knowledge of witnesses' testimony and CSA-related topics (Korkman et al., 2014; Lamb et al., 2018; Magnussen et al., 2020; Magnussen et al., 2010; Sternberg et al., 2001; Yi & Lamb, 2018). One of the most salient discrepancies emerging from Portuguese magistrates' accounts concerned the role of the specially qualified professional, with divergent perspectives ranging from a primarily supportive role to a more active involvement in conducting the interview (Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026b). Such variability reflects differences in perceived expertise and highlights the absence of a clearly defined and consensual role within the proceedings.

Despite the central role attributed to specially qualified professionals within SFU proceedings to support child victims, empirical research has largely overlooked their perspectives, practices, and

experiences. This gap is particularly relevant given the diversity of their professional backgrounds, the variability in their roles, and the lack of clear guidelines regulating their involvement. Understanding how these professionals conceptualize and enact their role, both in relation to children and judicial actors, is essential to advancing knowledge on how SFU proceedings are implemented in practice.

Addressing this gap is critical as these professionals may play a key role in bridging the gap between evidence-based interviewing practices and child-friendly justice principles. By contributing to the prevention of secondary victimization and enhancing the quality of children's testimony, these professionals have the potential to improve both child protection outcomes and the effectiveness of judicial processes.

The present study aims to examine the perspectives of specially qualified professionals involved in SFU proceedings with CSA victims. Specifically, it seeks to explore their reported practices, perceptions of the procedure's value and challenges, and views regarding their role within the process. By focusing on this underexplored group, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of SFU implementation and to inform the development of clearer, evidence-based, and child-centered practices.

Method

Transparency and Openness

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and legal restrictions related to the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential identifiability of participants working within the justice system. Even with de-identification, there remains a risk of indirect identification given the specificity of professional roles and institutional contexts.

The interview guide used in this study and the codebook developed for the thematic analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Participants

This sample comprised 10 participants aged between 25 and 60 years (M = 35.40, SD = 9.41), and most were women (n = 8; 80%). All were of Portuguese nationality. Participants were drawn from institutions across Portugal, with four (40%) from the North, three (30%) from the South, two (20%) from the Centre and Lisboa regions, and one (10%) from a Portuguese island. Two participants (20%) were professionals working within the court, whereas the remaining were external professionals notified by the court to participate in SFU proceedings.

In relation to educational background, 8 participants (80%) held degrees in Psychology and 2 (20%) in Law, with 8 (80%) holding a master's degree, one (10%) a doctoral degree, and one (10%) a

bachelor's degree. Regarding professional experience in the role, at the time of the interview, 1 participant (10%) had between 1 and 5 years of experience, 7 (70%) between 6 and 10 years, 1 (10%) between 16 and 20 years, and 1 (10%) more than 21 years of experience.

Regarding training in CSA-related topics, all participants reported having attended training covering these issues (e.g., the presence of secrecy dynamics). With respect to child interviewing, two participants (20%) reported prior training in an evidence-based standardized forensic interview protocol, with one of whom indicating ongoing training and supervision in this approach. Four (40%) participants indicated attending occasional theoretical training sessions, while two (20%) reported that they had not received any training or did not recall having done so.

Measures

Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview conducted individually with each participant. The semi-structured interview protocol began with questions addressing sociodemographic information (e.g., age, nationality, education, professional experience, and training). Subsequently, questions were developed to explore participants' practices in SFU interviews with CSA victims, as well as their perceived advantages of the procedure, perceived difficulties, constraints, and identified needs.

The interview guide included open-ended questions organized into domains, ensuring consistency across interviews while simultaneously allowing flexibility to explore individual narratives in depth.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho and authorization from the High Council for the Judiciary and the Public Prosecution Service.

In a prior study in which multiple case files were examined in court settings (Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026a), information was collected regarding the institutions of specially qualified professionals involved in SFU proceedings. Subsequently, professionals of these institutions were contacted and invited to participate in the study. For those who agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. Two (20%) interviews were conducted in person, and eight (80%) were conducted online via Zoom.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed about the aims and nature of the study, as well as the conditions of their participation, and provided with informed consent. The interviews were conducted individually by the first author. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed

verbatim for analysis. Interview lengths ranged from 27 minutes to 1 hour. Data collection was concluded once thematic saturation was reached (i.e., when additional data failed to generate new information; Braun & Clarke, 2012); consequently, no additional interviews were conducted with professionals.

Data analysis

All qualitative data were processed and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). This approach enabled themes to emerge from participants' accounts, allowing for the identification of patterns and subtleties not predefined in the coding scheme. The analytic procedure was structured according to six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the data through their in-depth reading, noting initial ideas; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) clustering of excerpts and identification of emerging patterns; (4) review and refinement of preliminary themes and subthemes; (5) definition of final themes; (6) synthesis and interpretation of thematic findings according to study's purposes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The unit of analysis corresponded to the *idea unit*, defined as the smallest segment of text conveying a complete and meaningful idea relevant to the research aims.

Two trained researchers (DF and JPG) independently read and coded the interview material to ensure analytical depth and reliability. A subset of the data was jointly coded to develop a preliminary codebook through discussion and consensus. This preliminary codebook was subsequently reviewed and refined by a third researcher (MM), who has expertise in qualitative methodologies, resulting in the final coding structure. All interviews were fully coded by the main author. Inter-rater reliability was calculated on 10% of the sample using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which yielded a coefficient of 0.92, indicating almost perfect agreement.

Results

The thematic analysis yielded four themes describing how specially qualified professionals understand their role and report their practices within SFU proceedings in CSA cases: (1) the interview continuum, (2) perceived value, (3) constraints, and (4) needs. Together, these themes capture participants' reported practices as well as their perceptions of the proceedings' benefits, limitations, and areas for improvement. Each theme comprises several subthemes. Table 1 presents the distribution of themes, subthemes, and corresponding frequencies.

Table 1

Distribution of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	*N* Participants[a]	*N* Statements[b]	Total Statements
The interview continuum				255
	Pre-interview tasks	10	151	
	In-interview tasks	10	47	
	Post-interview tasks	10	57	
Perceived value				41
	Reduced exposure and repetition	10	24	
	Enhanced evidentiary quality	6	17	
Constraints				
	Timing	9	38	222
	Limited case information	4	11	
	Material and environmental	9	49	
	Questioning and child engagement	10	63	
	Judicial actors' variability	10	47	
	Undefined specially qualified professional role	5	14	
Needs				200
	Celerity	9	19	
	Child-friendly settings	10	43	
	Material and technical conditions	4	10	
	Questioning practices and training	7	30	
	Specially qualified professionals' best practices	10	98	

Note. [a] Number of participants who mentioned the subtheme; [b] Number of references codified in each sub-theme.

Theme 1: The interview continuum

This theme encompasses the range of practices described by participants across the different phases of SFU proceedings, including tasks conducted before, during, and after the interview.

1.1. Pre-interview tasks

Pre-interview practices were described as contingent upon participants' prior knowledge of the case, particularly whether they had previous contact with the child or were notified by the court without prior involvement. These practices were organized across three domains: (a) engagement with the court; (b) with caregivers, and (c) with the child.

In relation to the court, participants described two procedural pathways. When they had prior involvement with the child, participants reported proactively contacting the court to request that they be appointed as the specially qualified professional responsible for supporting the child during the proceeding. In contrast, when they were notified through a court summons, participants described identifying the professional assigned to the case and requesting relevant case information from the court. Participants also emphasized the importance of liaising with court staff to prepare the physical setting (*n*

= 7). One participant explained that "*when working with the court, I usually ask the judge what they expect my role to be in the proceeding* (P9)".

With caregivers, pre-interview practices generally took place prior to the day of the proceeding and included introducing themselves, explaining the purpose of the proceeding, addressing questions or concerns, and assessing the feasibility of meeting the child in person prior to the interview (n = 6). When possible, participants reported conducting preparatory sessions in advance through in-person meetings, however, logistical constraints often required preparation to take place immediately before the interview on the same day (n = 9).

Regarding the child, participants described a set of preparatory practices aimed at orienting and supporting the child. This included introducing themselves and clarifying their role, explaining the purpose of the interview and the reasons for repeating the account, familiarizing the child with the setting, clarifying who would be present and their respective roles, explaining the use of audiovisual recording, outlining the rights and expectations, and addressing questions or concerns. Importantly, participants emphasized avoiding unrealistic assurances (e.g., promising that the child will not need to speak about the event again) or discussing the abusive event (n = 10). Four participants reported using supportive materials to facilitate preparation.

Additionally, one participant reported using preparatory practices with the child to assess their ability to express themselves, language level, and the presence of potential constraints that may interfere with the reporting of abusive experiences. This preliminary assessment was described as informing judicial actors about factors that could influence the interview process.

1.2. In-interview tasks

Participants reported substantial variability in their level of involvement during the interview, as illustrated by one participant's statement, "*in terms of my level of involvement, it has ranged from none at all to being highly involved and conducting the interview* (P9)". Specifically, all participants reported having experienced situations where they did not intervene during the interview, carrying out no specific tasks while the testimony was being taken, aside from remaining close to the child and being available to provide support if needed. Others reported that the general principle was non-intervention, however, they reported occasional intervention to clarify questions or support communication when the child appeared to struggle (n = 8). In contrast, three participants described instances in which the specially qualified professional assumed a leading role in conducting the interview with the child.

1.3. Post-interview tasks

In relation to post-interview practices, participants described interactions involving: (a) the child; (b) caregivers; and (c) judicial actors. With the child, participants reported assessing emotional well-being, validating feelings, reinforcing cooperation, and addressing any remaining questions or concerns (n = 10).

With caregivers, participants emphasized advising against questioning the child about the interview and providing contact information for follow-up support (n = 8).

In relation to judicial actors, two participants reported providing feedback to magistrates on their performance during the proceeding, including both positive aspects and areas for improvement.

Theme 2: Perceived value

The theme "perceived value" reflects participants' perceptions of the benefits of SFU proceedings, particularly in reducing children's exposure to the justice system and enhancing evidentiary quality.

2.1. Reduced exposure and repetition

All participants emphasized the value of SFU in limiting children's exposure to formal court proceedings and minimizing repeated questioning. As two participants described, "*the fact that it happens in a more informal context: no robes or gowns, the defendant not being there. These are all factors that, in my opinion, make it easier for the child to feel comfortable sharing their testimony* (P5)", and "*then there's also the fact that they don't have to go through a series of subsequent procedures or repeatedly give statements throughout the investigation and up to the trial* (P6)".

2.2. Enhanced evidentiary quality

Furthermore, some participants highlighted that SFU interviews are typically conducted earlier in the investigative process, allowing for greater proximity to the alleged events. This was perceived as supporting more accurate recall, richer detail, and reduced susceptibility to influences (n = 6). For example, one participant described "*clearly, collecting the testimony as thoroughly as possible and as close as possible to when the events occurred helps the child recall things more easily* (P6)".

Theme 3: Constraints

Despite recognizing the importance of SFU interviews, participants identified multiple constraints affecting their implementation, including spanning temporal, informational, environmental, procedural, and professional domains.

3.1. Timing

Regarding timing, several participants identified delays between disclosure and the SFU interview as a key concern, with potential negative effects on memory (*n* = 8). As one participant explained, "*we're talking about an interview that happens a long time after the judicial process has already started. This has very serious implications for the quality of a child's testimony, because time can clearly affect how information is recalled (...). And we also know that children are often threatened, sometimes even used or influenced, or, even unintentionally, exposed to information about the incidents, which can end up distorting or contaminating what they say* (P10)". In contrast, one participant noted that, in some cases, the SFU interview was scheduled in close temporal proximity to other procedures (e.g., police interview and forensic medical examinations), which resulted in fatigue for the child and potentially compromised the quality of the testimony.

Additional issues included the scheduling of defendants' hearings immediately before or after those involving child victims, increasing the risk of unintended encounters within court facilities (*n* = 3), as well as limited time between court notification of professionals and the SFU interview, limiting opportunities for adequate preparation (*n* = 5).

3.2. Limited case information

One constraint identified by some participants was the limited information provided by the court (e.g., details of the alleged offense, contact information), which hindered adequate preparation with the child and/or caregivers prior to the proceeding (*n* = 4).

3.3. Material and environmental

Material and environmental conditions within court facilities were also identified as relevant constraints. Specifically, several participants highlighted that preparation spaces were often unavailable, leading to preparation in corridors, while interview rooms were characterized by formal layouts and physical distancing between actors (*n* = 8).

Participants also reported technical issues, particularly related to recording, sometimes requiring children to repeat their statements later (*n* = 5). Additionally, some participants reported that recording equipment could be perceived as intimidating, particularly when cameras or microphones are positioned directly in front of children (*n* = 3).

3.4. Questioning and child engagement

Participants identified significant variability in judicial actors' questioning practices and interpersonal approaches as a key constraint during *SFU interviews*. Reported challenges included the

use of complex or developmentally inappropriate language, repetitive and, at times, confrontational styles, limited adaptation to children's developmental levels, difficulties managing children's emotional expressions (e.g., crying), discomfort in addressing the sensitive nature of the topic, and instances of suggestive questioning ($n = 9$). These practices were described as hindering effective communication and potentially compromising both the child's experience and the quality of the information obtained. Nonetheless, as one participant highlighted, "*it's very unfair, and sometimes it's extremely difficult for someone with a legal background to perform optimally in a task as complex as interviewing a child* (P9)".

Two participants also noted differences in how children and adolescents were addressed, with adolescents sometimes being met with greater skepticism by judicial actors regarding the credibility of their accounts. All these challenges were frequently attributed to limited specialized training and ongoing supervision ($n = 7$).

3.5. Judicial actors' variability

One of the constraints identified by all participants was that SFU practices varied substantially depending on the judicial actors involved. On the one hand, the overall conduct of proceedings and the level of involvement of the specially qualified professional were described as largely dependent on judicial discretion. As two participants noted, "*the decisions about how the proceeding is carried out are always the judge's responsibility, so there ends up being a wide range of ways to approach it* (P9)" and "*my role depends on the judge* (P2)".

On the other hand, frequent turnover among judicial actors was also reported to disrupt continuity and hinder the development of stable interprofessional relationships, requiring repeated efforts to establish collaboration ($n = 5$).

3.6. Undefined specially qualified professional role

A central constraint identified was the lack of clarity regarding the role of the specially qualified professional. Several participants reported uncertainty about the scope of their responsibilities and limits of their involvement, particularly in relation to whether and how they could intervene during the interview. This ambiguity, combined with the absence of formal guidelines, contributed to inconsistent practices, professional discomfort, and hesitation in situations where intervention might be warranted but for which participants felt unprepared. Reflecting on this topic, a participant stated, "*I know there are views that the role is mainly to prepare the child for the proceeding, like showing them the room and the people. But in my view, and based on research, that doesn't really impact the quality of the testimony* (P10)".

In addition, one participant highlighted that the absence of legislative guidance regarding the professional background or institutional affiliation of the specially qualified professional contributes to variability in practices. The same participant also noted that the lack of clearly defined responsibilities may result in situations where professionals only meet the child at the time of the proceeding. Emphasizing the implications of this, the participant stated, "*I think that if the professional only meets the child at that moment and just introduces themselves five minutes before, they're no different from a prosecutor, a judge, or anyone else. There wouldn't be any kind of therapeutic relationship there* (P2)".

Theme 4: Needs

Alongside the reported constraints, participants also described key domains in which the current system could be strengthened. These needs were captured across subthemes related to timeliness, child-friendly environments, material conditions, questioning practices and training, and the role of specially qualified professionals.

4.1. Celerity

The findings highlight celerity as a central priority in *SFU*, with participants consistently emphasizing the importance of conducting interviews as early as possible following the report of the alleged offense to minimize repeated exposure to distressing experiences and support the provision of more reliable accounts. As one participant noted, "*as soon as the situation is reported, SFU should be collected in a way that ensures their legal validity and their use as evidence in court. And, under our legal framework, that's only guaranteed with the presence of a judge, so access to a judge needs to be quick... the system should ensure that level of timeliness in its response* (P9)". Nonetheless, one participant added that this timeliness needs to be balanced with ensuring that the child is in a stable and safe condition.

4.2. Child-friendly settings

Participants advocated for less formal, more child-centered environments, including appropriate seating arrangements and reduced hierarchical cues (n = 5). Nevertheless, one participant noted that "*there shouldn't be distractions in the room. We don't want toys, we don't want PlayStation, we don't want anything that takes the child's attention away from the interview* (P9)".

Some participants also suggested that interviews should be conducted in facilities equipped with observation rooms and one-way mirrors (n = 5). As one participant mentioned, "*it would be important to have a room with a one-way mirror, where everyone can observe, but only one person is interacting with the child* (P10)".

Additionally, participants also underscored the need for child interviews to be conducted outside the court environment (*n* = 4).

4.3. Material and technical conditions

Several participants highlighted the importance of audiovisual recording for capturing children's nonverbal communication and supporting decision-making across proceedings (*n* = 3). At the same time, some participants underscored the need to minimize the intrusiveness of recording equipment (*n* = 2).

4.4. Questioning practices and training

One of the needs identified by participants regarding SFU interviews was the importance of using clear, developmentally appropriate communication and a more empathetic and sensitive approach toward the child (*n* = 4). Reflecting on this topic, a participant stated that "*they should just see the child as what they are: a child* (P2)". Additionally, several participants emphasized the importance of specialized training in forensic interviewing for professionals conducting interviews with CSA victims (*n* = 7).

4.5. Specially qualified professionals' best practices

This subtheme encompasses participants' perspectives on best practices that should be adopted by specially qualified professionals across the different phases of SFU interviews: (a) before, (b) during, and (c) after the interview.

Overall, two participants emphasized the importance of specially qualified professionals adopting a relaxed and age-appropriate demeanor throughout their interactions with the child.

Regarding pre-interview practices, some participants noted that, ideally, the specially qualified professional should meet with the child in the days preceding the procedure to provide preparation and familiarize them with the court setting (*n* = 4). Additionally, preparatory tasks with the child were described as including: explaining the purpose of the interview and what will happen, addressing preconceived ideas, clarifying who will be present, outlining the child's rights and responsibilities during the interview, allowing space for questions and concerns, normalizing the child's emotional responses, and avoiding promises that cannot be guaranteed (*n* = 6). Some participants also highlighted the importance of professionals working with judicial actors to better prepare them for these proceedings, particularly regarding appropriate questioning practices, child engagement strategies, and behaviors to adopt or avoid (*n* = 2).

With regard to in-interview practices, this was the aspect that generated the most divergent perspectives among participants. On the one hand, one participant described a non-active role for the professional, stating that "*our role doesn't have to be that heavy one of asking questions like that... it's*

not our role to decide the future. Our role is to support the person in this context of crime (P3)". On the other hand, several participants argued that professionals should be able to intervene more actively during the interview, feeling comfortable doing so and acting as facilitators of communication between judicial actors and the child (n = 3). In addition, some participants suggested that the interview itself should be conducted by a specially qualified professional, under the supervision of judicial actors (n = 5). As one participant explained, "*if we want the child's testimony to be highly reliable and useful as evidence, then we need a professional who knows how to conduct proper interviews, not someone who just acts as a kind of court guide* (P9)". However, they emphasized that this would require specialized training in child interviewing. One participant further elaborated on this requirement, noting that "*it's really important to have a degree in psychology (...). To have training in developmental psychology to understand what a child is and their developmental characteristics. They really need to understand how human memory works, and having some knowledge of psycholinguistics helps too. Of course, it's essential to be well trained in issues related to CSA and maltreatment, and the impact these can have on the interview (...). But beyond that, the key point is that the professional should have specialized training in a well-established forensic interview protocol* (P9)". Beyond initial training, some participants stressed the importance of ongoing professional development, including continuous training, self-evaluation of practice with feedback, and supervision (n = 3).

After the interview, some participants highlighted the need for specific practices with caregivers, particularly advising them not to question the child about the procedure and providing contact information for support if needed (n = 5).

Overall, one of the needs identified by participants was the importance of establishing formal directives or legislative clarification regarding the role of the specially qualified professional and the purpose of their presence in SFU proceedings, to reduce variability and arbitrariness in practice (n = 6). In line with this, participants further suggested the creation of a structured pool of specially qualified professionals with specialized training in child interviewing and evidence-based practices, ensuring that professionals assigned to these proceedings possess the necessary competencies (n = 2). As discussed by one participant, "*I think it would be important to have some kind of pool of specially qualified professionals dedicated specifically to this type of work, because it's different... It's completely different... it can't just be any professional assuming this role* (P3)".

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the perspectives of specially qualified professionals involved in SFU interviews (i.e., pre-trial testimony proceedings) in CSA cases in Portugal. Findings provide a nuanced understanding of how these professionals conceptualize their role, enact practices across the interview continuum, and perceive both the strengths and limitations of the current system.

Overall, the results point to a system marked by a substantial structural variability and role ambiguity, which appear to be closely associated with the absence of a clearly defined legal framework specifying the scope and responsibilities of these professionals. Within this context, practices varied according to institutional cultures and expectations regarding the scope of the professional's role, professional background, and level of specialized training, resulting in a role that is largely context-dependent and, to a considerable extent, self-defined. These findings also point to a broader implementation gap between existing child-friendly justice frameworks and evidence-based guidelines, and their translation into practice. As outlined in Directive 2012/29/EU, child victims should be supported by trained professionals through accessible victim support services and, when necessary, represented by specially appointed professionals acting in their best interests. Similarly, international guidelines on forensic interviewing emphasize the importance of developmentally appropriate communication, specialized training, and child-centered practices (Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). However, the variability and ambiguity identified in the present study suggest that these principles are not consistently operationalized within SFU proceedings.

In particular, the role of the specially qualified professional appears to reflect a hybrid and insufficiently defined function, combining elements of emotional support, procedural guidance, and, in some cases, interviewing responsibilities, without a clear framework to guide practice. This lack of clarity was reflected in participants' accounts, which revealed marked heterogeneity in role enactment, particularly during the interview phase, ranging from a strictly supportive, non-interventionist stance to a more active role involving clarification of questions or even direct interviewing of the child. Such variability may contribute to inconsistencies in both child support and interview conduct, potentially affecting children's experiences within the justice system as well as the quality and completeness of children's accounts.

Furthermore, participants' perspectives on what the role and best practices of the specially qualified professional should be were closely linked to differences in training and knowledge acquired both within and beyond their institutional contexts. Those without specialized training in forensic interviewing tended to conceptualize their role as primarily supportive, whereas those with such training

were more likely to advocate for a more active role in the interview process. These findings suggest that professionals' perceptions of their role are shaped not only by institutional cultures but also by their level of knowledge and technical competence. In the absence of training, professionals may lack the framework to identify inadequate questioning practices, which may reinforce a more passive stance. Conversely, specialized training appears to enable a more critical and intervention-oriented approach. As such, role enactment emerges as both knowledge-driven and contextually shaped, reflecting the interplay between individual competencies and institutional expectations.

These findings align with previous research highlighting the structural ambiguity of the specially qualified professional's role within SFU proceedings (Fernandes, Gomes, Albuquerque, & Matos, 2026b). However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating how such ambiguity translates into concrete differences in practice. In addition, some participants questioned the current model in which judges typically lead questioning, instead advocating for a model in which interviews are conducted by trained professionals under judicial supervision. This perspective reflects a growing recognition that forensic interviewing constitutes a specialized task requiring specific competencies that may fall outside traditional legal training (Lamb et al., 2018; Magnussen et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2012).

Closely related to this issue, participants consistently emphasized the importance of specialized training, particularly in child development, memory processes, and evidence-based forensic interviewing protocols. The findings suggest that insufficient training among judicial actors contributes to the use of developmentally inappropriate questioning strategies, potentially compromising both the child's experience and the quality of the testimony. At the same time, participants highlighted that even among specially qualified professionals, who are often trained in psychology, there may be important variability in knowledge and competencies related to memory and interviewing. This is consistent with research showing that psychologists do not necessarily demonstrate superior knowledge about memory processes compared to other professional groups (Andreu et al., 2025; Chung et al., 2022; Korkman et al., 2007; Magnussen & Melinder, 2012; Melinder & Magnussen, 2013). These findings underscore that expertise in forensic interviewing and memory cannot be assumed based solely on professional background, but instead requires specific, evidence-based training. In this sense, the findings point toward the need to conceptualize this role in terms of competencies rather than professional affiliation, suggesting that responsibility for conducting child interviews should not be determined by professional title (e.g., judge, psychologist), but grounded in demonstrable specialized knowledge and skills in areas such as child development, memory process, and evidence-based interviewing protocols. Participants further emphasized the importance of ongoing supervision, feedback, and continuous professional development,

supporting the need for a more professionalized and competency-based approach to child interviewing within the justice system, something highlighted also in the literature (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2018).

These findings are also consistent with victim-centered perspectives, which highlight that victims' sense of justice is not solely determined by punitive outcomes, but is strongly shaped by experiences of recognition, validation, and being believed by judicial actors (Sumalla & Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018). In this sense, the way professionals communicate with and engage the child may play an important role not only in facilitating disclosure but also in shaping children's perceptions of fairness and legitimacy within the justice process.

Another key finding concerns the discrepancy between the formal objectives of SFU and their practical implementation. While SFUs were designed to minimize repeated questioning and ensure early, high-quality evidence collection, participants reported persistent delays between disclosure and interview, as well as instances of repeated testimony due to procedural or technical issues. These delays were perceived as particularly problematic, both in terms of potential memory degradation and the emotional burden placed on the child. Importantly, participants framed timeliness not only as a procedural efficiency issue, but as a central component of child-centered justice. This is consistent with extensive research demonstrating that delays between an event and its recall are associated with reduced memory accuracy and completeness, as well as increased susceptibility to suggestion and post-event information, particularly in children (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In addition, participants identified multiple contextual and organizational constraints, including inadequate physical environments, limited access to case information, and technical shortcomings. Court settings were frequently described as overly formal and insufficiently adapted to children's needs, reinforcing power asymmetries and potentially inhibiting disclosure. At the same time, participants expressed nuanced views regarding child-friendly environments, emphasizing the need to balance comfort with the avoidance of distractions that could interfere with the interview process. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating the importance of the interview setting in facilitating children's engagement and supporting accurate accounts (Ferra et al., 2022; Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993), underscoring the need for evidence-informed design of interview settings, rather than purely intuitive or aesthetic adaptations (Gomes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018).

A further key issue concerns the variability among judicial actors, both in terms of practices and continuity over time. Participants reported that the conduct of SFU proceedings depends heavily on the

individual judge or prosecutor involved, as well as frequent turnover within the system. This lack of consistency was described as hindering collaboration, disrupting continuity, and requiring repeated efforts to establish working relationships. Taken together, these findings point to a system that relies heavily on individual discretion rather than standardized procedures, increasing the risk of unequal practices across cases. This pattern is consistent with international literature highlighting variability in forensic interviewing practices and judicial decision-making, often associated with differences in training and the absence of standardized protocols to conduct interviews (Korkman et al., 2014; Lamb et al., 2018; Magnussen et al., 2010).

Despite these challenges, participants clearly recognized the potential value of SFU proceedings, particularly in reducing children's exposure to the justice system and enhancing evidentiary quality. In this regard, participants emphasized that when SFUs are conducted in a timely and methodologically sound manner, including the use of appropriate interviewing techniques and audiovisual recording, SFUs may enhance both the quality of the evidence and the overall fairness and transparency of judicial proceedings.

Beyond the Portuguese context, these findings reflect broader challenges identified in international research on child-friendly justice and forensic interviewing. In particular, a growing body of research highlights persistent difficulties in implementing evidence-based practices, coordinating multidisciplinary responses, and ensuring that professionals conducting interviews receive adequate specialized training (Gomes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018; Johansson et al., 2017). Addressing these challenges requires not only context-specific reforms but also closer alignment with international standards that emphasize clearly defined roles, specialized training, and structured interdisciplinary collaboration.

In line with these implications, the findings also point toward the potential value of adopting more structured, multidisciplinary models of practice, such as the Barnahus model in Europe or Children's Advocacy Centers in the United States. These models aim to ensure the timely collection of children's testimony through a single, developmentally appropriate interview conducted by a trained professional, within a child-friendly environment and in coordination with judicial and investigative actors. By reducing repeated interviews, improving coordination, and embedding evidence-based practices within a structured framework, such models may offer a useful reference for strengthening the implementation of SFU proceedings in Portugal.

Despite the contributions of this study, some limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The relatively small sample size and the qualitative design limit the generalizability of the findings, and the reliance on self-reported data may not fully capture actual practices and may be subject to social desirability bias. Additionally, voluntary participation may have introduced self-selection bias, with professionals more engaged or interested in the topic being more likely to participate. Future research would benefit from larger and more diverse samples, as well as the inclusion of observational data to further examine how these practices are enacted in real-world settings.

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for a more integrated, multidisciplinary approach to child testimony proceedings. Effective implementation is unlikely to be achieved through isolated changes, but rather requires coordinated efforts across legal, psychological, and institutional domains. This includes the development of formal guidelines that clearly define the role, scope, and competencies of specially qualified professionals. Investment in specialized and continuous training, as well as improvements in organizational conditions, including timeliness, child-appropriate environments, and technical resources, is also necessary. In this context, structured collaboration between judicial actors and specialized professionals is crucial to ensure the consistent application of evidence-based and child-centered practices. Ultimately, such an approach may contribute to strengthening both the protection of child victims and the reliability and fairness of justice outcomes.

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PARTE III

DISCUSSÃO INTEGRATIVA

Contribuições do Presente Trabalho

A investigação científica tem sublinhado a relevância da participação de crianças ou adolescentes vítimas de ASC no sistema de justiça. Este envolvimento assume um papel crucial não só para a descoberta da verdade material e a fundamentação da decisão judicial, mas também para a restauração do sentido de justiça da própria vítima (Daignault et al., 2017; Lamb et al., 2018; Laney & Loftus, 2016; Quas & Goodman, 2012; Ribeiro, 2009). Contudo, é imperativo que esta participação ocorra de forma adequada para que produza os efeitos pretendidos. Caso contrário, poderá exacerbar o impacto das experiências abusivas e resultar em situações de vitimação secundária (Caprioli & Crenshaw, 2015; Elmi et al., 2018; Sumalla & Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018).

No contexto português, o sistema judicial atribui particular importância ao procedimento das DMF, configurando-o como um mecanismo obrigatório de recolha antecipada de prova nos crimes de ASC. A evidência empírica disponível sugere que a operacionalização das DMF tem sido deficitária, persistindo lacunas significativas na sua implementação (Peixoto et al., 2017; Peixoto & Ribeiro, 2020). Através deste trabalho, pretendeu-se contribuir para esta área, através da síntese da investigação científica sobre procedimentos de recolha do testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais, da caracterização do fenómeno do ASC em Portugal e da avaliação do procedimento das DMF, por um lado, através da análise da qualidade das entrevistas e, por outro, através da análise das perspetivas dos intervenientes que participam neste procedimento.

Na presente discussão apresentamos uma síntese integrativa dos principais resultados dos estudos anteriormente descritos, procurando articular os diferentes níveis de análise e contribuir para uma compreensão aprofundada dos procedimentos de recolha do testemunho de vítimas de ASC e o funcionamento das DMF no sistema de justiça português. Da mesma forma, são discutidas as limitações do presente trabalho e as principais direções para investigação futura, bem como são destacadas as implicações destes resultados para a prática profissional e para a definição de políticas públicas.

Contribuições para os Procedimentos de Recolha do Testemunho de Vítimas de ASC

Nos crimes de ASC, o testemunho das vítimas assume frequentemente um papel central, dada a recorrente ausência de testemunhas e de evidências físicas dos atos abusivos. Neste contexto, a entrevista forense constitui um procedimento determinante na medida em que a qualidade da informação recolhida depende, em larga medida, da forma como é conduzida (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Laney & Loftus, 2016). A literatura tem vindo a identificar um conjunto de princípios fundamentais para a condução destas entrevistas, entre os quais se destacam a adequação às características desenvolvimentais da criança ou adolescente (ex., idade no momento da entrevista, competências

cognitivas), a realização em momento temporal próximo dos factos, a limitação do número de entrevistas ao estritamente necessário e, de forma particularmente relevante, a utilização de estratégias de inquirição apropriadas (Classen & Clark, 2017; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

Neste âmbito, o tipo de questões assume um papel central. A evidência tem demonstrado, de forma consistente, que questões que promovem a recordação livre, nomeadamente questões abertas (ex., "*Conta-me tudo sobre...*"), estão associadas a relatos mais extensos, a uma maior proporção de detalhes centrais do evento (ex., comportamentos sexualmente abusivos) e a uma menor incidência de contradições. Por sua vez, as questões diretivas (ex., "*De que cor era o carro?*" quando um "carro" foi previamente mencionado), embora mais focadas, continuam a exigir processos de recordação, permitindo orientar a atenção da criança ou adolescente para aspetos específicos do evento e explorar detalhes adicionais relevantes (Brown et al., 2013; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

Em contrapartida, estratégias baseadas em processos de reconhecimento, como as questões de escolha múltipla, exigem apenas que a criança ou adolescente selecione, confirme ou rejeite informação apresentada pelo entrevistador. Por esse motivo, tendem a gerar respostas mais limitadas e mais suscetíveis ao erro ou contaminação, devendo ser utilizadas de forma criteriosa e preferencialmente nas fases finais da entrevista. De forma ainda mais crítica, as afirmações sugestivas introduzem informação nova e orientam implicitamente a resposta, estando associadas a menor fiabilidade e maior probabilidade de inconsistências, razão pela qual a sua utilização é amplamente desaconselhada (Brown et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

Para além das estratégias de questionamento, a investigação tem também destacado o papel do comportamento do entrevistador, salientando a importância de uma postura de apoio, sensível e responsiva, que promova o conforto, o bem-estar e a cooperação da criança ou adolescente ao longo da entrevista (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

Neste enquadramento, quando as recomendações descritas não são consideradas e as entrevistas com vítimas de ASC são conduzidas de forma inadequada, as entrevistas podem comprometer, por um lado, a qualidade da prova produzida e, por outro lado, aumentar o risco de vitimação secundária (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Johnson & Shelley, 2014; Lamb et al., 2018; Pipe et al., 2013; SAMHSA, 2014).

Não obstante a existência de recomendações internacionais para as boas práticas de entrevista com crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais, a sua implementação no contexto da investigação destes crimes permanecia vago. Da mesma forma, a literatura científica anterior identificou discrepâncias entre as normas teóricas e a prática quotidiana, nomeadamente ao nível do recurso

frequente de estratégias de reconhecimento em detrimento de abordagens que promovam o relato livre (Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). Assim, o Estudo 1 (*Forensic Interview Techniques in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Scoping Review*) e o Estudo 2 (*The Effectiveness of Forensic Interview Procedures in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Systematic Review*) pretenderam identificar e sintetizar as abordagens utilizadas em entrevistas em contextos judiciais reais para recolher o testemunho de vítimas de ASC, através de uma abordagem baseada na evidência e com uma metodologia estruturada.

O Estudo 1 teve como objetivo identificar e sintetizar os procedimentos de recolha do testemunho de crianças ou adolescentes, tendo sido identificados 30 procedimentos distintos. Entre estes, o protocolo de entrevista do *NICHD* e as suas variações destacaram-se como os mais frequentemente utilizados, seguindo-se abordagens que não recorriam a quaisquer diretrizes ou protocolos. Apesar desta diversidade, a maioria dos protocolos e diretrizes apresentava uma estrutura comum, organizada em três fases principais: (1) fase pré-substantiva ou introdutória (ex., explicação do objetivo da entrevista, estabelecimento de relação entre entrevistador e entrevistado); (2) fase substantiva, centrada na exploração das experiências sexualmente abusivas; e (3) fase pós-substantiva (ex., encerramento neutro, agradecimento pela colaboração da criança/adolescente). As principais diferenças entre protocolos ou diretrizes residiram: (1) no grau de estandardização das etapas da entrevista (i.e., alguns protocolos apresentam um conjunto de etapas mais estruturadas do que outros); (2) na inclusão de estratégias destinadas a melhorar a qualidade da entrevista (ex., explicitação de regras da entrevista, treino de memória episódica); e (3) na utilização de estratégias complementares à entrevista (ex., desenhos, diagramas da figura humana, bonecos anatomicamente corretos). Embora alguns destes procedimentos tenham sido desenvolvidos em contextos nacionais específicos, muitos basearam-se no protocolo do *NICHD* ou apresentavam características semelhantes, o que, paradoxalmente, contribuem para a fragmentação da investigação e dificulta a comparação entre estudos (ex., Gudjonsson et al., 2010; Lippert et al., 2009; Nogalska et al., 2023; Wolfman et al., 2016). Perante esta diversidade, tornou-se fundamental avaliar a eficácia das diferentes abordagens, de modo a identificar as práticas mais consistentes com a obtenção de testemunhos de maior qualidade, o que motivou a realização do Estudo 2.

A análise da eficácia de 27 procedimentos de recolha do testemunho permitiu evidenciar, de forma consistente, a relevância da utilização de protocolos na condução de entrevistas forenses com vítimas de ASC. Em termos gerais, as entrevistas orientadas por protocolos caracterizaram-se por uma maior adesão às boas práticas, nomeadamente pela inclusão de fases pré-substantivas e pós-substantivas, por um maior recurso a questões abertas e por uma menor utilização de questões fechadas

(diretivas, de escolha múltipla e sugestivas). Por sua vez, estes padrões associaram-se à obtenção de relatos com maior quantidade de detalhes em resposta a questões abertas e menor número em resposta a questões fechadas, contribuindo para uma maior fiabilidade do testemunho, bem como a uma maior proporção de detalhes centrais (ex., comportamentos sexualmente abusivos) em comparação com detalhes periféricos (ex., detalhes não essenciais ao enredo, como a roupa da vítima).

Entre os diferentes procedimentos analisados, o protocolo do *NICHD* destacou-se como o mais consistentemente associado a resultados positivos. As entrevistas conduzidas com este protocolo incluíram, mais frequentemente, práticas pré-substantivas, maiores proporções de questões abertas e facilitadores, e menores proporções de questões diretivas, de escolha múltipla e sugestivas. Adicionalmente, as crianças e adolescentes apresentaram mais revelações de experiências sexualmente abusivas, bem como respostas mais detalhadas com um menor número de questões, sugerindo maior espontaneidade narrativa e uma maior proporção de detalhes centrais (em comparação com detalhes periféricos). Para além disso, estas entrevistas caracterizaram-se por outras práticas que favorecem a qualidade da recolha do testemunho, tais como uma menor alternância de tópicos, maior exploração de revelações informais e das respetivas reações e menor frequência de negações. A versão revista do protocolo do *NICHD* veio reforçar estes aspetos, ao introduzir uma maior ênfase no estabelecimento de relação e uma maior sensibilidade às necessidades desenvolvimentais e emocionais da criança ou adolescente (Lamb et al., 2018), estando associada a mais revelações por parte do entrevistado. Assim, considerando os resultados consistentemente positivos associados a este protocolo, bem como as melhorias introduzidas na sua versão revista, recomenda-se a sua utilização na condução de entrevistas com vítimas de ASC.

De forma integrada, os resultados dos Estudos 1 e 2 evidenciaram ainda que a qualidade da recolha do testemunho não depende apenas das estratégias de inquirição, mas de um conjunto mais amplo de fatores interdependentes. Entre estes, destaca-se a organização do processo de entrevista, nomeadamente o número de sessões necessárias para a recolha do testemunho. A evidência sugeriu que a realização de múltiplas entrevistas pode ser particularmente benéfica, ao facilitar o estabelecimento de relação, promover sentimentos de segurança, aumentar as oportunidades de revelação - sobretudo quando estas não ocorrem numa fase inicial - e potenciar a obtenção de informação mais detalhada e centrada nos elementos essenciais do evento. Esta abordagem revelou-se particularmente relevante em casos que envolvem crianças com limitações desenvolvimentais ou maior relutância, que podem necessitar de mais tempo e de mais do que uma oportunidade para relatar as suas experiências. Neste sentido, o número de entrevistas deve ser ajustado de forma flexível às características individuais da

criança ou adolescente e às especificidades do caso, assegurando, em todas as sessões, a manutenção das práticas recomendadas pela literatura.

Adicionalmente, os resultados reforçaram a importância de privilegiar questões simples e claras, evitando questões compostas por múltiplas partes. Da mesma forma, sempre que seja necessário repetir alguma questão, deve privilegiar-se o formato aberto e explicitar a razão da repetição. Por sua vez, a utilização de bonecos anatomicamente corretos ou outro tipo de bonecos, assim como de desenhos para a interpretação de eventuais experiências abusivas, deve ser evitada, atendendo aos riscos associados à sugestionabilidade e à interpretação indevida.

Para além das estratégias de entrevista, a evidência sublinha o papel central da formação dos profissionais. Os resultados dos Estudos 1 e 2 corroboraram a literatura, demonstrando que modelos tradicionais de formação intensiva, de curta duração, têm impacto limitado na prática, sendo frequente uma regressão para estratégias desadequadas após o seu término (Gomes et al., in press; Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). Neste contexto, a implementação de programas de formação estruturados ao longo do tempo, que integrem oportunidades repetidas de prática, análise de desempenho e feedback individualizado é essencial para a consolidação das competências e para a sua aplicação consistente no contexto real (Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; O'Donohue & Fanetti, 2016).

Os resultados destes estudos evidenciaram ainda a relevância dos fatores linguísticos e culturais na recolha do testemunho, destacando a importância da realização da entrevista ser conduzida na língua nativa da criança ou adolescente. Embora o recurso a intérpretes possa ser necessário, este pode introduzir constrangimentos adicionais na qualidade da informação obtida, reforçando a necessidade de formação especializada e de uma preparação articulada entre entrevistador e intérprete.

Por fim, a evidência reforça a importância de assegurar condições contextuais adequadas à realização das entrevistas, incluindo a sua gravação em formato audiovisual, a presença de um único interlocutor direto com a criança ou adolescente e a utilização de espaços ajustados ao seu nível desenvolvimental, preferencialmente fora do contexto formal de tribunal (Gomes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018).

Contribuições para a Caracterização do ASC em Portugal e Compreensão da Participação das Vítimas no Sistema de Justiça

O ASC constitui-se como um fenómeno complexo e heterogéneo, cuja caracterização tem sido amplamente estudada a nível internacional. No que respeita às características das vítimas, a evidência empírica tem demonstrado de forma consistente que o ASC afeta predominantemente crianças ou

adolescentes do sexo feminino, embora se reconheça uma possível subnotificação dos casos que envolvem vítimas do sexo masculino, frequentemente associada a fatores socioculturais, como o estigma e as normas de masculinidade (Moody et al., 2018; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Relativamente aos perpetradores, a literatura aponta para uma predominância de indivíduos do sexo masculino (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015). Ainda assim, investigação mais recente tem vindo a dedicar particular atenção às perpetradoras do sexo feminino, caracterizando-as como um grupo heterogéneo (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Scurich, 2023).

Adicionalmente, verifica-se que, na maioria dos casos, o abuso é perpetrado por indivíduos conhecidos da vítima, incluindo familiares ou pessoas do seu círculo próximo. Esta proximidade facilita o acesso à criança ou adolescente e favorece a manutenção de relações caracterizadas por assimetrias de poder, confiança e dependência (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2015; Ventus et al., 2017). Neste contexto, a natureza da relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador assume um papel central na dinâmica e caracterização do abuso. Evidência científica indica que situações de abuso intrafamiliar ou em relações emocionalmente próximas tendem a prolongar-se ao longo do tempo, podendo estender-se por vários anos. Este padrão tem sido explicado pelo facto da criança ou adolescente procurar preservar a relação com o perpetrador ou a integridade familiar, bem como pelo impacto de sentimentos de lealdade, medo e ambivalência emocional (Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Ventus et al., 2017; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020).

No que concerne às características dos comportamentos abusivos, a literatura indica que a maioria dos casos envolve contacto físico, sendo frequente a ocorrência de múltiplas formas de abuso e episódios repetidos ao longo do tempo (García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Ventus et al., 2017). Paralelamente, a existência de outras formas de vitimação (ex., ameaças, violência física) dificulta a revelação e prolonga no tempo os crimes de ASC (Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Ventus et al., 2017; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Relativamente a potenciais diferenças associadas ao sexo da vítima na natureza dos comportamentos sexualmente abusivos, os resultados da literatura revelam-se inconsistentes. Por um lado, alguns estudos indicam que não existem diferenças significativas nas características do abuso entre crianças ou adolescentes do sexo masculino e feminino (García & Ochotorena, 2017; Ventus et al., 2017). Por outro lado, diversas investigações sugerem a existência de diferenças relevantes, evidenciando que as raparigas tendem a ser mais frequentemente vítimas de abusos que envolvem contacto físico e penetração (Ferragut et al., 2022; García-Montoliu et al., 2024; Junco et al., 2022; Kloppen et al., 2016; Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010). Em contraste, Hassan e colaboradores (2015) observaram uma maior prevalência de abusos com penetração em vítimas do sexo

masculino. Esta heterogeneidade de resultados poderá refletir, em parte, diferenças metodológicas entre os estudos, nomeadamente ao nível das características das amostras e dos contextos de recolha de dados. Adicionalmente, a sub-representação de vítimas do sexo masculino na investigação sobre o ASC, bem como a subnotificação destes casos - frequentemente associada a sentimentos de vergonha, estigma social e normas de género - podem contribuir para uma compreensão ainda incompleta e potencialmente enviesada deste fenómeno.

Paralelamente, tem-se assistido a um aumento significativo das formas de abuso online, principalmente junto de adolescentes, acompanhando a crescente utilização das tecnologias de informação e comunicação (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024; Patel & Roesch, 2022). Nestes casos, as dinâmicas envolvem diferentes formas de vitimação junto de crianças ou adolescentes mediadas pelas plataformas digitais, incluindo assédio sexual digital (ex., envio de mensagens com teor sexual, partilha de conteúdos explícitos), abuso sexual baseado em imagens (ex., captação, partilha ou ameaça de divulgação de imagens íntimas), comportamentos de agressão e/ou coação sexual (ex., chantagem, manipulação ou pressão para a realização de atos sexuais ou envio de conteúdos íntimos) e, ainda, assédio dirigido à identidade de género ou à sexualidade da vítima (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023; Patel & Roesch, 2022; Powell & Henry, 2019).

Relativamente ao contexto português, o conhecimento sobre as características da vítima e dos crimes de ASC permanecia limitado e fragmentado. Por um lado, os dados oficiais provenientes do sistema de justiça apresentam uma caracterização desigual dos diferentes crimes sexuais contra crianças e adolescentes. De um modo geral, para a maioria das tipologias criminais, a informação disponível restringe-se a indicadores descritivos globais, como, por exemplo, o número de crimes registados. No caso específico do ASC até aos 14 anos (artigo 171.º do CP), embora exista informação mais detalhada, esta permanece essencialmente limitada a variáveis descritivas básicas, como a idade e o sexo da vítima e do perpetrador, bem como a relação entre ambos, não permitindo uma análise aprofundada das dinâmicas, contextos e características dos casos. Adicionalmente, a focalização destes dados numa tipologia legal específica pode conduzir a uma visão redutora do fenómeno, ao não contemplar outras formas de ASC previstas no enquadramento jurídico.

Por outro lado, verificava-se uma escassez de evidência empírica sistematizada nesta área, sendo grande parte da informação disponível proveniente de dados estatísticos recolhidos por instituições de apoio a vítimas. Embora relevantes, estes dados apresentam limitações importantes, nomeadamente potenciais enviesamentos de seleção, uma vez que refletem apenas os casos que chegam a estas entidades, não sendo representativos da totalidade das situações de vitimação.

Neste contexto, tornava-se evidente a necessidade de aprofundar a caracterização do ASC no plano empírico, permitindo uma compreensão mais integrada do fenómeno. Este conhecimento revela-se fundamental não só para a identificação de fatores de risco e vulnerabilidade, mas também para o desenvolvimento de estratégias de prevenção, deteção e intervenção mais eficazes e baseadas na evidência. Paralelamente, a análise da forma como as vítimas interagem com os mecanismos formais de resposta permite identificar práticas suscetíveis de contribuir para a vitimação secundária ou de comprometer a qualidade da prova.

Neste sentido, o Estudo 3 (*Characterizing Child Sexual Abuse and Child Victims' Participation in the Portuguese Criminal Justice System*) teve como objetivo aprofundar o conhecimento empírico sobre as características do ASC no contexto português, contribuindo para colmatar as lacunas existentes. Simultaneamente, pretendeu-se produzir evidência que possa sustentar o desenvolvimento de práticas mais consistentes, alinhadas com a investigação científica e centradas na proteção e bem-estar das crianças e adolescentes.

Os resultados do Estudo 3 revelaram que as características das vítimas, dos perpetradores e a natureza dos crimes, bem como os padrões de vitimação no contexto português, são globalmente consistentes com aqueles descritos na literatura internacional, nomeadamente no que respeita à predominância de vítimas do sexo feminino, à predominância de perpetradores do sexo masculino e à elevada frequência de relações de proximidade entre vítimas e perpetradores. Relativamente à natureza dos comportamentos abusivos, estes também se mostraram consistentes com a literatura internacional sobre o tema, envolvendo predominantemente contacto físico (ex., toques, penetração oral, anal e/ou vaginal) e múltiplos episódios ao longo do tempo. Adicionalmente, os resultados evidenciaram variações relevantes em função da idade da vítima e da relação com o perpetrador, sugerindo que estas duas dimensões parecem assumir um papel central na configuração dos padrões de abuso. Em particular, observou-se que crianças mais novas tendem a estar mais expostas a contextos intrafamiliares, caracterizados por abusos com contacto físico, maior severidade, maior frequência e coocorrência com outras formas de vitimação. Por sua vez, os adolescentes apresentam maior envolvimento em formas de vitimação extrafamiliar, frequentemente sem contacto físico e particularmente mediadas pela tecnologia. Em conjunto, estes resultados sugerem a existência de uma mudança desenvolvimental nos contextos de risco do ASC, passando de formas predominantemente intrafamiliares e baseadas em contacto físico na infância para formas mais diversificadas, extrafamiliares e mediadas pela tecnologia na adolescência. Esta convergência com a literatura internacional reforça a ideia de que, apesar de especificidades legais e processuais, as dinâmicas do ASC assumem características transversais entre contextos.

Contudo, para além desta consistência global, os resultados permitem aprofundar a compreensão de como estas dinâmicas se articulam com o funcionamento do sistema de justiça criminal português. Em particular, a natureza da relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador, bem como o contexto em que ocorre o abuso, configuram desafios distintos ao nível da revelação, da produção de prova e da condução das entrevistas forenses. Nos casos caracterizados por relações de proximidade, maior cronicidade e maior severidade, frequentemente associados a contextos intrafamiliares, a revelação tende a ser dificultada por dinâmicas de ambivalência emocional, lealdade relacional e dependência, que comprometem a comunicação dos abusos (Alaggia et al., 2019; Alberto, 2022; Latiff et al., 2024; McGinn et al., 2026; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Por sua vez, nos casos que envolvem adolescentes e formas de vitimação mediadas pela tecnologia, emergem barreiras de natureza distinta, marcadas por sentimentos de vergonha, culpa e receio de estigmatização social, frequentemente associados ao risco de disseminação e permanência dos conteúdos digitais (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2023; McGinn et al., 2026; Patel & Roesch, 2022; Powell & Henry, 2019). Neste sentido, os dados empíricos sustentam a necessidade de procedimentos de recolha do testemunho particularmente sensíveis e ajustados a estas dinâmicas, reforçando a relevância de abordagens informadas pelo trauma, tal como evidenciado nos Estudos 1 e 2.

Um dos contributos mais relevantes do Estudo 3 prende-se com a caracterização da participação das crianças e adolescentes no sistema de justiça criminal. Os resultados evidenciam que as vítimas são frequentemente envolvidas em múltiplos momentos processuais, com uma média de participação em três procedimentos ao longo do processo judicial (ex., sendo os mais frequentes a inquirição na polícia, a avaliação psicológica forense e as DMF), sendo que cerca de 33% das vítimas foram envolvidas em quatro ou mais procedimentos. Este padrão levanta questões críticas relativamente ao cumprimento do princípio da intervenção mínima, amplamente defendido na literatura e nas diretrizes internacionais (Haldorsson, 2025; Lamb et al., 2018). Para além disso, os dados sugerem que alguns dos procedimentos em que a criança ou adolescente é envolvida tendem a ser operacionalizados como atos processuais formais e necessários em processos de crimes de ASC, nem sempre suficientemente ponderados em função das necessidades específicas da vítima e das características do abuso (ex., envolvimento em perícias médico-legais de natureza sexual após períodos recomendados pela literatura científica). Paralelamente, a análise dos processos judiciais permitiu identificar a existência de investigações paralelas conduzidas no âmbito de sistemas informais (ex., ações disciplinares em contextos escolares), bem como a possível articulação com procedimentos do sistema de promoção e proteção, o que sugere que a resposta ao ASC em Portugal não se circunscreve ao sistema de justiça

criminal (Peixoto, 2012; Ribeiro, 2009). Embora estas intervenções possam ser relevantes para a proteção da vítima, a sua realização não articulada pode conduzir à duplicação de procedimentos e à exposição da criança ou adolescente a múltiplos contextos de relato.

Em conjunto, estes resultados evidenciam que as crianças e adolescentes vítimas de ASC em Portugal são frequentemente expostas à necessidade de relatar repetidamente as suas experiências abusivas ao longo do processo judicial, muitas vezes em momentos próximos, em diferentes contextos institucionais, envolvendo diferentes profissionais com distintos níveis de conhecimento e formação em procedimentos de recolha do testemunho com crianças e adolescentes. Esta repetição e variabilidade, associada à ausência de articulação eficaz entre profissionais e sistemas, pode constituir uma experiência exigente e emocionalmente desgastante, contribuindo não só para o aumento do risco de vitimação secundária, mas também para a diminuição da qualidade e fiabilidade do testemunho. A investigação tem demonstrado que, mesmo quando a criança possui acompanhamento psicológico, os fatores relacionados com o testemunho em procedimentos criminais (ex., necessidade de prestar depoimento em múltiplos momentos, linguagem utilizada pelos intervenientes judiciais) parecem aumentar os níveis de sofrimento emocional e impacto negativo na criança ou adolescente (Elmi et al., 2018).

Adicionalmente, a análise dos processos judiciais revelou a existência de atrasos significativos ao longo do percurso processual, incluindo períodos prolongados entre os alegados factos, os vários momentos de recolha do testemunho e a decisão judicial. Especificamente, os dados do Estudo 3 mostraram que o primeiro procedimento criminal pode ocorrer até 13 anos depois do primeiro (ou único) evento abusivo provado. Tal como descrito na literatura, este longo hiato temporal desde o início do abuso até a sua revelação pode resultar de diferentes fatores, nomeadamente características da vítima (ex., sexo, idade no momento do primeiro incidente, presença de défice intelectual), do abuso (ex., severidade, frequência, relação entre a vítima e o perpetrador) e do contexto familiar e social da criança ou adolescente (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Latiff et al., 2024; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Adicionalmente, para além do tempo necessário até à revelação das experiências abusivas por parte da criança ou adolescente, os resultados mostraram que existe um atraso adicional no sistema de justiça até à realização das DMF, sendo este um procedimento de elevado valor probatório. O tempo médio entre a data de autuação do processo e a concretização das DMF foi de cerca de 11 meses. Estes atrasos assumem particular relevância quando considerados à luz da investigação sobre memória e testemunho, uma vez que podem comprometer a precisão e a quantidade de informação recordada, aumentar a suscetibilidade à sugestão e dificultar a própria revelação em entrevistas formais, ao intensificar sentimentos de medo, vergonha e estigma (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2018; Morrison et al.,

2018). Adicionalmente, nestas circunstâncias, a escassez de informação recordada pela criança ou adolescente pode conduzir ao recurso de questões fechadas ou sugestivas para induzir o seu relato, práticas que colocam em causa a fiabilidade do testemunho (Lamb et al., 2018).

Em suma, a divergência entre as práticas observadas e as recomendações baseadas na evidência levanta questões relevantes quanto à efetiva implementação de uma abordagem verdadeiramente centrada na criança ou adolescente no sistema de justiça português. Tal pode ter implicações não só para o risco de vitimação secundária, mas também para a fragilização da confiança no sistema de justiça enquanto mecanismo capaz de proteger eficazmente as vítimas e de responsabilizar os perpetradores. Para além disso, estes resultados vão além de uma mera caracterização descritiva, permitindo evidenciar tensões estruturais no funcionamento do sistema de justiça, particularmente no equilíbrio entre a proteção da vítima e as exigências probatórias inerentes à investigação criminal. Neste sentido, reforça-se a necessidade de promover uma maior integração, coordenação e adaptação dos procedimentos às especificidades de cada situação, bem como de aproximar o conhecimento científico da prática judicial, nomeadamente através da redução do número de momentos de recolha de testemunho, da diminuição dos atrasos processuais e da garantia de realização precoce de entrevistas com elevado valor probatório, como as DMF, em consonância com as recomendações internacionais.

Contribuições para o Procedimento de DMF no Crime de ASC

As DMF constituem um mecanismo central na investigação e prova dos crimes de ASC em Portugal, permitindo a recolha antecipada do depoimento da vítima com vista à sua utilização em fases posteriores do processo. Neste tipo de criminalidade, em que frequentemente escasseiam evidências físicas ou outras testemunhas dos atos abusivos, o testemunho da vítima assume um valor probatório central para o apuramento da verdade judicial (Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; Laney & Loftus, 2016). Paralelamente, a consagração deste mecanismo como obrigatório visa assegurar a recolha do depoimento da vítima num momento temporal próximo dos alegados factos e em condições ajustadas à vulnerabilidade da vítima, minimizando o risco de vitimação secundária (Carmo, 2013). Neste sentido, as DMF refletem a evolução do sistema de justiça criminal para modelos progressivamente mais sensíveis às necessidades das vítimas.

Não obstante, a literatura tem vindo a evidenciar limitações na sua implementação, nomeadamente a persistência de múltiplos momentos de relato para além deste procedimento, a sua realização frequentemente tardia e a utilização de práticas de inquirição nem sempre alinhadas com as recomendações baseadas na evidência (Peixoto et al., 2017; Peixoto & Ribeiro, 2020). Assim, a análise

das DMF revelou-se particularmente relevante, não apenas ao nível da sua previsão legal, mas sobretudo da sua concretização prática no sistema de justiça atual.

Os resultados do presente trabalho (Estudos 3 a 6) contribuem para uma compreensão mais aprofundada do funcionamento das DMF no sistema de justiça português, ao evidenciar um desfasamento consistente entre o enquadramento normativo deste procedimento e a sua concretização prática. Apesar das DMF constituírem um mecanismo legalmente estruturado com o objetivo de assegurar uma recolha de testemunho adequada às necessidades da criança ou adolescente e de minimizar a vitimação secundária, os resultados sugerem que a sua implementação ocorre de forma heterogénea e nem sempre alinhada com as recomendações baseadas na evidência científica.

Um contributo central deste trabalho reside na identificação de uma variabilidade significativa na implementação das DMF entre diferentes contextos judiciais, sugerindo que a aplicação deste mecanismo não é uniforme no sistema de justiça português. Esta variabilidade manifesta-se ao nível das condições de realização das diligências, das práticas de inquirição adotadas, do papel atribuído aos diferentes intervenientes e da forma como o procedimento é interpretado e operacionalizado pelos magistrados, contribuindo para experiências potencialmente distintas por parte das crianças e adolescentes envolvidos. Neste sentido, os resultados evidenciam que a qualidade do procedimento resulta da interação entre fatores contextuais, organizacionais e decisórios, refletindo não apenas as condições estruturais do sistema, mas também os processos de tomada de decisão que orientam a sua implementação.

Os resultados do Estudo 3 (*Characterizing Child Sexual Abuse and Child Victims' Participation in the Portuguese Criminal Justice System*) mostraram que, de 403 crianças e adolescentes identificados nos processos consultados no sistema de justiça criminal português, 82,13% participaram no procedimento obrigatório de DMF. Não obstante, verificou-se que uma proporção não residual de vítimas (17,87%) não foi abrangida por este mecanismo, sendo que, nestes casos, a maior parte teve de prestar declarações em audiência de julgamento. Por sua vez, entre as vítimas que participaram nas DMF, 11,48% voltaram ainda assim a ser chamadas a depor em julgamento.

De forma a aprofundar a compreensão destes resultados, foram conduzidas entrevistas com magistrados com experiência na realização de DMF (Estudo 5), cujas perspetivas corroboraram os padrões identificados na análise dos processos acima descritos. Em particular, os magistrados referiram que, apesar do carácter obrigatório deste procedimento nos crimes de ASC, existem situações em que as DMF não são promovidas. Entre as principais razões apontadas destacam-se: (1) a indisponibilidade da vítima no momento da diligência (ex., deslocação para o estrangeiro); (2) a vítima já ter atingido a

maioridade aquando da revelação formal dos factos; (3) a perceção de insuficiência de prova, antecipando-se o arquivamento do processo; e (4) em casos envolvendo adolescentes, a consideração de que possuem maturidade suficiente para depor em julgamento ou que os factos não são suscetíveis de esquecimento significativo até ao julgamento. Relativamente à obrigatoriedade das DMF, emergiram posições divergentes entre os magistrados. Enquanto alguns defendem que a remoção da sua obrigatoriedade permitiria uma maior flexibilidade na adequação do procedimento às especificidades de cada caso, outros alertam que tal alteração poderia aumentar a arbitrariedade na tomada de decisão, potenciando decisões assentes em critérios subjetivos e, consequentemente, comprometendo a proteção das vítimas.

A não promoção das DMF nas situações anteriormente descritas tem implicações relevantes, quer para a proteção da criança ou adolescente, quer para o próprio processo judicial. Por um lado, a ausência de DMF pode implicar a prestação de depoimento em fases mais tardias e potencialmente mais exigentes do processo, aumentando o risco de vitimação secundária. Por outro lado, pode comprometer a preservação precoce do testemunho, com possíveis repercussões na sua qualidade, detalhe e fiabilidade, afetando, em última instância, a produção de prova e a decisão judicial, devendo a sua ponderação ser feita de forma cuidadosa.

Para além das questões estruturais e processuais identificadas, tornou-se igualmente fundamental analisar a forma como as DMF são conduzidas na prática. Neste sentido, o Estudo 4 (*Bridging Guidelines and Practice: Questioning Styles in Judicial Interviews With Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal*) permitiu examinar a qualidade das entrevistas realizadas em sede de DMF, através da análise do tipo de questões colocadas e das respostas fornecidas pelas crianças e adolescentes. Os resultados evidenciaram que, apesar da existência de recomendações baseadas na evidência que privilegiam o uso de questões abertas e não sugestivas, persistem práticas de inquirição que podem comprometer a qualidade e a fiabilidade do testemunho. Em particular, questões de escolha múltipla foram significativamente mais frequentes que os restantes tipos de questões (i.e., abertas, diretivas, sugestivas, sumários e facilitadores). Questões de reconhecimento (escolha múltipla e sugestivas) foram duas vezes mais frequentes que questões abertas. Como resultado, mais de metade dos detalhes fornecidos pela criança ou adolescente foram obtidos por questões de reconhecimento. Relativamente às questões abertas - o tipo de questão mais recomendado pela evidência científica - representaram apenas 6% das questões totais. Ainda assim, quando analisada a produtividade de cada tipo de questão, isto é, o número de detalhes fornecidos em resposta a cada uma das questões, as perguntas abertas foram as que geraram mais informação.

Adicionalmente, destacam-se lacunas ao nível material e ambiental. Especificamente, a maioria das DMF foi apenas gravada em formato áudio, com equipamentos posicionados de forma potencialmente intimidante para a criança ou adolescente, sendo frequentemente conduzidas em salas de audiência ou de diligência nos tribunais, com múltiplos adultos presentes. A desadequação dos meios de gravação, dos espaços físicos e dos materiais disponíveis configura-se como um obstáculo à participação das crianças ou adolescentes no sistema de justiça, tal como evidenciado na literatura, que aponta o ambiente e a organização dos espaços judiciais como fatores potencialmente ansiogénicos (Ferra et al., 2022; Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Santtila et al., 2004; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993).

Esta análise revela que a eficácia das DMF não depende apenas da sua realização, mas também da forma como o procedimento é conduzido e das condições em que ocorre. Mesmo quando o testemunho é recolhido precocemente, a utilização de estratégias de inquirição inadequadas pode limitar a quantidade e qualidade da informação obtida, bem como introduzir riscos de contaminação do relato e vitimação secundária. Estas limitações assumem particular relevância quando articuladas com os resultados do Estudo 3, que mostraram que a realização de DMF estava associada a maior probabilidade de desfechos judiciais mais severos, incluindo uma maior probabilidade de condenação, reforçando assim o papel central deste mecanismo na produção de prova em crimes de ASC. Neste sentido, os resultados do Estudo 4 complementam os dados do Estudo 3, demonstrando que eventuais fragilidades do procedimento não se situam apenas ao nível da sua implementação (ex., ausência ou atraso), mas também ao nível das práticas concretas de recolha do testemunho.

Os resultados qualitativos obtidos junto de juízes e procuradores (Estudo 5) permitiram aprofundar a compreensão das dinâmicas subjacentes à implementação das DMF. De forma consistente, os participantes demonstraram possuir conhecimento teórico das boas práticas recomendadas na condução de entrevistas a crianças e adolescentes, nomeadamente a gravação vídeo, atendendo à importância da comunicação não verbal das vítimas, a utilização de questões abertas, o evitamento de questões sugestivas, a adaptação da linguagem ao nível desenvolvimental da criança ou adolescente e a criação de um ambiente facilitador da comunicação e amigo das crianças. Estes resultados sugerem que, ao nível concetual, existe uma consciência clara dos princípios orientadores de uma inquirição adequada e alinhada com a evidência científica.

Apesar do conhecimento concetual apresentado pelos magistrados, a sua tradução na prática revela-se inconsistente, tal como demonstrado pelos resultados do Estudo 4. Para além disso, os próprios magistrados no Estudo 5 mencionaram adotar práticas que se afastam das recomendações baseadas na evidência científica (ex., utilizar desenhos ou bonecos para obter revelações dos atos abusivos; falar

com as crianças como falam com os seus filhos; Korkman et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2018). Adicionalmente, alguns magistrados reconheceram dificuldades na operacionalização destas recomendações no contexto real das DMF, apontando para constrangimentos estruturais e organizacionais que limitam a sua aplicação. Entre estes, destacam-se a natureza formal do contexto judicial, a presença de múltiplos intervenientes durante a diligência e a insuficiência de formação prática e especializada. Neste enquadramento, os magistrados referem recorrer frequentemente a estratégias baseadas na sua experiência profissional, em detrimento de práticas sistematicamente alinhadas com a evidência científica. Assim, emerge um desfasamento entre o que os profissionais sabem que deveria ser feito e aquilo que efetivamente conseguem implementar no contexto concreto do sistema de justiça.

Este desfasamento entre conhecimento e prática encontra-se amplamente documentado na literatura internacional. Embora os profissionais reportem utilizar frequentemente perguntas abertas, a evidência indica que, na prática, a condução das entrevistas assenta maioritariamente em questões diretivas ou fechadas (Yi & Lamb, 2018). Esta discrepância parece estar associada a dificuldades na operacionalização das estratégias recomendadas, refletindo, em parte, limitações na identificação e distinção entre diferentes tipos de questões, bem como equívocos concetuais sobre o que constitui cada uma delas (Powell et al., 2013). Consequentemente, mesmo quando os profissionais procuram utilizar abordagens alinhadas com a evidência, estas são frequentemente mal operacionalizadas, através de formulações que aparentam ser abertas, mas que, na prática, limitam a resposta da criança ou adolescente (Henderson et al., 2020). Especificamente, os entrevistadores podem assumir que qualquer questão iniciada por "*conta-me*" corresponde a uma questão aberta, classificando questões como, por exemplo, "*conta-me de que cor era a camisola dele*" como abertas, quando, na realidade, solicitam informações específicas e não promovem um relato livre (Henderson et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2013; Yi & Lamb, 2018).

Neste âmbito, importa ainda considerar que, embora os magistrados tenham referido a existência de algumas sessões de formação teórica, a literatura tem vindo a demonstrar que este tipo de formação, por si só, é insuficiente para promover mudanças estáveis e duradouras nas práticas de inquirição (Gomes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2012; Sternberg et al., 2001). Adicionalmente, a literatura internacional sobre o conhecimento de magistrados em matérias de ASC e funcionamento do testemunho indica que níveis mais elevados de experiência profissional tendem a associar-se a maior confiança na própria competência, sem que tal corresponda a um aumento efetivo de conhecimento científico (Korkman et al., 2014; Magnussen et al., 2008). Em particular, estudos conduzidos com magistrados têm consistentemente mostrado que, embora detenham alguns

conhecimentos alinhados com a evidência científica, mantêm simultaneamente conceções incorretas sobre aspetos do ASC e do funcionamento do testemunho (Jiang & Luo, 2016; Korkman et al., 2014; Magnussen et al., 2008; Magnussen et al., 2010). Assim, a evidência aponta para a necessidade de modelos de formação que integrem componentes práticas, supervisão contínua e feedback estruturado, permitindo a consolidação de competências e a sua transferência efetiva para o contexto real de entrevista. A ausência destes elementos poderá contribuir para a manutenção de práticas divergentes das recomendações baseadas na evidência, mesmo na presença de formação inicial ou conhecimento concetual adequado (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb, 2016; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; O'Donohue & Fanetti, 2016).

Para além destes aspetos, emergiu ainda, na perspetiva dos magistrados, uma limitação associada ao princípio da imediação na apreciação da prova. Em particular, foi referido que a recolha antecipada do testemunho através das DMF pode afastar o julgador do contacto direto com a vítima, dificultando a avaliação da credibilidade do depoimento. Neste contexto, a gravação vídeo das declarações foi apontada como uma estratégia potencial para colmatar esta lacuna, permitindo preservar elementos não verbais da comunicação e aproximar o julgador da experiência da imediação.

Esta lacuna entre as intenções ou conhecimentos e comportamentos efetivos pode ser interpretada à luz da teoria do comportamento planeado (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020). Esta teoria sugere que as intenções – que refletem a motivação e a disposição para agir – são moldadas por atitudes, normas subjetivas e controlo comportamental percebido, influenciando desta forma o comportamento. Aplicando ao contexto particular deste trabalho, os magistrados podem querer melhorar a prática das DMF, mas percebem que a cultura judicial valoriza outros objetivos como a celeridade e o formalismo (normas subjetivas), sentem falta de tempo ou condições para o fazer de forma adequada e não percebem apoio institucional (controlo percebido). Como resultado, verifica-se a existência de intenção sem correspondente mudança comportamental.

Adicionalmente, é possível enquadrar as dificuldades na implementação de boas práticas nas DMF à luz do modelo ecológico do desenvolvimento humano (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) que enfatiza a influência de múltiplos níveis contextuais no comportamento humano. Neste contexto, a atuação dos magistrados não pode ser analisada apenas ao nível individual (ex., conhecimento ou competências), mas deve ser compreendida à luz de fatores presentes em diferentes sistemas. Ao nível do microssistema, destacam-se as interações diretas durante a diligência, incluindo a presença de múltiplos intervenientes e a dinâmica da sala de audiência. O mesossistema reflete a articulação entre diferentes atores e instituições (ex., magistratura judicial, magistratura do Ministério Público, técnicos

especialmente habilitados), que pode facilitar ou dificultar a aplicação de práticas adequadas. Por sua vez, o exossistema inclui aspetos organizacionais, como a existência (ou ausência) de protocolos de entrevista e oportunidades de formação contínua, prática e especializada. Finalmente, ao nível do macrossistema, emergem normas e características mais amplas do sistema judicial, nomeadamente o seu carácter formal e adversarial. Neste sentido, as dificuldades na operacionalização de práticas baseadas na evidência parecem resultar da interação entre estes múltiplos níveis contextuais, reforçando a ideia de que intervenções eficazes deverão ir além do indivíduo e incidir também sobre dimensões organizacionais e sistémicas.

Adicionalmente, outro aspeto particularmente relevante para este trabalho foi a análise do papel do técnico especialmente habilitado nas DMF. Tanto na perspetiva dos magistrados (Estudo 5) como dos próprios técnicos (Estudo 6), este papel emerge como um elemento central no procedimento, porém estruturalmente ambíguo, caracterizado pela ausência de definição clara de funções, elevada variabilidade na prática e forte dependência das decisões dos juízes envolvidos na diligência.

Os resultados dos Estudos 5 e 6 mostraram que a atuação destes profissionais se organiza globalmente em três fases - antes, durante e depois da diligência - sendo, contudo, altamente variável o que é concretamente realizado em cada uma delas. Em particular, durante as DMF, as práticas variaram desde uma posição não interventiva, centrada exclusivamente no apoio à criança ou adolescente, até à condução da própria entrevista. Estes resultados são corroborados pelos dados do Estudo 4, que evidenciaram que cerca de 6% das entrevistas analisadas foram conduzidas por técnicos especialmente habilitados e que, do total de questões colocadas à criança ou adolescente, 8% foram formuladas por estes profissionais. Esta variabilidade parece estar associada à familiaridade dos magistrados com as competências dos técnicos, mas também à ausência de diretrizes claras que orientem a sua atuação.

Adicionalmente, os dados do Estudo 6 sugerem que a atuação dos técnicos tende a refletir o enquadramento institucional e formativo em que estão inseridos, sendo que as suas práticas são frequentemente guiadas pelas normas implícitas das instituições de origem, mais do que por um referencial comum e padronizado de atuação nacional no contexto das DMF. Neste sentido, também a própria concetualização do que constitui uma "boa prática" parece ser influenciada por esse enquadramento, refletindo os modelos de intervenção e orientações que lhes são transmitidos ao nível institucional, o que poderá contribuir para a heterogeneidade observada entre profissionais.

Neste contexto, emerge ainda, de forma consistente nos Estudos 5 e 6, a perceção de que a condução das entrevistas deveria ser assegurada pelos técnicos especialmente habilitados. Embora esta posição reflita o reconhecimento da importância de competências especializadas na interação com

crianças e adolescentes, os resultados sugerem que tal entendimento poderá simplificar excessivamente a questão. Com efeito, a variabilidade observada nas práticas e competências destes profissionais indica que a qualidade da entrevista não depende exclusivamente do grupo profissional responsável pela sua condução.

Esta interpretação é consistente com a literatura que demonstra que a formação em psicologia, por si só, não garante níveis superiores de conhecimento sobre processos de memória ou sobre a condução de entrevistas forenses, quando comparada com outros grupos profissionais (Andreu et al., 2025; Chung et al., 2022; Korkman et al., 2007; Magnussen & Melinder, 2012; Melinder & Magnussen, 2013). Assim, estes resultados sugerem que a eficácia da condução das DMF não depende exclusivamente do grupo profissional responsável pela entrevista, mas antes da existência de formação especializada, estruturada e baseada na evidência, bem como de condições que permitam a sua aplicação consistente na prática.

Para além disso, os resultados evidenciam fragilidades ao nível da comunicação e articulação entre os diferentes intervenientes no procedimento. Em particular, observa-se que a ausência de diálogo prévio às DMF entre magistrados e técnicos relativamente ao papel esperado pode conduzir a interpretações restritivas por parte destes últimos, que assumem não poder intervir em determinadas situações, mesmo quando os magistrados não se oporiam a essa intervenção. Em alguns casos, esta falta de clarificação poderá mesmo comprometer a qualidade da diligência, nomeadamente quando os técnicos, apesar de possuírem informação relevante ou identificarem dificuldades na interação com a criança, optam por não intervir por não se sentirem legitimados para o fazer. Estes dados sugerem a importância de promover momentos de articulação prévia entre os intervenientes, bem como de encorajar os técnicos a clarificarem ativamente o âmbito da sua intervenção junto do magistrado, sobretudo na ausência de orientações formais.

Adicionalmente, os dados sugerem que o valor atribuído ao técnico especialmente habilitado não é intrínseco à sua presença, mas depende das condições em que a sua intervenção é operacionalizada. Em particular, a existência de uma preparação prévia adequada e a construção de uma relação de confiança e proximidade com a criança ou adolescente emergem como fatores centrais para a eficácia da sua atuação. Na ausência destas condições - nomeadamente quando o técnico interage com a vítima apenas momentos antes da diligência como descrito pelos profissionais - a sua presença tende a ser percecionada como equivalente à de qualquer outro adulto no contexto daquela diligência, limitando o seu potencial de apoio e mediação. Assim, os resultados sugerem que estes profissionais possuem o

potencial de atuar como mediadores entre as recomendações baseadas na evidência e a sua aplicação no contexto judicial, papel que aparenta permanecer, no entanto, subaproveitado.

No seu conjunto, os resultados dos diferentes estudos sugerem que a resposta ao ASC em Portugal permanece fragmentada, sustentada em múltiplos procedimentos e intervenientes, e insuficientemente centrada na criança ou adolescente, o que compromete simultaneamente a proteção da vítima, ao aumentar o risco de vitimação secundária, e a qualidade e a fiabilidade da prova produzida no sistema de justiça.

Esta leitura é ainda reforçada por evidência empírica produzida no contexto português que integrou a perspetiva das próprias crianças e adolescentes sobre as suas trajetórias no sistema de justiça (Ribeiro, 2009). De forma consistente com os resultados do presente trabalho, esse estudo evidenciou que a repetição dos testemunhos em diferentes contextos, a multiplicidade de intervenientes e a inadequação dos espaços físicos constituem dimensões centrais da experiência das vítimas. Adicionalmente, o estudo destaca que a qualidade do contacto relacional com os profissionais emerge como determinante para a forma como a criança ou adolescente compreende, vivencia e colabora com o processo judicial. Neste sentido, a participação pode assumir um carácter insecurizante ou facilitador, dependendo menos das características da criança ou adolescente e mais da forma como os procedimentos são conduzidos e das condições em que ocorrem. Esta convergência entre a perspetiva dos diferentes intervenientes reforça que as limitações identificadas refletem fragilidades estruturais na organização da participação das crianças e adolescentes no sistema de justiça.

Limitações e recomendações para investigações futuras

Apesar dos contributos relevantes do presente trabalho para a literatura, importa reconhecer um conjunto de limitações que devem ser consideradas na interpretação dos resultados, bem como apontar direções para investigações futuras.

Em primeiro lugar, a análise empírica realizada no Estudo 3 baseou-se em processos judiciais consultados num conjunto específico de tribunais portugueses, o que poderá limitar a generalização dos resultados a todo o sistema de justiça nacional. Tendo em conta a variabilidade institucional identificada ao longo da investigação, estudos futuros deverão analisar amostras mais alargadas e diversificadas, possivelmente não captadas na presente amostra.

Em segundo lugar, a análise da qualidade das DMF (Estudo 4) centrou-se predominantemente no tipo de questões utilizadas e na quantidade de informação obtida, não abrangendo outras dimensões relevantes da entrevista forense, como a qualidade da relação estabelecida com a criança ou adolescente, os aspetos não verbais da interação ou o impacto emocional da diligência na vítima.

Investigações futuras poderão beneficiar da inclusão destas dimensões para captar de forma mais abrangente a complexidade do processo de inquirição.

Adicionalmente, os estudos qualitativos (Estudos 5 e 6) basearam-se em autorrelatos de magistrados e técnicos especialmente habilitados, os quais podem estar sujeitos a enviesamentos, nomeadamente de desejabilidade social ou de memória. Neste sentido, futuras investigações poderão articular dados de autorrelato com análise das diligências em que participaram, de modo a aprofundar a compreensão das práticas efetivamente implementadas. Adicionalmente, torna-se relevante analisar os conhecimentos e crenças destes intervenientes relativamente ao ASC e à recolha do testemunho, considerando o potencial impacto destes fatores nas práticas adotadas.

Importa ainda salientar que o presente trabalho não integrou a perspetiva das crianças e adolescentes envolvidos nas DMF, constituindo uma limitação particularmente relevante, tendo em conta que a sua experiência no sistema de justiça é central para a avaliação da adequação do procedimento e do risco de vitimação secundária. Assim, embora desafiador, futuras investigações deverão privilegiar a inclusão da voz das crianças e adolescentes, explorando a sua experiência subjetiva, perceção de segurança, compreensão do procedimento e sentido de justiça.

No âmbito do Estudo 4, não foi possível analisar a associação entre a qualidade das entrevistas e os resultados processuais. Assim, futuras investigações poderão procurar integrar estas dimensões, de modo a compreender de forma mais aprofundada em que medida as práticas de inquirição se podem relacionar com os desfechos judiciais.

Por fim, considerando a relevância atribuída à formação e à experiência dos profissionais na literatura e nos resultados do presente trabalho, futuras investigações poderão explorar de forma mais sistemática o impacto de programas de formação e supervisão na qualidade das práticas de inquirição, contribuindo para a identificação de estratégias eficazes de implementação de recomendações baseadas na evidência. Da mesma forma, também se torna pertinente investigar o impacto vicariante da exposição a este tipo de casos em magistrados, técnicos especialmente habilitados e oficiais de justiça.

Em conjunto, estas linhas de investigação futura poderão contribuir para o desenvolvimento de um modelo mais consistente, integrado e baseado na evidência para a condução das DMF no sistema de justiça português.

Implicações práticas e políticas

Os resultados da presente investigação evidenciam um conjunto de fragilidades na implementação das DMF, que se manifestam ao nível da sua concretização prática, da qualidade das práticas de inquirição e da articulação entre os diferentes intervenientes no procedimento. Em particular,

a variabilidade identificada entre contextos judiciais, a discrepância entre conhecimento e prática, bem como a ambiguidade associada ao papel do técnico especialmente habilitado, sugerem que a eficácia deste mecanismo depende não apenas do seu enquadramento legal, mas sobretudo das condições em que é operacionalizado. Neste sentido, estes resultados apontam para a necessidade de intervenções que ultrapassam o nível individual, incidindo também sobre dimensões organizacionais e sistémicas do funcionamento das DMF. Assim, apresentam-se de seguida um conjunto de implicações práticas e políticas que decorrem diretamente dos resultados desta investigação para o envolvimento das crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais no sistema de justiça, com vista a assegurar uma maior consistência, qualidade e alinhamento com as recomendações baseadas na evidência.

Em primeiro lugar, tendo em conta que se trata de um procedimento de elevado valor probatório, destaca-se a importância de assegurar maior celeridade na realização das DMF, reduzindo os atrasos entre a autuação do processo e a sua concretização. Esta necessidade torna-se particularmente evidente quando se consideram não apenas os atrasos inerentes à revelação do abuso por parte da criança ou adolescente, mas também aquelas introduzidos pelo próprio sistema de justiça. A realização precoce das DMF permite preservar a qualidade da memória, reduzir o risco de influências externas e potenciar a robustez da prova.

Paralelamente, os resultados apontam para a necessidade de promover uma maior uniformização das práticas entre tribunais, reduzindo a variabilidade atualmente observada na implementação deste procedimento. Neste sentido, a criação e implementação de diretrizes nacionais para este procedimento, constitui uma medida fundamental para assegurar maior consistência na condução das DMF, orientar a atuação dos diferentes intervenientes e potenciar a colaboração das vítimas de ASC.

Ao nível dos magistrados, torna-se essencial investir na formação especializada, com particular enfoque na componente prática da entrevista a crianças e adolescentes, bem como na sensibilização para o impacto das diferentes estratégias de inquirição na qualidade do testemunho e na experiência da vítima. Neste âmbito, assume especial relevância a formação em protocolos de entrevista forense baseados na evidência, bem como o desenvolvimento de competências ao nível da compreensão do desenvolvimento infantil e das suas implicações na comunicação e na recolha do testemunho. Este investimento deverá abranger todos os profissionais envolvidos no procedimento de DMF, promovendo uma linguagem comum e uma compreensão partilhada das boas práticas.

No que respeita especificamente aos técnicos especialmente habilitados, os resultados evidenciam a necessidade de clarificação do seu papel no âmbito das DMF, incluindo a definição explícita

das suas funções ao longo das diferentes fases do procedimento. Adicionalmente, a implementação de modelos de formação padronizados poderá contribuir para reduzir a variabilidade observada e promover uma atuação mais consistente entre técnicos.

Um dos aspetos mencionados pelos participantes dos estudos qualitativos foi a necessidade de envolver o técnico especialmente habilitado na condução da entrevista das DMF. No entanto, importa salientar que a condução de uma entrevista forense junto de crianças e adolescentes não deve depender da formação académica de origem do interveniente, mas sim das competências técnico-científicas que este possui, nomeadamente ao nível da vitimologia (ex., dinâmicas e consequências do ASC), da psicologia da memória e do testemunho (ex., características do funcionamento da memória), do desenvolvimento infantil (ex., aspetos desenvolvimentais típicos das diferentes faixas etárias), dos trâmites judiciais e de um protocolo de entrevista forense baseado na evidência. Da mesma forma, estes conhecimentos devem ser atualizados com formação contínua, estruturada e regular, bem como acesso a supervisão e feedback contínuos, assegurando a qualidade e consistência das práticas de inquirição.

Para além da qualificação dos profissionais, torna-se igualmente necessário melhorar as condições materiais e ambientais em que as DMF são realizadas, assegurando ambientes adequados, que promovam o conforto e a segurança da criança ou adolescente e que facilitem a comunicação. Em particular, destaca-se a necessidade de privilegiar a gravação audiovisual das entrevistas, bem como a utilização de espaços especialmente concebidos para a inquirição de crianças e adolescentes, distintos das salas de audiência tradicionais. Adicionalmente, a redução do número de adultos presentes na sala, privilegiando a existência de um único interlocutor direto com a criança ou adolescente e a participação dos restantes intervenientes à distância (ex., através de circuito fechado de vídeo ou de espelho unidirecional) contribuem para um ambiente menos intimidatório e mais facilitador da comunicação da vítima. Ainda assim, importa ponderar criticamente o recurso a espelhos unidirecionais, uma vez que, apesar de permitirem a observação indireta, podem constituir um elemento distrator para a criança e comprometer a sua concentração e conforto (Haldorsson, 2017; Korkman et al., 2024). Neste sentido, a promoção de uma abordagem centrada na vítima e alinhada com os princípios da justiça amiga da criança deverá constituir um eixo orientador fundamental, implicando também o reforço da articulação entre os diferentes intervenientes no procedimento e a adoção de práticas multidisciplinares.

Ao nível das políticas públicas, os resultados desta investigação apontam para a necessidade de uma reflexão mais ampla sobre o enquadramento das DMF no sistema de justiça português. Em particular, destaca-se a importância de proceder à clarificação e eventual reforma do enquadramento legal deste mecanismo, bem como à institucionalização de práticas baseadas na evidência,

nomeadamente através da definição de protocolos de entrevista obrigatórios, da implementação de sistemas de supervisão e da promoção de formação contínua. Adicionalmente, importa promover uma reflexão crítica sobre a necessidade do envolvimento da criança ou adolescente nos diferentes procedimentos processuais, assegurando que a sua participação é limitada ao estritamente necessário, em que cada intervenção é devidamente justificada à luz da proteção da vítima e das exigências probatórias.

Torna-se ainda essencial investir em recursos humanos especializados e materiais, bem como desenvolver mecanismos de monitorização e avaliação sistemática do funcionamento das DMF, que permitam identificar fragilidades e promover melhorias contínuas. Este esforço deverá ainda articular-se com as diretivas e recomendações internacionais nesta área, garantindo uma maior harmonização com os padrões de justiça centrada na vítima e na proteção da criança ou adolescente.

Para além das dimensões diretamente associadas ao procedimento de DMF, os resultados desta investigação evidenciam a necessidade de uma maior articulação interinstitucional. A multiplicidade de procedimentos em que a criança ou adolescente é envolvida, frequentemente distribuídos por diferentes sistemas (judicial, proteção e saúde), bem como a existência de investigações paralelas, nomeadamente em contexto escolar, sugerem a necessidade de definir mecanismos formais de coordenação que evitem a duplicação de intervenções e a exposição desnecessária da vítima a múltiplos contextos de relato. Neste sentido, torna-se fundamental assegurar que a participação da criança ou adolescente é limitada ao estritamente necessário, sendo cada intervenção cuidadosamente ponderada à luz das exigências probatórias e da proteção da vítima.

Adicionalmente, para além das medidas anteriormente descritas que incidem sobre a melhoria do funcionamento do modelo atual, importa ainda equacionar abordagens mais estruturais e integradas como os modelos do tipo *Barnahus* ou *Children's Advocacy Centers.* Estes modelos assentam numa abordagem multidisciplinar e centrada na criança ou adolescente, reunindo num único espaço diferentes profissionais (ex., justiça, saúde, proteção), com o objetivo de assegurar uma resposta coordenada, reduzir a repetição de relatos e promover condições de inquirição mais adequadas às necessidades da vítima (Haldorsson, 2017; National Children's Alliance, 2025). Estes modelos encontram-se amplamente implementados a nível internacional. Nos Estados Unidos, os *Children's Advocacy Centers* foram introduzidos na década de 1980, existindo atualmente aproximadamente 1000 centros em funcionamento (National Children's Alliance, 2026). Na Europa, o modelo Barnahus teve origem na Islândia, na década de 1990, tendo sido progressivamente adotado e adaptado em vários países europeus, encontrando-se, em 2023, implementado em 29 países (Council of Europe, 2023).

A introdução de modelos desta natureza no contexto português poderá constituir uma resposta estruturada a várias das fragilidades identificadas no presente estudo, nomeadamente ao nível da limitada articulação entre intervenientes, da variabilidade de práticas e da ausência de utilização de protocolos de entrevista forense baseados na evidência, conduzidos por profissionais com formação especializada. Adicionalmente, ao centralizar a intervenção num único contexto e ao privilegiar a condução das entrevistas por profissionais especializados, estes modelos contribuem para a redução da vitimação secundária e para a melhoria da experiência da criança ou adolescente no sistema de justiça. Neste sentido, a consideração de modelos integrados como o *Barnahus* ou os *Children's Advocacy Centers* poderá representar um passo decisivo no sentido de uma transformação mais profunda do sistema, alinhada com os princípios da justiça amiga da criança e com as recomendações internacionais nesta área.

Por fim, para além das respostas no âmbito do sistema de justiça, os resultados desta investigação sugerem igualmente a necessidade de reforçar estratégias de prevenção e sensibilização ajustadas às diferentes formas e contextos da vitimação. Neste sentido, torna-se fundamental promover ações de sensibilização dirigidas a crianças, adolescentes, famílias e profissionais, que abordem a identificação precoce de situações de risco, as dinâmicas do abuso e as barreiras à revelação, incluindo a vergonha, o medo de estigmatização e, no contexto digital, a perceção de responsabilidade associada à partilha de conteúdos. Estas estratégias deverão incluir também a promoção de literacia digital e de competências de autoproteção, contribuindo para uma resposta mais abrangente do fenómeno do ASC.

Em conjunto, estas implicações sublinham a necessidade de uma abordagem integrada e sistémica, que promova não apenas a existência formal de procedimentos como as DMF, mas a sua qualidade (i.e., baseada na evidência científica) e efetiva implementação enquanto instrumentos simultaneamente orientados para a proteção da criança ou adolescente e para a produção de prova fiável. Este equilíbrio é fundamental não só para a eficácia do sistema de justiça, mas também para o reforço da confiança das vítimas e da sociedade na sua capacidade de responder de forma adequada, célere e centrada nas necessidades das crianças e adolescentes.

Neste contexto, e como síntese particularmente expressiva dos progressos em Portugal na investigação do crime de ASC e desafios que ainda persistem, este trabalho termina destacando a voz de um magistrado que colaborou nesta investigação: *«Eu acho que estamos cada vez mais num bom caminho, embora percebamos que há muito caminho a fazer».*

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ANEXO

Anexo A. Parecer da Comissão de Ética



Universidade do Minho

Conselho de Ética

Comissão de Ética para a Investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas

Identificação do documento: CEICSH 079/2022

Relator: Cristina Maria Moreira Flores

Título do projeto: *O testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais: das práticas judiciais ao impacto psicológico*

Equipa de Investigação: Delfina Fernandes (IR), Doutoramento em Psicologia Aplicada, Escola de Psicologia da Universidade do Minho; Marlene Matos e Pedro Albuquerque (Orientadores), Escola de Psicologia da Universidade do Minho

PARECER

A Comissão de Ética para a Investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas (CEICSH) analisou o processo relativo ao projeto de investigação acima identificado, intitulado *O testemunho de crianças e adolescentes vítimas de crimes sexuais: Das práticas judiciais ao impacto psicológico.*

Os documentos apresentados revelam que o projeto obedece aos requisitos exigidos para as boas práticas na investigação com humanos, em conformidade com as normas nacionais e internacionais que regulam a investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas.

Face ao exposto, a Comissão de Ética para a Investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas (CEICSH) nada tem a opor à realização do projeto nos termos apresentados no Formulário de Identificação e Caracterização do Projeto, que se anexa, emitindo o seu parecer favorável, que foi aprovado por unanimidade pelos seus membros.

Braga, 20 de junho de 2022.

O Presidente da CEICSH



(Acílio Estanqueiro Rocha)

Anexo: Formulário de identificação e caracterização do projeto