

# What Sex Offenders Can Teach Us About Interviewing

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## Part I.

Several groups of adult male sex offenders (N = 142) participated in a survey focused on the police interview that resulted in their arrest and, in most cases, long-term incarceration. The majority of subjects were child molesters (62%), while others had convictions for statutory rape (12%), rape (11%), online sexual exploitation of children/CSAI (9%), and other sexual crimes such as exhibitionism (6%). All of the offenders were involved in court mandated sex offender treatment in Oregon at the time the survey took place. During the survey, each offender was asked to describe, from his point of view, how he was approached by police, what transpired during the interview, the specific thoughts or concerns he had during the interview, and the reason he confessed, declined to be interviewed or lied and denied committing the crimes. As opposed to most studies, where confession rates cluster around 30% (Lippert, Cross, Jones & Walsh, 2010), more than half of the participants in the current survey said they admitted a portion of their crimes during the interview and some said they “told police everything.” The authors surmised that the higher confession rate among this particular group was probably related to the manner in which the offenders were selected. The offenders who participated in the survey volunteered as part of a community service project and may have been more compliant by nature.

During the survey, the offenders were asked about the detective’s personal style of rapport building and the line of questioning used. Offenders were also asked about incidental things, such as the impact of note taking, audio recording, the presence of an additional officer in the room and the outcome of being interviewed in the field or at the police station. Of the men who “fully” admitted, several said they felt “relieved” by the process, and “needed help to stop.” Three men reported that they had been confronted by family members and contacted the police department to “turn themselves in.” Some of the “admitters” also stated that they knew lying would cause additional harm to themselves and their victim. Others reported feeling concerned about the additional consequences of lying. The majority of admitters reported that officers approached them in a “calm and friendly, but business-like manner.” Of the offenders who confessed to police, the overwhelming majority described “respectfulness,” “comradery,” “guilt,” and “self-preservation” as the most important factors related to their willingness to admit. The admitters were also more likely to report that they were “treated fairly,” and were convinced there was “more to gain by being honest.” The remaining men, the deniers (denied throughout the investigation) and those who requested an attorney and refused to be interviewed, stated emphatically, that “nothing” the officer did or said “could have

gotten me to admit it.” Some said they “knew the game going in,” while others believed they had more to gain by denying. Offenders who felt threatened or belittled also appeared to have been less willing to admit. Overall, the results of this survey were similar to those of an extremely comprehensive and worthwhile study conducted in Australia by Kebbell, Hurren & Mazerolle in 2006.

**The below quotes were taken directly from survey forms and interviews.**

**Admitters:**

*I was already starting to feel bad about it, so when the cop told me he could tell I was struggling and probably didn't know what to do, I opened up.*

*They came in and caught us together. One cop took her in the other room and started questioning her while the other one kept me in the living room. I could hear the cop talking to her. He was talking to her about being a rape victim. I knew the way he was talking to her was going to screw her up more, so I confessed so he'd stop talking to her.*

*The cop gave me a way out. He said he knew how these things happen and why guys do it. He seemed to understand.*

*It's funny, I knew the tape recorder was on, but after a while, I forgot about it.*

*They told me they weren't there to find out if I did it, just why I did. They were actually pretty pleasant.*

*They had so many details about what happened there just wasn't much point in lying.*

*If it had just been one girl I would have lied, but I knew it wouldn't work to say both of them were lying.*

*He told me he wasn't there to judge me and I was tired of living a lie.*

*They had the victim call me while they recorded me. I knew it was being recorded but I still admitted, I couldn't call her a liar on the phone.*

*I knew they had DNA so there was no point.*

*He was cool, he had me meet him at Starbucks and it seemed so non-threatening I guess didn't really understand what was happening.*

*He was straightforward with me and didn't seem fake at all. Now I know he probably was. I told him because what I'd been doing was wrong and I knew it was. I was sorry.*

*I don't know why, but I felt like I was disappointing him when I lied, so I told him what I'd done.*

*There were two of them, even though I knew they were doing that good cop/bad cop thing, I still told the nice one everything.*

*The cop told me what would happen to the victim if I lied. That she would have to go to court and testify in front of people. I just couldn't do that.*

*The cop told me lying would only hurt my family more.*

*I knew I was hurting my victim but I didn't know how to stop. I guess I was relieved when the cops showed up. I needed someone else to stop me.*

*I told my pastor first, who called the police and asked for an officer to come to our church and talk to me. I felt better with my pastor there and it was really good of the cop to come to the church. I could tell he was a Christian.*

*He told me there was help for people like me and my victim would get help too.*

*The cop told me they had everything they needed and they just wanted to hear my side for the record.*

*For a detective, he was polite and friendly. He was easy to talk to, just like a friend and he understood.*

*He took his time with me. He was patient and really seemed to want to see it from my point of view. Even though I knew he was doing his job, he treated me fair.*

*She made me sing like a canary, she convinced me it was no big deal, said she was just taking a statement and put me at ease.*

*He warmed me up first, really got to know me, made me feel at ease.*

*I just wanted to get it over with.*

*I was worried about what he thought about me, I didn't want him to think I was a pervert or some kind of predator so I told him what I'd really done because it wasn't as bad as they thought it was.*

*I knew the more I told, the longer I'd do. So I only admitted what they knew.*

*They had my computer, what else could I say?*

*I knew that calling her a liar would make me look like an ass.*

*They made me feel trapped, like I didn't have any choice but to tell. They said if I didn't cooperate, they would arrest me and I believed them.*

*While they were talking to me they said they understood how someone could do something like that, I didn't feel like such a monster.*

*They interrogated me for four hours, told me they knew I was lying. I think they just wore me down.*

*He took me outside and talked to me there. He didn't embarrass me in front of my family, he let me save my self-respect and I felt like I owed him.*

### **Deniers:**

*He almost had me but he gave up too soon.*

*He harassed me at work, made promises he never kept, lied about what I said.*

*He was a jerk, he harassed me at work, threatened to talk to everyone I knew and said he'd get me sooner or later. I figured I'd just wait him out.*

*I was not going to tell them anything. I knew I'd lose my job, my career, my family, my house and everything else I owned. My fear kept me lying and denying.*

*He thought he was so was slick. He thought he knew all the tricks and threats. He had his hand on his gun during the whole interview. I despised him and wouldn't have told him anything.*

*My life was already in shambles. One more person threatening me wasn't going to make any difference.*

*They played a bunch of word games and kept trying to trip me up. They must have thought I was stupid.*

*The whole time I was sitting there, I knew it would ruin my whole life and I knew they didn't care at all.*

*They put me in the ice box to scare me. I knew what they were doing. They must have thought I was stupid but I didn't fall for that.*

*I'd been arrested before so I knew what would happen if I talked. There was nothing he could have said or done that would have made any difference.*

*The more frustrated he got, the more fun I had. I loved watching him squirm.*

*The minute he turned on that recorder, I clammed up.*

## **What Works: Basic Tips for Child Abuse/Sex Crime Investigators**

### **PART II**

In addition to the surveys conducted with sex offenders, 26 police officers from 9 law enforcement agencies in Oregon were asked to describe what they believed were the most effective investigation and interview strategies with sex offenders. Some of the officers were interviewed individually, while others participated in group discussions. The participants were seasoned detectives who brought a wealth of experience, expertise and passion to the discussion. Throughout the process, it was evident that most of the officers had great insight into offender behavior, benefited from each year of experience and were able to maintain a sense of humor despite daily contact with some of society's most challenging offenders. Overall, the officers offered suggestions, techniques and examples of questioning strategies to the process. At the end of this article is a list of the officers who participated in these discussions. To be sure, they are some of Oregon's finest.

1. For most officers, it takes "at least two years" to become "comfortable and skilled enough" to successfully interview sex offenders. Rotating detectives out of sex crimes after two years is not recommended.
2. Watch/listen to as many interviews by more experienced officers as you can. Adapt what works for them to fit you/your style. "No one style works for everyone."

3. Develop the case as much as you can “before” you interview the offender. The more you know about them ahead of time, the quicker you can “get in their head” and the less of “an uphill battle it will be.” Know where they live, what they do, how long they have been married, any hobbies they have or if they served in the military.
4. Get clear, concise victim statements with details that can be corroborated. Ask the victim if anyone saw it happening, if the victim told anyone else, if victim thinks it might have happened to anyone else.
5. Find out related information that can be used during the suspect interview, i.e. victim’s school performance, relationships with family members, friends, helpful around house, etc.
6. Interview other family members, look for/ask about other victims, prior allegations/family history of sexually inappropriate behavior, child abuse or domestic violence.
7. Check criminal history, ask witnesses about drug use, solicitation, pornography/computer use, anything that might be linked to offending.
8. If possible, conduct pre-text phone call. Review the procedure with the victim ahead of time and talk about possible things to say/ask. “The police are coming to talk to me, what should I tell them?” Or, “Why did you do that to me?”
9. The interview setting: field vs. office vs. phone. Home or work setting might “help them feel more comfortable,” but might allow them to feel “too comfortable.” Get a sense of what will work in this case. Suspect might talk more on the phone.
10. If interviewing in station, and you do not plan to arrest them, have them sign in on “visitor’s log,” give them a visitor’s badge and offer them a drink. Let them know they are “free to leave at any time,” you will “not be arresting them, this is just a preliminary discussion” to “gather more information.”
11. Introduce self, “I am a police officer, I’m here to investigate a complaint, have you done anything to offend anyone?” “Do you know what this might be about?” If you are in the home, look for things that are unusual or out of place.
12. Before you start talking about the sexual crime, ask about the suspect’s family constellation, “how they get along” with everyone, who lives in the home, how everyone else gets along, what the children are like (school work, chores,

relationships, behavioral problems of any kind?) If they were complimentary about the child, it will make it harder for them to call the child a liar or “bad kid” later.”

13. Attempt to build rapport, “find something you have in common, be patient, and go with the flow.” Make them feel like you care about what they have to say. “Help me understand your side.” Remember, this is “reverse grooming.”
14. If using two detectives, one should take notes while the other takes the lead position as the interviewer. If it’s not working, make a subtle switch. Learn from each other. Pick someone you work well with and develop your joint style/tag team.
15. Wear them down. If one of you starts to get tired, “switch off and start asking the questions you came up with while you were taking notes.”
16. If you have a one-way mirror, use it. If the observer sees/hears something the interviewer might be missing, “text message or call them on their cell phone.” If you have/can use an ear bud, “all the better.”
17. Let the suspect keep his cell phone. At some point, leave the room, “then listen in on who he calls and what he says.”
18. Let them believe you “understand” them, how and why they did what they did, that you’ve heard everything before and “nothing they tell you will surprise or shock you.”
19. “Put your own spin on it.” Learn what works for you, how to develop themes, when to challenge them and “when to step back.”
20. Be respectful and likable. “Don’t be arrogant, cocky or judgmental.”
21. “It’s all about helping them minimize what they’ve done or shift the blame onto someone or something else.”
22. If you feel the “L” word coming on, slow things down, tell them to stop and listen to you for a while. Then do your best to repeat where you are with them, what you think about the case, what would be best for them.
23. Props - have a notebook with the case # and the suspects name and picture on the front, periodically review what’s inside, even if it’s blank paper. Do not let them see it’s blank.

24. Don't over commit, don't get caught pretending you have more information than you do. Don't lose your credibility.
25. Avoid the "tennis match." "No I didn't, yes you did, no I didn't, yes you did, no I didn't...."
26. Don't let them get off track too far, re-direct them back to the allegation and resume questioning.
27. If you are going to cuff them, cuff them with their hands behind their back, as they open up, move the cuffs to the front. When they start telling more, possibly remove the cuffs. Reward talking and honesty.
28. Don't give up too early. Don't stop the interview unless they ask for a lawyer or make a confession. Once they make a confession, get details and ask about other victims. Typical interviews take two to three, maybe even five hours.
29. Don't have a young cop interview an old suspect.
30. Don't threaten to do things you can't back up.

**Types of interview lines: "Some will talk, some will walk."**

*Look everybody has problems, some people drink, some gamble, some beat their wives and others have problems touching kids, it's not like you're a murderer or a rapist, it looks to me like you just made a mistake here.*

*It's not like you are some freak, running around raping kids on the playground or something.*

*It's easy to understand how these things happen, just look at all the sex in society, everybody's having trouble with it, just look at the news.*

*I've seen way worse stuff, what this is, just isn't all that big a deal, it's just touching, it wasn't like you were trying to hurt them.*

*We all have things that get out of control in our lives, urges you just can't control.*

*At least you didn't rape her. You aren't that kind of person.*

*Let me be your advocate.*



*I don't want to make any mistakes about what you are saying.*

*To other cop, "Hey, I don't think you are really hearing him, I think what he's trying to say is....."*

*A lot of eight and nine year old girls are developing earlier and know more about sex these days, I can see how someone might get themselves in trouble this way.*

*Did you do this a lot or just once? Did you penetrate or just rub?*

*I know you must really care about her because I could tell by the way she talked about you, she really cares about you. She isn't mad at you, she doesn't want anything bad to happen to you, she doesn't want you to be mad at her, she just wanted it to stop.*

*If we thought you were a dangerous person, we wouldn't be having this conversation, we'd be arresting you. We know you aren't like those other guys.*

*In these kinds of cases, we just want to get both sides of the story.*

*Is there anyway the kid could have misunderstood something you did, did you ever wrestle with her, help her wash herself, have her sit on your lap, hug her too long?*

*Maybe your hand slipped while you were tucking her in?*

*Maybe the kid's been molested by someone else. Any prior abuse you know of? Any sexualized behavior you noticed? Maybe the kid started it. Did they ever grab your crotch, kiss you too much? Maybe she liked it. I can see how it might have felt good.*

*She is a teen and I could see how she might have been attracted to a good looking guy like you.*

*I can completely understand how and why this happened. I've seen Ashley and she is a very pretty/sexy girl.*

*So why do you think she'd say that? Why would a kid make something like that up? So are you saying the kid is a liar? What do you think should happen to the victim for lying?*

*I know you are a man and want to do what a man would do, take responsibility for what has happened. You aren't the kind of man who would lie or blame the kid are you? You want*

*your family to be able to respect you when this is all over. To do that, they need to know you told the truth, you stepped up. You have to set an example for your boys.*

*Are you religious, oh, a Catholic? So am I, were you an altar boy too? You learned about sin and what happens to people to sin right? They go to hell forever. What could you do to avoid that right now? Or, I hear you were in the military, what would Oliver North say you should do?*

*Look, lots of guys your age experiment with other guys, it's not about being gay, it's just about curiosity, doesn't mean you are gay or anything.*

*So how's your sex life at home with your wife? That bad eh? Well, no wonder, then it's really her fault isn't it? Man, I know how that goes, after that long, hell, even when the wind blows you get a hard on.*

*Think about it this way, imagine you are on a jury and you hear some poor little kid have to testify about being molested. Then, you hear this guy come in, with all the excuses and bullshit you're giving me, who would you believe?*

*Most people know that kids lie to keep themselves from getting into trouble, not about stuff like this, most kids don't even want to talk about this kind of stuff, everybody knows that.*

*Look, you seem like a smart guy, you don't seem like one of those guys who doesn't know what's in his best interest. You don't want to brand yourself a liar.*

*You need to know that, when I write my report, I'm going to write either, he denied it at first, but the more we talked, the more he told the truth and finally did the right thing, or, I talked to this guy for three hours and he just kept lying.*

*It's ok if you change your story as we go along, we know it's hard to admit these kinds of things and talk about them. As you get to feeling more comfortable, it will be easier to talk about, we won't think badly of you for that.*

*I want to make sure I understand what you are saying. (Then repeat back lies). How do you think that sounds? Doesn't that sound ridiculous to you? Do you think anyone would believe that load of crap? Do I look that dumb? Are we done lying yet?*

*Look, think about this, six months from now, a lot of people are going to read these reports and have to make decisions about you. They will have to decide what kind of person you*

*are. Do you want them to think you are a liar, or someone who knows they made a mistake and was trying to make things right.*

*You already admitted that she's a good kid, does well in school, helps around the house and now, you're telling me she's a liar and would set you up like this?*

*What, you weren't ever even alone with her? Why don't you just stop there, I've given you an opportunity to come clean with me and tell the truth, if you keep lying, I'm going to walk out of this office and the interview will be over, is that what you want?*

*So, what you're telling me is that you were trying to teach her about sex, right? I could see how it might seem like it's better for a kid to learn about that from someone close, someone who cares. Is that what you were trying to do? I've been doing this for a long, long time, I'm probably the only person who can understand how you got yourself in this situation.*

*A lot of men like you had trouble when they were a kid, got too involved in sex, maybe got abused, started touching kids this way and it just became a way of life. I bet you've been dealing with this for a long, long time. You probably just need the right kind of help.*

**Apology letters:**

*I bet you'd feel a whole lot better about yourself if you wrote her a letter apologizing for what happened between the two of you. It would also show that you know what you did is wrong and people will think better of you for doing that.*

*If you could get a message to the victim, what would you say?*

**At end of interview:**

*What do you think should happen to you?*

*So, why did you tell me all this stuff?*

## References:

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## Officers Interviewed For This Project:

Detective Nick Amendolara, West Linn Police Department,  
Detective Todd Baltzell, Newberg Police Department,  
Detective Michael Boyd, West Linn Police Department,,  
Sergeant John Brent, Lake Oswego Police Department,  
Detective Eric Carter, Portland Police Bureau,  
Detective Tyler Chapman, Marion County Sheriff's Office,  
Detective William Crockett, Portland Police Bureau,  
Detective Maurice Delehant, Clackamas County Sheriff's Office,  
Detective Jeff Green, Clackamas County Sheriff's Office,  
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Detective Todd Hargrove, Linn County Sheriff's Office,  
Sergeant Randy Harris, Clackamas County Sheriff's Office,  
Detective Geary Hellman, Clackamas County Sheriff's Office,  
Special Agent, Ben Hicks, Department of Justice,  
Detective Brandon Kaopuiki, Gresham Police Department,  
Detective Robert Lee, Lake Oswego Police Department,  
Sergeant Patick Kelly, Portland Police Bureau,  
Detective Karen Mack, Portland Police Bureau,  
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