



# Measurement and Implementation Considerations for Collecting Data on Trauma in Children

**Benjamin E. Saunders, Ph.D.**

National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center  
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Medical University of South Carolina

# Topics

- ▶ Scope of potentially traumatic events, outcomes, mediators, and moderators to be measured with children
- ▶ Screening, case detection, and case classification challenges with children
- ▶ Ethical and legal issues with children

# What PTEs to Assess?

War Zone  
Trauma

Animal  
Attacks

Sexual  
Assault

MVA

Community  
Violence

Bullying

Traumatic  
Death

Physical  
Abuse

Terrorist Acts

Natural  
Disasters

Drug/Alcohol  
Rape

Mass  
Shootings

Immigration  
Trauma

Man-made  
Disasters

Physical  
Assault



## Incident/Event Characteristics

- Actual
- Perceived

# What Incident Characteristics to Assess?

- Series vs. a single incident
- Duration of the series
- Frequency of the series
- Sexual penetration
- Fear activation during the event
- Fear of physical injury during the event
- Fear of death during the event
- Significant pain
- Physical injury, even minor injury.
- Emotionally close and trusted offender
- Response of adults



**PTSD**

# What Trauma-Related Problems to Assess?

Peer  
Relationships

Delinquency

Physical  
Health

Suicide

Resilience!

Depression

PTSD

Social  
Functioning

Behavior  
Problems

Fears

Anxiety

Substance Use

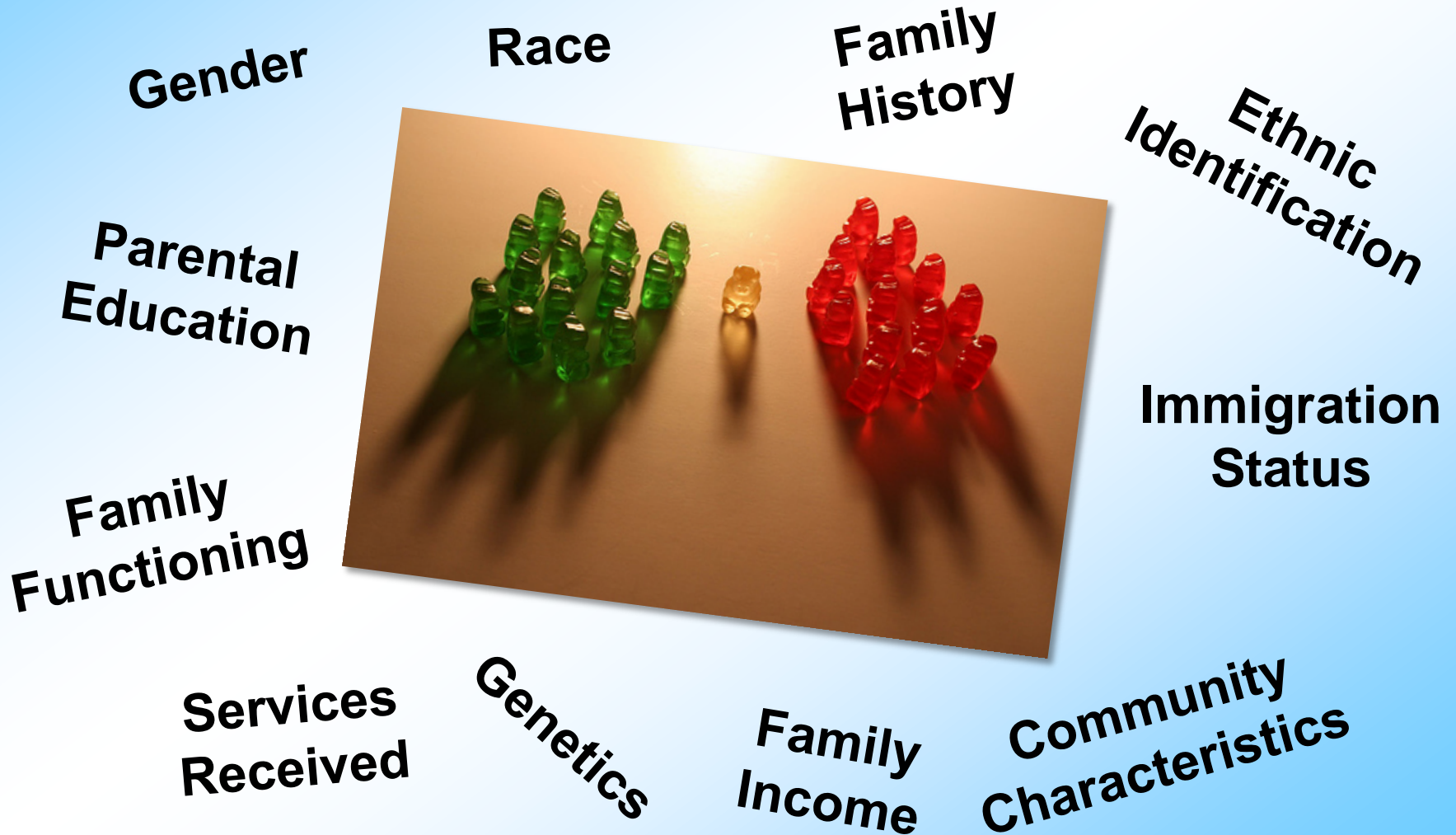
Traumatic  
Growth

Academic  
Achievement

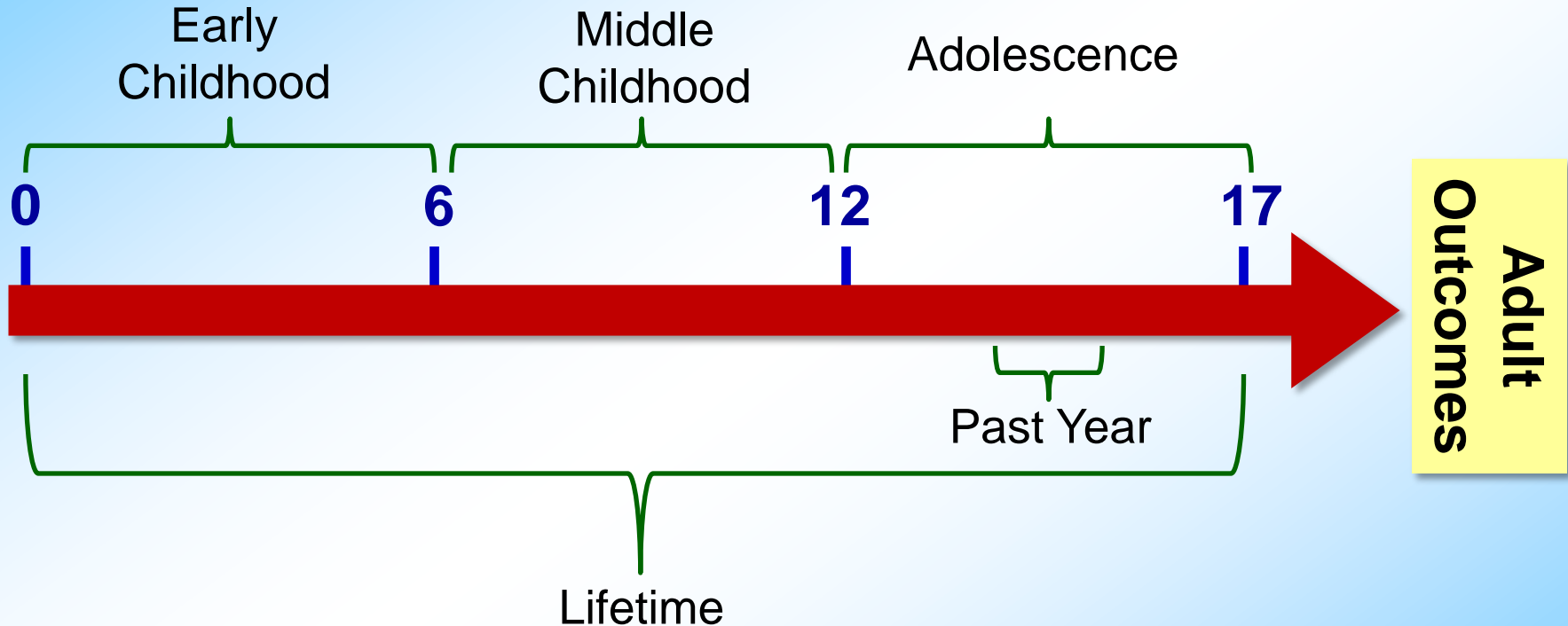




# Mediators, Moderators?



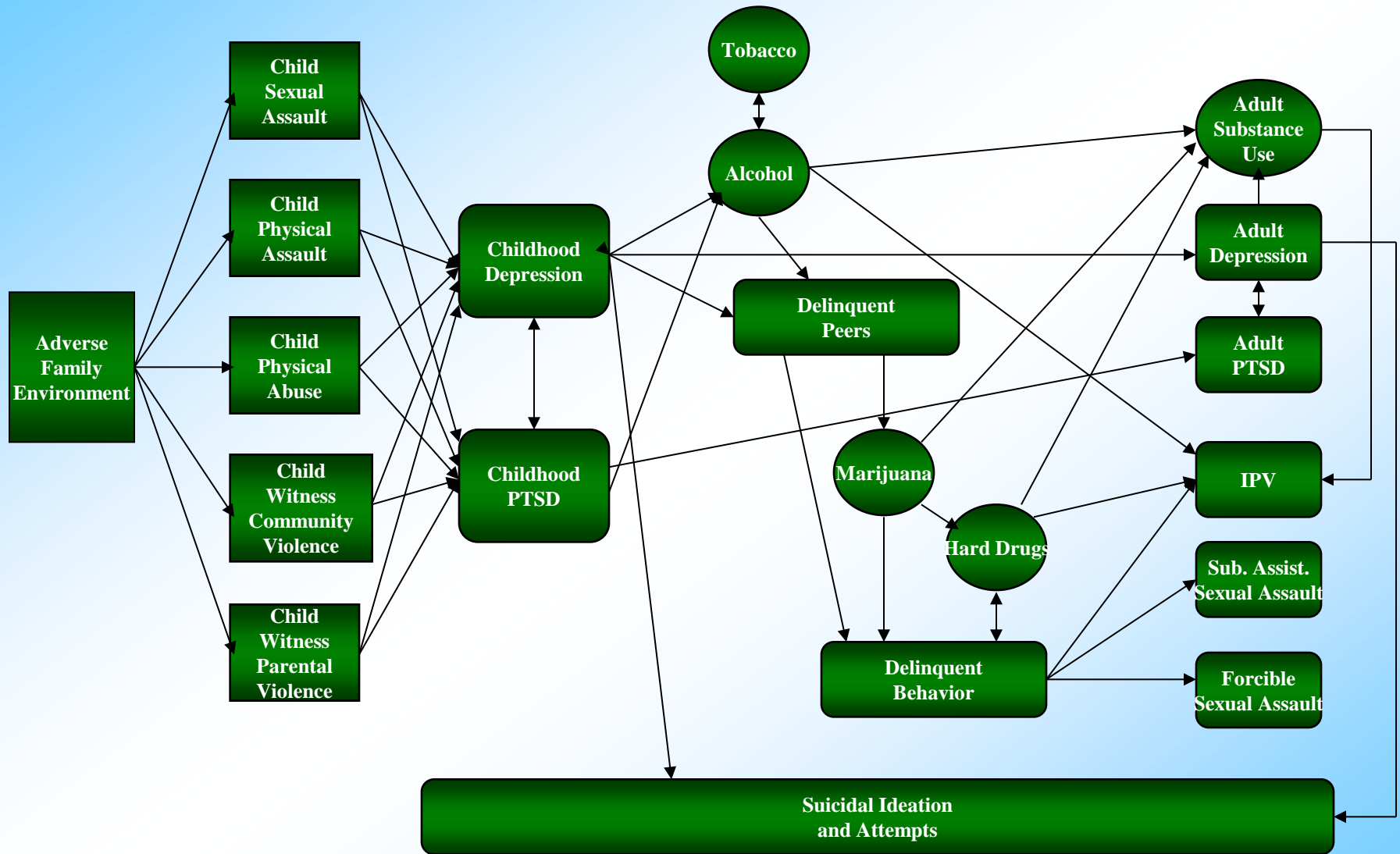
# Time Period of Interest?



**Incidence?  
Prevalence?**

**Sources of  
Information?**

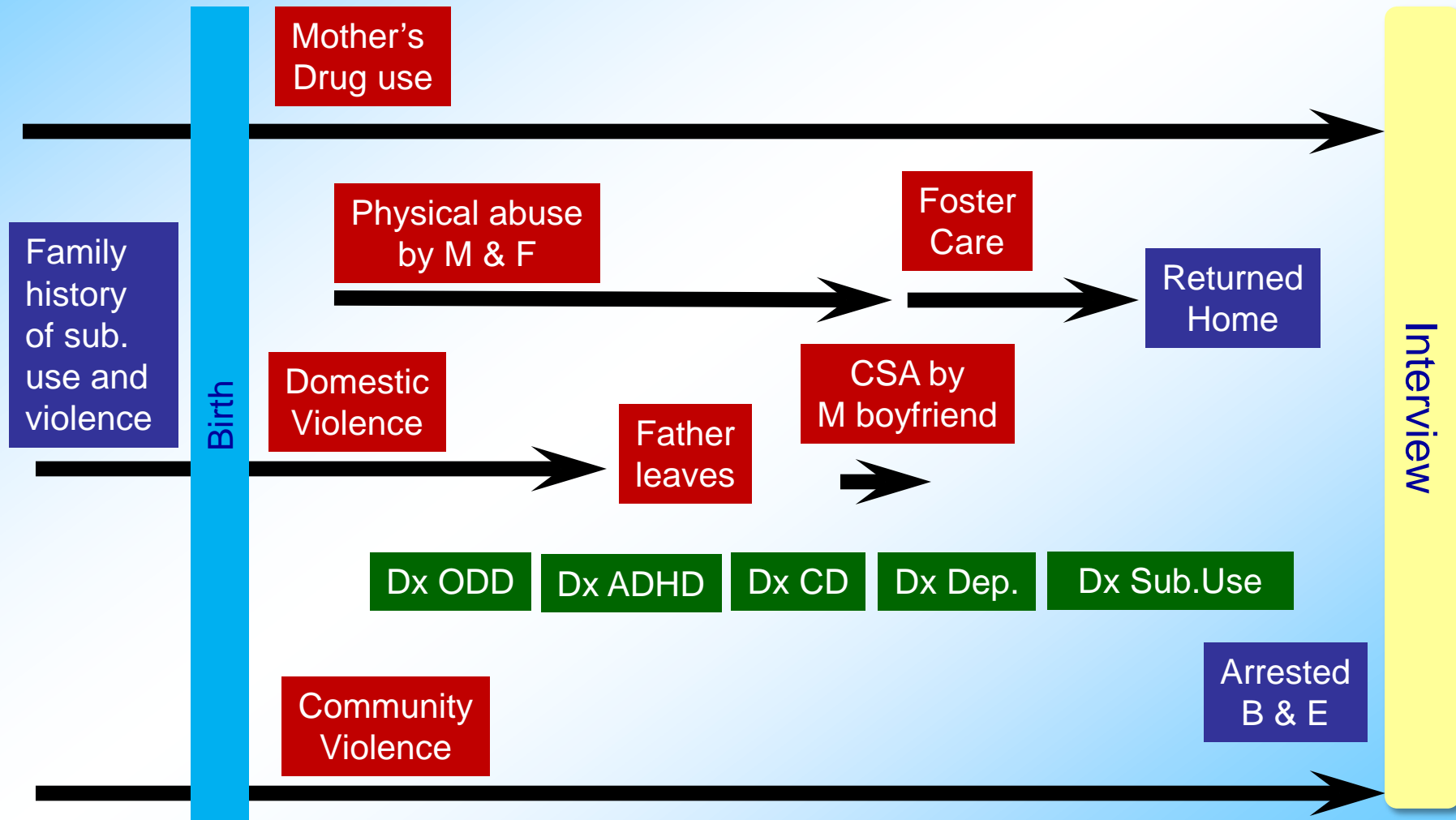
# NSA -- Model of Childhood Victimization and Adult Outcomes



**Moderators: Gender, Race, Family Income**



# Polyvictimization and Comorbidity Respondent Timeline



Research  
Questions

Feasibility



# Screening for Trauma History



- **Case detection**
- **Accurate classification**
  - False negative?
  - False positive?

# Case Detection

- **Definition.** Clear conceptual and operational definitions of the PTEs of interest.
- **Introduction.** Brief paragraph prior to screening questions to set the cognitive context, dispel stereotypes, adjust for common schemas concerning the trauma type, and cue memory.
- **Screening questions**
  - Multiple questions covering the range of experiences within type
  - Behaviorally specific to reduce interpretation
  - Language level consistent with the target age group
  - Should cue retrievable memories of past events
  - Match respondent's interpretation and labeling of experiences
- **Incident characteristics.** Follow-up questions for “hits” on screening questions to assess relevant PTE characteristics.

# Interview Progression

- Sections should build on each other
  - Easy, Sensitive, Easy, Debrief
- Balance similar and different structures and response sets across interview sections. Inspire attention, not confusion.
- Terms should remain the same across sections
- Length related to age





# Common Errors in Screening

- Not asking questions
- “Gate” questions
- Single screening items
- Undefined terms that are open to significant interpretation by respondents
  - physically abused, sexually abused, fondled, bullied, raped, molested, attempted, domestic violence.
- Double (or more) barreled questions
- Lengthy or overly wordy questions
- Asking follow-up questions after each screening hit



## National Survey of Adolescents

# Sexual Assault Screening Questions

1. *Has a man or boy ever put his private sexual part inside your private part, rear end or inside your mouth when you didn't want him to?*
2. *Has anyone, male or female, ever put fingers or objects inside your private sexual part or inside your rear end when you didn't want them to?*
3. *Has anyone, male or female, ever put their mouth on your private sexual parts when you didn't want them to?*
4. *Has anyone, male or female, ever touched your private sexual parts when you didn't want them to?*
5. *Has anyone, male or female, ever made you touch their private sexual parts when you didn't want to?*
6. (Boys only) *Has a woman or girl ever made you put your private sexual part in her mouth or inside her body when you didn't want to?*

# Factors Affecting Case Detection

- Level of perceived confidentiality offered
  - Concerns of getting self or others in trouble, fear of retribution
- Context of the screening setting
  - Location of respondent (home, school, other)
  - Method (in-person, group, telephone, paper, computer)
  - Who is present? (interviewer, parents, teacher, peers, siblings)
- Recall of events by respondents
  - Experiences not recalled, forgotten, and not accessible
  - Experiences partially forgotten, but retrievable with the right cuing
  - Remembered experiences, but are not defined by the respondent in the same way as the screening question is worded
  - Remembered experiences that are willfully withheld
- Willful nondisclosure

# Reasons For Willful Nondisclosure

- Sense of stigma, shame, guilt, self-blame
- Threats or instructions by a parents
- Fear of punishment, “getting into trouble”
- Fear of consequences to family and family members
- Cultural and familial beliefs about privacy
- Psychological distress about events
- Fear of retribution by assailant
- History of negative outcomes from prior disclosures (disclosure inoculation)



# Common Ethical Questions in Child Trauma Research

- Are questions about traumatic events overly distressing to children or adolescents?
- Do parents get overly upset when they learn about the questions you are asking their children?
- Does asking these questions place some children at risk from their parents?
- Legal implications



# Confidentiality and Mandatory Reporting

- Confidentiality parameters presumed by research participant, child or adult.
- Confidentiality parameters agreed to in the informed consent process.
  - Disclosure of situations leading to a break in confidentiality?
  - Disclosure of procedures for determining these situations?
  - Disclosure of mandated reporting situations?
  - Disclosure of child in danger situations (suicide, harm from others)?
- Child in Danger Protocol

# Questions?

