

Interviewing and staff safety checks

The following information has been adapted to an OSCAR context from “Safer Recruitment Safer Children” (Child Matters / Children’s Action Plan) pages 23-27.

(<http://childrensactionplan.govt.nz/assets/CAP-Uploads/childrens-workforce/Safer-Recruitment-Safer-Children.pdf>)

During the interview process you will be able to collect important information and impressions about the candidate.

- It’s essential to have well-thought out questions and a clear idea what each question is trying to determine.
- Ask questions to check information given at the application stage and fill in any gaps.
- Be ready to ask follow-up questions to reach the information you are after and to discuss more sensitive topics around child safety.
- At least two people should conduct all interviews for core children’s workers, so as to base judgments on more than one perspective.
- Consider how you can help the candidate to be comfortable and relaxed – this may help you get a truer impression of their personality and manner.
- You may wish to conduct a second interview to follow up on anything that arises in the referee checks and other background screening.

Empathy, respect and kindness towards children are all positives in a potential staff member. Most OSCAR services like to have a friendly and informal culture within their programme but this must be underpinned by firm professional boundaries, a strong commitment to child protection and safe practices, and a good understanding of children’s developmental needs.

In general you will be making judgements in an interview about

- the attitude the candidate has towards children, especially matters around control and discipline
- the candidate’s openness and willingness to discuss sensitive topics, past behaviour and issues around child mistreatment and abuse
- the awareness and commitment shown by the candidate to actively promote good child protection practices in the workplace
- Be aware of any impressions you get that
- the candidate is withholding information or has a secretive or deceptive nature
- there is a lack of awareness about what is appropriate around children
- any indications of poor personal / professional boundaries e.g. “I just want to be their friend”

Guidelines for interview questions

The interview should be based around prepared questions. For some questions it is advisable to prepare follow-up questions that allow responses to be opened up to more scrutiny and depth.

Open-ended questions can provide a wide range of useful responses and impressions.

Closed questions are useful for getting definite responses that may open up further lines of questioning.

The examples below illustrate these different approaches.

An open question will invite the candidate to describe and explain. e.g.

- "Based on your experience in children's services, how do you approach building a positive relationship with children?"
- "Tell us about a rewarding experience you have had, when working with children."
- "One of our important policies is that staff avoid situations where they are alone with a child. Could you tell us why that is important?"

Be ready to ask follow up questions, 1) where the answer is quite general and could be explained further to make the meaning clear or 2) you feel like there is more that the candidate could tell you. e.g.

1) "What values do you consider important, for working with children?"

Examples of follow up questions:

- candidate answers, among other things with the word "respect". Follow up question could be "Can you tell us more about how you view respect?"
- more generally, a follow up could be: "Those seem like very worthwhile values. Which values do you feel personally, are most important?" [then] "Why that one in particular."

2) "Can you tell us about a situation where you have had to help a child who is very upset or angry?"

Examples of follow up questions:

- "How did the child respond to that?"
- "What was the outcome for the child?"
- "That seems like a good approach. Did it work? Why do you think it worked?"
- "Are there skills you would like to develop, to be more effective in these sorts of situations?"

A closed question usually invites a limited "yes or no" type answer. The question might start with "did" or "have". In general you want to ask less of these.

- "Have you ever had a complaint made about how you conduct yourself in the workplace?"
- "Has anyone ever made a complaint about how you have treated a child?"
- If the answer is "no", have a follow up question ready...
- "Can you tell us about a situation where you have felt tested or challenged by a child's behaviour or attitude."
- "Can you tell us about a time where you wondered if a complaint might occur, because of how you treated or responded to a child."

Behavioural questions vs. "what ifs...."

Behavioural-based questions are based on the idea that past behaviour is the best indicator of future behaviour. Be aware of the "what would you do if....." style of questioning, that usually leads to a hypothetical answer. e.g.

"How would you deal with 2 children who were fighting over a toy?" (hypothetical situation)

better to ask....

"Tell me about a time when you have had to resolve a conflict between children?" (specific/behavioural question)

When candidates are talking through real situations they have been in:

you are more likely to get an insight into their true character

you can follow up with more probing questions that elaborate on important elements (e.g. talk me through why you did that? or how did the child respond when you said that?)

it may become apparent, if the candidate is not being entirely honest or transparent.

If the candidate can't recall a specific situation, then a hypothetical answer might have to do, but a persistent lack of recall about common, real situations might need further follow up to check the candidate's real work experience.

A few other warning signs

Responses where you ask for more detail, but answers remain or become vague, especially if you were discussing a past experience. Is the candidate being truthful, or concealing something?

A candidate who sees themselves very differently from how others describe them (e.g. referees)

Any attitude that indicates a lack of respect for children – mockery, belittling, judgmental

An overly strict or punitive approach to working with children

Unrealistic expectations of how children will behave or what they might be capable of

Lack of personal commitment or passion in regards to the welfare and safety of children

Poor awareness of personal / professional boundaries around children

Poor awareness or lack of willingness to be open in communication about concerns regarding children and possible abuse – do they demonstrate awareness of need to share information and consult others?

Some sample interview questions

Note: this is not intended as a complete list. Other questions will be likely to examine employment history, reasons for leaving previous jobs, courses undertaken and how that training relates to this role etc.

Based on your experience in children's services, how do you approach building a positive relationship with children?

Tell us about a rewarding experience you have had, when working with children.

What aspects of working with children do you find difficult or challenging? Why?

What were your specific duties in your previous role with children? Which tasks did you like most? Which tasks did you like least? Why?

Can you think of a situation recently where you have had to learn new skills?

What are your expectations of this job?

Is there anything about the practical requirements of the job that you think you might find difficult or challenging?

Can you tell me about a work situation where you have been under stress? How do you cope in this sort of situation?

Have you read our policies on age of staff, childcare for staff children and police vetting? Is there anything you wish to ask about or add to your application form?

Have you ever had a complaint made about how you have conducted yourself in the workplace?

Tell me about a time when you have had to run an activity or event for a group (preferably of children).

What do you think makes a good school holiday programme? What sort of activities?

What do you think are the main differences between the needs of a five year old and a ten year old?

Have you had any experience with children who are reluctant to participate in activities? What did you do?

Have you had any experience with children who are disrupting an activity? What did you do?

Can you tell me about a situation where you have helped a child overcome some difficulty e.g. shyness

What values do you consider important, for working with children?

Do you get along well with children? Why do children like you / relate well to you?

Can you tell us about a situation where you have had to help a child who is very upset or angry?

Have you been in a situation where a child in your care is hurt/unwell and needs comforting? What did you do?

What sorts of boundaries are important for you, when working with children?

Tell us about the discipline practices you have used, in your previous work with children.

How do you respond to children who are disobedient or argumentative?

Tell me about a time when you have had to resolve a conflict between children?

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt a child was unsafe? What happened? What action did you take?

One of our important policies is that staff avoid situations where they are alone with a child. Could you tell us why that is important?

Have you ever had to respond to a situation where children were involved in intimate or inappropriate touching behaviour? (If not what would you do?)

Have you ever had children invite or engage in intimate or inappropriate touching or contact with yourself? (If not what would you do?)

NOTE: re- interview questions about criminal offending

Employers should be careful how they question candidates about criminal offending. Information about criminal records, taking into account the provisions of the Clean Slate Act, is probably be gathered at the written application form stage.

Information from Ministry of Justice <http://www.justice.govt.nz/publications/publications-archived/2004/criminal-records-clean-slate-act-2004>

I am an employer. How does this law impact on what questions I can ask an applicant in an application form or an interview?

The law applies to employment and any other situation where an individual is asked about his/her criminal record (e.g. tenancy, insurance, and bank application forms).

It enables someone who meets the eligibility criteria to answer a question asked about his/ her convictions or criminal record by stating that he/ she has no criminal record.

It will be an offence for any person, without lawful authority, to require or request that an individual disclose their criminal record, when he/she is lawfully entitled not to. The maximum penalty for this offence is a fine not exceeding \$10,000.

It would seem that under the Clean Slate Act, the question: “*have you ever been convicted of an criminal offence*” can be answered “no”, if Clean Slate applies, even where the person has had a conviction. The intention of the Act is clearly to allow concealment, under certain circumstances, of a criminal record. Hence the wording on the Police Vetting web-site: “This Act allows you to conceal your convictions...” <http://www.police.govt.nz/faq/declaring-convictions-on-job-application-forms>

We suggest you take note of the wording of the **Clean Slate legislation**, concerning this issue.

Section 14. Effect of clean slate scheme on eligible individual

- (1) If an individual is an eligible individual, he or she is deemed to have no criminal record for the purposes of any question asked of him or her about his or her criminal record.
- (2) An eligible individual may answer a question asked of him or her about his or her criminal record by stating that he or she has no criminal record.

Section 18. Offence to require or request that individual disregard scheme

- (1) A person commits an offence if, without lawful authority under this Act, the person requires or requests that an individual -
 - (a) disregard the effect of the clean slate scheme when answering a question about his or her criminal record; or
 - (b) disregard the effect of the clean slate scheme and disclose, or give consent to the disclosure of, his or her criminal record.