

Forensic interviewing guidelines: Is the “something else” option appropriate in child forensic interviews?

by Dr. Dan Swerdlow-Freed on January 3, 2018

Forensic interviewing guidelines instruct child forensic interviewers to proceed through a series of question formats (Lamb, LaRooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). The standard of practice is to begin with open-ended prompts that invite a child to relate an experienced event in her own words. Next, clarification or additional information is elicited through specific but non-leading questions that seek elaboration on topics the child has previously mentioned.

It is also common for child forensic interviewers to ask ‘yes-no’ or multiple-choice questions; often referred to as ‘forced choice’ (Korkman, Santtila & Sandnabba, 2006). These question formats provide a limited number response options and are riskier than open-ended questions because children often answer them even when they lack information that is relevant to the topic (State of Michigan Governor’s Task Force on Children’s Justice and Department of Human Services, 2015). One reason for asking these questions is that children will answer them and thereby provide information that might not otherwise be elicited.

A [forensic interviewing](#) guideline exists that directs child forensic interviewers to include a *something else* option as a response choice to closed questions. This response option is based on the premise that a child will select the *something else* option if the other response options are false, and when prompted, will self-generate the correct answer. For example, if a child mentions that she was touched, an interviewer might ask, “Did that happen in the bedroom, the living room or somewhere else.” If the first two response options are false, the child should select the *somewhere else* option and, when prompted, disclose the location where the touching occurred.

A 2017 study by London, Hall and Lytle investigated the accuracy of children’s responses to *something else* options. The remainder of this paper will briefly describe their study and its major findings.

Ninety-four 3 – 5-year old children participated in an event in which a researcher touched them on “public” parts of their body. One week later, each child was interviewed and asked 30 forced-choice questions to indicate where they were touched.

The 30 questions were divided into three even groups: The *true question* group, included the correct answer as the first or second response choice. In the *false question* group, all the response options were incorrect. In the *unanswerable question* group, the children lacked the relevant information to correctly answer the questions.

Half the children were in a *standard* condition that consisted of a two-alternative version of the questions. The remaining children were in the *something else* condition, which asked the same two questions and included a third, *something else* response option. Each time a child chose *something else* as the answer, they were asked a question that required them to generate a response.

The major findings

Children in the *true question* group selected the correct answer 61% of the time. Conversely, children in the *something else* question group selected the correct answer 54% of the time. Overall, the five-year-old children answers were more accurate compared to the 3- and 4-year-old children.

Children in the *false question* group had difficulty rejecting false answer options. Eighty-five percent of the time, children in the *standard* condition indicated that a false answer was correct. Children in the *something else* condition were slightly more accurate, but still indicated that a false answer was accurate 69% of the time.

Children's answers to the *unanswerable questions* were also highly inaccurate. In the *standard* condition, where children were presented with two incorrect response options, they rejected both options only 23% of the time. In the *something else* option, where children were presented with two incorrect response options and the *something else* option, they chose *something else* 30% of the time, resulting in 150 responses. The children who gave these answers were asked to generate another response that explained their *something else* choice, and only 44 (29%) of these answers were correct.

A few of the researcher's conclusions

"The major finding of the study is that children showed very high rates of incorrect responses on the false and the unanswerable questions regardless of the something else alternative. When given the something else alternative along with two other answer choices, children selected the something else alternative 35% of the time, at just over the chance rate."

"... a something else prompt does not bypass concerns about children's performance on forced-choice questions even when children are provided with an opportunity to follow up their something else reply with their own self-generated response. Although children made use of the something else alternative, the majority of their self-generated responses were inaccurate."

"Although perhaps intuitively appealing, the use of a something else alternative is without scientific support at this time. Our data indicate that children generated responses at high rates for false and unanswerable questions, yet the responses showed high inaccuracy rates."

"In the present study, children frequently generated their own incorrect responses when provided the something else alternative. These findings are particularly important given self-generated details are considered more reliable in legal settings. In a forensic interview, children might be pressured to provide a response to an interviewer's follow up prompt because, by selecting the something else alternative, the child has indirectly agreed they have an answer to provide (vs. responding "I don't know" or refuting the claim). However, forensic interviewers should not be lulled into a false sense of confidence about monosyllabic responses, even those produced (vs. selected) by the child."

London, Hall and Lytle (2017) concluded that the most appropriate way to question children during a forensic interview, is to avoid asking forced-choice questions. This recommendation is consistent with best practices identified by other authoritative sources (Lamb, LaRooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011) and is consistent with other research that has demonstrated high quality child forensic interviews can be conducted with minimum use of option-posing questions (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2012).

For more information about this topic or to schedule a consultation appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at 248.539.7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390

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