

Does It Help, Hurt, or Something Else? The Effect of a Something Else Response Alternative on Children’s Performance on Forced-Choice Questions

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Forensic guidelines recommend minimizing forced-choice questions when interviewing children. We investigated whether adding a “something else” alternative to forced-choice questions affected 3- to 5-year-olds’ ($N = 94$) reports of an event involving innocuous touch. Following a 1-week delay, children were randomly assigned to receive either standard 2-alternative forced-choice questions or the same questions with an additional something else alternative. All children received 3 counterbalanced question types: correct alternative present, no correct alternative present, and unanswerable. Children’s overall accuracy was not affected by the something else alternative except on questions with no correct alternative present, where performance went from 15% to 31% accurate. Children selected or generated inaccurate and speculative responses to the majority of unanswerable questions regardless of a something else alternative. These findings suggest that the inclusion of a something else alternative does not bypass concerns about the use of forced-choice questions during interviews with children.

Keywords: forensic interviews, questioning techniques, children’s eyewitness testimony, forced-choice questions, something else alternative

Developmental psychologists have long expressed concern about the use of forced-choice questions during forensic interviews with children (e.g., Bruck & Ceci, 1997, 1999, 2004; Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002; Ceci & Bruck, 1993, 1995; Orbach & Lamb, 2001; Peterson & Grant, 2001; Zaragoza, Payment, Ackil, Drivdahl, & Beck, 2001). Although the strategy of using forced-choice questions increases the probability that children will provide information, it is problematic because children’s answers to these types of questions often are inaccurate (Bruck, London, Landa, & Goodman, 2007; Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, & Orbach, 1997; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Mehrani & Peterson, 2015; Poole & Lindsay, 1998; Roebers & Fernandez, 2002; Zaragoza et al., 2001). Children have particular trouble when faced with forced-choice questions when neither response alternative is correct (Bourg, Broderick, Flagor, Kelly, Ervin, & Butler, 1999; Fritzley, Lindsay, & Lee, 2013; Peterson & Grant,

2001; Rocha, Marche, & Briere, 2013). Children generally do not provide do not know responses (Walker, Lunning, & Eilts, 1996), even with instructions regarding the acceptability of a “do not know” reply (Earhart, La Rooy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2014; Peterson & Grant, 2001).

Interview protocols around the world recommend judicious use of forced-choice questions when interviewing child witnesses (e.g., American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2012; CornerHouse, 2004; Davies & Westcott, 1999; Great Britain Ministry of Justice, 2011; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; State of Michigan Governor’s Task Force on Children’s Justice and Department of Human Services, 2004; Yuille, Cooper, & Hervé, 2009). Despite best practice recommendations, many forensic interviewers continue to rely on forced-choice questions (Davies & Westcott, 1999; Lamb et al., 2008; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, Stewart, & Mitchell, 2003). Although acknowledging the increased risk for inaccurate responses associated with forced-choice questions, some child abuse professionals argue children’s answers to open-ended prompts are too sparse, thereby necessitating the use of forced-choice questions, particularly among preschool-aged children (e.g., Faller, 2000).

A novel modification to standard two-alternative forced-choice questions involves the addition of a third alternative, the option to select something else. The “something else” alternative has become ubiquitously used by child interviewers in the United States (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Bourg et al., 1999; CornerHouse, 2004; Faller, 2000; Miller, 2008; Oregon Department of Human

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Services, 2012; Walker, 2013). For example, CornerHouse (2004), a widely used set of guidelines in the United States, indicates the following:

Multiple-choice questions provide two or three options from which a child can choose a response. Interviewers can generally expect a child will select one of the options provided. The most appropriate multiple-choice questions include an alternative response, or an “out” option. That is, children should be given the opportunity to select a response that was not offered: “Do you live in an apartment, in a house, or *some other place?*” or “Were you sitting, lying down, or doing something else?” (p. 232)

The rationale for including the something else alternative is that interviewers usually are unaware of whether they are including a correct response option in their forced-choice questions. The something else alternative provides children with another option so they are not locked into selecting one of the two alternatives provided. The goal of the current research was to examine whether the something else alternative enhances children’s response accuracy to forced-choice questions regarding an experienced event.

Because the interviewer does not know whether they are providing a correct answer choice, the something else option might encourage children to provide an answer of their own if the correct answer is not present. A something else response is different than a do not know response in this regard. A do not know response implies the child does not have the requisite knowledge to answer the question. A something else reply, on the other hand, indicates the child has knowledge but that the answer is different than the two choices provided. Because a something else answer choice implies the child knows the answer, interviewers ask the child to clarify with a directive prompt as in the following example:

- Interviewer (I): Has anyone touched you in a private place?
- Child (C): My dad.
- I: In which private place did your dad touch you?
- C: Pee pee.
- I: Did he touch you with his hand, his mouth, or something else?
- C: Something else.
- I: What did he use to touch your pee pee?
- C: His pee part.

To our knowledge, only one published study has reported data regarding the effect of a something else alternative on children’s responses. Stolzenberg, McWilliams, and Lyon (2017) compared 3- to 6-year-old children’s performance on questions involving placement and spatial language. Children were questioned with either standard forced-choice, forced-choice with an added something else alternative, yes/no, or wh-type questions. In their study, Stolzenberg et al. showed children human figurines with clothing completely on, completely off, or partially on, and children were randomly assigned to the different question conditions to describe the clothing placement. In a second task, children were asked to describe whether a sticker was over, under, or partially under the clothing. Of relevance to the current study, children performed almost identically on the forced-choice questions regardless of the

inclusion of the something else option. Although the Stolzenberg et al. study is important in shedding light on questioning methods regarding spatial language and clothing placement, we seek to expand upon two central methodological features of their study to broaden the implications for forensic practice. Foremost, Stolzenberg et al. did not prompt children for responses after they selected the something else alternative. Therefore, we are left not knowing whether the something else option, along with its accompanying prompt, might bolster children’s reports. In forensic interviews, children are prompted to supply their own alternative following the choice of “something else.” One possibility is that the something else alternative might bolster children’s performance when children are actually allowed to generate their own response alternative. Second, Stolzenberg et al. questioned children about clothing and sticker placements that were contemporaneously occurring. All of the questions pertained to truly occurring contemporaneous events. As we argue next, the driving force for including a something else alternative in forensic interviews is that interviewers might ask children questions where the child does not have requisite knowledge to answer the question or where no correct answer choice is provided.

In light of extant developmental research, how should we expect the something else alternative to affect children’s responses? Children generally perform well in correctly recognizing true event details even in the absence of a something else option (e.g., London, Bruck, & Poole, 2011; Rocha et al., 2013). Assuming a forced-choice question with an obvious correct answer choice is posed, children should perform quite well regardless of the inclusion of a something else alternative. One possible benefit of the something else option is that children may provide their own response if they do not recognize a correct answer choice. For example, if an interviewer asked a child whether they wore a skirt or jeans, but the child does not remember that detail, then the child could accurately say they were wearing a hat (a different but also true detail). However, another possibility is that the something else alternative distracts children from the correct answer choice, leading to a reduction in the quality of children’s reports to true questions.

In theory, questions that have no correct response alternative are ideally suited for the inclusion of a something else alternative. For example, imagine in a forensic setting that a child had been sexually abused by an adult who took partially nude photographs of the child. The interviewer could ask, “When he took your picture, did you have your clothes on, off, or something else?” If the child correctly picked the something else alternative, the interviewer would logically prompt the child with a directive prompt such as, “How were your clothes?” The child could then respond that their clothes were partially off. In terms of cognitive demands, to benefit from a something else alternative, children would need to resist picking one of the initial incorrect answer choices and instead pick the something else option. Following the selection of the something else alternative, children would need to self-generate a correct detail when prompted.

One potential problem with the something else alternative is that interviewers might ask questions where the premise of the question itself, not just the answer choices, is incorrect. Imagine a case where a child is asked if they were touched over or under their underwear, but that no inappropriate touching ever took place. The child might reply “something else,” similar to a reply of “don’t

know," simply because neither of the two provided alternatives is correct. However, the interviewer would be trained to prompt, "Where were you touched?" At this point, like with a standard two-alternative forced-choice question, to succeed on the question, the child would have to volunteer that neither option is correct; they were not touched at all. However, to date, no published studies have explored whether or at what age children can proficiently use the something else alternative and subsequently generate their own correct response alternative. Does the something else alternative help children resist picking an incorrect answer choice? If so, can they successfully generate their own correct alternative?

Unanswerable forced-choice questions are questions for which the child does not have the requisite knowledge to answer, that is, the question requires them to speculate (Beuscher & Roebbers, 2005; Fritzeley & Lee, 2003; Waterman & Blades, 2011; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2000). Unanswerable questions encourage children to guess or speculate, as the only appropriate response would be "I don't know" or somehow challenging the question (Pratt, 1990; Roebbers & Fernandez, 2002; Waterman & Blades, 2011; Waterman et al., 2000; Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2004). Unanswerable forced-choice questions pose particular difficulty for children. For example, Hughes and Grieve (1980) explored 5- and 7-year-old children's responses to four questions that did not have logical answers (e.g., "Is red heavier than yellow?" "One day there were two flies crawling up a wall. Which fly got to the top first?"). Hughes and Grieve found young children offered replies to these bizarre questions the majority of the time (87.5%), whereas the 7-year-olds provided a response every time (100%; for similar findings, see Rocha et al., 2013).

In the case of unanswerable questions, we predicted a something else alternative is unlikely to bolster children's performance. On the one hand, the something else alternative may assist children to not be "locked in" to picking one of the other choices. However, if a child replies "something else" to an unanswerable question, then they would then be queried with a follow-up prompt and be expected to provide an answer. For example, imagine a child is asked the following question about which they have no requisite knowledge: "Is my dad a firefighter, a veterinarian, or something else?" The child replies "something else." They would then be prompted, "What does he do?" At this point, the empirical question is whether the child will speculate (e.g., "He is a police officer") or use this follow-up prompt to correctly state they have no knowledge (i.e., "I don't know what my dad does."). However, a large literature indicates children have difficulty resisting selecting a response and indicating they do not know (e.g., Earhart et al., 2014). Therefore, we did not expect that the something else option would bolster performance on unanswerable questions.

The goal of the current study was to examine whether the addition of a something else alternative affected children's performance on forced-choice questions. Given the rationale for including the added alternative in forensic interviews, we were particularly interested in whether the something else alternative aided children in resisting false and unanswerable questions.

Design Overview

Children participated in a staged event involving innocuous touch. Following a 1-week delay, children were individually in-

terviewed about the event. Children were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: standard two-alternative forced-choice questions or two-alternative forced-choice questions with an added something else option. All children received three different question types: (a) correct answer present (for clarity and simplicity, termed *true questions*), (b) no correct answer present (*false questions*), and (c) questions that require speculation (*unanswerable questions*). We examined the extent to which the something else alternative bolstered or impeded children's overall accuracy on the three question types. We also report children's accuracy specifically when they provided a self-generated response to the something else option. We tested preschool-aged children given some practitioners have argued forced-choice questions are particularly necessary for young children due to their limited communication skills.

Method

Participants

Children ($N = 94$, 48 females) were recruited from schools and childcare centers in a Midwestern city and ranged in age from 3- to 5-years-old (38 to 71 months; $M = 54$ months, $SD = 9$ months). There were 3-year-olds ($n = 28$; 17 female), 4-year-olds ($n = 35$; 15 female), and 5-year-olds ($n = 31$; 16 female). Approximately 84% of children were Caucasian, 14% were African American, and less than 2% were of other races. The study was approved by our institutional review board.

Procedure

Event. Children initially participated in a 20-min event that was part of a larger study of children's use of forensic interview aids. In the event, a research assistant touched children on different "public" locations on the child's body and then asked the child to show on either a doll or a human-figure drawing where they were touched. See Lytle, London, and Bruck (2015) for full event details.

Interview. Children were individually interviewed about the touch event following a 1-week delay ($M = 7.7$ days, $SD = 2.33$ days). Each child was asked 30 forced-choice questions and was randomly assigned to one of two question conditions. Half the children (3-year-olds [14], 4-year-olds [17], and 5-year-olds [16]) were randomly assigned to receive the standard two-alternative version of the questions (standard condition). The other half of children (3-year-olds [14], 4-year-olds [18], and 5-year-olds [15]) received the same question with an added something else option (something else condition). See Table 1 for example questions. (A full list of questions is available by contacting the corresponding author.)

All children received 10 each of three different forced-choice question types. For true questions, the correct answer choice was alternated as the first versus second option. In the second question type, termed *false questions*, no correct answer choice was provided. In the third question type, children would not have relevant information to answer the question correctly (i.e., *unanswerable questions*).

In the something else condition, children were asked the same questions as in the standard condition but were also given a third

Table 1
Questions in the Standard Versus Something Else Conditions

Question type	Condition	
	Standard	Something else
True	Did you play with a doll or a monkey?	Did you play with a doll, a monkey, or something else?
False	Did (name of researcher from Session I) tickle you or arm wrestle you?	Did (name of researcher from Session I) tickle you, arm wrestle you, or something else?
Unanswerable	Is (name of researcher from Session I)'s dad a firefighter or a doctor?	Is (name of researcher from Session I)'s dad a firefighter, a doctor, or something else?

response alternative of something else (see Table 1). In keeping with forensic interview practices, the something else alternative always was provided as the final response choice. If a child chose "something else" as their response, then the interviewer asked a follow up question. For example, if the interviewer asked, "Did you play with a doll, a monkey, or something else?" and the child chose "something else," then the interviewer asked, "What did you play with?" Question order was randomized via a computer, and 10 different question orders were used.

Scoring. For all question types, children's responses were coded for accuracy and also according to whether the child selected one of the provided alternatives or if they provided a self-generated response. A self-generated response could occur in two different ways. First, responses were coded as self-generated if they resulted from the researcher's prompt following a child's something else response. For example: "Did you play with a baseball, a monkey, or something else?" If the child replied "something else," then he or she was asked, "What did you play with?" The child's response to the something else prompt was coded as self-generated. Second, some children spontaneously generated their own response without explicitly saying the words "something else." For example, if asked "Did you play with a baseball or a monkey?", a child could reply, "A doll." If children generated their own response without explicitly saying "something else," then the response also was coded as self-generated.

The correct answer to false questions was to respond "neither" or to self-generate a correct detail. "Don't know" responses were also tallied. For unanswerable questions, children were credited with correct responses when they replied any derivative of "don't

know" to either the initial question or the researcher's follow-up prompt.

Scoring was objective, and all of the interviews were independently checked by three coders to ensure no errors were present. The corresponding author also tallied all of the variables to ensure each category of responses totaled the correct number to ensure no errors in counts occurred.

Results

Analytic Overview and Preliminary Analyses

There were no gender differences in children's performance, so data were collapsed across this variable. All means are the proportion correct out of 10 questions for each question type. Bonferroni corrections were applied for multiple comparisons. First, for each question type, we report children's responses (correct, incorrect, or do not know) according to whether the child selected one of the two answer choices (initial responses) or whether they self-generated their own response (self-generated responses). Not surprisingly, children in the standard question condition never used the term *something else* before self-generating a response. In the something else condition, children stated the term "something else" before self-generating a response 71% of the time they self-generated replies.

Analyses are conducted on the total correct responses (which is the sum of the correct initial responses and correct self-generated responses which appear in bold in Tables 2 through 4). Analyses focus on correct responses because, from a forensic standpoint, the

Table 2
Children's Responses to True Questions by Age and Interview Condition

Condition/Age	Gave initial response			Self-generated a response		
	Correct	Incorrect	Don't know	Correct	Incorrect	Don't know
Standard						
3 (<i>n</i> = 14)	.50	.46	.01	.01	.02	.00
4 (<i>n</i> = 17)	.51	.37	.05	.05	.02	.00
5 (<i>n</i> = 16)	.71	.18	.05	.05	.02	.00
Total	.58	.33	.04	.03	.02	.00
Something else						
3 (<i>n</i> = 14)	.31	.31	.09	.16	.11	.03
4 (<i>n</i> = 18)	.29	.37	.05	.15	.07	.06
5 (<i>n</i> = 15)	.60	.16	.03	.10	.07	.03
Total	.40	.29	.06	.13	.09	.04

Note. Rows may not add to one due to rounding. The bolded values are the two columns that when summed show the children's total accuracy.

variable of interest is whether children ultimately did or did not provide a correct response (or resist an incorrect response).

Following the overall accuracy analysis, for each question type, we report data specifically examining the accuracy of self-generated responses only. That is, among children who self-generate statements, how accurate were the responses?

True Questions

Overall accuracy. Collapsed across age, children were 61% correct on true items in the standard condition versus 54% correct in the something else condition. A 2 (condition: standard vs. something else) × 3 (age: 3- to 4- vs. 5-year-olds) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the total number of correct responses to the 10 true question items (i.e., the sum of the initial and self-generated correct columns that appear in bold in Table 2). The results revealed a main effect of age, $F(2, 94) = 15.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$. The 5-year-olds outperformed both the 3- and 4-year-olds ($ps < .001$) with the latter two groups not differing from one another ($p > .20$). Neither the main effect of condition, $F(2, 94) = 2.87, p = .094, \eta^2 = .03$, nor the Condition × Age interaction, $F(2, 94) = 0.31, p = .731, \eta^2 = .01$, attained significance. See Table 2. Next, we further examine accuracy on self-generated responses only.

Accuracy on self-generated responses. Although the accuracy rates did not differ in the standard versus something else conditions, we were interested in accuracy specifically when children provided a self-generated reply, so we more closely examined those responses. As noted in the Method section, children were credited with a self-generated response if they either self-generated a reply to the something else prompt or if they spontaneously provided their own response alternative instead of choosing one of the two alternatives provided.

Across all children in the standard condition, 5% of the overall responses derived from self-generated responses. This represents a total of 25 self-generated responses (out of a grand total of 470 responses, $n = 47 \times 10$ true items). Of these 25 self-generated responses, 16 (64%) were correct. Among children in the something else condition, 26% of the 470 overall responses derived from self-generated responses, for a total of 123 self-generated responses. Of these 123 responses, 65 (53%) were correct. The

accuracy rates for these self-generated answers in the standard and something else condition did not significantly differ, $\chi^2(1) = 1.04, p = .31$.

Taken together, children in the something else condition are using the something else option (and then self-generating responses) more often than children in the standard condition on the true question items, but about half of children's self-generated responses were incorrect. The relatively low accuracy rates in self-generated responses explain the above findings showing that the something else option does not improve children's overall accuracy on the true questions compared with the standard forced-choice condition.

False Questions

Overall accuracy. Collapsed across age, children responded accurately to 15% of the false question items in the standard condition versus 31% correct in the something else condition. A 2 (condition: standard vs. something else) × 3 (age: 3- to 4- vs. 5-year-olds) ANOVA was conducted on the total number of correct responses to the 10 false question items. See Table 3. Paralleling the findings on the true questions, the results revealed a main effect of age, $F(2, 94) = 46.06, p = .001, \eta^2 = .14$. The 5-year-olds again outperformed both the 3- and 4-year-olds ($p = .001$ and $p = .04$, respectively) with the latter two groups not differing from one another ($p = .59$). A main effect of condition, $F(2, 94) = 9.56, p = .003, \eta^2 = .26$, revealed children in the something else condition ($M = 0.31, SD = 0.27$) outperformed children in the standard condition ($M = 0.15, SD = 0.28$). The Condition × Age interaction, $F(2, 94) = 1.42, p = .247, \eta^2 = .03$, did not attain significance. Children in both experimental conditions performed quite poorly in correctly rejecting false items with the something else condition resulting in a nominally better performance, albeit at only 31% correct. That is, children either chose or self-generated incorrect responses to the vast majority of questions regardless of the something else option.

Accuracy on self-generated responses. Next, we examined performance only among the self-generated responses for false questions. In the standard condition, 8% of children's total 470 responses were self-generated, for a total of 37 self-generated responses. Of these 37 responses, 29 (78%) were correct. In the

Table 3
Children's Responses to False Questions by Age and Interview Condition

Condition/Age	Gave initial response			Self-generated a response		
	Correct	Incorrect	Don't know	Correct	Incorrect	Don't know
Standard						
3 ($n = 14$)	.01	.94	.01	.01	.02	n/a
4 ($n = 17$)	.09	.68	.14	.09	.01	n/a
5 ($n = 16$)	.16	.48	.28	.04	.06	n/a
Total	.09	.69	.15	.05	.03	
Something else						
3 ($n = 14$)	.04	.53	.10	.17	.15	.01
4 ($n = 18$)	.10	.42	.11	.13	.11	.13
5 ($n = 15$)	.15	.21	.10	.35	.08	.11
Total	.10	.39	.10	.21	.11	.09

Note. Rows may not add to one due to rounding. The bolded values are the two columns that when summed show the children's total accuracy.

something else condition, 41% of children's total 470 responses were self-generated, for a total of 195 self-generated responses. Of these 195 responses, 99 (51%) were correct. Compared with children in the standard condition, children in the something else condition produced a higher number of incorrect self-generated items, $\chi^2(1) = 9.59, p < .005$, Cramer's $V = .20$. The odds of a child generating an incorrect response in the something else condition were 3.51 times the odds of a child producing an incorrect response in the standard condition.

Unanswerable Questions

Overall accuracy. Collapsed across age, children in the standard condition were 23% accurate on the unanswerable question items compared with 30% correct in the something else condition. See Table 4. A 2 (condition: standard vs. something else) \times 3 (age: 3- to 4- vs. 5-year-olds) ANOVA was conducted on the total number of correct responses to the 10 unanswerable question items. Paralleling the results on the true and the false question items, the results revealed a main effect of age, $F(2, 94) = 11.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$. The 5-year-olds outperformed both the 3- and 4-year-olds ($p < .001$ and $p = .005$, respectively) with the latter two groups not differing from one another ($p = .27$). Neither the main effect of condition, $F(2, 94) = 1.52, p = .221, \eta^2 = .02$, nor the Condition \times Age interaction, $F(2, 94) = 1.34, p = .267, \eta^2 = .03$, attained significance.

Accuracy on self-generated responses. Next, we examined children's performance on self-generated responses for unanswerable questions. In the standard condition, 3% of children's 470 overall responses were self-generated, for a total of 16 self-generated responses. None of the 16 responses were correct. In the something else condition, 32% of children's 470 responses were self-generated, for a total of 150 self-generated responses. Of these, 29% (44/150) were correct (i.e., the child said, "don't know," or otherwise verbalized they did not have the information to answer the question). While both conditions were highly inaccurate when they self-generated responses to unanswerable questions, children in the something else condition generated their own responses at a much higher rate compared to the standard condi-

tion, $\chi^2(1) = 6.39, p = .01$. The odds of a child self-generating a speculated response was over four times greater in the something else condition compared with the standard condition.

Discussion

Many forensic interviewers across the United States have adopted the practice of using forced-choice questions with the inclusion of a third alternative, a something else *option*, when questioning child witnesses. We sought to empirically examine whether the provision of a something else alternative indeed improved children's performance on forced-choice questions without inviting them to guess or speculate.

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. Stolzenberg et al. (2017) found children selected the something else alternative at similar rates. Our results extend upon past work by Stolzenberg et al. by indicating 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.

Our findings parallel past research indicating very high rates of speculative responses on unanswerable questions (e.g., Hughes & Grieve, 1980; Waterman & Blades, 2011), a pattern that is not ameliorated by the inclusion of the something else alternative. Children made use of the something else alternative on the unanswerable questions, despite the fact that it did not significantly improve their performance. In the standard forced-choice condition, children infrequently generated their own speculated response to unanswerable items, but rather they tended to select one of the alternatives provided to them. Children's overall accuracy on the unanswerable items was similar in the something else and standard conditions.

Children's performance on the unanswerable questions improved with age across both questioning conditions. However, no developmental improvements occurred in children's accuracy according to the something else prompt. In the standard condition, 3-year-olds selected one of the two answer choices provided to them for almost every unanswerable question. This finding highlights the dangers of using forced-choice questions with young preschoolers for questions where the interviewer is uncertain whether they are providing a correct alternative. The 3-year-olds performed equally poorly in the something else and standard conditions. Their rates of selecting an incorrect response on the initial question was lowered by the something else prompt because children selected the something else prompt about a third of the time (chance rates with three options). However, when 3-year-olds were prompted for their own responses on the unanswerable questions, they generally self-generated an inaccurate response. For example, in our staged event, children used an unnamed doll to show the location of where they had been touched. Children were asked, "What was the doll's name, Sally, Sammy, or something else?" One child replied, "Uncle Frank." Perhaps surprisingly,

Table 4
Children's Responses to Unanswerable Questions by Age and Interview Condition

Condition/Age	Gave initial response		Self-generated a response	
	Correct (Don't know)	Incorrect	Correct (Don't know)	Incorrect
Standard				
3 ($n = 14$)	.00	.97		.03
4 ($n = 17$)	.17	.76		.06
5 ($n = 16$)	.49	.51		.01
Total	.23	.74		.03
Something else				
3 ($n = 14$)	.11	.54	.07	.28
4 ($n = 18$)	.17	.52	.11	.21
5 ($n = 15$)	.33	.37	.10	.20
Total	.20	.48	.09	.23

Note. Rows may not add to one due to rounding. The bolded values are the two columns that when summed show the children's total accuracy. Blank cells indicate "not applicable."

despite their immature vocabularies, even the 3-year-olds were able to generate their own (inaccurate) responses when prompted. Although children performed progressively better on the unanswerable items with age, even the 5-year-olds performance was at about 50% accurate. Like the 3-year-olds, rather than indicating they did not know the answer, older children tended to confabulate a response on the unanswerable questions regardless of the inclusion of a something else alternative.

The something else alternative did produce higher accuracy rates for the false questions (i.e., questions where no correct response alternative was provided) compared to the standard two-alternative questions, but still performance was very poor on these questions with overall 31% accuracy in the something else condition versus 15% correct in the standard condition. For the false question items, again the 5-year-olds outperformed the 3- and 4-year-olds but no significant effect of the something else alternative emerged with age. With over half incorrect in the something else condition, even with the oldest children, performance was more apt to be inaccurate than accurate and was of low reliability from a forensic perspective.

Like the unanswerable questions, children were much more apt to self-generate their own response alternative when given the additional something else alternative on false questions. However, just over half of their self-generated responses were incorrect. In terms of raw numbers of inaccurate self-generated responses, children in the something else condition were over three times more likely to generate incorrect responses compared with children in the standard condition. Hence, the something else prompt might postpone children's speculated responses, but children still performed poorly. This finding is consistent with extant literature indicating children struggle on forced-choice questions when no correct response alternative is provided (e.g., [Fritzley et al., 2013](#); [Peterson & Grant, 2001](#); [Rocha et al., 2013](#)). Our data add to this literature by demonstrating that children often will self-generate their own inaccurate responses to questions when no correct alternative is provided.

One encouraging finding is that the something else prompt did not have adverse effects on children's performance when true answer choices were provided. However, when they did generate their own responses on true items, over half were incorrect. For example, one child was asked if they were touched on the ankle, the elbow, or something else (with elbow being the correct choice) and instead responded they were touched on the teeth. Children's relatively low accuracy rates on the true questions suggest the event details were not highly memorable to the 3- and 4-year-olds following a 1-week delay. However, this does not negate the findings for the false and unanswerable items demonstrating children provide and generate false and speculative responses to adults' questions regardless of whether they remember the event.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has a number of limitations. First, our design did not allow a direct comparison of children's accuracy on forced-choice questions versus open-ended prompts. However, open-ended prompts were not included in the study for several reasons. Foremost, we were primarily interested in whether the something else prompt helped children resist providing inaccurate or speculative responses since these are the types of questions for which the

something else prompt is used by forensic interviewers. There is no logical match to the false and unanswerable questions in an open-ended format. Further, a vast literature already documents the superiority of open-ended prompts over forced-choice questions (e.g., [Fivush, Peterson, & Schwarzmuller, 2002](#); [Peterson, Dowdin, & Tobin, 1999](#)). The something else option is used by interviewers with the idea that it eliminates children's tendency to select an incorrect response, so we reasoned the logical starting point was to compare standard forced-choice questions either with or without the added something else alternative. Future studies might directly compare the something else prompt with open-ended questions.

A second limitation of the study is that children performed poorly on the true event questions, indicating they had a fuzzy memory for the details of the event. However, given many children delay abuse disclosure, we chose employed a delayed memory test. Future work can test children's immediate memory using the something else prompt. However, given [Stolzenberg et al.'s \(2017\)](#) finding that children performed similarly poorly describing contemporaneously occurring touch or clothing placement on a doll, we are skeptical that children's performance will be affected with the something else prompt under shorter delays. Finally, replication is needed of these results. Experimental paradigms using different staged events with forced-choice questions that are interspersed among more open-ended questions would more closely parallel actual forensic interviews.

We hope our study helps generate further research on the something else prompt, given the frequency by which it has been adopted in forensic practice. More studies are needed to ensure our results are robust across different questions involving different events. Finally, our study design was driven by scientific considerations of experimental control and statistical power. In actual forensic interviews, the interviewer generally intersperses the something else prompts among other question types. Future studies could employ a more ecologically valid presentation of the question types.

Forensic Implications

The major concern expressed by developmental psychologists about forced-choice questions is that children tend to pick a response regardless of whether they know the answer. Some practitioners have argued providing a something else alternative obviates concerns about children's tendency to pick an answer when given forced-choice questions. Since forensic interviewers rarely know whether they are including a correct response alternative, the idea is the something else alternative makes children free to generate their own response rather than locking them in to two alternatives. For example, the following quote is taken from an excerpt of expert testimony given by a forensic pediatrician:

Q: Also dangerous is asking yes or no questions, even when the questions are not leading, right?

A: No, asking a yes or no question isn't necessarily leading. Especially if you give them more than yes or no. So yes, no, or something else, that would be a multiple choice question . . . (*State of Louisiana vs. Keith Hall, 2011*).

Similarly, a forensic interviewer testified to the use of the something else option in a child sexual abuse trial stating,

... if they already made a disclosure of abuse, and we would ask, was it on top of the clothes or underneath the clothes or something else? We always want to give them that something else option, because children are trying to answer adults, and if you give them two options, a lot of times they're going to pick one. So we like to give them the option of something else, in case it was a different way" (*State of Texas vs. Jon Stover*, 2013).

Although perhaps intuitively appealing, the use of a something else alternative is without scientific support at this time. Our data indicate children generated responses at high rates for false and unanswerable questions, yet the responses showed high inaccuracy rates. For example, on one unanswerable question, children were asked whether the interviewer's favorite fruit was an apple, a banana, or something else. One child said "something else" and was prompted, "What is her favorite fruit?" The child replied, "Carrots."

A general principle in forensic interviews is that children's self-generated statements are more reliable than children's responses to forced-choice questions. There are exceptions, however. Poole and Lindsay (2001) and Principe and colleagues (see Principe & Schindewolf, 2012, for a review) found high rates of false suggested information in children's free recall narratives. 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.

In endorsing the use of the something else option, Faller (2000) argued,

... there is a possibility that all the choices are wrong. For example, suppose the interviewer asks if the abuser was dad or older brother, but in fact it was the next-door neighbor. Therefore, the interviewer should consider including an open-ended alternative, such as "someone else" or "someplace else," when using a Multiple Choice Question. (p. 49)

Our study findings, combined with many others (Lamb et al., 1997, 2003, 2007; Stolzenberg et al., 2017), indicate the most developmentally appropriate way to pose the question would be to avoid the forced-choice options altogether. Rather the interviewer could ask "When you say someone touched you, tell me all about that" rather than suggesting whether it was "dad, older brother, or someone else."

Our results suggest the provision of a something else alternative does not overcome children's tendency to select (or generate) responses to forced-choice questions. Perhaps the biggest danger of incorporating a something else alternative is the practice may cause interviewers to have confidence in forced-choice questions, a confidence that is not warranted according to our data. Importantly, the youngest children were the most at risk for selecting or providing inaccurate responses. Overall, our findings lend further support to scientifically supported protocols (e.g., Lamb et al.,

2008; Poole, 2016) that emphasize the use of open-ended prompts when interviewing children. Lamb and colleagues' corpora of studies demonstrate that open-ended questions not only produce more accurate reports but provide more complete reports as well, even among preschoolers.

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