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Abstract

Most experimental studies examining the use of pre-interview instructions (ground rules) show that children say 'I don't know' more often when they have been encouraged to do so when appropriate. However, children's 'don't know' responses have not been studied in more applied contexts, such as in investigative interviews. In the present study, 76 transcripts of investigative interviews with allegedly abused children revealed patterns of 'don't know' responding, as well as interviewers' reactions to these responses. Instructions to say 'I don't know' when appropriate did not affect the frequency with which children gave these responses. Interviewers rejected 'don't know' responses nearly 30% of the time, and typically continued to ask about the same topic using more risky questions. Children often answered these follow-up questions even though they had previously indicated that they lacked the requested information. There was no evidence that 'don't know' responses indicated reluctance to talk about abuse. Implications for forensic interviewers are discussed.

An Examination of 'Don't Know' Responses in Forensic Interviews with Children

In recent decades, children's involvement in the legal system as victims and witnesses has intensified. A vast body of literature now exists detailing best-practice guidelines for interviewing child witnesses. Some procedures have been intensively researched both under controlled lab conditions and in field interviews, and the benefits of these procedures are well-understood (e.g., the use of open-ended questions; inclusion of a practice narrative; see Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011, Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010; Yuille, Cooper, & Hervé, 2009). Other procedures such as the use of 'ground rules', or interview instructions, to improve children's communicative competence have received less attention, although analogue research testing the efficacy of their use is growing (Cordón, Saetermoe, & Goodman, 2005; Ellis, Powell, Thomson, & Jones, 2003; Waterman & Blades, 2011; see Saywitz et al., 2010, for a review).

Ground rules are intended to make children aware that they are in control of the interview, that they should not feel pressured to answer questions if they do not know the answers, and that they can ask interviewers to explain anything that they do not understand (see Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lyon, 2010; Saywitz et al., 2010). It is particularly important for children to understand that they should say 'I don't know' rather than guess when they cannot answer a question. The investigative interview situation is one that is unusual for children who are accustomed to being questioned by knowledgeable adults who ask questions to test memory, vocabulary, or knowledge rather than to seek answers (e.g., 'What colour are daddy's shoes?'; Lyon, 2010; see also Poole & Lamb, 1998). The purpose of the 'don't know' ground rule, then, is to enhance the accuracy and credibility of children's testimony by reducing children's propensity to guess.

Although researchers have studied children's 'don't know' responses experimentally (e.g., Vogl, 2012; Waterman, Blades & Spencer 2000, 2001), children's reactions to the 'don't know' ground rule have not been explored in an applied context, such as during investigative interviews. In the present study, accordingly, we describe children's 'don't know' responses and interviewers' reactions to these responses during investigative interviews about sexual abuse. We begin by reviewing the empirical research underlying the use of this particular interview instruction and its observed effects in analogue research, followed by an explanation of how it is employed in forensic interviews, before presenting the hypotheses and design of the present study.

The Rationale for the 'Don't Know' Ground Rule

Children often feel pressured to answer adults' questions. For example, when interviewers ask children nonsense questions or unanswerable questions (i.e., questions about event details the child has not experienced, and therefore have no correct answers), many children attempt to answer those questions rather than saying 'I don't know' even when they lack the required information or when the questions do not make sense (Waterman et al., 2000; 2001). Although classic studies found that children attempt to answer nearly all unanswerable questions asked of them (Hughes & Grieve, 1980; Pratt, 1990), more recent research has demonstrated that this is particularly true for closed (yes-no) questions, as opposed to more open questions (wh-questions; Waterman et al., 2000, 2004; Gee, Gregory & Pipe, 1999). In one such study children answered the large majority of nonsensical closed questions, although they judged 92% of these questions to be 'silly questions' during a later session (Waterman et al., 2000).

Clearly, children are more likely to provide incorrect information if they guess, but in addition, there is research demonstrating that the detrimental effects on accuracy extend beyond

the initial interview; generating guesses about what might have happened can also change memory for experienced events. When participants are forced to choose (guess) between two options in response to misleading questions, both adults and children have been shown to maintain the misleading information at a second interview (Gombos, Pezdek & Haymond, 2012; Stolzenberg & Pezdek, 2013). Participants recall their guessed responses as having been part of their own experiences, and may actually feel more confident that these are true memories over time (Pezdek, Sperry & Owens, 2007).

Therefore, pressuring children to guess when they do not know the answer could distort their memories, in the same way that suggestive questions introduce information into children's reports. Children may later confuse the source of these guesses, attributing them to real experiences. Because children's memories are more influenced by externally presented information than adults' memories are (e.g., Bruck & Ceci, 1999, Cassel & Bjorklund, 1995), there is reason to be particularly concerned about the effects of forced confabulation on children's memories.

According to Koriat and colleagues (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Koriat, Goldsmith, Schneider & Nakash-Dura, 2001; see also Roebers & Schneider, 2005), allowing 'don't know' responses might also improve accuracy by changing the regulation strategies that children use in deciding whether or not to report information. When people have the freedom to control what they do or do not report, their reports become more accurate. Children may be capable of monitoring the quality of their memories more carefully if they do not feel pressured to answer questions. This suggests that interview instructions should not only alleviate social pressures within the interview but must also address children's cognitive development by giving them opportunities to strategically monitor their memory reporting.

The research discussed here indicates that children do not typically say 'I don't know' in response to adults' questions when they are unsure, especially when the questions are forced choice. Children's tendency to guess when they do not know the answer can be problematic. Taken together, these findings demonstrate both the importance of children's 'don't know' responses and why 'don't know' instructions are necessary in investigative interviews. Preventing children from guessing during investigative interviews should improve their accuracy as eyewitnesses by decreasing the amount of incorrectly reported information, and also prevent this inaccurate information from being confused with real experiences later on. This issue is of particular importance when children are interviewed multiple times on different occasions, as is often the case in the legal system (Jaudes & Martone, 1992).

Experimental Research on the 'Don't Know' Ground Rule

A limited body of experimental research has looked at whether explicitly encouraging children to say 'I don't know' using pre-interview instructions increases 'don't know' responding as well as accuracy. Several early studies of children between 4- and 10-years-old showed increases in 'don't know' responding when children were encouraged to say 'I don't know' (Moston, 1987; Nesbitt & Markham, 1999). In particular, pre-interview instructions lead to increases in 'don't know' responding to misleading questions, but have no effect on responses to non-misleading questions (Howie & Dowd, 1996; Mulder & Vrij, 1996, Waterman & Blades, 2011). Roebers and her colleagues have also shown that children respond with 'I don't know' more frequently in response to unanswerable questions when rewards and penalties are given for correct and incorrect responses (Roebers & Fernandez, 2002; Roebers & Schneider, 2005). These studies demonstrate that, when children are given clear instructions that remove the pressure to guess, they are capable of monitoring their memory accuracy more carefully.

In general, the greatest benefits of the 'don't know' instruction have occurred when children have practiced saying 'I don't know' to unanswerable questions after delivery of the rule (e.g., Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994), whereas effects are minimal or not present when there is no opportunity to practice implementation (e.g., Ellis et al., 2003; Peterson & Grant, 2001).

The 'Don't Know' Ground Rule in Forensic Contexts

As noted, forensic interviews are unfamiliar contexts for children, who must be prepared for their unique roles by being told that it is acceptable to say 'I don't know' to remove pressure to answer all questions posed. Such ground rules have been used in tens of thousands of interviews worldwide (e.g., Hershkowitz, Horowitz & Lamb, 2005; Orbach et al., 2000). The effect of 'don't know' instructions, however, has not been directly examined in forensic interviews where children are asked, often after considerable delay, about personally meaningful, negative, and complex events. Thus while the results of lab studies may show what children are *capable* of doing, they may not accurately reflect what children actually do when discussing more negative and meaningful events.

Currently, interview protocols recommend the use of ground rules without evidence that they are effective at encouraging the appropriate use of 'don't know' responses in applied contexts. Accordingly, the present study, involving forensic interviews with 76 alleged victims of child sexual abuse, had several inter-related goals. The first was to describe when and how often children said 'I don't know' in investigative interviews. The second goal was to evaluate the effect of pre-interview instructions that encourage 'don't know' responses. Third, interviewers' reactions to 'don't know' responses were evaluated, and finally, the possibility that 'don't know' responses might indicate reluctance was examined.

Based on the experimental literature showing the benefits of pre-interview 'don't know' instructions, it was expected that presentation of the 'don't know' ground rule would increase 'don't know' responding. It was also expected that children who received the ground rule would be less likely to elaborate on their 'don't know' responses by guessing, and less likely to provide answers if interviewers continued to question them about the same topic. Interviewers may find 'don't know' responses frustrating because they are not able to get the information they have requested, and therefore, it was predicted that interviewers might reject 'don't know' responses by continuing to question children and increasing the pressure to answer. However, it was also expected that interviewers would be less likely to do so if they had given the children instructions encouraging 'don't know' responses. Finally, because studies examining the effect of 'don't know' instructions tend to show increases in 'don't know' responses to unanswerable questions but no effect on answerable questions, it was hypothesized that there would be no relation between the number of 'don't know' responses and how informative the interviews were.

Method

Sample

The interviews used in this study were drawn from a larger set of 132 investigative interviews with children alleging sexual abuse that had been used in a previously published study (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001). Children were interviewed by police officers and social workers from 13 police forces in England and Wales between 1994 and 1997, and there was a strong suspicion that abuse had occurred in all of these cases (e.g., corroborating evidence or a prior disclosure). Interviews were conducted in accordance with the Memorandum of Good Practice (MOGP; Home Office, 1992), a comprehensive document that provided detailed

guidelines for conducting forensic interviews with child witnesses in England and Wales. The MOGP encouraged the use of ground rules during the rapport building phase of the interview, but in practice, not all of the ground rules are presented in each interview; in the present sample, 98% of the interviewers discussed the importance of telling the truth, 49% encouraged children to say 'I don't know' when appropriate, and 8% reminded children that the interviewer had not been present at the time of the alleged events. All of the interviewers had been trained to use the MOGP, typically by attending 5-day training courses (Sternberg et al., 2001).

Interviews were excluded from the sample if the child did not make an allegation during the interview, the child alleged a type of abuse other than sexual abuse (i.e., physical abuse only), the child was older than 13, or the child was a witness rather than a victim. From the remaining interviews, participants who received the 'don't know' ground rule and participants who did not were individually matched as closely as possible with respect to age (within 1 year), the severity of the abuse, whether the abuse had occurred once or multiple times, and the child's relationship to the perpetrator (see Table 1). Interviews were matched with respect to these variables because previous research has demonstrated that each of these factors is related to how informative children are during investigative interviews (e.g., Lamb, Orbach, Warren, Esplin, & Hershkowitz, 2007; Orbach & Lamb, 2007). All interviews that could be matched were included, and the resulting sample consisted of 76 transcripts; 38 that included the 'don't know' ground rule, and 38 that did not. None of the children to whom the ground rule was presented were given the opportunity to practice applying the rule. The children were aged 4 to 13 ($M = 8.70$, $SD = 2.29$), and 78% were female. Information about ethnicity was not available for 20 children, but of the remaining 56 children, 95% were White British. Children were separated into three age groups for analyses (4- to 6-year-olds, 7- to -9-year-olds, and 10- to 13-year-olds). The average

interview length was 42.20 minutes (SD = 21.77). Analyses revealed no significant effects of either the severity of the abuse or relationship to the perpetrator on the number of 'don't know' responses in this sample, Fs ≤ 1.38, ps ≥ .26.

Coding

The coding manual was developed and refined based on reviewing eight interviews (approximately 10% of the sample). Six interviews that were not included in the sample (e.g., because they involved physical abuse only) were used to train the coders. After training, the first author coded the entire sample, and a research assistant independently coded 16 interviews (21% of the sample) to estimate reliability. Percent agreement ranged from 83 to 100%, and Kappas ranged from .67 to 1.00. Percent agreement and Kappa are reported for each type of coding below.

The 'don't know' ground rule. To assess the effect of the 'don't know' ground rule, transcripts were coded to determine whether or not the child was provided with instructions that it was acceptable to say 'I don't know' during the interview. The instructions were either *present* or *absent*. Percent agreement for the presence of the 'don't know' ground rule was 94% (Kappa = .88). There was a disagreement in one interview; the ground rule was mistakenly coded as present by one rater because the interviewer told the child it was okay to ask for clarification if he or she did not understand a question.

Frequency of 'don't know' responses. 'Don't know' responses were defined as statements by the child indicating a lack of knowledge about a specific topic and could include a variety of terms, such as "I don't know," "I don't remember," "I'm not sure," etc. All of the children's 'don't know' responses during the substantive phase of the interview were identified. 'Don't know' responses during the pre-substantive phase (i.e., ground rules and rapport building)

were not included. 'Don't knows' in response to non-substantive utterances were also not included (i.e., utterances that did not directly relate to the abuse; for example, procedural comments such as, "Do you know why we're recording this interview?"). Reliability with respect to the number of 'don't know' responses showed 83% agreement. After the 'don't know' responses had been identified, they were categorized in a number of ways.

How 'don't know' responses were elicited. Each response was categorized as either *interviewer-elicited* if the 'don't know' was directly in response to an interviewer's question, or *spontaneous* if the child spontaneously offered that he or she did not know specific information that the interviewer had not asked about. Percent agreement for this coding was 96%, and Kappa was .83.

Elaboration of 'don't know' responses. Children's responses were coded to determine whether they speculated or elaborated on possibilities about the information they did not know. A *non-elaborated* response was coded when the child simply indicated that he or she did not know the information (e.g., "When did that happen?" Child: "I don't know"), whereas an *elaborated* response also included a guess about what the answer might be (e.g., When did that happen?" Child: "I don't know, but I think it was before Christmas some time, probably around the fall"). Percent agreement for this coding was 90%, and Kappa was .75.

Expression of 'don't know' responses. The wording that children used to indicate that they did not know was coded into three categories. Responses were coded as *don't know* or *don't remember* if children used those specific words, and the *other* category was used for any responses that did not fit within the first two categories (e.g., "I'm not too sure"). Percent agreement for this coding was 97%, and Kappa was .95.

Eliciting question types. The questions interviewers asked that elicited 'don't know' responses were categorized into the four most common types of utterances identified in this and related studies: invitations, directives, option-posing questions, and suggestive questions. *Invitations* are open-ended utterances using questions, statements, or imperatives to elicit free-recall responses. Invitations may ask about the whole incident (e.g., "Tell me what happened") or previous content mentioned by the child (e.g., "You mentioned x, tell me more about that"). The interviewer's question does not constrain the child's response, except in the most general way when using something the child previously mentioned as a cue. *Directives* request additional information about details mentioned by the child earlier in the interview, typically in the form of 'wh-' questions (who, what, when, where, and why; e.g., "When did he touch you the first time?"). *Option-posing questions* focus the child's attention more narrowly on aspects of the account that the child did not previously mention, but do not imply that a particular response is expected. These could be yes-no questions or forced choice questions (e.g., "Did he touch you over your clothes or under?"). Finally, *suggestive questions* are questions that assume incident-related information that has not been disclosed by the child earlier in the interview, imply that a particular response is expected, or quote the child incorrectly. When children spontaneously said 'I don't know', the 'don't know' was attributed to the interviewer utterance immediately preceding the child's narrative. Percent agreement for utterance types was 89%, and Kappa was .81.

Interviewers' reactions to 'don't know' responses. Interviewers' reactions to children's 'don't know' responses were examined to determine whether interviewers accepted or rejected the 'don't know' responses. Reactions were also coded as explicit or implicit, leading to four codes, with decreasing degrees of supportiveness: explicit acceptance, implicit acceptance,

implicit rejection, and explicit rejection. *Explicit acceptance* referred to generally supportive or encouraging comments about the child's 'don't know' response which indicated that it was acceptable to say 'I don't know.' *Implicit acceptance* was coded when an interviewer did not explicitly support the child's 'don't know,' but accepted the 'don't know' as a legitimate response. The interviewer continued with the interview as if the child had provided an answer by either moving on to the next logical question or refocusing on something that the child had previously mentioned. For the purpose of analyses, it was decided that the two 'acceptance' categories were not meaningfully different, so these codes were combined. An *implicit rejection* was coded when the interviewer ignored the fact that the child had said 'I don't know' and continued questioning the child about the same topic. *Explicit rejection* referred to generally negative comments about the child's ability or the response, which increased the pressure to provide an answer. The interviewer did not treat the 'don't know' as a legitimate response and indicated that the child had not answered the question or that the interviewer did not believe the child. An explicit rejection was also coded when the interviewer led the child to guess or suggested a possible answer after a 'don't know' response. These reactions explicitly discouraged the children from saying 'I don't know.' Percent agreement for interviewer reactions was 89% and Kappa was .67.

Question types following 'don't know' responses. When interviewers rejected children's 'don't know' responses, the next question asked about that topic was coded to determine if it was the same question type, a riskier question type, or a safer question type than the original eliciting question. To make these judgments, the next question was coded as per the four utterance categories discussed above. Question types were considered more 'risky' as they became narrower and the interviewer introduced more information (i.e., invitations were the

safest prompts, and suggestive questions were the riskiest). For example, if the eliciting question was an invitation and the interviewer's next question was option-posing, the next question was considered a 'riskier' question. The child's reaction to the interviewer's rejection was coded as either providing an answer, or maintaining not to know. Percent agreement for both the quality of the next question and the children's responses were 100% (Kappas = 1.00).

Indicators of reluctance. To assess whether 'don't know' responses were related to reluctance, the associations between the number of 'don't know' responses and several variables were examined. Measures of reluctance included the number of details provided in the interview; whether or not the child spontaneously disclosed sexual abuse during the interview, dichotomously coded; and the number of questions asked before the child made an allegation. The number of details was reliably coded for a previously published study (see Sternberg et al., 2001, for a more detailed description of the coding procedure).

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Results

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Preliminary Analyses

There was no significant gender difference in the number of 'don't know' responses or the number of details provided in the interviews. Five children had been interviewed previously about the alleged abuse, but preliminary analyses confirmed that these participants did not differ from the rest of the sample on the number of 'don't know' responses or age.

To determine whether interviews including the 'don't know' ground rule were of higher quality than those without, independent samples t-tests were conducted comparing the proportions of questions of each type that interviewers used (open-ended, directive, option-posing, and suggestive questions). There were no significant differences, ts ≤ .73, all ps ≥ .47, Cohen's ds ≤ .17.

Describing Children's 'Don't Know' Responses

There were an average of 7.07 'don't know' responses in the interviews (SD = 5.93), with a range from 0 to 33. On average, children said 'I don't know' in response to 5.9% of all interviewer utterances (SD = .04). To determine whether there were age differences in the frequency of 'don't know' responding, a one-way (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on the number of 'don't know' responses. Interview length (in minutes) was included as a covariate because older children's interviews were longer on average, and may have contained more 'don't know' responses as a function of interview length. Interview length was significant as a covariate, $F(1, 67)$ = 16.11, $p < .001$, but there was no significant effect of age, $F(2, 67)$ = 1.22, p = .30, η_p^2 = .05.

A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 2 (Elicited: Interviewer, Spontaneous) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed a significant main effect of how 'don't know' responses were elicited, $F(1, 69)$ = 300.05, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .81; on average, children were significantly more likely to say 'I don't know' in response to specific interviewer prompts (M = .89, SD = .17) than spontaneously (M = .11, SD = .17). There was no significant main effect or interaction with age, both Fs ≤ .65, ps ≥ .53.

A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 2 (Elaboration: Yes, No) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed a significant main effect of elaboration, $F(1, 69)$ = 85.65, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .55, with the majority of responses not elaborated (M = .82, SD = .27). There was also a significant interaction with age, $F(2, 69)$ = 4.32, p = .02, η_p^2 = .11. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons showed that the 3- to 6-year-olds were far less likely to elaborate on their responses (M = .03, SD = .11) than either the 7- to 9-year-olds (M = .22, SD = .27) or the 10- to 13-year-olds (M = .30, SD = .27), who did not differ from each other.

A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 3 (Expression: Don't Know, Don't Remember, Other) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed no significant main effect or interaction with age, Fs ≤ 1.01, ps ≥ .40, but a main effect of how children expressed their ignorance, $F(2, 68) = 4.11$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons revealed that the effect was driven by one difference in means: the children were more likely to say 'I don't know' ($M = .41$, $SD = .30$) than 'I don't remember' ($M = .26$, $SD = .27$). The mean proportion of responses when children used 'other' expressions ($M = .32$, $SD = .24$) did not differ from either of the first two means. Overall, children used a variety of phrases to indicate that they did not remember information.

To examine which question types were most likely to elicit 'don't know' responses, proportions were calculated for each question type by dividing the number of questions of that type that elicited a 'don't know' response by the total number of questions of that type in the interview. As there were relatively few 'don't know' responses in the interviews, these proportions were quite small, with approximately 6% of invitations, 8% of directives, 4% of option-posing questions, and 6% of suggestive questions resulting in 'don't know' responses. These proportions were subjected to a 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 4 (Question Type: Invitation, Directive, Option-Posing, Suggestive) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor. There was no significant main effect or interaction with age, Fs ≤ .66, ps ≥ .52. There was a significant main effect of question type, $F(3, 64) = 9.40$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$; post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons demonstrated that only directive and option-posing questions differed.

The Effect of the Ground Rule on Children's Responses

To test the hypothesis that 'don't know' instructions would increase the number of 'don't know' responses provided by children in the interviews, an independent samples t-test was

conducted on the number of 'don't know' responses. The 'don't know' instructions did not have a significant impact on the number of 'don't know' responses that children provided in the interviews, $t(74) = -.02$, $p = .99$, Cohen's $d = .01$. Children who received the instructions gave the same number of 'don't know' responses ($M = 7.05$, $SD = 5.34$) as those who did not receive those instructions ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 6.54$). A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 2 (Ground Rule: Yes, No) ANOVA also showed no significant interaction between the ground rule and age on the frequency of 'don't know' responses, $F(2,70) = .86$, $p = .43$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Although the 'don't know' ground rule did not affect the frequency with which children said 'I don't know', the possibility that the ground rule resulted in qualitative differences in the types of 'don't know' responses children provided was examined. Independent samples t-tests were conducted on the proportion of spontaneous 'don't know' responses (versus those elicited by interviewers) and the proportion of elaborated 'don't know' responses (versus non-elaborated responses). Neither test was significant, both ts ≤ 1.18, ps $\geq .24$, Cohen's ds $\leq .28$. Presentation of the 'don't know' ground rule did not change the likelihood that children spontaneously reported that they did not know information or that they elaborated on their 'don't know' responses.

Interviewers' Reactions to 'Don't Know' Responses

A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 3 (Interviewer Reaction: Accept, Implicit Rejection, Explicit Rejection) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor indicated no significant main effect or interaction with age, Fs $\leq .36$, ps $\geq .84$. There was, however, a significant main effect of reaction type, $F(2, 68) = 137.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .80$. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons indicated that all three proportions were significantly different from each other, with interviewers

most often accepting 'don't know' responses ($M = .71$, $SD = .28$), followed by implicit rejections ($M = .22$, $SD = .25$) and finally explicit rejections ($M = .07$, $SD = .12$).

Because interviewers rejected 'don't know' responses nearly 30% of the time, the question type of the interviewers' next questions compared to the eliciting questions were of interest, as well as whether or not the children answered follow-up questions. A 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 3 (Next Question Type: Same, Safer, Riskier) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor showed a main effect of the next question type, $F(2, 41) = 44.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .69$, but no significant effect of age or interaction, Fs $\leq .71$, ps $\geq .59$. Follow-up Bonferroni comparisons demonstrated that all three proportions were different from each other, with interviewers being most likely to follow up their questions with a riskier question ($M = .69$, $SD = .35$), next most likely to ask a question of the same type ($M = .26$, $SD = .31$), and least likely to ask a follow-up question that was more open than the original question ($M = .05$, $SD = .18$).

To assess how often children answered follow-up questions that increased the pressure for children to respond, a 3 (Age: 4-6, 7-9, 10-13) x 2 (Question Answered: Yes, No) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor was run. There was no significant main effect or interaction with age, Fs ≤ 2.67, ps $\geq .08$. Children were significantly more likely to answer the next question ($M = .81$, $SD = .24$) than to maintain their 'don't know' responses ($M = .19$, $SD = .24$; $F [1, 44] = 54.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .55$). When children said 'I don't know,' interviewers were very likely to follow up with more specific, riskier questions about the same topic, and children were highly likely to answer these questions, despite having already indicated that they did not know the information they were being asked about.

The proportions of interviewer reactions in each category were subjected to a series of independent samples t-tests to see whether interviewers reacted differently to 'don't know'

responses when they had or had not provided the ground rule. There were no differences between

conditions for any type of interviewer reaction, ts ≤ .57, all ps ≥ .57, Cohen's ds ≤ .14.

Interviewers who had provided the 'don't know' ground rule rejected children's 'don't know'

responses just as frequently (M = .31, SD = .21) as interviewers who had not provided the

instructions (M =.27, SD = .17).

Finally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the ground

rule had an effect on whether or not children answered the interviewers' next questions after they

had rejected 'don't know' responses. There was no significant difference in responses between

children who got the ground rule (M = .85, SD = .22) and those who did not get the ground rule

(M = .73, SD = .28), $t(45)$ = -1.75, p = .09, Cohen's d = .52.

The Relationship between 'Don't Know' Responses and Reluctance

It was not possible to examine the number of 'don't know' responses as a function of

spontaneous versus prompted disclosure or the number of substantive questions before the

children made allegations due to a lack of variability. Only one child in the sample

spontaneously disclosed abuse; of the rest of the sample, 83% disclosed in response to the first

question, 14% in response to the second question, and only 3% were asked a third question

before alleging that they were abused.

The relation between the number of 'don't know' responses and the number of details

provided was examined. Longer interviews tended to contain more details and also more 'don't

know' responses, so a partial correlation was computed controlling for the length of the

interview in minutes and the number of words spoken by the children in the entire interview. The

correlation between the number of 'don't know' responses and the number of details was only

marginally significant, $r(67) = .23$, $p = .06$, and was in a positive direction. Therefore, there was no evidence that children who said 'I don't know' more often were less informative overall.

Discussion

This study examined investigative interviews with children alleging sexual abuse to describe patterns of 'don't know' responding and interviewers' reactions to these responses, as well as to determine whether prior instructions affected children's tendencies to say 'I don't know.'

Describing 'Don't Know' Responses

'Don't know' responses were relatively rare, occurring in response to only about 6% of interviewer prompts, but when they occurred, children used a variety of phrases to indicate that they could not provide the requested information. There were no developmental differences except that younger children were much less likely than older children to elaborate on 'don't know' responses. Children most commonly said 'I don't know' when asked for specific information, and children seldom told the interviewers spontaneously that they were lacking specific information. As well, children seldom elaborated or speculated about answers to the interviewers' questions when they said 'I don't know,' although this varied for different age groups.

Proportionally more directives than option-posing questions resulted in 'don't know' responses. Similar findings have been obtained in experimental studies (Gee et al., 1999; Waterman et al., 2000, 2004), probably because option-posing questions are easy to answer and are highly conducive to guessing. The unwillingness to say 'I don't know' in response to forced choice questions is problematic, because these questions often involve interviewers introducing

information. These findings thus serve to emphasize the importance of recommendations that interviewers use open prompts and directives as much as possible, and only use more closed prompts when necessary to elicit information about details already mentioned by the child (e.g., Lamb et al., 2007).

The Effect of the 'Don't Know' Ground Rule

A major goal of this study was to determine whether the 'don't know' ground rule affected the course of forensic interviews with children. Counter to our hypotheses, the 'don't know' ground rule did not affect any aspect of children's 'don't know' responding. Children who received instructions encouraging them to say 'I don't know' when appropriate were no more likely to do so, and there were no effects on how often children elaborated about possible answers. Additionally, when interviewers rejected 'don't know' responses and increased the pressure to respond, children who had received the ground rule were no less likely to succumb to the interviewers' pressure and answer the question.

Although these findings are not in line with experiments that generally show that children say 'I don't know' more often if they are instructed to do so when necessary, perhaps this was because none of the interviewers used an example of the ground rule to which children could practice responding (Gee et al., 1999). High quality interviews, such as those conducted according to the NICHD Protocol, often include a demonstration of the ground rule: the child is asked a question that s/he cannot answer (e.g., What is my dog's name?) and has the opportunity to practice saying 'I don't know.' Such practice may help children understand what the instructions mean, and the use of an example may help children feel more comfortable saying 'I don't know.' In addition, practice with a counter-example (i.e., to ensure that children *do* respond when they *do* know the answer) can help to prevent children from overusing 'don't

know' responses (Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994). It is possible that, without such practice, the 'litany' of ground rules is overwhelming to children and they are not able to process them all at the beginning of the interview. Similar explanations have been offered to explain why warnings about repeated questions do not affect children's behavior (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996), and experimental studies that do not show an effect of the ground rule most often do not use an example (e.g., Ellis et al., 2003, Peterson & Grant, 2003). It is also possible that even when interviewers provided the ground rule, their unsupportive reactions to 'don't know' responses created conflicting messages regarding the appropriateness of such responses. This possibility is further discussed below.

Interviewers' Reactions to 'Don't Know' Responses

An examination of interviewers' reactions to 'don't know' responses yielded interesting results. Although interviewers usually accepted 'don't know' responses, they did reject 'don't know' responses nearly 30% of the time. Further, when interviewers rejected 'don't know' responses they asked more closed questions about the same topic 69% of the time. Because interviewers' rejections increased the pressure on children to provide answers, children in fact provided answers 81% of the time, even though they had previously indicated that they did not know! This tendency to ask more specific questions (which children tend to answer) after children have expressed ignorance is worrisome because guessing is likely to undermine the accuracy of their current and future testimony.

Interviewers' unwillingness to accept 'don't know' responses at face value may be a function of the tremendous pressure they face to obtain critical details about the case, which makes 'don't know' responses rather frustrating. In addition, interviewers may believe that children are reluctant to talk about traumatic experiences, and that 'don't know' responses signal

children's unwillingness to talk about things that they do in fact remember (although our preliminary data on reluctance do not support this conclusion). When interviewers push for information they often get answers from the children, and although these responses may not be accurate, the interviewers' strategy is nonetheless reinforced.

Another discouraging finding was that interviewers who provided children with the 'don't know' ground rule at the beginning of the interview rejected 'don't know' responses just as often as those who did not set the ground rule. This may be one reason why the ground rule did not affect children's tendencies to say 'I don't know'; children received conflicting messages about whether it is acceptable to say 'I don't know. Such interviewer behaviour probably does not occur in lab-based studies where interviewers are under less pressure to obtain information, and are thus more likely to accept 'don't know' responses. This may explain the inconsistency between the results of this study and those found in the experimental literature.

When children are asked detailed questions, often after long delays, it might be better that they admit ignorance rather than confabulate answers. An important implication of these results is that interviewers need to accept 'don't know' responses to prevent children from guessing and reducing the accuracy of their current and future statements (Stolzenberg & Pezdek, 2013). If the objective of the 'don't know' ground rule is to reduce pressure on children to guess when they are unsure, unsupportive interviewer reactions to 'don't know' responses are clearly counter-productive.

The Relationship between 'Don't Know' Responses and Reluctance

There was no evidence that children who said 'I don't know' more often were any less informative in the interviews overall, because the frequency of 'don't know' responses was unrelated to the number of details provided in the interview. This suggests that children do not

simply say 'I don't know' when they are uncomfortable talking about abuse. Children appear to be making thoughtful decisions about uncertainty, disclosing many details about aspects of the events that they do remember.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One limitation of the current study is that the sample was drawn from a set of interviews dating from the 1990s, from which time interviewing protocols have changed somewhat, and they were of relatively low quality (although low quality interviews are actually commonplace; e.g., Korkman, Santtila, Westeraker & Sandnabba, 2008; Sternberg et al., 1996). Generally these interviews included few open-ended invitations to elicit details from the children (see Sternberg et al., 2001, for an account of the question types used in the same set of interviews). It could be argued that the ground rule is actually more important in low quality interviews because riskier questions elicit proportionately fewer 'don't know' responses. However, researchers and practitioners alike are most interested in high quality interviews, and it is important to consider whether these results would be the same in interviews dominated by open questions. A study looking at higher quality interviews would be informative, although it may be difficult to find a comparison group of high quality interviews that do not include the ground rules.

Because we had no control over the events being described, it was not possible to assess the extent to which 'don't know' responses enhanced the accuracy of testimony. Although there is a substantial literature showing that 'don't know' responses are preferable to guessing, we cannot confirm that 'don't know' responses had a positive impact on the accuracy of memory reports in this study. Finally, despite the fact that most predictions were not supported, the first author was the primary coder and was aware of the study hypotheses.

Further field research on 'don't know' responses is necessary to clarify the inconsistencies between the results of this study and experimental research on ground rules. As discussed above, an important next step would involve examining the impact of the 'don't know' ground rule in forensic contexts when children have opportunities to practice saying 'I don't know' at the onset of the interview.

In conclusion, this field study showed that the 'don't know' ground rule had no effect on any aspect of the children's 'don't know' responding. In addition, interviewers often continued to question children who expressed ignorance, increasing the pressure to respond. Children were likely to answer interviewers' follow-up questions despite having already indicated that they did not know the answers. The results of this study underscore the need for further research using investigative interviews to clarify the inconsistencies between these results and those of previous studies, and to identify the best ways of ensuring that children are encouraged by investigative interviewers to provide information of the highest possible accuracy.

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Table 1

Sample size for each level of the matching variables in instructions and no-instructions groups

Matching Variable		Ground Rule Condition	
		Instructions	No Instructions
Severity	Exposure	4	4
	Touch over	9	8
	Touch under	8	9
	Penetration	17	17
Number of incidents	Single incident	16	15
	Multiple incidents	22	23
Relationship to perpetrator	Immediate family	15	13
	Other family	4	7
	Familiar other	14	16
	Unfamiliar other	5	2

Note: Chi-square tests comparing the distribution of participants who received the ground rule to those who did not on each matching variable were not significant, *p*s = *ns.*