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Examining the impact of interviewer rejections following “Don't know” responses in forensic interviews of alleged preschool-aged victims of abuse

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Abstract

When forensic interviewers reject children's “Don't know” responses, either by repeating questions or pressuring the children to provide different responses, children may change their subsequent responses. The primary objective of the current study was to examine interviewer reactions following preschool-aged alleged abuse victims' “Don't know” responses in 114 forensic interviews and the children's responses to these rejections. Interviewer reactions were dichotomously coded as either interviewer acceptance (i.e., transitioning to the next logical question or formulating questions focusing on previously mentioned details) or interviewer rejection (i.e., repeating questions or making negative remarks about recall ability). The results showed that the interviewers accepted the children's “Don't know” responses 75.3% of the time and rejected them 24.7% of the time. When interviewers rejected the children's “Don't know” responses, 75.9% of the subsequent responses contradicted the children's initial responses. These results suggest that interviewer rejections following preschool-aged children's “Don't know” responses may be suggestive.

KEYWORDS

“Don't know” responses, forensic interviewing, ground rules, interviewer acceptance, interviewer rejections, preschool-aged children

1 | INTRODUCTION

Young children's recollections are notably susceptible to suggestions from adult conversational partners (Principe et al., 2013; Principe & London, 2022; Stolzenberg & Pezdek, 2013). It is common to observe variations in children's recollections of the same event across multiple retellings, particularly when forensic interviewers reject children's responses by either repeating already answered questions or by making negative remarks about the children's ability to recall (Earhart et al., 2014; Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1995; Howie et al., 2004).

Interviewer rejections are contrasted with interviewer acceptance, which is characterized by transitioning to the next logical question or formulating questions focusing on details the child has previously mentioned (Earhart et al., 2014).

Rejecting children's responses can be highly suggestive (Principe & London, 2022). If individuals in authoritative roles, such as forensic interviewers, reject children's responses, the children may interpret this as a hint that their previous responses were inadequate or incorrect. This might prompt the children to “improve” their responses by offering a different response following interviewer

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rejections (Earhart et al., 2014; Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1995; Principe & London, 2022; Tully, 2011). Consequently, interviewer rejections may therefore increase the risk of inconsistencies in children's responses, potentially undermining the credibility of their testimonies (Szojka et al., 2017). Therefore, it is crucial that forensic interviewers avoid rejecting children's responses to maintain the integrity of their testimonies (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2022).

The primary objective in forensic interviews is to obtain reliable information about the allegations (Newlin et al., 2015; The Mendez Principles, 2021). Substantial evidence indicates that adherence to research-based recommendations for forensic interviewing—such as utilizing invitations (e.g., “Tell me all about dad”) and cued invitations (e.g., “You said that dad [...]. Tell me all about that”)—significantly improves the quantity and quality of information provided by children (e.g., Brown & Lamb, 2015; Lamb et al., 2007; Lamb et al., 2008; Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2019), even in those as young as three (Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Peterson, 2012). However, research has shown that forensic interviewers often do not adhere to these recommendations, typically resorting to suggestive questioning (e.g., Baugerud et al., 2020; Cederborg et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2015; Korkman et al., 2006; Otgaar et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2010). For instance, Baugerud et al. (2020) found in a sample of 207 forensic interviews with preschool-aged children (aged three to seven), conducted following the Sequential Interview model (the SI model; Langballe & Davik, 2017), that 34%–36% of the questions were yes/no questions, 8%–12% were leading questions and 3%–6% of the questions posed during the interviews were repeated. Such question types are linked to higher risk of contamination of children's testimonies (Lamb et al., 2018), especially in the youngest children, and is therefore highly discouraged (Lamb et al., 2007; Newlin et al., 2015). Additionally, Baugerud et al. (2020) noted that the frequency of leading and repeated questions was highest among the youngest children in their sample (i.e., children aged 3–4.5 years).

The SI model is used in Norway when the alleged child victim of abuse is of preschool age (Langballe & Davik, 2017). Research on the SI model is limited, with only one published study by Magnusson et al. (2021), which reported no significant differences in the number of details produced during free recall when comparing with abbreviated versions of the NICHD protocol. However, it is important to note that Magnusson et al. (2021) did not include measurements for interviewer adherence to either the SI model or the NICHD protocol in their study.

1.1 | Ground rules

Forensic interviews are characterized by a set of formal frameworks and legal regulations applicable to the interview context (e.g., Criminal procedures act, 1981; Ministry of Justice, 2022; Regulations on adapted interviews, 2015). This includes ground rules, which are instructions informing children that they, not the interviewers, are the experts on the events in question and preparing them for the unique and unfamiliar conversation style characteristic of forensic interviews

(APSAC Taskforce, 2022; Brubacher et al., 2015; Faller, 2015; Lamb et al., 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2022). The literature describes several ground rules addressing different aspects of the forensic interview. Common ground rules include instructions to tell the truth (the truth admonition) and that the children must respond “I don't know” or “I don't remember” if they do not know or do not remember the answer to a question. Other common ground rules include the importance of correcting the interviewer if the interviewer says something incorrect, to ask for clarification if the child does not understand a question and informing the child that the interviewer was not present during the event(s) and therefore that the child is the only one who knows what actually happened (see Brubacher et al., 2015; Faller, 2015).

Despite the frequent occurrence of repeated questions, at least within certain jurisdictions (e.g., Baugerud et al., 2020; Earhart et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2015), only the Cognitive Interview guideline explicitly informs children that questions may be repeated without implying that their initial response was incorrect (Saywitz et al., 1992). This instruction is commonly referred to as the “Repeated questions” ground rule (Brubacher et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that other evidence-based guidelines and recommendations advise against repeating questions unless there is a valid justification, such as when it is clear that the child misunderstood a question (e.g., Korkman et al., 2024; Memon & Vartoukian, 1996; Ministry of Justice, 2022; Newlin et al., 2015).

Recommendations on which of the ground rules should be implemented in forensic interviews and how to implement them vary among the guidelines (Brubacher et al., 2015; Faller, 2015; Lamb et al., 2007; Langballe & Davik, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2022).

1.2 | Ground rules: “don't know”

Empowering individuals to share or withhold information can enhance the accuracy of their responses. For example, when forensic interviewers inform children that “Don't know” is an appropriate response if they are unsure of what to answer, the children are better enabled to monitor the accuracy of their responses (Koriat et al., 2001; Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996). Specifically, if children are asked about something they do not remember or do not know, they might guess answers if they feel compelled to respond (Stolzenberg & Pezdek, 2013). However, instructing children to respond “Don't know” when they are unsure not only empowers them to decide which information to share or withhold but also aids in accurately reporting only what they know and remember (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996; Nesbitt & Markham, 1999).

The “Don't know” ground rule has been the focus of much research (Brubacher et al., 2015). This research has shown that instructing children to respond “Don't know” improves the accuracy of their responses (Nesbitt & Markham, 1999; Quas et al., 1999). However, such instructions may also increase the risk of children responding “Don't know” to questions about which they have information (Gee et al., 1999; McWilliams et al., 2021). Further, some studies have revealed that the effectiveness of the “Don't know” ground

rule only emerges when children have had opportunities to practice following it. For instance, Dickinson et al. (2015) found that practicing rule-following enhanced children's adherence to ground rules, including the "Don't know" rule. Similar findings were reported in a field study by Hamilton et al. (2016) where alleged child abuse victims benefited from ground rule instructions (i.e., instructions to correct the interviewer if necessary, the importance of telling the truth, "Don't know", "Don't remember" and "Don't understand"). When explicitly examining the "Don't know" ground rule Hamilton et al. (2016) found no effect of "Don't know" instructions without practice (i.e., asking children questions to which "Don't know" is the only appropriate response—"What is my dogs name? when the child do not know the name of the dog").

Further, Earhart et al. (2014) examined "Don't know" responses in 76 forensic interviews of alleged abuse victims aged 4–13. The results showed no statistical correlation between the interviewers' "Don't know" instructions and the children's "Don't know" responses to substantive questions. Earhart et al. (2014) did not report whether the "Don't know" rule following were practiced or not.

1.3 | Ground rules: "repeated questions"

While interviewers are advised to refrain from repeating questions (Ministry of Justice, 2022), there are circumstances where repeating questions may be warranted, particularly if the child misunderstood the question. In such situations, to reduce the potential suggestiveness of question repetition that may arise from repeating questions to child witnesses, forensic interviewers should proactively address this issue at the interview's onset by informing children that a repeated question does not imply that their initial response was incorrect. This approach helps alleviate potential confusion or pressure on the child to change their initial response (Brubacher et al., 2015; Saywitz et al., 1992). If it becomes necessary to repeat a question during a forensic interview, the interviewer should first clarify the reason for the repetition (e.g., "I think you misunderstood me") before repeating the question in an open manner (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996).

Few studies have evaluated the effect of the "repeated questions" ground rule on children's responses. In one study, children aged five to eight (first and third graders from primary school) observed a staged event and were subsequently posed both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions (i.e., yes/no and forced-choice questions). All children were instructed not to fabricate answers, and half of them were informed that some questions could be repeated. The results revealed that the "repeated questions" ground rule had no effect on the five-year-old children (first graders) but led to reduced accuracy in the information from the eight-year-olds (third graders) (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996). In another study, Geddie et al. (2001) interviewed children aged three to six about an event that they attended ten days prior. During the interviews, the children were given four ground rule instructions (i.e., "Tell me everything", "Naïve interviewer", "Don't know", and "Repeated questions"), each practiced until understood. The results indicated that the ground rule

instructions did not affect the accuracy of the children's responses. However, a limitation in Geddie et al. (2001) is that the effects of the ground rules were not tested separately. Considering that younger children have poorer long-term and working memory than their older counterparts (Peterson et al., 2016), implementing multiple ground rules in Geddie et al. (2001) may therefore have tested the young children's memory capacity rather than the individual effects of each ground rule.

1.4 | Repeated questions after children's "don't know" responses in forensic interviews

One study has provided data on the impact of question repetitions following "Don't know" responses in alleged child abuse victims. Earhart et al., 2014 examined "Don't know" responses and the interviewer reactions in 76 forensic interviews of children between the ages of four and 13 years. Interviewer reactions were categorized as either accepting (i.e., interviewer utterances indicating that "Don't know" responses were legitimate or changed the focus in the subsequent question), implicit rejection (i.e., interviewers ignored the "I don't know" responses and continued asking questions about the same topic), or explicit rejection (i.e., interviewer explicitly increased the pressure to respond). The results revealed that 71% of the children's "Don't know" responses were accepted by the interviewers. However, in 29% of the instances, the interviewers rejected the children's "Don't know" responses, with 22% being implicit rejections and 7% explicit rejections. When the interviewers rejected the children's "Don't know" responses, the children changed their subsequent responses in 81% of the cases (Earhart et al., 2014). The findings from Earhart et al. (2014) underscore the importance of interviewers being cautious when repeating questions after children's "Don't know" responses.

1.4.1 | Purpose of the present study

Many forensic interviewers face challenges when conducting interviews with preschool-aged children (Katz & Kosher, 2020). Factors such as short attention spans and difficulties in memory retrieval can heighten the risk of interviewers resorting to suggestive interviewing techniques when interviewing children in preschool age (Magnusson et al., 2020). Additionally, some forensic interviewers view interviews where children do not provide the desired information as less successful, leading them to pose suggestive questions to elicit the desired responses (Wright et al., 2007). Furthermore, greater concerns about false denials from children rather than false accusations (Fessinger & McAuliff, 2020), and social pressure from their peers to obtain disclosures (Rivard & Schreiber Compo, 2017) may lead some of the forensic interviewers to reject the preschool-aged children's "Don't know" responses by repeating questions or in other ways increase the pressure on the children to respond differently (Earhart et al., 2014).

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet examined interviewer rejections following children's "Don't know" responses and children's reactions to these rejections in a sample consisting solely of forensic interviews with alleged child abuse victims below school age (i.e., preschool-aged children). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was (i) to explore the interviewer implementation of the "Don't know" and "Repeated questions" ground rules, (ii) to examine interviewer reactions following preschool-aged alleged abuse victims "Don't know" responses (i.e., whether the interviewers accepted or rejected the children's "Don't know" responses) and (iii) the preschool-aged children's responses following interviewer rejections.

1.4.2 | Hypotheses

In their study utilizing data from forensic interviews with preschool-aged children following the SI model (Langballe & Davik, 2017), Bagerud et al. (2020) found that 3%–6% of the questions posed during the interviews were repeated. However, Bagerud et al. (2020) did not report the context of these repetitions (i.e., the children's responses before the question repetition). In contrast, Earhart et al. (2014) reported that the interviewers in their sample, who had completed a five-day training program in forensic interviewing of child victims, predominantly accepted the children's "Don't know" responses. Consequently, it was anticipated that the forensic interviewers in the current study, all of whom were police investigators with specialized training in forensic interviewing of preschool-aged children (Norwegian Police University College, 2014), would primarily accept the children's "Don't know" responses. Yet, based on Bagerud et al. (2020), it was expected that interviewer rejections would occur with some regularity.

Additionally, following the patterns observed by Earhart et al. (2014) it was also anticipated that in instances where the forensic interviewers rejected the children's "Don't know" responses, the preschool-aged children would mostly acquiesce to the interviewers' requests for information, resulting in a changed subsequent response. As young age is associated with increased susceptibility to suggestive questions (Ceci et al., 1987; Ceci et al., 2016; Cordisco Steele & National Children's Advocacy Center, 2015; Crossman et al., 2004), it was expected that the younger children in the sample would change their responses more frequently than their older counterparts.

Given a lack of research on the use of ground rules in forensic interviews with children in Norway, coupled with the absence of clear recommendations for implementing such rules following the SI model (aside from the legal requirement for the truth admonition) (Langballe & Davik, 2017), an exploratory approach was adopted for the implementation of the "Don't know" and "Repeated questions" ground rules.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Sample and case characteristics

The sample in the current study constituted a subset of a larger, ongoing investigation into the quality of a national sample of forensic

interviews of preschool-aged, alleged victims of abuse in Norway during 2015–2017, funded by The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security. The sample included 114 forensic interviews of preschool-aged children conducted by Norwegian police investigators, comprising 62 (54%) girls and 52 (46%) boys. The children's ages ranged from 2 years and 8 months to 7 years and 0 months ($M = 61.5$ months; $SD = 9.9$ months; range 32–84 months). None of the children had enrolled in primary school at the time of the interviews. The children were alleged victims of sexual abuse ($n = 29$, 25%), physical abuse ($n = 82$, 72%), or both ($n = 3$, 3%). The children's primary caregivers ($n = 95$, 83%) and other individuals known to the child ($n = 19$, 17%) were identified as the alleged perpetrators. Legal and ethical permissions to access the interview transcripts was granted by the Norwegian State Attorney, The National Police Directorate, the Norwegian Data Inspectorate, and The Data Protection Officer at Oslo Metropolitan University.

2.2 | Forensic interviewers

The forensic interviews were conducted by 45 experienced police investigators from the Norwegian Police Force, comprising 41 women (91%) and four men (9%). All interviewers had completed a 15-credit continuing education course on child witness interviewing from The Norwegian Police University College (Norwegian Police University College, 2014), which includes training on conducting forensic interviewing following the SI model (Langballe & Davik, 2017).

2.3 | The sequential interview model

The SI model (Langballe & Davik, 2017) draws inspiration from the Extended Forensic Interview (EFI; Carnes et al., 2001; Carnes et al., 1999) and is tailored to meet the needs of preschool-aged witnesses (Langballe & Davik, 2017). The model has a flexible structure, dividing the interview into three sessions separated by breaks. The initial phase aims to establish rapport and explain the interviewer's expectations (i.e., ground rules), with the only mandatory ground rule being the truth admonition (i.e., "Tell the truth"), a legal requirement under the Norwegian Criminal Procedure Act [§ 128]. Other ground rules are advised, though the SI model does not specify which ones (Langballe & Davik, 2017).

In the second phase, questions focusing on the allegations are posed, emphasizing invitations and cued invitations. The third phase involves asking clarifying questions about information provided by the child earlier in the interview. The forensic interview is videotaped, and the recording serves as a substitute for the child's testimony in court proceedings (Regulations on adapted interviews, 2015; § 1).

2.4 | Inter-rater reliability between coders

A native Norwegian speaker was instructed in the coding procedure by an experienced coder, using a mock interview, before individually

TABLE 1 Overview of the coding procedure.

Category	Variable name	Coding	Operationalization
Ground rules	“Don't know”	Present/absent	“Don't know”, “Don't remember”
	Repeated questions	Present/absent	“I may repeat questions” etc.
Childrens “Don't know” responses	“Don't know”	Responses	“Don't know”, “Don't remember”, “Not sure”, “Don't have a clue” etc. to substantive questions.
“Don't know” responses during substantive questioning	Interviewer reactions	Accept/reject	Accept: Acknowledging “Don't know”/refocusing the topic Reject: Repeating the question/intensifying the pressure to respond
	Childrens responses to rejections	Non-productive/ productive	Non-productive: Continuation of “Don't know,” off-topic responses, silence Productive: Forensic relevant information

coding 29 (25%) of the 114 transcripts. Cohen's kappa (κ) for categorical variables ranged from .75 to .91, indicating “substantial” to “almost perfect” agreement (Landia & Koch, 1977).

An overview of the coding procedure is displayed in Table 1. Following is a description of the variables included in the coding procedure.

2.5 | Coding procedure

2.5.1 | Ground rule instructions

The “Don't know” and the “repeated questions” ground rules were coded as either present or absent. Given that the “Don't know” ground rule may also convey other functions (Brubacher et al., 2015), instructions to respond “Don't remember” were coded as “Don't know” instructions.

2.5.2 | Frequency of “Don't know” responses

The frequency of children's “Don't know” responses to substantive questions (i.e., questions related to the allegations) was coded. The “Don't know” responses included “Don't remember,” “Not sure,” “Don't have a clue,” and similar responses indicating a lack of knowledge. Responses that incorporated the phrase “Don't know” but served functions other than expressing a lack of knowledge, such as “I don't know what you mean”, were not categorized as “Don't know” responses.

2.5.3 | Interviewer reactions following “Don't know” responses

Interviewer reactions were dichotomously coded to determine if the children's “Don't know” responses were accepted or rejected. Acceptance was coded if the interviewer changed the focus in the subsequent question or in other ways signaled that “Don't know” was an acceptable response (e.g., Interviewer: “Was mum angry at your

sister?” Child: “I don't know.” Interviewer: “Ok. Tell me about what happened when you ate breakfast.”). Interviewer rejection was coded if the interviewer repeated a version of the initial question (e.g., Interviewer: “Has it happened many times?” Child: “I don't know.” Interviewer: “How many times has it happened?”) or in other ways increased the pressure on the child to respond (e.g., Interviewer: “Maybe you can answer if you think hard.”).

2.5.4 | Responses to interviewer rejections

Children's responses to interviewer rejections were dichotomously coded as either non-productive or productive. A non-productive response was coded if the child's response to an interviewer rejection was “Don't know” or a similar response, if the response was off topic (e.g., “Can I have a break”), or if the child was silent. A response was considered productive if the child abandoned the initial “Don't know” response and provided a changed and forensically relevant response (e.g., Interviewer: “Has it happened many times?” Child: “I don't know.” Interviewer: “How many times has it happened?” Child: “Many.”).

2.6 | Statistical analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 28. Visual inspection indicated that the data was not normally distributed, prompting the use of non-parametric tests, specifically Mann-Whitney U.

For the purpose of the analysis, the sample ($N = 114$) was divided into two age-based categories; Group 1 ($n = 48$, 42%) comprising children aged four years or younger ($M = 51.60$ months; $SD = 6.22$ months; range 32–59 months), and Group 2 ($n = 66$, 58%) comprising children aged five years or older ($M = 67.58$ months; $SD = 5.74$ months; range 60–84 months). The division of the sample into two age groups rather than analyzing age as a continuous variable was made due to the non-uniform age distribution, with certain ages (e.g., 66 months) being more prevalent. Dividing the sample into two age groups allowed for a clearer differentiation between developmental stages and avoided potential skewing of results due to uneven age distribution.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary results

The average interview length, measured in terms of question-response pairs, was 354 ($SD = 145.8$, range = 106–1132). Interviews of children aged four or younger had an average length of 332 question-response pairs ($SD = 123.47$, range = 141–737), while those of children aged five or older averaged 371 question-response pairs ($SD = 159.14$, range = 106–1132). Independent samples t-tests revealed no significant differences in interview length between the age groups ($p = .159$) or between boys and girls ($p = .998$). Additionally, a Mann-Whitney U-test showed no significant differences ($p = .489$) in the distributions of “Don't know” responses between boys (median = 4, range = 0–24, mean rank = 59.83) and girls (median = 3.5, range = 0–27, mean rank = 55.55).

Due to the limited number of male interviewers in the current sample (only four), no statistical analysis was conducted based on the interviewer gender.

3.2 | Ground rules instructions

Table 2 displays the frequency of ground rule instructions across the total sample and by age groups. The “Don't know” ground rule, including “Don't remember”, was presented in 13 (11%) of the interviews. It appeared in three interviews (6%) of children aged four or younger, and in ten interviews (15%) of children aged five or older. The “repeated questions” ground rule was absent from all interviews. Due to infrequent use, ground rule instructions were excluded from further statistical analysis.

3.3 | Children's “Don't know” responses

As shown in Table 3, the mean frequency of “Don't know” responses per interview for the total sample was 5.14 ($SD = 5.60$, range 0–27).

TABLE 2 Frequency of ground rule instructions in the total sample and within age groups.

	“Don't know”	Repeated questions
Total sample ($n = 114$)	13 (11%)	0
Children aged <4 ($n = 48$)	3 (6%)	0
Children aged ≥ 5 ($n = 66$)	10 (15%)	0

TABLE 3 Frequency of “Don't know” responses in the total sample and within age groups.

	Total sample ($N = 114$)			Children aged <4 ($n = 48$)			Children aged ≥ 5 ($n = 66$)					
	M (SD)	Range		M (SD)	Median	Range	Mean rank	M (SD)	Median	Range	Mean rank	p
Responses	5.14 (5.60)	0–27		3.88 (4.69)	2.5	0–21	48.49	6.06 (6.06)	4	0–27	64.05	.013

For children aged four or younger, the mean frequency was 3.88 ($SD = 4.69$, range 0–21); for those aged five or older, it was 6.06 ($SD = 6.06$, range 0–27).

A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that children aged four or younger (median = 2.5, mean rank = 48.49) provided significantly fewer “Don't know” responses than those aged five or older (median = 4, mean rank = 64.05), $p = .013$.

3.4 | Interviewer reactions

Table 4 summarizes the interviewer reactions following children's “Don't know” responses and the children's responses to them during substantive questioning. Interviewers accepted 75.3% of the preschool-aged children's “Don't know” responses and rejected 24.7% of them. The mean frequency of interviewer acceptance was 3.87 per interview ($SD = 4.28$, range 0–23). In interviews with children aged four or younger, the mean frequency of interviewer acceptance was 3.08 per interview ($SD = 3.58$, range 0–14), whereas the mean frequency of interviewer acceptance in interviews with children aged five or older was 4.44 per interview ($SD = 4.67$, range 0–23).

The mean frequency of interviewer rejections in the total sample was 1.27 per interview ($SD = 2.01$, range 0–10). In interviews with children aged four or younger, the mean frequency of interviewer rejections was .79 per interview ($SD = 1.74$, range 0–10), whereas the mean frequency of interviewer rejections in interviews with children aged five or older was 1.62 per interview ($SD = 2.13$, range 0–9).

A Mann-Whitney U test revealed that interviewers accepted the children's “Don't know” responses significantly less often in children aged four or younger (median = 2, mean rank = 50.40) compared to those aged five or older (median = 3, mean rank = 62.87), $p = .048$. Similarly, a second Mann-Whitney U test revealed the interviewers' rejected significantly fewer “Don't know” responses in children aged four or younger (median = 0, mean rank = 48.65) compared to children aged five or older (median = 1, mean rank = 63.94), $p = .008$.

3.5 | Children's responses to interviewer rejections

When the interviewers rejected children's “Don't know” responses, 24.1% of the subsequent responses were non-productive, whereas 75.9% were productive (i.e., changed responses).

The mean frequency of non-productive responses following interviewer rejections in the total sample was .31 per interview ($SD = .69$, range 0–3). In interviews with children aged four or younger, the mean frequency of non-productive responses following interviewer

TABLE 4 Children's "Don't know" responses, interviewer reactions and the children's responses to interviewer rejections.

Variables	Total sample (N = 114)			Children aged <4 (n = 48)			Children aged ≥5 (n = 66)			p		
	M (SD)	Range	Mean rank	M (SD)	Median	Range	Mean rank	M (SD)	Median		Range	Mean rank
	Interviewer reactions	3.87 (4.28)	0-23	50.40	3.08 (3.58)	2	0-14	50.40	4.44 (4.67)		3	0-23
Accept (75.3%)	1.27 (2.01)	0-10	48.65	.79 (1.74)	0	0-10	48.65	1.62 (2.13)	1	0-9	63.94	
Reject (24.7%)	.31 (.69)	0-3	53.96	.19 (.53)	0	0-3	53.96	.39 (.78)	1	0-3	60.08	
Childrens responses to interviewer rejections	.96 (1.54)	0-7	49.40	.60 (1.30)	0	0-7	49.40	1.23 (1.66)	1	0-7	63.39	
Non-productive (24.1%)												
Productive (75.9%)												

rejections was .19 per interview ($SD = .53$, range 0-3), and the mean frequency of non-productive responses following interviewer rejections in interviews with children aged five or older was .39 per interview ($SD = .78$, range 0-3).

The mean frequency of productive responses following interviewer rejections was .96 per interview ($SD = 1.54$, range 0-7). In interviews with children aged four or younger, the mean frequency of productive responses following interviewer rejections was .60 per interview ($SD = 1.30$, range 0-7), whereas the mean frequency of productive responses following interviewer rejections in interviews with children aged five or older was 1.23 per interview ($SD = 1.66$, range 0-7).

Mann-Whitney U-tests were performed to analyze the differences in the distribution of non-productive and productive responses to interviewer rejections between the two age groups (i.e., children aged four or younger vs. children aged five or older). There were no significant differences in non-productive responses between children aged four or younger (median = 0, mean rank = 53.96) and those aged five or older (median = 1, mean rank = 60.08), $p = .163$. However, significant differences were found in productive responses; children aged four or younger (median = 0, mean rank = 49.40) provided significantly fewer productive responses compared to those aged five or older (median = 1, mean rank = 63.39), $p = .012$.

4 | DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the current study was to examine forensic interviewers' reactions to "Don't Know" responses from preschool-aged alleged abuse victims, as well as the children's responses following interviewer rejections. Additionally, the study also examined whether interviewers presented the "Don't know" and the "repeated questions" ground rules. The findings revealed that the "Don't know" ground rule was implemented in 13% of interviews, while the "repeated questions" ground rule was absent in all interviews. Interviewers accepted 75.3% of the "Don't know" responses to substantive questions and rejected 24.7%. Following these rejections, 75.9% of the children provided a productive response (i.e., changed response), while 24.1% resulted in a non-productive response.

4.1 | Ground rule instructions

The results revealed that the "Don't know" ground rule was seldom introduced by interviewers, and the "repeated questions" ground rule was never presented.

A possible explanation for these findings could be attributed to the SI model's general recommendation on ground rules beyond the truth admonition (i.e., "Tell the truth"), which is mandated by law in Norway (Criminal procedures act, 1981; Regulations on adapted interviews, 2015). For example, in the only thorough description of the SI model, Langballe and Davik (2017) specified that "[...] the child should be informed of the basic rules of communication for the

interview, including that the child can say “I don't know” if there is something they simply do not know, and to correct the interviewer if they say something that may be incorrect” (p. 175). This guidance, aside from the legal requirements for truth admonition, represents the only guidance on ground rule instructions within the SI model. Consequently, the SI model's vague recommendations for ground rules instructions may have caused the interviewers in the sample to place less emphasis on these instructions, potentially leading to their inconsistent implementation.

Additionally, the interviewers' prioritization of ground rules instructions might have been influenced by perceived challenges in interviewing preschool-aged children, such as their short attention span (Magnusson et al., 2020), leading the interviewers to focus more on substantive questions rather than on ground rules instructions.

4.2 | Children's initial “Don't know” responses

The current study identified a significant difference in the frequency of “Don't know” responses between younger children (aged four or younger) and older children (aged five or older). Specifically, the younger children provided significantly fewer “Don't know” responses compared to their older counterparts. Since there were no statistically significant differences in interview length between the two age groups, interview length alone cannot explain the disparity in “Don't know” responses between the younger and the older children.

At least two explanations can account for this observation. It is possible that the forensic interviewers in the sample adapted their questioning styles more effectively for younger children, who are known to face greater challenges as witnesses than older children (Cordisco Steele & National Children's Advocacy Center, 2015; Lamb et al., 2007; Waterman et al., 2000, 2001). Consequently, the younger children in the sample may have been asked more appropriate questions compared to their older counterparts. However, while children aged four or below are very young, it is important to recognize that children aged five and six are also very young and possibly subjected to similar questioning techniques (e.g., Baugerud et al., 2020). In their field study involving forensic interviews of children aged three to seven following the SI model, Baugerud et al. (2020) reported higher frequencies of closed and suggestive questions directed at the younger children (3–4.5 years) compared to the older children in their sample. The interviews assessed in Baugerud et al. (2020) were conducted during the same period as the interviews in the current study (2015–2017). This suggests that the younger children in the current sample may have been more frequently subjected to unanswerable, incomprehensible, and suggestive questions, potentially explaining the lower frequency of appropriate “Don't know” responses among them (e.g., Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Carter et al., 1996; Chae & Ceci, 2005; Crossman et al., 2004; Waterman et al., 2000, 2001).

4.3 | Interviewer reactions

Building on the findings of Earhart et al. (2014), it was anticipated that the interviewers would primarily refrain from rejecting children's “Don't know” responses. The result of the current study aligns closely with this expectation revealing that the interviewers predominantly accepted children's “Don't know” responses, with an acceptance rate of 75.3%.

However, the fact that the interviewers rejected approximately one-fourth of the children's “Don't know” responses (24.7%) raise concerns due to the relatively high frequency of interviewer rejections. The potential adverse effects of such practice have been extensively documented (e.g., Earhart et al., 2014; Howie et al., 2009; Howie et al., 2004; La Rooy et al., 2011; Poole & White, 1991). For instance, Krähenbühl and Blades (2006) suggested that a child's initial “Don't know” response may be accurate but rejecting these responses can lead to the child providing incorrect information when questioned again later.

The results also showed a significant difference in the number of interviewer acceptances and rejections between children aged four or younger and those aged five or older. This discrepancy is likely due to the older children providing a greater number of “Don't know” responses, thus presenting more opportunities for interviewers to either accept or reject these responses.

4.4 | Children's responses to interviewer rejections

Expanding on findings by Earhart et al. (2014), which showed that children changed their responses in 81% of cases following interviewer rejections, this study anticipated similar outcomes. Indeed, the results confirm that 75.9% of the instances where the interviewer rejected the children's initial “Don't know” responses, the children subsequently provided a productive response. Due to the nature of this study and the information about the cases available to the researchers, it remains uncertain whether it was the children's initial “Don't know” responses or the children's subsequent responses following the interviewer rejections that were more accurate (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2019). However, police investigators and other legal decision-makers involved in these cases also encounter the same challenges when assessing the accuracy of the information provided by young children following interviewer rejections (i.e., determining whether the initial “Don't know” response or the subsequent changed/productive response is the correct response) (Alexander, 2011; Principe & London, 2022).

A notable distinction exists between the current study and that of Earhart et al. (2014) in terms of the children's mean ages; 61 months (5.1 years) in the current study versus 92.4 months (8.7 years) in Earhart et al. (2014). Generally, young age is associated with higher levels of suggestibility (Ceci et al., 1987; Ceci et al., 2016; Cordisco Steele & National Children's Advocacy Center, 2015; Crossman et al., 2004), which might suggest a higher rate of

productive responses following interview rejections in the current sample compared to Earhart et al. (2014). However, the results from this study showed a lower rate of productive responses compared to Earhart et al. (2014).

At least three factors may explain this discrepancy observed between the findings of Earhart et al. (2014) and the current study. The first potential factor is the difference in training and competency among the forensic interviewers in the two studies. In Earhart et al. (2014) interviewers underwent a five-day training program. In contrast, interviewers in the current study completed a 15-credit part-time continuing education course at the university level (Norwegian Police University College, 2014). Considering that a one-year full-time study program equals 60 credits, a 15-credit course corresponds to approximately two to three months of full-time training (NOKUT, n.d.). The differences in training and competency among the interviewers in the current study and Earhart et al. (2014) may have influenced the interviewers' approach to the children and their questioning style. Consequently, the forensic interviewers in the current study may have adopted the interview conditions more appropriately to the children's needs compared to the interviewers in Earhart et al. (2014). A second potential factor is the differences in sample characteristics, particularly socioeconomic factors (McFarlane et al., 2002). It is possible that the children in the current study and those in Earhart et al. (2014) differed in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds, which also may have influenced the outcomes.

A third possible factor is the nuanced differences in the coding of productive responses between the current study and Earhart et al. (2014) may have played a role. In the current study, a child's provision of "forensically relevant information" was coded as a productive response, while Earhart et al. (2014) coded "providing an answer" (p. 753) as a productive response. It is important to acknowledge that there may be unaccounted differences between "forensically relevant information" and "providing an answer", which may have contributed to this observed discrepancy.

Finally, an intriguing finding from this study is that the older children (aged five or older) provided significantly more productive responses following interviewer rejections compared to the younger children (aged four or younger). This observation is surprising considering that young age is typically associated with increased suggestibility (Ceci et al., 2016), and changed responses following interviewer rejections could potentially be influenced by suggestive questions (La Rooy et al., 2011).

There are at least two possible explanations for this unexpected finding. First, as mentioned earlier, it is possible that the interviewers had a greater emphasis on providing support to the younger children compared to the older children. Research has shown that a lack of interviewer support increases the risk of suggestibility in children's responses (Chae & Ceci, 2005). Therefore, the older children may have received less support during the interviews, leading to a higher susceptibility to suggestions and a higher likelihood of providing productive responses following interviewer rejections. However, a second plausible explanation is that the older children may have

developed a better understanding of adults as authority figures (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ceci et al., 1987; Howie et al., 2004) including police investigators. This increased understanding of police investigators as authority figures may have significantly influenced the older children's tendency to comply with interviewer rejections compared to the younger children. The older children may therefore have been more inclined to view interviewer rejections as an indication that their initial response was incorrect or inadequate, motivating them to change their subsequent responses.

4.5 | Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be addressed. First, visual inspections revealed that the distributions of children's "Don't know" responses, interviewer reactions, and children's responses to interviewer rejections were not uniform. Consequently, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests used cannot determine the magnitude of the differences between the medians and mean ranks within each of these test variables across the age groups (which requires uniform distributions between the groups). Therefore, it can only be concluded that there is a difference.

A second limitation, which is in line with other studies involving data from forensic interviews with children, it remains ultimately impossible to evaluate the accuracy of the information provided by the children (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2019). Therefore, in this study it is impossible to determine whether interview rejections had a positive or negative effect on the veracity of the children's responses.

Further, it is crucial to acknowledge that children might provide "Don't know" responses for reasons other than not recalling the information, such as reluctance to disclose incriminating information about loved ones (Happel, 2016). The current study did not measure indicators of reluctance, which might have provided deeper insights into the motivations behind children's responses. Notably, Earhart et al. (2014) did not find a direct correlation between "Don't know" responses and reluctance, but including such measures in the current study could have enhanced the current study's quality by allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the children's "Don't know" responses.

Finally, many of the repeated questions that were coded as interviewer rejections involved slight rephrasing's of the initial questions (e.g., Interviewer: "Has it happened many times?" Child: "I don't know." Interviewer: "How many times has it happened?"). It is possible these rephrasing's were perceived by the children as new questions, while we coded them as rejections. This perception might have led to changes in the children's responses that were not necessarily due to the suggestive nature of repeated questions (Fivush & Schwarzmuller, 1995; Happel, 2016; Howie et al., 2004). However, it is important to note that this limitation probably do not apply in situations where the interviewer rejected the children's "Don't know" responses by pressuring the children to respond differently (e.g., "Maybe you can answer if you think hard?").

5 | CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence suggesting a potential suggestive effect of interview rejections following “Don't know” responses from preschool-aged abuse victims, aligning with the findings of Earhart et al. (2014).

The potential negative consequences of interviewer rejections of preschool-aged children's “Don't know” responses and the children's providing of changed and contradictory responses are significant for two main reasons. First, changed responses, especially those following repeated questions, increases the risk of establishing false memory representations in the children, which can influence their subsequent verbal accounts of the events (Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1995). Research indicates that children may repeat these changed and possibly incorrect responses on later occasions (Howie et al., 2004). Second, contradictory responses can diminish the perceived credibility of the children's testimony among decision-makers (Leippe et al., 1992; Spencer, 2011) with potential adverse consequences for the outcomes of criminal cases involving child victims. To mitigate these risks, it is essential for forensic interviewers to avoid rejecting young children's “Don't know” responses and adhere to research-based recommendations (Brown & Lamb, 2015; Lamb et al., 2007), which discourages repeating questions the children have already answered (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

If repetition of a question is necessary, interviewers should clearly explain the reason for the repetition, such as apparent misunderstandings by the child (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996). This practice can help reduce the potential suggestive effect of repeated questions on children's responses (Howie et al., 2004; La Rooy et al., 2011). By adopting these strategies, interviewers can minimize the potential negative consequences associated with changed and contradictory responses from young children.

Due to the limited implementation of the “Don't know” ground rule and the absence of the “repeated questions” ground rule in the forensic interviews included in the sample of the current study, it was not possible to assess any associations between these ground rules and the children's “Don't know” responses and their responses to interviewer rejections. However, considering the potential suggestive effect of interviewer rejections following children's “Don't know” responses observed in the current study and by Earhart et al. (2014), future studies should investigate the impact of implementing both the “Don't know” and “repeated questions” ground rules on children's responses to interviewer rejections following children's “Don't know” responses. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these ground rules in minimizing suggestive effects and promoting more accurate and reliable responses from children.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rolf Magnus Grung: Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; validation; visualization. **Gunn-Astrid Baugerud:** Supervision; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Ragnhild Klingenberg Røed:** Validation;

writing – original draft; conceptualization. **Miriam S. Johnson:** Supervision; validation; writing – original draft; funding acquisition; writing – review and editing; methodology; conceptualization; investigation; formal analysis; project administration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interests regarding this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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