



Bridging Guidelines and Practice: Questioning Styles in Judicial Interviews with Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Background: Statements for Future Use (SFU) are judicial pre-trial testimony proceedings and a central evidentiary mechanism in child sexual abuse (CSA) cases in Portugal. This procedure aims to prevent children from testifying at trial and to collect their accounts closer in time to the alleged events. Although evidence-based guidelines recommend open-ended, child-centered interviewing practices, little is known about how questioning is conducted in SFU interviews.

Objective: This study examined questioning styles and children's responses in SFU interviews to assess alignment with best-practice recommendations.

Participants and setting: The sample comprised 128 SFU interviews conducted between 2014 and 2024 with CSA victims aged 4 to 19 years.

Methods: This retrospective observational study coded interviewer utterance types and children's responses in real-world SFU interviews. Descriptive statistics and linear mixed-effects models were conducted.

Results: Option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than all other utterance types. Focused-recognition prompts were approximately twice as frequent as open or recall-based prompts. Invitations accounted for only 6% of utterances. Because focused-recognition prompts were used so frequently, more than half of the children's reported details were elicited through these prompts. Although rarely used, invitations were the most productive utterance type, eliciting the greatest number of details per utterance.

Conclusions: Despite international guidelines supporting child-centered, open-ended interviewing, Portuguese judicial interviews rely heavily on recognition-based questioning. Children's responses may therefore be more vulnerable to error and interviewer influence, potentially compromising testimonial reliability. Findings highlight the need to strengthen adherence to evidence-based interviewing protocols and child-sensitive justice practices.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the scientific community has increasingly focused on identifying practices that improve the effectiveness of

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forensic interviews with victims of child sexual abuse (CSA)¹ aiming to maximize both the amount and reliability of the information obtained while minimizing the risk of secondary victimization. In this context, converging evidence from both laboratory and field research has consistently identified specific interviewing strategies that facilitate children's reporting and improve the quality of the information obtained.

Among these strategies, prompts encouraging free-recall narratives, which require children to rely on recall memory processes are the questioning approach most likely to achieve these aims. Specifically, invitations (e.g., "Tell me everything that happened") are associated with a greater amount of information provided by the child, a higher proportion of forensically relevant details, fewer contradictions, and responses generally considered more reliable, since children retrieve information using their own memory search processes rather than responding to interviewer-introduced information. Focused-recall prompts, such as directive utterances (e.g., "What color was his car?" when a "car" was mentioned), are used to explore additional details previously disclosed by the child and therefore tend to elicit less extensive responses (Brown et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In contrast, recognition-focused prompts rely on recognition memory processes, requiring children to select, confirm, or reject information introduced by interviewers. As a result, the interaction becomes interviewer-led rather than child-led. For example, option-posing utterances tend to elicit shorter responses and increase susceptibility to error and interviewer-introduced information. For this reason, international best-practice guidelines recommend that such utterances be used sparingly and primarily toward the end of the interview, when the aim is to clarify or obtain crucial details that have not yet emerged from the child's narrative. Suggestive prompts go further by introducing information not previously disclosed by the child and imply an expected response. Statements elicited through such prompts are among the least reliable and most prone to contradiction, and their use is therefore strongly discouraged throughout the interview (Brown et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In addition, research has also shown that supportive interviewer behavior, such as rapport-building, encouragement, and nonjudgmental support, aimed at enhancing children's emotional comfort and cooperation, is associated with increased disclosure among reluctant children and may help reduce the potential harm associated with recounting abusive experiences (Fernandes et al., in press; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018).

In light of these considerations, inadequately conducted interviews may compromise the quality and reliability of the information obtained from child victims. Moreover, such limitations may also affect credibility assessments, case outcomes, increase the risk of false allegations or wrongful convictions, and contribute to secondary victimization (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; La Rooy et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2018; Pipe et al., 2013; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). In response to these concerns, a substantial body of research has led to the development of standardized forensic interview protocols designed to guide interviews with CSA victims (Fernandes et al., 2024).

Although several forensic interview protocols have been developed, research consistently shows that forensic interviews conducted with standardized protocols are of higher quality than those conducted without guidance (Fernandes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024). Specifically, protocol-based interviews are associated with greater adherence to recommended practices throughout the interview process, including explaining the interview's purpose, establishing ground rules, building rapport, and closing the interview in a neutral and supportive manner. They are also characterized by greater reliance on open-ended prompts, reduced use of closed or suggestive utterances, and the elicitation of more extensive information in response to open-ended prompts, thereby enhancing the reliability of the information collected. Moreover, protocol-guided interviews tend to yield a higher proportion of central, forensically relevant details (e.g., sexually abusive behaviors) relative to peripheral information that is not central to the event (e.g., the victim's clothing). For these reasons, the use of evidence-based interview protocols is widely recommended when conducting investigative interviews with CSA victims (Fernandes et al., in press; Korkman et al., 2024).

In recent years, scientific interest in children's participation in the Portuguese criminal justice system and in forensic interviewing practices in CSA cases has increased. Recent research indicates that children participate, on average, in three different procedural acts, a number that in some cases may reach up to 10. These interviews and assessments take place in different settings and are conducted by professionals with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of training in interviewing children (e.g., police interview, forensic psychological assessment; Fernandes et al., 2026a).

Under Portuguese law, only statements provided before a judge are admissible as evidence in court. Accordingly, since 2007, children's testimony in these cases has been mandatorily recorded during the investigation phase, through a pre-trial proceeding known as *Declarações para Memória Futura* (Statements for Future Use [SFU]). This proceeding serves two main purposes: preventing the child from having to testify at trial and ensuring that the child's account is collected as early as possible in the investigative process, thereby minimizing the interval between the alleged abusive incident (or its disclosure) and the interview.

In SFU proceedings in Portugal, several professionals are required to be present during the interview, including the judge, the prosecutor, the defense, and, if requested, the victim's attorneys, a specially qualified professional, and a court clerk. The judge is formally responsible for interviewing the child, while prosecutors and attorneys may propose questions to be asked through the judge. In practice, however, judges often allow prosecutors and attorneys to address questions directly to the child.

In addition, the presence of a specially qualified professional to assist the child during the hearing is mandatory. Nevertheless, the law does not specify this professional's precise role, functions, or level of involvement. As a result, the extent of their participation

¹ In this article, the term "child sexual abuse" follows the definitions established by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompassing the involvement of children and adolescents under the age of 18 in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to provide informed consent, or for which they are not developmentally prepared and therefore cannot consent.

depends largely on the presiding judge's discretion and may range from explaining the procedure to the child and managing emotional distress during the hearing to conducting the interview directly with the child (Portuguese Penal Code, art. 271).

Prior Portuguese research examined how SFU interviews were conducted in practice across several criminal courts. The findings indicated that interviewers did not follow any standardized protocol or specific guidelines when interviewing CSA victims. Most questions were option-posing, and only 3% were open-ended prompts. Consequently, the majority of the details reported by children were elicited through recognition-based prompts, which are associated with greater risks of inaccuracy, reduced informativeness, and lower reliability (Peixoto et al., 2017). These findings underscore important limitations in interviewing practices and the urgent need to address these problems.

In response to these concerns, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol was translated and adapted to the Portuguese context. Subsequent studies examining its implementation in real forensic cases found that interviews conducted under this framework relied largely on open-ended prompts (48%), consistent with the international literature on best practices in child forensic interviewing (Peixoto et al., 2016).

Furthermore, several guidelines have been incorporated into Portuguese legislation following the Council of Europe (2007) Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse and subsequent European Union directives (e.g., Directive 2012/29/EU, 2012). These provisions emphasize obtaining children's testimony as early as possible in developmentally appropriate settings, ensuring that interviews are conducted by specifically trained professionals, limiting the number of interviews to those strictly necessary for criminal proceedings, and audiovisual recording of the interviews.

In recent years, the European Union's policies, legislative reforms, and best practice guidelines have sought to improve the investigation of CSA. At the same time, widespread scientific knowledge has accumulated on evidence-based approaches to interviewing child victims. An important question, therefore, remains: to what extent have these developments translated into changes in practice in Portugal? Although these reforms and guidelines emphasize the importance of evidence-based interviewing practices, little is known about how these recommendations are reflected in real-world interviewing practices.

The present study addresses this gap by examining questioning practices in SFU interviews, a key proceeding within the Portuguese criminal justice system for investigating CSA cases. By analyzing real-world interviews, this study aims to characterize the types of questions used by interviewers and the nature of children's responses during these proceedings. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) what types of questions are most frequently used in SFU interviews in CSA cases; (2) to what extent do interviewers rely on recall-based prompts (e.g., invitations and directive questions) compared to recognition-based or suggestive prompts; and (3) how do different utterance types relate to the amount and type of information provided by children.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

A total of 128 interviews conducted in SFU proceedings between 2014 and 2024 were analyzed. These interviews took place in 25 courts across Portugal: 82 (64.06%) in the North, 36 (28.13%) in the South, 9 (7.03%) in the Centre and Lisbon area, and one (0.78%) on a Portuguese island.

The interviews involved CSA victims aged 4 to 19 years ($M = 11.88$, $SD = 3.13$, $Mdn = 12$). Most alleged victims were girls ($n = 105$, 82.03%). Six children (4.69%) had an intellectual or cognitive disability. Multiple perpetrators were involved in seven cases (5.47%). In approximately 87 cases (62.14%), the alleged perpetrators were known to the child. Of these, 34 (39.08%) were acquaintances (e.g., a neighbor, a family friend) and 53 (60.92%) were family members (e.g., biological parents, the stepfather, grandparents). The abusive behaviors reported by the children included explicitly sexual conversations or comments, non-genital body kissing, sexual exposure (e.g., pornographic videos/images, exhibitionism, voyeurism), fondling over or under the clothes, coerced touching or masturbation, oral, anal, or genital penetration (with hands or genitals), and facilitating sexual contact with the child. In most cases ($n = 109$ cases, 85.16%), victims experienced multiple forms of these sexually abusive behaviors. In 16 cases (12.50%), sexually abusive behaviors co-occurred with other forms of maltreatment, such as physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., insulting), or psychological abuse (e.g., threats). Regarding frequency, 57 children (44.53%) reported single abusive events, and 71 (55.47%) reported repeated events.

The delay between the earliest (or single) abusive event and the first criminal proceeding could be precisely calculated in 62 cases (48.44%). The mean delay was approximately 6 months ($M = 192.61$ days, $SD = 423.44$ days). In the remaining cases, the timing could only be estimated (e.g., when it was only known that the incident occurred sometime in 2016). It was known either that only a few days had passed ($n = 3$, 2.34%) or that several months had elapsed ($n = 30$, 25.78%), ranging from 1 to 138 months (approximately 11.5 years).

The delay between case filing and the SFU interview ranged from 0 to 909 days (2 years and 4 months; $M = 276.02$, $SD = 232.36$). Interview duration ranged from approximately 5 min to 2 h and 30 min. Most of the interviews ($n = 120$, 93.75%) took place in courthouse rooms, whereas a small number ($n = 8$, 6.25%) were conducted in a specialized room outside the courthouse equipped with a two-way mirror, with the child and the specially qualified professional on one side and the remaining professionals (judge, prosecutor, attorney, court clerk) on the other. Similarly, most interviews were audio-recorded ($n = 121$, 94.53%), while only seven interviews (5.47%) were video-recorded. Thirteen children (10.16%) who participated in an SFU interview were later required to testify at trial.

Among the cases of perpetrators that proceeded to trial ($n = 135$; 96.43%), 109 (80.74%) were convicted and 26 (19.26%) acquitted. Among convictions, the most common outcome was a suspended prison sentence ($n = 67$, 61.47%), followed by effective imprisonment ($n = 37$, 33.94%), security measures involving institutionalization ($n = 3$, 2.75%), and community service ($n = 2$,

1.83%). Ancillary penalties were imposed in 12 cases (11.01%), including prohibitions on engaging in professions involving contact with children or suspending parental responsibilities.

2.2. Procedure

This study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Minho and authorization from the High Council for the Judiciary in Portugal. Subsequently, on-site reviews of CSA case files were conducted in several Portuguese courts. During the file review process, strict ethical and confidentiality procedures were followed. Only information relevant to the aims of the study was collected. Audio or audiovisual recordings and written transcripts of the interviews were formally extracted from the case files.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio or audiovisual recordings. When transcripts were already available in the case files, they were systematically reviewed by the first author to ensure completeness and accuracy. The coding process was then carried out.

2.3. Data Coding

The present study examined the types of utterances used by interviewers and the quantity and quality of information provided by children regarding the alleged sexually abusive incident. Accordingly, only the substantive phase of the interviews was coded and analyzed. This phase included all utterances referring to the investigated incident, its immediate context, and the disclosure of the event.

Interviews were coded using a coding scheme developed by Lamb and colleagues (Lamb et al., 1996; Lamb et al., 2018), which has been widely used in research on child forensic interviewing. The coding manual was translated into Portuguese for the purposes of the present study.

2.3.1. Interviewer Utterances

Interviewer's utterances were coded into the following categories: invitations, directives, option-posing, suggestive, summaries, and facilitators.

Invitations were defined as questions or statements that prompt free-recall responses (e.g., "Tell me everything you can remember"). Directives were recall-based prompts that refocused on allegation-related details previously mentioned by the child, often using "wh" questions (e.g., "When did this happen?"). Option-posing questions were focused-recognition prompts that may introduce undisclosed details, without implying that a specific response is expected. These included yes/no questions or forced-choice questions (e.g., "Did anyone see what happened?"). Suggestive utterances were defined as questions or statements that introduce undisclosed details, imply an expected response, misquote the child, or repeat the same option-posing question for the third time (e.g., "He touched you, didn't he?"). Summaries were statements that repeated what the child had previously said without requesting additional information (e.g., "You said he touched you" [After the child said "he touched me"]).

In the original coding scheme, facilitators (e.g., "Uh-huh", "Yes", "Ok") were not considered independent utterances, and any details elicited were attributed to the preceding information-seeking prompt (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb et al., 2009). However, previous research has shown that facilitators may vary in their functions depending on placement and context and sometimes increase children's narrative productivity (Hershkowitz, 1999, 2002; Yi et al., 2016). Accordingly, facilitators were divided into two categories based on their functional role. Facilitators accompanying another utterance type (e.g., "Uh-huh. Tell me more about that"), which could interrupt the child's narrative or serve to validate the child's account without independently eliciting new information, were still counted; however, they were not coded as independent utterances, and any details provided were attributed to the associated utterance type. In contrast, facilitators functioning as standalone prompts that encouraged additional elaboration were coded as independent utterances (e.g., when a child pauses during their narrative and looks toward the interviewer as if awaiting further guidance or encouragement; "The room had the desk here, there was a wardrobe here, and the bed was on this side like this. [Uh-huh]. And then he pulled me away from the desk and pushed me onto the bed"). This refinement was introduced to enhance mutual exclusivity across categories and more accurately capture facilitators' contributions to children's narrative productivity.

2.3.2. Children's Responses

Children's responses were classified into the following categories: responsive, unresponsive, omissions, resistance, and denials.

Responsive answers included verbal or behavioral responses related to the utterance posed, including responses that did not contain informative details or whose meaning was unclear. Unresponsive answers referred to responses unrelated to the interviewer's utterance but still provided incident-related information. Omissions included responses such as "I don't remember" or "I don't know", as well as the absence of a response. Resistance referred to explicit refusals to answer (e.g., "I do not want to talk"), and denials referred to statements rejecting the occurrence of the alleged abuse (e.g., "nothing happened" when the child had previously indicated otherwise). Because omissions, resistance, and denials occurred infrequently and distinguishing among them was not central to the aims of the study, these responses were combined into a single category labelled reluctance, consistent with previous studies (Ahern et al., 2014).

Subsequently, the number of words and the number of central and peripheral details provided by the child were counted. Details were defined as discrete units of information related to the investigated incident, identifying or describing people, objects, actions, locations, emotions, thoughts, and sensory experiences. Details were counted only when they were reported for the first time. Details

were classified as central (information crucial for understanding the abuse incident, such as sexual acts) or peripheral (contextual information not central to the incident, such as the victim's clothing).

2.4. Inter-Rater Reliability

Two independent coders (DF and JPG) were trained by a researcher with expertise in the coding scheme used (TSA). Prior to coding the study transcripts, both coders were trained using an independent set of transcripts until they reached at least 90% agreement in identifying interviewer utterances and children's details. Subsequently, the two coders independently coded 30% of the transcripts ($n = 38$) randomly selected from the database. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated to assess agreement in the classification of interviewer utterance types, as well as in the total number of details and the number of central and peripheral details reported by the children. High agreement was obtained across all measures, with ICC values ranging from 0.960 to 1.000.

3. Results

3.1. Interviewer Utterances

Across all interviews, 12611 interviewer utterances were produced during the substantive phase, corresponding to an average of 98.52 utterances per interview ($SD = 72.04$). Interviews involved direct questioning by judges, prosecutors, attorneys, and specially qualified professionals. Of the total number of utterances, 78.59% were produced by judges, 12.58% by prosecutors, 7.50% by the specially qualified professional present, and 1.32% by attorneys. Table 1 presents the distribution of utterance types by each interviewer.

Before conducting the inferential analyses, the frequency of each utterance type was transformed into proportions by dividing the number of utterances of each type by the total number of utterances within each interview. This procedure controlled for variation in interview length and overall questioning frequency across cases. A linear mixed-effects model was used to examine differences in the proportion of utterance types. Utterance type was treated as a within-interview factor, and the interview was included as a random effect to account for the non-independence of observations within interviews and variation in the number of utterances across interviews.

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of utterance type, $F(5, 127.00) = 279.21, p < .001$. Table 2 presents the proportion of each utterance type. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction showed that option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than all the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). No significant differences were observed between directives and suggestive utterances; both were significantly more frequent than invitations, facilitators, and summaries (all $ps < .001$). Summaries were significantly more frequent than invitations ($p < .01$) and facilitators ($p < .001$), whereas no significant differences were found between invitations and facilitators. Overall, focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were approximately twice as common as utterance types more closely aligned with best-practice recommendations (i.e., invitations, directives, summaries, and facilitators).

To examine differences in the proportion of utterance types and potential changes over time, a generalized linear mixed model was conducted. Utterance type and interview year were included as fixed effects, with interview included as a random effect to account for the non-independence of observations within interviews. The interview year was entered as a continuous predictor representing the period from 2014 to 2024. Results revealed a significant effect of utterance types, $Z(5,761) = 340.88, p < .001$, indicating that the proportion of utterance types differed significantly. In contrast, interview year was not significantly associated with the distribution of utterance types, $Z(1,761) = 0.02, p = .90$, suggesting that questioning practices remained largely unchanged between 2014 and 2024. The distribution of utterance types continued to be dominated by focused-recognition prompts, whereas open-ended prompts remained infrequent.

3.2. Children's Responses

Overall, 91.90% of children's responses were coded as responsive, 7.95% as reluctant, and 0.15% as unresponsive. Children produced a mean of 778.29 ($SD = 922.65$) words per interview. Across all interviews, children provided a total of 35,193 details ($M = 274.95, SD = 346.38$). Of these, 60.72% were classified as central details ($M = 166.95, SD = 222.07$), whereas 39.28% were peripheral details ($M = 107.99, SD = 136.69$). The distribution of details elicited by each utterance is presented in Table 3.

Prior to inferential analyses, the number of details elicited by each utterance type was converted into proportions relative to the total number of details provided within each interview. This transformation was applied to control differences in overall productivity

Table 1
Percentage of different utterance types by each interviewer.

	<i>N</i>	Option-posing	Directive	Suggestive	Summaries	Invitations	Facilitators
Judge	9911	46.48%	15.34%	17.67%	10.20%	5.52%	4.79%
Prosecutor	1587	45.12%	13.55%	20.10%	14.05%	4.41%	2.77%
Specially qualified professional	946	39.43%	19.13%	3.28%	13.53%	12.47%	12.16%
Attorney	167	46.71%	9.58%	27.54%	13.77%	0%	2.40%

Table 2
Mean proportions of each utterance type.

	<i>M (SD)</i>
Option-posing	0.47 ^a (0.11)
Directive	0.16 ^b (0.08)
Suggestive	0.16 ^b (0.11)
Summaries	0.10 ^c (0.08)
Invitations	0.06 ^d (0.05)
Facilitators	0.05 ^d (0.06)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

across children. Linear mixed-effects models were then used to examine differences between utterance types in the proportion of total, central, and peripheral details elicited from children, while accounting for the non-independence of observations within interviews and variation in the number of utterances across interviews.

Analyses examining the proportion of total details revealed a significant effect of utterance type, $F(5,118.94) = 323.57$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more details than the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). They were followed by directive utterances, which elicited significantly more details than invitations ($p < .01$) and the other utterance types (all $ps < .01$). No significant differences were observed between details elicited by invitations and suggestive utterances. Facilitators and summaries elicited significantly fewer details than suggestive utterances ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively). Both categories also yielded significantly fewer details than all remaining utterance types (all $ps < .001$).

Analyses examining the proportion of central details revealed a significant main effect of utterance type, $F(5,122.76) = 214.57$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5), following a pattern similar to that observed for total details. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more central details than the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). Directive utterances elicited significantly more central details than the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). No significant differences were observed between central details elicited by invitations and suggestive utterances. Facilitators and summaries elicited significantly fewer details than suggestive utterances ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively). Both categories yielded significantly fewer central details than all other utterance types (all $ps < .001$).

Analyses examining the proportion of peripheral details revealed a significant main effect of utterance types, $F(5,125.94) = 178.01$, $p < .001$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction indicated that option-posing utterances elicited significantly more peripheral details than the other utterance types (all $ps < .001$). Directive utterances elicited significantly more peripheral details than suggestive utterances ($p < .01$), facilitators and summaries ($p < .001$), but did not differ significantly from invitations. Invitations elicited significantly more peripheral details than facilitators ($p = .01$) and summaries ($p < .001$).

Given that utterance types were not equally distributed across interviews, the proportion of details associated with each utterance type may primarily reflect differences in usage frequency. Accordingly, the rate of details elicited per utterance was analyzed to examine the productivity of each utterance type independent of its frequency of use. This distinction is important because, although option-posing utterances elicited the largest proportion of total details (see Tables 3–5), this result likely reflects their high frequency of use rather than their productivity.

To examine differences in productivity across utterance types, a linear mixed model was estimated with the number of details elicited per utterance as the dependent variable. Utterance type was included as a fixed effect and interview as a random effect to account for the non-independence of utterances within interviews and the unequal distribution of utterance types across interviews. The analysis revealed a significant effect of utterance type on the number of details elicited per utterance, $F(5, 120.59) = 37.16$, $p < .001$, indicating that the effectiveness of eliciting details differed across utterance types (see Table 6). Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction showed that invitations elicited significantly more details per utterance than directives, option-posing, suggestive, and summaries (all $ps \leq .05$), but did not differ significantly from facilitators. Facilitators elicited significantly more

Table 3
Percentage of details by each utterance type.

	Total details	Central details	Peripheral details
Option-posing	38.71%	39.04%	38.19%
Directive	20.22%	21.46%	18.32%
Invitations	16.93%	15.86%	18.57%
Suggestive	9.72%	9.98%	9.30%
Facilitators	9.38%	8.78%	10.30%
Summaries	3.78%	3.83%	3.70%
Non-substantive utterances ^a	1.27%	1.04%	1.62%
Total	35,193	21,370	13,823

^a Children's responses to interviewer utterances that were not focused on the investigated incident, but in which the child nevertheless provided incident-related details.

Table 4
Mean proportion of total details elicited by different utterance types.

	<i>M (SD)</i>
Option-posing	0.41 ^a (0.16)
Directive	0.22 ^b (0.13)
Invitations	0.16 ^c (0.14)
Suggestive	0.13 ^c (0.13)
Facilitators	0.09 ^d (0.11)
Summaries	0.03 ^e (0.04)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

Table 5
Mean proportion of central and peripheral details elicited by each utterance type.

	Central details <i>M (SD)</i>	Peripheral details <i>M (SD)</i>
Option-posing	0.41 ^a (0.17)	0.41 ^a (0.23)
Directive	0.23 ^b (0.14)	0.21 ^b (0.18)
Invitations	0.15 ^c (0.14)	0.16 ^{bc} (0.18)
Suggestive	0.13 ^c (0.13)	0.12 ^{cd} (0.17)
Facilitators	0.09 ^d (0.13)	0.10 ^d (0.13)
Summaries	0.03 ^d (0.06)	0.03 ^e (0.05)

Note. Proportions are calculated separately for central and peripheral details relative to the total number of central and peripheral details reported in each interview; therefore, values sum approximately to 1 within each column. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

details than option-posing and summary utterances (both $ps < .01$), but did not differ significantly from directives and suggestive utterances. Directives elicited significantly more details than option-posing, suggestive, and summaries (all $ps \leq .05$). Option-posing and suggestive utterances did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .930$), but both elicited significantly more details than summaries ($ps \leq .05$). Summaries elicited significantly fewer details than all other utterance types (all $ps \leq .05$).

4. Discussion

The present study examined forensic interviews conducted in the Portuguese criminal justice system. Under Portuguese law, only statements given before a judge are admissible as evidence. Accordingly, interviews conducted within the pre-trial proceeding known as SFU play a central role in criminal investigations and may substantially influence case outcomes. Despite their central evidentiary role, only limited empirical research has examined how these interviews are conducted in practice in Portugal (Peixoto et al., 2017). The present findings, therefore, provide important insights into current forensic interviewing practices and their alignment with evidence-based recommendations.

The findings indicate that, in most cases, disclosure of CSA did not occur immediately after the abusive incident, with delays ranging from a few days to approximately 11 years. In cases where the interval could be determined precisely (48.44%), the average delay between the first abusive incident and disclosure was approximately 6 months. Previous research suggests that disclosure timing may be influenced by several factors, including the relationship between the child and the perpetrator, abuse severity, threats, and the child's age at the onset of abuse (Latiff et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2018; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020). Such delays are particularly relevant in the context of investigative interviewing, as longer intervals between the abusive event and the interview may affect

Table 6
Mean number of details elicited per utterance type.

	<i>M (SD)</i>
Invitations	10.71 ^a (26.09)
Facilitators	4.67 ^{ab} (5.69)
Directives	3.85 ^b (2.80)
Option-posing	2.38 ^c (2.04)
Suggestive	2.37 ^{bc} (5.46)
Summaries	0.83 ^d (1.48)

Note. Means in the same column with different subscripts differ significantly based on post hoc pairwise comparisons.

children's ability to retrieve and organize their memories of the events.

Additionally, after CSA was reported, the time to SFU interview ranged from 0 to approximately 2 years, with an average delay of about 9 months. Thus, in addition to the delay between the abusive incident and disclosure, there is often a further prolonged interval before the key procedural interview takes place, largely imposed by the justice system. Human memory is a dynamic set of processes that are susceptible to both internal and external influences, and long delays may amplify these effects, particularly in children. These influences include memory deterioration, as recollections tend to lose clarity over time, as well as interference from new experiences or information acquired after the event. Delays may also increase children's susceptibility to external suggestions and heighten their awareness of the potential consequences of disclosure for themselves, their family, or the perpetrator, which may further inhibit reporting (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2018). Accordingly, SFU interviews should be conducted as promptly as possible to minimize delays that may compromise the accuracy and completeness of children's recall of the events.

Most interviews were conducted inside the courthouse, with at least five adults present in the room where the child was interviewed (judge, prosecutor, attorney, a specially qualified professional, and a court clerk). This raises two distinct concerns: the environment in which the testimony is collected and the number of adults present at the interview. With respect to the environment, research has shown that testimony in court settings, compared to testimony obtained in child-friendly environments, tends to contain less correct information about the target event, more errors, and higher levels of perceived stress (Nathanson & Saywitz, 2003; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993). These potential harmful effects - including reduced accuracy, increased errors, and heightened stress levels - have been recognized for several decades. Research has also shown that the number of adults present during the interview can affect both the quantity and quality of information provided by children, even when those adults do not directly question the child. Studies indicate that children interviewed by a single interviewer provide longer and more accurate accounts than children interviewed in the presence of additional adults (Ferra et al., 2022; Santtila et al., 2004). In light of these findings, current guidelines recommend that only the child and the interviewer should be present in the interview room, while other professionals monitor the interview remotely (Korkman et al., 2024). However, this practice occurred in only 6% of the interviews analyzed in the present study. This discrepancy highlights the gap between evidence-based recommendations and current investigative practices within the Portuguese judicial context.

Regarding the interview, the findings indicate that judges played a leading role in the interviews, asking most of the questions posed to the child. Additionally, option-posing utterances were significantly more frequent than other utterance types. Focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were approximately twice as common as invitations, directives, summaries, and facilitators. Notably, invitations - the prompt type most strongly recommended in evidence-based interviewing guidelines - were the second least used category, representing only 6% of all utterances. These findings may partly reflect the fact that interviewers had prior access to case files and information about the alleged incident, which may lead them to use the interview to confirm or disconfirm previously obtained evidence. Prior access to case information may also lead interviewers to form preliminary beliefs about the case and, wittingly or unwittingly, guide their questioning in ways that align with these beliefs, a phenomenon widely documented in the literature as confirmation bias (Lamb et al., 2011; Rohrabough et al., 2016). Such bias may inadvertently increase reliance on recognition-based prompts while limiting opportunities for children to provide free narrative accounts.

Because focused-recognition prompts (option-posing and suggestive) were used so frequently, more than half of the total details reported by children were elicited by these utterance types. This pattern raises concerns, as research has consistently shown that such prompts do not encourage children to retrieve information using their own memory cues or to report events in their own words. Instead, children are typically required only to confirm or reject the information suggested by the interviewer, which often leads to shorter responses. This interpretation is consistent with the present findings showing that focused-recognition prompts elicited substantially fewer details per utterance than invitations. Responses obtained through such prompts are more vulnerable to errors, and inconsistencies (Fernandes et al., *in press*; Lamb et al., 2018). Consequently, heavy reliance on such questioning strategies may compromise the reliability and evidentiary value of children's testimony, raising serious concerns for both victims and the criminal justice process.

Across the interviews, children predominantly provided central details describing the abusive events, which are critical for advancing criminal investigations. Peripheral details, although less frequent, may also be relevant for contextualizing events and evaluating the coherence of the child's account. Nevertheless, analysis of questioning styles showed that both central and peripheral details were more frequently associated with focused-recognition prompts. This pattern largely reflects the high frequency with which these prompts were used during interviews, reinforcing the concerns discussed earlier.

One of the most striking findings of the present study concerns the productivity of invitations. Although invitations were used relatively infrequently, being the second least common utterance type, they emerged as the most effective in eliciting details per utterance. This finding highlights the efficiency of invitations in maximizing children's informativeness despite their limited use. In the present study, invitations generated substantially more details per prompt than other utterance types. This pattern is consistent with extensive research showing that open-ended prompts elicited the richest and most informative accounts from children (Fernandes et al., *in press*; Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2018). This finding suggests that increasing the use of invitations may represent one of the most effective ways to improve both the informativeness and likely reliability of children's testimony in judicial interviews.

Despite growing awareness of best practices in the investigation of CSA cases, the present findings suggest that these practices remain inconsistently implemented. This is evident in several aspects of the interviews, including the courthouse setting in which they were conducted, the presence of multiple adults in the room, the limited use of video recording across courts, and the predominance of recognition-based questioning strategies. For these reasons, interviews with child victims should be conducted by professionals with specialized training in evidence-based forensic interviewing protocols and solid knowledge across multiple relevant domains, including victimology, child development, and memory processes. Evidence suggests that initial protocol training alone is insufficient

to ensure the sustained implementation of best practices over time. Ongoing training, regular supervision, and structured feedback are therefore essential to sustain effective questioning practices and reduce reliance on less reliable prompts that may compromise the accuracy and informativeness of children's testimony (Fernandes et al., *in press*; Korkman et al., 2024).

Importantly, analyses examining changes over time indicated that these questioning patterns remained largely unchanged across the 2014–2024 period, with no significant variation in the proportion of utterance types as a function of interview year. This suggests that the predominance of focused-recognition prompts and the limited use of invitations are not confined to earlier practices but continue to characterize most recent interviews. The persistence of these practices may reflect structural and institutional barriers to implementation, including the continued dominance of legally oriented questioning styles within the judicial framework, limited systematic dissemination and implementation of evidence-based interview training, the absence of mandatory standardized protocols, and insufficient ongoing supervision and quality control (Fernandes et al., 2026b). Together, these factors may help explain why scientific advances, legislative reforms, and evidence-based recommendations have not translated into substantial changes in forensic interviewing behavior, despite extensive evidence supporting open-ended interviewing approaches.

These findings are consistent with previous Portuguese research examining SFU interviews conducted between 2009 and 2014, which reported that the majority of questions were option-posing and that only 3% were open-ended. Nevertheless, despite European directives, robust scientific knowledge of interviewing CSA victims, and specific best-practice recommendations to improve investigations of CSA crimes, the findings suggest that forensic interviewing practices within the Portuguese criminal justice system have remained largely unchanged over the past decades. This persistence is particularly concerning given the extensive body of international research demonstrating the advantages of open-ended interviewing strategies in improving the accuracy and completeness of children's reports.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, although the sample included interviews from multiple courts across Portugal, it may not fully capture all regional variations in investigative practices, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analyses focused primarily on questioning styles and the details elicited from children. Other potentially relevant contextual factors were not examined, such as interviewer training, children's age and developmental characteristics, or socio-emotional dynamics during the interview. Future research should therefore examine how interviewer characteristics and children's individual differences influence both questioning practices and children's narrative productivity. Future studies could also examine supportive and inappropriate interviewing behaviors, children's subjective experiences of participating in SFU interviews, as well as the longitudinal association between interview quality and judicial outcomes. Finally, given the relatively high productivity observed for facilitators, future research should examine the sequential context in which these utterances occur within interviews. Additionally, because the analyses relied on transcripts of the interviews, nonverbal behaviors and interactional dynamics between the interviewer and the child could not be examined. Moreover, the observational design of the study does not allow causal conclusions about the effects of specific questioning strategies on children's responses.

4.2. Conclusion and Implications

This study provides empirical insight into current interviewing practices in SFU interviews in Portugal. The findings reveal several gaps between current practices and evidence-based recommendations for interviewing child victims. In particular, interviews should be conducted as promptly as possible, with careful consideration of children's developmental and emotional needs. Whenever possible, SFU interviews should be conducted in child-friendly environments outside the courtroom and systematically audio- and video-recorded. Ideally, the child should be interviewed by a single trained interviewer. Other professionals should observe the interview from an adjacent room via video link and communicate with the interviewer in real time when necessary (e.g., through an earpiece). Additionally, interviews should be conducted by professionals with specialized technical and scientific knowledge in relevant areas such as victimology, child development, and memory processes. Ongoing training, supervision, and feedback are essential to ensure the sustained implementation of best practices over time.

Addressing these challenges will require sustained institutional commitment to the implementation of evidence-based interviewing practices. Models such as the Barnahus framework implemented in several European countries and the Child Advocacy Center model widely used in the United States provide examples of integrated approaches designed to improve investigative quality while protecting child victims. Strengthening the implementation of evidence-based interviewing practices represents a crucial step toward improving both the quality of evidence and the protection of child victims within the criminal justice system.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Delfina Fernandes: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **João P. Gomes:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Telma Sousa Almeida:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Marlene Matos:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Pedro B. Albuquerque:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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