

THE RESPONSE FROM DIOCESES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Every published empirical study on the disclosure of child sexual abuse indicates that a high percentage of those child sexual abuse victims who report their abuse to authorities delay disclosure of their abuse, and that a significant number of children do not disclose the abuse at all¹. The delay between the initial occurrence and the subsequent disclosure of the abuse varies, depending on a number of factors such as the abused child's age at the time of abuse, the relationship between the perpetrator and the child, the gender of the child, the severity of the abuse, developmental and cognitive variables related to the abused, and the likely consequences of the disclosure.

Consequently, child sexual abuse is significantly underreported. When victims do report that they were abused, they often do so years after the abuse occurred. Adult retrospective studies of childhood sexual abuse underline the delay in disclosure. In a study of 228 adult female victims of childhood incest who were predominantly abused by males, Roesler and Weissmann-Wind found that the average age of first abuse was 6 years, and the abuse lasted on average 7.6 years. Only one-third of the subjects in this sample disclosed the abuse before the age of 18, and the average age of disclosure was 25.9.² Arata found that only 41% of the 204 female participants in her study, whose average age at the time of victimization was 8.5, disclosed the abuse at the time it occurred.³ Lawson and Chaffin found that only 43% of their child subjects disclosed their abuse when they were initially interviewed.⁴ Lamb and Edgar-Smith conducted a study with 45 adult female and 12 adult male victims of childhood sexual abuse, and they found that although the average age at the time of victimization was 10, 64% of the victims disclosed their abuse in adulthood.⁵ In a study of childhood rape of girls, Smith, Letourneau, and Saunders found that approximately half of the women waited more than eight years to disclose the abuse.⁶

If abuse is reported years after it occurred, there may be errors in the accuracy of the report due to "telescoping", or the likelihood that an individual will report the event as happening earlier or later than it actually occurred.⁷ Several social science studies have tested the telescoping phenomenon. Several studies found that forward-telescoping, or recalling an event that occurred prior to the reporting period in question, is more prevalent than backward telescoping.⁸ One study showed that memory disorientations, such as telescoping, occur more often in survey respondents 55 years or older than respondents less than 55 years of age.⁹ Another study portrayed survey participants as showing a tendency to forward-telescope events that were prominent in their lives.¹⁰ In other words, these survey respondents showed a higher likelihood of recalling significant life events, such as crime victimization, as occurring more recently in time than the event actually did. Yet another study examined the existence of telescoping in crime victimization surveys, and found that non-reported incidents were

telescoped by respondents to a slightly greater extent than incidents reported to the police.¹¹ This notion reveals a propensity for crime victims to telescope forward victimizations from their past, particularly if the crime was never reported to the police or criminal justice officials. Though telescoping has consistently been an issue in temporal reporting of a variety of abuses¹², no empirical studies have examined this problem specifically with sexual abuse disclosure.

The process of disclosing childhood sexual abuse varies, though it is often described within two axes: as purposeful or accidental and as spontaneous or prompted.¹³ DeVoe and Coulborn-Faller found that child subjects in their study required assistance with disclosure.¹⁴ Sorenson and Snow noted that accidental disclosure was more common in preschool children, whereas purposeful disclosure was more common in adolescents. They also found four stages of disclosure in their retrospective study of 630 subjects who were aged three to 17 at the time of abuse: denial, disclosure (tentative and active), recantation and reaffirmation. These researchers also found that 72% of their subjects originally denied the abuse; 78% of the subjects who tentatively revealed their abuse progressed to active disclosure; 22% recanted their reports, and of those who recanted 93% later reaffirmed the original report.¹⁵ Lawson and Chaffin found that a significant factor in the disclosure process was the belief of the caretaker in the veracity of the disclosure.¹⁶ Bradley and Wood's research also supported the notion that the role of the caretaker is essential. Although recantations of disclosure were rare in their sample, they found that 50% of children who recanted did so under pressure from a caretaker.¹⁷

One model of child sexual abuse, the Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome, is intended to help explain the hindrance to disclosure (Summit, 1983). This syndrome is not intended to be diagnostic, but rather as a clinical tool to assist in putting abuse victim behavior in context. It consists of five components: secrecy (the abuse occurs when the victim and perpetrator are alone, and the perpetrator encourages the victim to maintain secrecy); helplessness (children are obedient to adults and will usually obey the perpetrator who encourages secrecy); entrapment and accommodation (once the child is helplessly entrenched in the abusive situation, he or she assumes responsibility for the abuse and begins to dissociate from it); delayed disclosure (because the victims who report child sexual abuse often wait long periods of time to disclose, their disclosures are subsequently questioned); and retraction (as in the recantation stage described by Sorenson and Snow, the victims may retract their disclosures of abuse after facing disbelief and lack of support after their disclosure).¹⁸ Of course, not all victims react in predicted ways, but some broad patterns can be discerned.

FACTORS INFLUENCING DISCLOSURE

VICTIM'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE PERPETRATOR

If the perpetrator is a relative or acquaintance, victims of child sexual abuse are less likely to report the offense, or they are likely to disclose the abuse after a delay.¹⁹

In Arata's study, 73% of the victims did not disclose the abuse when the perpetrator was a relative or stepparent, and 70% did not disclose when the perpetrator was an acquaintance.²⁰ Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, and Goodman found that those children who felt responsible for the abuse, often because the abuse occurred within the family, took longer to report the abuse.²¹ Wyatt and Newcomb found that the women who did not disclose their abuse to

anyone were likely to have been closely related to the perpetrator and abused in close proximity to their home.²²

SEVERITY OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Research results vary in regard to disclosure of abuse in relation to the severity of that abuse. Arata found that child victims who experienced more severe levels of sexual abuse were less likely to disclose this type of abuse.²³ This is consistent with the findings of Gries, Goh, and Cavanaugh, who reported that fondling was reported by 80% of their subjects who disclosed.²⁴ In contrast, however, Hanson found that of their 341 adult females who were victims of childhood rape, the more severe assaults were likely to be reported.²⁵ DiPietro et al (1998) also found that contact sexual offenses were those most commonly reported in their sample of 76 children.²⁶

DEVELOPMENTAL AND COGNITIVE VARIABLES

Lamb and Edgar-Smith speculate that "more astute" children may not disclose because they may "anticipate unsupportive reactions".²⁷ They also maintain that such children may wait until adulthood to disclose when they can choose appropriate people to tell. White et al (1986), as cited in Campis et al (1993), found that older victims of child sexual abuse were less likely to disclose than their younger counterparts and noted that the knowledge of social consequences was a significant hindrance to disclosure.²⁸ Keary and Fitzpatrick concluded that children over the age of five, who had previously disclosed sexual abuse, were more likely to disclose this information during formal assessment, but the converse was true for children under five.²⁹ Similarly, DiPietro (2003:140) found that "developmental maturation clearly facilitates" disclosure.³⁰

FEAR OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Sorenson and Snow found that fear of further harm had an impact on a child's motivation to disclose abuse and that child victims often only felt safe enough to disclose after the departure of the perpetrator.³¹ Berliner and Conte also noted that the fear about perceived reactions of others prevent some children from disclosing sexual abuse.³² Roesler and Weissmann-Wind found that 33.3% of their subjects did not disclose their abuse during childhood because they feared for their safety. They also found that 32.9% of their subjects did not report their abuse during childhood because they felt guilt or shame as a result of the abuse.³³

GENDER DIFFERENCES

DeVoe and Coulborn-Faller; Gries, Goh, and Cavanaugh; Lamb and Edgar-Smith; and Walrath, Ybarra, and Holden all found that girls are more likely to report abuse than boys.³⁴ Reinhart found that sexual abuse of males was more likely to be disclosed by a third party.³⁵ There are no methodologically sound empirical studies that indicate that males disclose at a higher rate than females. Gender does not appear to be as important, however, as victim-perpetrator relationship in disclosure of abuse (Paine and Hanson, 2002).

- ¹ For a comprehensive review of the literature on disclosure of childhood sexual abuse, see Paine, M.L. and Hansen D.J. (2002) Factors influencing children to self-disclose sexual abuse. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 22: 271-295.
- ² Roesler, T.A., & Weissmann-Wind, T.A. "Telling the Secret: Adult Women Describe Their Disclosures of Incest," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 9 (3, 1994): 327-338.
- ³ Arata, C M. "To Tell or Not to Tell: Current Functioning of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors who Disclosed Their Victimization," *Child Maltreatment: Journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children* 3 (1, 1998): 63-71.
- ⁴ Lawson, L., & Chaffin, M. "False Negatives in Sexual Abuse Disclosure Interviews: Incidence and Influence of Caretaker's Belief in Abuse in Cases of Accidental Abuse Discovery by Diagnosis of STD," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 7 (4, 1992): 532-542.
- ⁵ Lamb, S., & Edgar-Smith, S. "Aspects of Disclosure: Mediators of Outcome of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 9 (3, 1994): 307-326.
- ⁶ Smith, D.W., Letourneau, E.J., & Saunders, B.E. "Delay in Disclosure of Childhood Rape: Results From a National Survey," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24 (2, 2000): 273-287.
- ⁷ Sudman & Bradburn, (1973), as cited in Schneider, Anne L. & Sumi, David. "Patterns of Forgetting and Telescoping." *Criminology*. Vol. 19, No. 3. (November 1981): p. 401.
- ⁸ Schneider et al., (1978); NRC, (1976), as cited in Schneider, Anne L. & Sumi, David. "Patterns of Forgetting and Telescoping." *Criminology*. Vol. 19, No. 3. (November 1981): p. 401. This article discusses telescoping patterns as well as the Portland Forward Records Check.
- ⁹ Sudman & Bradburn (1974), as cited in Gottfredson, Michael R. & Hindelang, Michael J. "A Consideration of Telescoping and Memory Decay Biases in Victimization Surveys." *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Vol. 5. (1977): p. 206. This article describes characteristics and tendencies of telescoping commonly found in social science research.
- ¹⁰ Neter & Waksberg, (1964), as cited in Gottfredson, Michael R. & Hindelang, Michael J. "A Consideration of Telescoping and Memory Decay Biases in Victimization Surveys." *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Vol. 5. (1977): p. 206. This article describes characteristics and tendencies of telescoping commonly found in social science research.
- ¹¹ Schneider et al., (1978); NRC, (1976), as cited in Schneider, Anne L. & Sumi, David. "Patterns of Forgetting and Telescoping." *Criminology*. Vol. 19, No. 3. (November 1981): p. 409. This article discusses telescoping patterns as well as the Portland Forward Records Check.
- ¹² Skogan, (1975), as cited in Levine, James P. "The Potential for Crime Overreporting in Criminal Victimization Surveys." *Criminology*. Vol. 14, No. 3. (November 1976): p. 318; Schneider et al., (1978), as cited in Schneider, Anne L. & Sumi, David. "Patterns of Forgetting and Telescoping." *Criminology*. Vol. 19, No. 3. (November 1981): p. 402.
- ¹³ Devoe, E.R., & Coulborn-Faller, K. "The Characteristics of Disclosure Among Children who May Have Been Sexually Abused," *Child Maltreatment: Journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children* 4 (3, 1999): 217-227; Reinhart, M.A. "Sexually Abused Boys," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 11 (2, 1987): 229-235; and Sorenson, T., & Snow, B. "How Children Tell: The Process of Disclosure in Child Sexual Abuse," *Child Welfare* 70 (1, 1991):
- ¹⁴ Devoe & Coulborn-Faller, p#
- ¹⁵ Sorenson and Snow, p # 4.
- ¹⁶ Lawson and Chaffin, p#
- ¹⁷ Bradley, A.R., & Wood, J.M. "How Do Children Tell? The Disclosure Process in Child Sexual Abuse," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20 (9, 1996): 881-891
- ¹⁸ Summit, R.C. "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 7 (2, 1983): 177-193.
- ¹⁹ Arata, p#; Elisabeth Kahl, Desmond K. Runyan, and Doren D. Fredrickson, "Predictors of Disclosure During Medical Evaluations for Suspected Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 6 (1, 2003): 133-142; Rochelle F. Hanson, Heidi S. Saunders, Benjamin E. Saunders, Dean G. Kilpatrick, and Connie Best, "Factors Related to the Reporting of Childhood Rape," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 23 (6, 1999): 559-569; Smith Letourneau and Saunders, p#; and Wyatt, G.E., & Newcomb, M.D. "Internal and External Mediators of Women's Sexual Abuse in Childhood," *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology* 58 (6, 1990): 758-767.
- ²⁰ Arata, p#
- ²¹ Goodman-Brown, T.B., Edelstein, R.S., & Goodman, G.S. "Why Children Tell: A Model of Children's Disclosure of Sexual Abuse," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27 (5, 2003): 525-540.
- ²² Wyatt & Newcomb, p#
- ²³ Arata, p#
- ²⁴ Gries, L.T., Goh, D.S., & Cavanaugh, J. "Factors Associated With Disclosure During Child Sexual Abuse Assessment," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 5 (3, 1996): 1-20.
- ²⁵ DiPietro, P#
- ²⁶ Hanson, 566

²⁷ Lamb & Edgar Smith, 321.

²⁸ Campis, L.B., Hebden-Curtis, J., & DeMaso, D.R. "Developmental Differences in Detection and Disclosure of Sexual Abuse," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 32 (5, 1993): 920-924.

²⁹ Keary, K., & Fitzpatrick, C. "Children's Disclosure of Sexual Abuse During Formal Investigation," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 18 (7, 1994): 543-548.

³⁰ Dipietro 2003 p. 140

³¹ Sorenson & Snow, P#

³² Berliner, L., & Conte, J.R. "The Effects of Disclosure and Intervention On Sexually Abused Children," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 19 (3, 1995): 371-384.

³³ Roesler & Weissmann-Wind, P#

³⁴ Walrath, C., Ybarra, M., & Holden, E.W. "Children With Reported Histories of Sexual Abuse: Utilizing Multiple Perspectives to Understand Clinical and Psychosocial Profiles," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27 (5, 2003): 509-524.

³⁵ ReinHart, P#