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Why children tell: a model of children's disclosure of sexual abuse☆,☆☆

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Abstract

Objective: The present study investigated variables associated with delay of disclosure of child sexual abuse and tested a model of time to disclosure.
Method: Data were obtained for 218 alleged child sexual abuse victims whose cases had been referred to District Attorneys' Offices. Five variables were posited to influence the delay between an abusive event and children's disclosure of that event to a reporting adult: child's age, gender, type of abuse experienced (intrafamilial or extrafamilial), perceived responsibility for the abuse, and fear of negative consequences of disclosure. These variables were used to create a model of factors influencing children's disclosure of sexual abuse.
Results: Results indicated that age, type of abuse, fear of negative consequences, and perceived responsibility all contributed to predicting time to disclosure. There was significant support for the model, suggesting that children who were older, came from incestuous families, felt greater responsibility for the abuse, and feared negative consequences of disclosure took longer to disclose.
Conclusions: Children's cognitive appraisal of others' tolerance of disclosure of child sexual abuse, and their own perceptions of responsibility for the abuse, are crucial to the decision to disclose. When

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evaluating children for possible sexual abuse, developmental, cognitive, and socio-emotional factors need to be taken into consideration.

Keywords: Sexual abuse; Children; Disclosure; Model

Introduction

Children who have been sexually abused often do not tell. In fact, many children fail to disclose their abuse until adulthood (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Russell, 1983; Sauzier, 1989). Fears of retribution and abandonment, and feelings of complicity, embarrassment, guilt, and shame all conspire to silence children and inhibit their disclosures of abuse (Sauzier, 1989; Summit, 1983). Unfortunately, because there is often little, if any, physical evidence of sexual abuse, intervention depends heavily on children's disclosure (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Sauzier, 1989). By not disclosing, children may be subjected to longer or repeated abuse and may not receive treatment for psychologically damaging sequelae. Nondisclosure also precludes protection from further abuse, prevents the child from obtaining therapy, and may even put other children in danger of being abused. Thus, sexually abused children face a serious dilemma in deciding whether or not to disclose.

Yet, despite these obstacles, some children do come forward, taking the brave step to reveal their victimization. Even among children who ultimately disclose, however, many do not do so for several weeks, months, or even years, after the abuse has occurred (Farrell, 1988; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Sauzier, 1989; Smith et al., 2000). There is clearly a large amount of variability in the timing of children's disclosures. What then determines the delay between an abusive event and disclosure?

Factors influencing the disclosure process

Developmental factors. Developmental factors, particularly cognitive limitations, may inhibit disclosure in young children (DeYoung, 1987; DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994). For example, as postulated by Bussey and Grimbeek (1995), young children's lack of knowledge may hinder their disclosures of sexual abuse. Because young children have limited knowledge about societal sexual taboos (Goldman & Goldman, 1982), they may not fully understand that the abuse is wrong and inappropriate. Consequently, they may be unlikely to disclose abuse to adults. However, although younger children's lack of knowledge may inhibit their reports, it may also inadvertently facilitate the disclosure of sexual abuse. Because younger children may not appreciate the taboo nature of sexuality and may not appreciate the possible negative consequences to themselves or others, they may be more willing to discuss topics and acts that easily embarrass older children (e.g., Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan, 1991). Bradley and Wood (1996), however, found that only 10% of children in their sample of 234 substantiated sexual abuse cases were reluctant to talk about the abuse when questioned by police or social service workers. Reluctance to disclose abuse was unrelated to the victim's age (see also Sternberg et al., 1997).

Gender. There are reasons to believe that boys are more reluctant to disclose abuse than girls. In a large random-sample phone survey conducted by the Los Angeles Times ($N = 2{,}626$), 42% of adult males compared to 33% of adult females said they had not disclosed sexual abuse to anyone during childhood (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). Similarly, Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994), in a retrospective interview of 60 adult victims of child sexual abuse, reported a trend toward men disclosing the abuse less frequently than women. Consistent with these findings, both DeVoe and Faller (1999) and Gries et al. (1996) reported that, during a formal assessment for suspected sexual abuse, proportionately more female children disclosed to an examiner than did males. With respect to delay of disclosure in particular, Sas (1993) found that, in a sample of 126 child victims of sexual abuse, boys were more likely to have delayed the disclosure of abuse than were girls (81% vs. 58%).

Reasons for boys' reluctance may include fears of negative consequences (e.g., being labeled as homosexual, being stigmatized as a victim; Finkelhor, 1984). On the other hand, given that boys are less likely than girls to suffer abuse at the hands of parents (Finkelhor, 1984), one might expect that boys would be more willing than girls to disclose sexual abuse because they would be less fearful of getting a parent in trouble. Nevertheless, the majority of studies suggest that, compared to girls, boys will take longer to disclose, if they disclose at all.

Type of abuse: intrafamilial versus extrafamilial. As might be expected, the child's relationship to the perpetrator can affect the timing of the disclosure of abuse (Arata, 1998; DiPietro et al., 1997; Sas, 1993; Sauzier, 1989; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). Sauzier found that children were least likely to disclose when the perpetrator was a natural parent, with 53% of these children never disclosing (the incest was discovered by accidental means). In extrafamilial cases, children were more likely to disclose immediately, although only 39% of the children did so even then.

These findings are consistent with those of Sas (1993), who reported that 89% of intrafamilial abuse victims, compared to 54% of victims of extrafamilial abuse, either delayed disclosing the abuse or did not disclose at all. Similarly, DiPietro et al. (1997), Smith et al. (2000), and Wyatt and Newcomb (1990) found that children were less likely to disclose abuse the more closely related they were to the perpetrator.

As will be discussed in the following sections, victims of intrafamilial abuse may be more concerned than extrafamilial abuse victims about betraying a parent or about potential punishment as a result of their disclosure. They may also fear family disruption if they disclose or feel that they are at least partially to blame for their abuse. These factors, in turn, may relate to their willingness to disclose abuse to parents or other adults, resulting in longer delays of disclosure.

Fear of negative consequences. As mentioned previously, a potentially important factor inhibiting children's willingness to reveal abuse may be their knowledge of the social and familial consequences of disclosure. Perpetrators may threaten children into silence with direct threats, such as the threat of harm to the child as well as to parents or relatives (Sauzier, 1989; Summit, 1983). Children at times report that the perpetrator made threats such as "I'll hurt your mother" or "I'll kill you if you tell" and thus may often fear retaliation if they disclose (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1978). Children may also fear punishment by their parents, for example, if parents believe the child is lying (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986).

Fear of negative consequences of disclosure may be particularly salient in cases of incest, because children may fear their parent will be punished (Farrell, 1988; Sauzier, 1989). They may also fear that, by disclosing the abuse, they will create a disruption in the family (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). In addition, children who are abused by a family member may feel more loyalty toward the perpetrator and thus more ambivalence about disclosing the abuse (Mian, Wehrspann, Klajner-Diamond, LeBaron, & Winder, 1986). They may have more difficulty understanding that the abuse is wrong when the perpetrator is a trusted adult in a position of authority.

Perceptions of responsibility. For many reasons, children who have been sexually abused may come to believe that they are at least partially responsible for their own abuse. Developmental factors, such as a young child's natural egocentrism, may lead children to assume responsibility for events in which they are involved, regardless of the role they may have played (Piaget, 1932). Consistent with this notion, Hazzard, Celano, Gould, Lawry, and Webb (1995) reported that, among female sexual abuse victims, younger children were more likely to blame themselves for the occurrence of the abuse.

Research also suggests that gender may be related to children's attributions of responsibility for abuse, such that girls are more likely to blame themselves than are boys (Hunter, Goodwin, & Wilson, 1992). This finding may be due in part to the fact that girls are more likely to be abused by a family member than are boys (Finkelhor, 1984), with intrafamilial abuse being associated with increased perceptions of responsibility for the abuse (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Quas, Goodman, & Jones, 2003).

Of importance, Wyatt and Mickey (1988) found that children were less likely to disclose sexual abuse if they attributed the cause of their victimization to internal, rather than external events. These findings suggest that children's perceptions of responsibility for their abuse may affect how quickly they disclose the abuse to others, such that children who blame themselves for the abuse will take longer to disclose.

Delay of disclosure

Although previous research has identified factors associated with whether or not abuse is disclosed during childhood, only a few studies have specifically examined the delay between the abusive event and disclosure among children who disclose. Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994) found that the length of time until the first disclosure of abuse was not related to the severity, duration, or frequency of the abuse, or to the victim's relationship to the perpetrator. However, Smith et al. (2000) reported that the 73% of their sample who reported waiting longer than 1 month to disclose were twice as likely to be related to the perpetrator as those who disclosed within 1 month. Children who were younger at the time of the abuse and who experienced more frequent abuse also took longer to disclose. Sjöberg and Lindblad (2002) similarly found that age at the time of the abuse was negatively related to delay of disclosure, and that children took longer to disclose the more closely related they were to the perpetrator. Children's age and relationship to the perpetrator may also influence children's perceptions of responsibility and fears of negative consequences, which would in turn affect delay of disclosure.

The present study

The present study was designed to contribute to the investigation of the disclosure process and to test a simple model of factors that influence how quickly children disclose sexual abuse. The participants were children ($n = 218$) whose cases of alleged child sexual abuse had been referred to prosecutors' offices. Data were obtained from prosecution files, from structured interviews with the children's caretaker, and from the children themselves (see Goodman et al., 1992, for more detailed information about this sample and data). Because all of the children in the sample had disclosed their abuse in some manner, the present study focuses on the timing of those disclosures.

Based on previous research, a model of delay of disclosure was proposed (see Figure 1). The model posits three exogenous variables: child's age at report of sexual abuse, child's gender, and intrafamilial versus extrafamilial abuse. It was predicted that younger compared to older

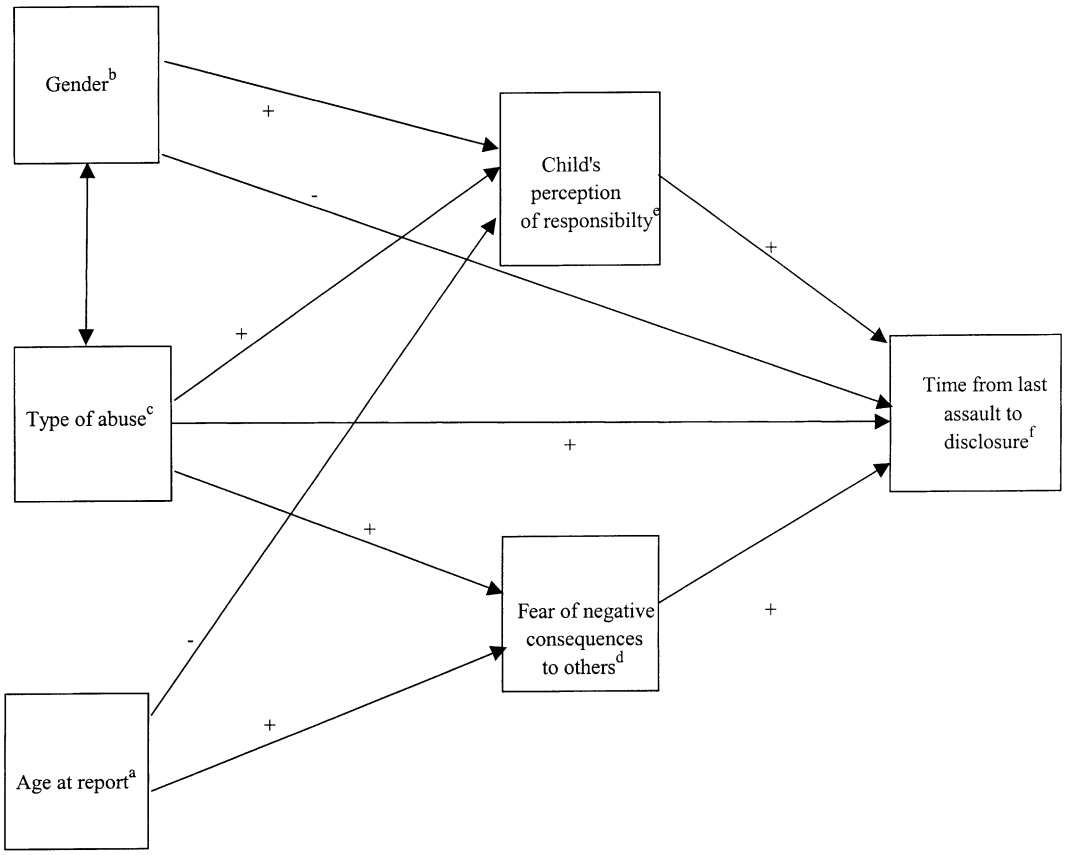

Figure 1. Proposed path model predicting time to disclosure. [a]Age at the time of initial police report (in years); [b]0 = male, 1 = female; [c]0 = extrafamilial abuse, 1 = intrafamilial abuse; [d]child feared negative consequences to others of disclosure; 0 = no, 1 = yes; [e]1 = felt no responsibility for abuse, 2 = felt partial/some responsibility, 3 = felt responsible for the abuse; [f]1 = within 48 hours; 2 = 2 days to 2 weeks; 3 = more than 2 weeks to 1 month; 4 = more than 1 month to 6 months; 5 = more than 6 months.

children would feel more responsibility for the abuse (e.g., because of greater egocentricity in the Piagetian sense), whereas older children would be more aware of potential negative consequences of disclosure (e.g., because of greater cognitive awareness). Compared to girls, boys were expected to perceive less responsibility for the abuse. Children who suffered intrafamilial abuse were expected to feel greater responsibility for the abuse and to foresee more negative consequences of disclosure. In turn, children who felt more responsible for the abuse and who expected more negative consequences as a result of disclosure were expected to take longer to tell what happened. Moreover, we expected type of abuse to be directly related to delay of disclosure. Children who experienced intrafamilial abuse were expected to take longer to disclose compared to victims of extrafamilial abuse, because of factors other than fears of negative consequences and perceptions of responsibility for the abuse.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the present study were 218 children whose cases were referred for prosecution in Denver, Colorado, on charges of child sexual abuse. All such cases referred during the 2-year period of data collection were eligible, with the exception of two cases excluded at the request of the District Attorneys due to the families' tenuous cooperation with the prosecution. The children ranged in age from 2 to 16 at the beginning of the abuse ($M = 8.56$ years, $SD = 3.32$), from 3 to 16 at the end of the abuse ($M = 8.99$ years, $SD = 3.48$), and from 4 to 16 years at the time of the initial police report ($M = 9.29$ years, $SD = 3.62$). Seventy-seven percent of the sample was female, a distribution typical of child sexual abuse reports. Seventy percent of the children were Caucasian, 17% were Hispanic, and 11% were African American. Socio-economic status (SES) of the children's families was calculated using Watt's (1976) adaptation of Hollinghead's SES scale, which ranges from 1 (high) to 7 (low). The families' mean SES was 4.94 (middle to low) and, although middle-to-low SES was most typical, the families varied across the entire 7-point range.

Abuse experiences included exhibitionism or nongenital contact (10%), genital contact without penetration (48%), and penetration (42%). Approximately 47% of the children suffered intrafamilial abuse, which was defined as abuse by a parent, step-parent, grandparent, mother's boyfriend, or other relative; the 52% of children who experienced extrafamilial abuse were victimized by such individuals as teachers, babysitters, neighbors, or in a few cases, strangers. In this sample, the frequency of the abuse ranged from 1 time (42%), 2–3 times (21%), to over an extended period (33%), with the remaining 4% described as "unknown."

Representativeness of the sample. Out of 359 families who had been referred to the District Attorney's offices, 61% agreed to participate in this study. However, for purposes of determining the representativeness of the sample, information was collected on both the 218 families who agreed to participate and the 140 families who either refused, could not be found, or who the prosecution asked not to contact due to their tenuous cooperation with the DA's office. Information from the nonparticipating families was taken from the prosecution files. For

these nonparticipating families, information consisted of brief descriptions of the victim, the defendant, the charges, and the assault.

Chi square statistics were used to compare the participating and nonparticipating families. The two groups did not differ significantly with respect to several characteristics: (a) race and age of victim, $\chi^2(4) = 7.82$ and $\chi^2(1) = 1.39$, respectively; (b) race and age of the defendant, $\chi^2(1) = 1.28$ and $\chi^2(3) = .42$, respectively; (c) whether the child had been injured during the assault(s), $\chi^2(1) = 07$, and if so the severity of the injury, $\chi^2(1) = 00$; (d) whether the defendant had been charged with incest, $\chi^2(1) = .46$; (e) whether a second charge was filed against the defendant (e.g., physical abuse, kidnapping), $\chi^2(1) = 2.74$; (f) type of sex act (e.g., exhibitionism vs. penetration), $\chi^2(2) = 1.79$.

However, the participating families significantly differed from the nonparticipating families in other ways. Only 50% of the families involved in cases of intrafamilial abuse (the defendant was either the father or step-father) agreed to participate in the study, compared to 67% of families where the perpetrator was a known and trusted nonfamily member, 62% of families where the perpetrator was a known but not trusted nonfamily member, and 75% of the families where the perpetrator was a stranger, $\chi^2(3) = 8.75$, $p < .05$. A surprising result was that, proportionally, significantly more families with male children agreed to participate than families with female children (72% vs. 58%), $\chi^2(1) = 4.01$, $p < .05$. A likely explanation for this difference involves the charge of incest. Boys in the study were more likely to experience extrafamilial abuse whereas girls more often were subjected to incest, $\chi^2(1) = 11.97$, $p < .01$. (As mentioned previously, families involved in intrafamilial abuse cases were significantly less likely to participate compared to those involved in extrafamilial cases.) Type of charge was also an influence on whether or not the family agreed to participate; there were higher rates of participation in families where the charges involved more severe and invasive abuse (e.g., first, second, or third degree sexual assault charges), $\chi^2(1) = 10.86$, $p < .01$.

Questionnaires

Sexual assault profile (SAP; Conte & Berliner, 1984). Questions on the SAP concern demographic information about the child, characteristics of the abuse (e.g., age of child at abuse onset, the child's relationship to the defendant), characteristics of disclosure (e.g., time lapse between the last assault and the child's disclosure, victim's age at time of disclosure, what victim believed would happen if abuse was revealed), and any former abuse history of the child. The SAP was completed by trained graduate students, or for one jurisdiction, a trained victim advocate who worked with the District Attorney. Information was collected from a variety of sources, including prosecutor files, police records, parent and child report, and social service interviews. Five researchers were trained on sample cases at the outset of the study. Reliability, calculated as proportion of agreement, ranged from .67 to 1.00 for 10–12 sample cases. Proportion agreement for key scaled variables was .80 or higher.

Procedure

The present study was approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Boards at the University of Denver and the University of California, Davis. Participants were solicited

from three District Attorneys' Offices. When a case of child sexual assault was referred to the prosecutor's office, a victim advocate contacted the child's primary caretaker to ask if the family was interested in participating. If the caretaker expressed interest, the family was contacted by the researchers, and an appointment was scheduled.

At the first appointment, informed consent from the primary caretaker and assent from the child were obtained. Information about the assault was recorded by trained researchers on the SAP, and was obtained primarily from police reports and other information contained in prosecutors' files, as well as from interviews with parents. Researchers were not permitted to question the children about abuse directly; however, children at times volunteered information or were questioned by others in the presence of researchers. Information about children's perception of responsibility (scored as 1 = none, 2 = partial/some, and 3 = full) and fear of negative consequences (0 = no, 1 = yes) was obtained from interviews with parents, comments by children, or from police files.

Examples of coding attributions of responsibility include the following: a child who indicated that the abusive relationship was consensual and another child who said she wanted to see a doctor to stop feeling like the abuse was all her fault received a score of 3 or "full responsibility;" a child who thought he had done something wrong received a score of 2 or "partial responsibility" for the abuse. Examples of coding fears of negative consequences of disclosure include the following: indications that the child feared that people would not like her if she disclosed and that the defendant would kill her mother if she disclosed were coded for the presence of fears of negative consequences to the self and others, respectively.

Statistical analysis

To test the hypothesized relations among the variables of interest in this study, correlational analyses were conducted. In addition, to provide a more rigorous test of the hypothesized causal relations among these variables, path analysis was performed (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). A path analysis consists of a series of multiple regressions, which allows the influence of one variable on another to be estimated while the influences of other variables are simultaneously considered. Path analysis further allows for the estimation of both direct and indirect effects of one variable on another.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Of the 132 children for whom we had information on fears of negative consequences of disclosure, 14 (11%) were reported to fear negative consequences to others, 49 (37%) were reported to fear negative consequences to themselves, and 10 (8%) were reported to fear negative consequences to the defendant. Of the 157 children for whom we had information on perceptions of responsibility, 124 (79%) were considered to perceive no responsibility for the abuse, 31 (20%) were considered to perceive partial or some responsibility for the abuse, and two (1%) were considered to perceive complete responsibility for the abuse.

Table 1
Time from last assault to disclosure

Time from last assault to disclosure	Percent of children
<48 hours	42
>48 hours–2 weeks	17
>2 weeks–1 month	5
>1 month–6 months	14
>6 months	15
Unknown	8

Note. $n = 200$.

The length of time until disclosure reflects the time from last assault to disclosure to police or social services. As shown in Table 1, 42% of the children disclosed the abuse within 48 hours of the last assault, while 15% did not disclose for more than 6 months. We had information for 194 children as to whether or not the disclosure was voluntary or involuntary. Forty-five children (23%) were considered to have made an involuntary disclosure (e.g., a parent or another adult elicited the disclosure). When these children were excluded from the analyses reported in subsequent sections, the results were unchanged.

In addition, for some of the children who participated, there were missing data on a few key variables (e.g., fear of negative consequences, perceptions of responsibility). However, the results of the study did not substantially change when analyses were conducted only with children for whom we had full data. That is, when only these children were included, the magnitude of the correlations and betas from the path analysis were almost identical. The number of participants included in each analysis is indicated in the following sections.

Time to disclosure

Of central interest was the relation between several key variables (e.g., gender, age at abuse, perception of responsibility) and the time lapse between the last assault and the victim's disclosure to anyone (time to disclosure). Table 2 presents the intercorrelations among the variables of interest. Age was significantly associated with time to disclosure, with older compared to younger children taking longer to disclose. It was hypothesized that girls would disclose more quickly than boys. However, contrary to prediction, gender was not significantly correlated with time to disclosure. As predicted, children took longer to disclose in intrafamilial than in extrafamilial abuse cases. Another hypothesis was that children who did not expect negative consequences of disclosure would take less time to disclose than children who expected negative consequences. The relation between time to disclosure and children's fear of negative consequences to others (e.g., family members other than the defendant) was significant; children who believed that their disclosure would bring harm to others took longer to disclose than children who had not expressed these fears. Surprisingly, fear of negative consequences to the self, however, was unrelated to time to disclosure, $r = .06$, $n = 126$, as was the child's fear of negative consequences to the offender, $r = .02$, $n = 126$. These results suggest that the children's fears of negative consequences focused mostly on harm to others in general, rather than to the perpetrator of the abuse or to themselves, in affecting the children's willingness to

Table 2
Intercorrelations among variables included in the path analysis

	Age	Gender	Type of abuse	Fear of negative consequences to others	Perceived responsibility
Age[a]	–				
Gender[b]	.04 (218)	–			
Type of abuse[c]	−.02 (217)	.24** (217)	–		
Fear of negative consequences[d]	.18* (132)	.20* (132)	.19* (132)	–	
Perceived responsibility[e]	.19* (157)	−.06 (157)	.10 (157)	.07 (104)	–
Time to disclosure[f]	.23** (200)	−.02 (200)	.30** (200)	.29** (126)	.17* (200)

Note. *N*s for each correlation are indicated in parentheses.
[a] Age at the time of initial police report (in years).
[b] 0 = male, 1 = female.
[c] 0 = extrafamilial abuse, 1 = intrafamilial abuse.
[d] Child feared negative consequences to others of disclosure; 0 = no, 1 = yes.
[e] 1 = felt no responsibility for abuse, 2 = felt partial/some responsibility, 3 = felt responsible for the abuse.
[f] 1 = within 48 hours; 2 = 2 days to 2 weeks; 3 = more than 2 weeks to 1 month; 4 = more than 1 month to 6 months; 5 = more than 6 months.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

disclose sexual abuse. The prediction that children who perceived more responsibility for the abuse would take longer to disclose was supported.

When correlations between time to disclosure and type of abuse, fear of negative consequences to others, and perceived responsibility were recalculated with age at report partialled, the correlations remained significant, all *p*s $< .05$.

Additionally, in contrast to previous research, older children felt more responsibility for the abuse. Older children also feared more negative consequences to others than did younger children. Gender was significantly associated with fear of negative consequences to others, such that girls more than boys feared negative consequences to others. The relation between gender and fear of negative consequences remained significant with age partialled, $r = .18$, $p < .05$.

Thus, a number of predictions were supported in correlational analyses. However, to test the predicted model, path analysis was performed.

Path analysis

The proposed path model posited child age, child gender, and intrafamilial versus extrafamilial abuse as exogenous variables. Fear of negative consequences and perceived responsibility were hypothesized as endogenous variables. Because the correlational analyses indicated that fear of negative consequences to others, but not to the self or the defendant, was associated with time to disclosure, only the former was included in the tested model. Figure 2 presents the results of this path analysis. Age and fear of negative consequences to others were

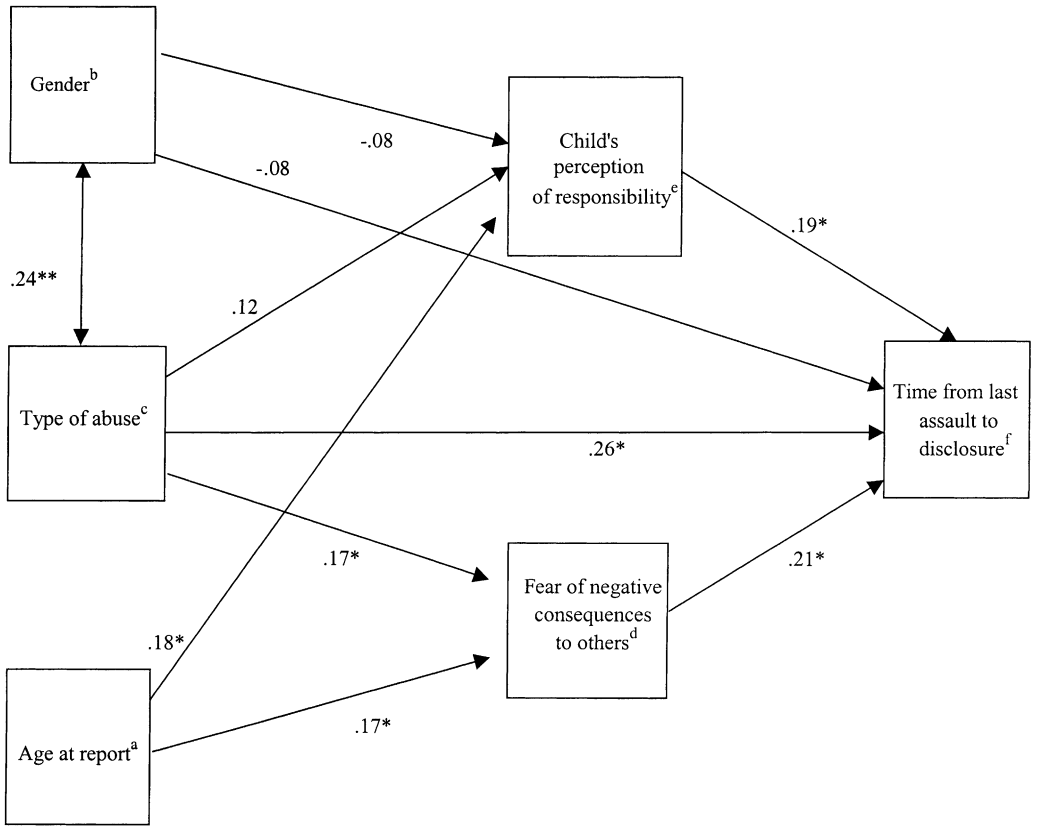

Figure 2. Path model predicting time to disclosure. [a]Age at the time of initial police report (in years); [b]0 = male, 1 = female; [c]0 = extrafamilial abuse, 1 = intrafamilial abuse; [d]child feared negative consequences to others of disclosure; 0 = no, 1 = yes; [e]1 = felt no responsibility for abuse, 2 = felt partial/some responsibility, 3 = felt responsible for the abuse; [f]1 = within 48 hours; 2 = 2 days to 2 weeks; 3 = more than 2 weeks to 1 month; 4 = more than 1 month to 6 months; 5 = more than 6 months. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

significantly related, such that older children perceived more negative consequences to disclosure than did younger children. Type of abuse was also directly related to children's fears of negative consequences; victims of intrafamilial abuse feared greater negative consequences to others compared to victims of extrafamilial abuse.

Age was significantly related to perceived responsibility. Contrary to prediction, older rather than younger children felt greater responsibility for the abuse. Also contrary to prediction, neither gender nor type of abuse significantly predicted perceptions of responsibility.

Type of abuse was significantly associated with time to disclosure, as was fear of negative consequences. Children who had been abused by a family member and who feared that their disclosure would result in negative consequences took longer to disclose. Finally, there was a significant path from children's perceptions of responsibility to time to disclosure, indicating that children who felt more responsible at the time of the abuse took longer to disclose.

Discussion

The present study was designed to contribute to an understanding of the disclosure process and to test a model of related factors that influence how quickly children disclose sexual abuse. Socio-emotional factors of perceived responsibility for the abuse and fears of negative consequences of disclosure were investigated to determine how these factors might relate to children's disclosures. A number of other potentially important variables (e.g., age, type of abuse, and gender) were also explored.

Results of the present study confirmed that age, type of abuse (intrafamilial or extrafamilial), fear of negative consequences, and perceived responsibility all contributed either directly or indirectly to the length of time it took for children to disclose sexual abuse. Next, the results bearing on each hypothesis are discussed. Then, implications of the study for clinical practice and future research are addressed.

Hypotheses

Children's age. One prediction was that older compared to younger children would be more fearful about the negative consequences of disclosure. This prediction was based on the assumption that older versus younger children would be more likely to believe that sexual acts are taboo, possibly stigmatizing, and potentially punishable (e.g., Goldman & Goldman, 1982). The results of the present study suggest that fear of negative consequences to others was more influential for older than younger children in regard to the length of time it took them to disclose.

The age of the child was also significantly associated with perceptions of responsibility for the abuse. Older children were more likely to feel that they had some responsibility for the incidents. Older children may be more likely to feel, realistically or not, that they could have escaped or ended the abuse. Being older may also be associated with longer duration of abuse, which could also contribute to older children's feelings of responsibility. In any case, our results stand in contrast to those of Hazzard et al. (1995) who found that, for female sexual abuse victims, younger rather than older children were more likely to blame themselves for the abuse. (Note that in our sample, gender and perceptions of responsibility were unrelated.)

Gender's contribution to disclosure. Gender was unrelated to time to disclosure. This is surprising given clinical observations and previous research suggesting that, compared to girls, boys take longer to disclose sexual abuse, or fail to disclose altogether (Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Sauzier, 1989; Widom & Morris, 1997). Given that children tend to take longer to disclose intrafamilial versus extrafamilial abuse, the lack of significant gender associations may be due to our sample's relative lack of male incest victims. (There were 16 male incest victims and 98 female incest victims.)

Because other research indicates that a higher rate of boys than girls never disclose sexual abuse in childhood (e.g., Finkelhor, 1990), it is possible that, because all boys in our sample had disclosed, this sample is not representative of the larger population of male child abuse victims.

We also predicted that boys as opposed to girls would feel less responsible for the abuse, with perceptions of responsibility being associated with longer delays to disclosure. The findings

did not support this prediction, and stand in contrast to previous research suggesting that girls are more likely than boys to blame themselves for sexual abuse (Hunter et al., 1992).

Type of abuse and time to disclosure. Children whose abuse was intrafamilial took longer to disclose their abuse than did children whose abuse was extrafamilial. These findings are consistent with results from numerous previous studies (Arata, 1998; DiPietro et al., 1997; Sas, 1993; Sauzier, 1989; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). As discussed shortly, fear of negative consequences for children involved in intrafamilial abuse cases contributed to the time it took them to disclose. However, other factors not measured in our study are also implicated by the findings of a significant direct path between type of abuse and time to disclosure. These other factors could include loyalty conflicts, concerns about responses of other family members to the disclosure, lack of knowledge that the sexual acts were taboo, and so forth.

Negative consequences to self and others. We also predicted that children would take longer to disclose when they believed that their disclosure would produce negative consequences. In the present study, this hypothesis was supported, suggesting that children often weigh the consequences of their actions prior to disclosing.

Interestingly, of particular importance in predicting time to disclosure were children's fears of negative consequences to others. Especially in incest cases, children may want to protect family members other than the perpetrator. As discussed by Crittenden and Ainsworth (1989), maltreated children often feel a sense of protectiveness toward their parents. In the case of incest, children might rightfully be concerned about the results of disclosure of sexual abuse due to their own possibly precarious quality of care and lack of nurturance from their parents.

Of note, the majority of children in our sample did not report fears of negative consequences to themselves, the defendant, or to others. Because all children in our sample eventually disclosed, it is possible that the anticipated benefits of disclosure necessarily outweighed the feared consequences for these children. In addition, it was surprising that fear of negative consequences to the self or to the offender were not significant predictors of time to disclosure. However, it is often anecdotally reported that children disclose sexual abuse out of concern for others, such as when the child fears that the perpetrator is starting to molest a younger sibling, rather than out of concern for the self. It is also possible that some children actually *wanted* their disclosure to bring about negative consequences to others, for instance the defendant. On the other hand, fear of negative consequences to the offender may be unrelated to time to disclosure because of factors that could override children's fears in some cases (e.g., wanting the abuse to end).

Children's perceptions of responsibility. Our final prediction was that children would be less likely to disclose quickly if they felt responsible for the abuse. This prediction was supported. Perceived responsibility was significant in a path predicting longer time to disclosure. Issues of shame and complicity might be factors in delayed disclosure for children who feel somewhat responsible for their abuse. In addition, the literature that has dealt with perceived responsibility would lead to the prediction of greater stress and greater symptomatology for children who believe that they are responsible for the abuse (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Spaccarelli, 1994).

Perhaps, for these children, there is an increased need to deny or conceal what has happened to them, or there is greater psychological confusion about what has occurred, interfering with and thus delaying disclosure.

Caveats and directions for future research

The present study provides valuable information for researchers and practitioners concerned with children's disclosures of sexual abuse. Few researchers have examined the timing of disclosure, and even fewer have tested a model of disclosure. However, despite the strength of our study, several caveats should be mentioned. First, the present study is based on a prosecution sample of children, who at least eventually, disclosed the abuse. Findings from a nonprosecution sample may differ. For instance, children who have not yet disclosed may fear more negative consequences of disclosure or perceive more responsibility for the abuse compared to children who have disclosed. It should be noted, however, that a prosecution sample provides a conservative test of the hypotheses. Maternal support and family functioning may have been relatively high in this group compared to the total population of abuse cases, given that the families were willing to see the prosecution through.

Second, the present study was correlational in nature. It is thus difficult to identify causal relations. Third, ideally, we would have interviewed the children more directly about their fears and perceptions. However, the realities of working with a prosecution sample precluded such questioning. Fortunately, we were able to talk to the children's caregivers, read relevant police and prosecution notes, and, at times, hear from the children themselves. Thus, we had multiple sources of information on which to base our scoring. Fourth, we had missing data in some cases, which reduced the statistical power of our analyses. Thus, some associations that proved nonsignificant might emerge as statistically significant with a larger sample size and more complete data. Nevertheless, our study provides valuable new information.

With respect to future research, to the extent that disclosure may not be a single event, but rather typically one that takes place over time, longitudinal study of the disclosure process would be particularly valuable. Children who have just disclosed should be examined, as should their caregivers. Subsequently, researchers should follow the sample over time, examining family outcomes, stressors, development or reduction of symptoms, and parental support.

Furthermore, in future studies, researchers should study young children longitudinally to explore whether children experience increased self-blame for actual negative consequences to the family after the child's disclosure. Although intrafamilial abuse did not directly relate to perceived responsibility in the current research, a study investigating this possible association using measures that assess children's feelings directly may in the future elucidate some relation.

Investigations of children with sexually transmitted diseases who have not disclosed might be feasible for prospective studies on the disclosure process, expanding on Lawson and Chaffin's (1992) work. For instance, are children who are burdened with the weight of self-blame and fear of negative consequences more likely to disclose and then rescind the disclosure? Moreover, how do factors such as perceptions of responsibility affect children's mental health outcomes in both the short- and long-terms? Finally, research is needed on ways to help sexually abused children disclose and to identify factors that may mitigate the tremendous pressures placed on children to maintain the silence so often associated with child sexual abuse.

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