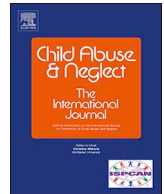


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# Child Abuse & Neglect

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## A retrospective approach to examining child abuse disclosure

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Often times, a child's disclosure is the only forensic evidence available in child abuse cases. Therefore, understanding disclosure patterns of suspected child abuse victims plays a critical role in the forensic investigations of both child physical abuse (CPA) and child sexual abuse (CSA) cases.

**Objective:** To explore adults' retrospective reports about childhood disclosure of CPA and CSA. **Participants and setting:** College students ( $N = 907$ ) were screened for reported histories of CSA ( $n = 94$ ) or CPA ( $n = 109$ ).

**Methods:** Through an online survey, participants provided anonymous information regarding CSA and CPA experiences along with information about any disclosure events or opportunities that they have encountered since the abuse.

**Results:** Among the adults reporting CSA histories, 50 % indicated disclosing the abuse during childhood; 80 % indicated any lifetime disclosure. Among the adults indicating CPA histories, 32 % reportedly disclosed the abuse to someone during childhood with 52 % reporting any lifetime disclosure. For both groups, length of delay until disclosure was bimodal with many individuals reporting immediately and many waiting considerable time. Among adults reporting CSA, a minority (16 %) indicated the abuse came to the attention of authorities, with even fewer CPA cases (8%) reporting authorities were aware of their abuse. Denial and recantation in a formal setting was infrequent regardless of abuse type reported.

**Conclusions:** Given that participants experiencing CSA and CPA both reported low levels of denial and recantation, forensic investigators and practitioners may benefit from considering consistent interviewing approaches and protocols, regardless of the type of abuse suspected.

### 1. Introduction

Disclosure of child abuse plays a critical role in the forensic proceedings of child abuse allegations (Bottoms et al., 2016). Forensic interviewers base their interview style on their beliefs about how children disclose abuse (London & Kulkofsky, 2010; Rush, Lyon, Ahern, & Quas, 2014), and it has long been known that some interview styles can be detrimental to an investigation (e.g., People v. Buckley, 1984; State of New Jersey v. Michaels, 1994). At the same time, researchers have expressed concerns about false negatives, where truly abused children deny abuse during formal investigations, potentially leading to what Lyon, Stolzenberg, and McWilliams (2017) termed "false acquittals". Psychologists, then, have an obvious interest in examining whether and how maltreated children tell others about their abusive experiences (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Two overriding research questions were explored in the current study. First, adults with self-reported histories of child sexual abuse (CSA) and child physical abuse (CPA) were surveyed

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about whether they ever disclosed, denied or recanted the abuse, as well as whether anyone ever suspected or questioned them about the abuse. Second, self-reported disclosure patterns among cases of CSA and CPA were compared.

The scientific study of child abuse generally, and disclosure patterns specifically, presents a number of major methodological challenges. Some studies have examined disclosure rates among children presenting for forensic or medical evaluation (for a review, see London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008). However, some researchers have argued that these children represent a minority of all abuse cases and therefore may not be representative of the larger population of sexually abused children whose cases never come to the attention of authorities (Lyon, 2007, 2009). Researchers estimate only about 10–15 % of CSA (Bottoms et al., 2016; Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005) and 7–9 % of CPA (Bottoms et al., 2016; Bottoms, Rudnicki, & Epstein, 2007) cases ever reach authorities. Among CSA cases that come to the attention of authorities, the child's disclosure usually prompts the abuse investigation (Kellogg & Menard, 2003; London et al., 2008; Rush et al., 2014). That is, the child is already telling about the abuse and continues to do so during forensic assessment. As a result, the use of child samples undergoing contemporaneous forensic assessment for CSA may spuriously inflate disclosure rates (a phenomenon called *suspicion bias*; Lyon, 2007). Another problem with the use of child forensic samples is that often the validation of CSA is contingent upon the child's disclosure since other case evidence typically is lacking, an occurrence dubbed *substantiation bias* (Lyon, 2007; Rush et al., 2014). Substantiation bias can inflate disclosure rates because, if only substantiated cases are used to estimate disclosure rates, it is still only children who are more likely to disclose that are being sampled.

## 2. Retrospective studies examining child abuse disclosure

A second source of scientific information on abuse disclosure that attempts to bypass these methodological challenges comes from anonymous surveys of adults who retrospectively report having been abused as children (Bottoms et al., 2016; for reviews, see London et al., 2008; Lyon, 2009; McElvaney, 2015; Tener & Murphy, 2015). In such studies, adults are asked whether they ever experienced child abuse and, if so, whether they told anyone.

A majority of the retrospective studies indicate that delay and non-disclosure of CSA is a common occurrence (for reviews see Alaggia, Collin-Vezina, & Lateef, 2017; London et al., 2005, 2008, Lyon, 2009; McElvaney, 2015). As shown in Table 1, extant retrospective studies produce a wide range of CSA *childhood* disclosure estimates (30–87 %) and a wide range of CSA non-disclosure (i.e., never disclosing to anyone before this survey) estimates (13–62 %).

Extant retrospective studies have addressed the issue of *delayed* disclosure and non-disclosure, to our knowledge, retrospective studies have not queried adults' regarding any experiences of being questioned (in either a formal or informal setting) about abuse. Hence, the retrospective studies to date provide limited information regarding whether children should be expected to *deny* or *recant* abuse. Second, most of the extant retrospective studies focus exclusively on CSA with only a few recent studies examining disclosure in physical versus sexual abuse (Bottoms et al., 2007, 2016; Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018; Rush et al., 2014). The present study addresses these issues by examining adults' retrospectively reported experiences with disclosure, denial, and recantation of both physical and sexual abuse.

### 2.1. Operational definitions of child sexual abuse and disclosure

While the studies converge to indicate many children delay or fail to come forward, the disclosure estimates vary considerably. A multitude of factors likely contribute to the variation reported in retrospective studies. One likely factor that affects disclosure rates lies in the operational definitions (or lack thereof) of abuse and disclosure. When surveying adults about any disclosures, most of the retrospective studies inquired only whether they ever "disclosed" the "abuse" to anyone (see Table 1, column 9). In the majority of studies, "disclosure" was not well defined for the participants. For example, when asked "did you ever tell anyone," some participants may construe they are being asked whether they ever made a formal report. Researchers also have used different (or unspecified) ages for "childhood" disclosure. In the present study, very detailed questions to participants regarding "disclosure" and "denial" were provided. While non-disclosure and denial may be related, they describe different phenomena. *Non-disclosure* occurs when an abused child never came forward to tell anyone about the abuse. *Denial* occurs when an abused child explicitly denies abuse when directly questioned.

Operational definitions of CSA also greatly vary across the retrospective studies (see Table 1, column 4). In some studies, *abuse* required sexual contact, while others included a variety of both contact and non-contact sexual experiences. In some studies, *abuse* was defined as any *unwanted sexual experiences* (see Table 1, studies 6, 13, & 17). This definition produces ambiguity as some participants' interpretations of this concept may include non-abusive experiences, such as regretted ones.

Only three studies (see Table 1, studies 4, 5, & 7) reported providing participants with specific definitions of abuse. The findings from these studies illustrate the potential impact of failing to clearly operationalize the *abuse* and *disclosure* constructs in surveys. Bottoms et al. (2007) found, when asking participants if they considered themselves a victim of CSA, only 60 % of those who fit criteria for CSA actually considered themselves abused. Furthermore, 67 % of disclosing CSA survivors considered themselves abused while this was true of only 37 % of non-disclosing CSA survivors. Additional research has found that identifying oneself as abused affects subsequent disclosure (Bottoms et al., 2016; Lahtinen, Laitila, Korkman, & Ellonen, 2018; McElvaney, 2015). Therefore, the present study includes both objective and subjective measures of abuse status.

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