



Factors affecting disclosure among Israeli children in residential care due to domestic violence[☆]

Rachel Lev-Wiesel, Ruth Gottfried^{*}, Zvi Eisikovits, Maya First

Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Aba-Hushi Avenue, Mount Carmel, 3478601 Haifa, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Disclosure of child abuse may enable initiating interventions to end maltreatment and mediate its negative physical and psychological consequences. The present study reviews the field of disclosure and examines factors affecting disclosure among a service population of abused children who were placed in residential care due to various forms of abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional, neglect and witnessing domestic violence). The sample consisted of 286 Israeli (Hebrew and Arabic speaking) children aged 12–17 (mean = 14 ± 1). Following approval of the Ethics committee of the University and parents' written consent, participants were administered a self-report questionnaire that included the following measures: a Socio-Demographic Questionnaire, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), and the Disclosure of Trauma Questionnaire (DTQ). Results indicated that the three key factors enhancing the likelihood of disclosure were: moral factors, external initiatives and intolerable physical pain. The three key factors inhibiting disclosure were feelings of shame, fear of losing social support and uncertainty as to how and to whom to disclose. Results also showed that children preferred to disclose to their nuclear family members (parents and siblings) in comparison with professionals.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment including sexual, physical, emotional abuse as well as neglect and exploitation is of global concern (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002; Pinheiro, 2006). According to recent survey data, more than one in four children worldwide reported having experienced severe physical abuse, while nearly one in five females and one in eleven males reported having fallen victim to child sexual abuse (United Nations Children's Fund, 2012).

There is a consensus between researchers and practitioners in the field that occurrences of child maltreatment are underreported due to children's reluctance to disclose (Hunter, 2011; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; Ullman, 2002). Enhancing the understanding of the dynamics of disclosure and non-disclosure is therefore necessary for improved child protection, and is likely to help overcome reporting gaps (McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2012). Note however, that the extent to which disclosure leads to healing is still controversial (Graham-Bermann, Kulkarni, & Kanukollu, 2011; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994).

Estimated disclosure rates for child sexual abuse, for example, have been estimated in the 31%–45% range, based on retrospective adult reports (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008). Increased knowledge of the factors that facilitate and inhibit disclosure may increase disclosure rates, reduce the risk of further victimization,

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^{*} Corresponding author.

increase the likelihood that victims receive the necessary treatment for the psychological and physical health consequences of abuse, and help initiate legal interventions (Paine & Hansen, 2002; Ullman, Starzynski, Long, Mason, & Long, 2008).

The present study examined the occurrences of child maltreatment, self-reported encouraging versus discouraging disclosure factors as well as children's preference of confidant, according to ethnicity and gender. The study population consisted of Israeli children at risk (Hebrew and Arabic speaking), who were placed by welfare services in residential care, due to having had experienced and/or witnessed domestic violence. It should be noted, that the term "disclosure" is used in the literature in various ways, and can mean telling about abuse: (1) to any person, (2) during a formal interview, or (3) during therapy (Jones, 2000). In this article, the term refers to any initiated formal or informal verbal disclosure of all forms of child maltreatment.

Literature review

Definitions and forms of child abuse

Child abuse encompasses all forms of sexual, physical and emotional abuse as well as neglect and exploitation – resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's overall health and development. For all specific forms of abuse, an important characteristic is that the abuser is in a position of responsibility, trust or power (Krug et al., 2002). Although each form of abuse has its specific characteristics, abused children often suffer multiple and varied forms of abuse (Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Farrell-Swails, 2005; Clemmons, DiLillo, Martinez, DeGue, & Jeffcott, 2003; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Higgins & McCabe, 2001; Saunders, 2003).

Child sexual abuse is defined as the unlawful engagement of a child, who has not reached the legal age of maturity, in any sexual activity via coercion, force or overt or covert threats (Krug et al., 2002; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). The Council of Europe further defines sexual abuse as taking sexual advantage of a child who is suffering from a mental or physical disability or sexually victimizing a child who is dependent (Council of Europe, 2007). Child physical abuse comprises actual or potential physical harm from either a single or repeated interaction or lack of an interaction (Krug et al., 2002), while emotional abuse of a child, involves the failure to provide a developmentally supportive environment that allows a child to establish a full range of emotional and social competencies. This form of abuse includes non-physical acts that cause actual or potential harm to the child's overall wellbeing and development (Krug et al., 2002). Child neglect is defined as the failure to provide for the overall development and wellbeing of the child, within the caretaker's available resources, resulting in actual or potential harm. Some of the categories of neglect emerging from the literature are: physical and emotional care, health, education, nutrition, safe living conditions and supervision (Krug et al., 2002). Finally, child exploitation refers to the detrimental utilization of a child for the benefit of others, in work or in activities such as: child labor, child prostitution and child trafficking (Krug et al., 2002). This last aspect of child maltreatment was not surveyed in the current study.

Disclosure: overview and fostering versus inhibiting factors

Disclosure may be influenced by various factors (e.g. ethnicity, gender), children's preference of confidante, and the specific disclosure pathway. Regarding confidant, children most often disclose to parents (usually mothers), other family members and friends, and less often to professionals (Alaggia, 2004; Hunter, 2011; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Shackel, 2009). The main disclosure pathways are accidental, purposeful, and prompted/elicited; however, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Alaggia, 2004). Accidental disclosure refers to situations in which the abuse is discovered by chance, for example through observation or medical examinations. Behavioral manifestations, whereby the victim does not directly tell about their victimization verbally, may fall into this class. In contrast, purposeful disclosure occurs when the abuse is deliberately disclosed. Finally, the term prompted/elicited disclosure refers to situations in which authorities, professionals, parents, caregivers or other adults actively encourage disclosure.

Literature focusing on multiple and varied as opposed to individual and singular forms of victimization shows that a substantial proportion of children, who might be identified by screening for a specific victimization type, are actually victims of multiple forms of abuse (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2007). The fostering versus inhibiting factors of child abuse disclosure discussed below, though gathered from studies focusing mostly on singular categories of maltreatment, mainly sexual abuse, are presented together as being potentially relevant to child maltreatment in all its forms. This is consistent with the view that factors influencing child sexual abuse disclosure are also likely to apply to disclosures of other types of abuse (Hunter, 2011).

Factors inhibiting disclosure

Inhibiting factors associated with child abuse disclosure include: type of abuse, age and gender of the child, relationship to the abuser, characteristics of the abusive event (intra-familial versus extra-familial) (Hershkowitz, 2006), strategies used by the abuser to assure secrecy (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007), lack of understanding that the abusive behavior is unacceptable (Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011), factors related to post-traumatic stress disorder (Ullman, 2007) and dissociation (Carrion & Steiner, 2000), the identity of the confidant (Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, 2010), the wish for confidentiality to be maintained (McElvaney et al., 2012), fear of the criminal justice system, belief in the importance of

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