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Research article

Predictors of maternal support following children's sexual abuse disclosures[☆]Rachel Wamser-Nanney^{*}, Julia C. Sager

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of parental support following children's sexual abuse (CSA) disclosures, there is a dearth of research regarding the predictors of support. Much of the prior literature is limited by the use of small sample sizes, measures of support without adequately reported psychometric properties, and inadequate or inconsistent definitions of support, which hinders the ability to accurately identify key predictors. Further, some potentially important predictors of parental support remain unexplored, including child-reported abuse stressors (e.g., family conflict, nonsupportive disclosure responses). The present study aimed to better delineate predictors of maternal belief and emotional support by examining the links between child, maternal, and family factors, and abuse characteristics as reported by both mothers and children. Two hundred and forty-seven treatment-seeking children (M age = 9.24, SD = 3.74) and their non-offending mothers were included in the study. Select demographic factors (i.e., child's age, minority status), abuse characteristics (i.e., use of penetration, repeated CSA incidents, and amount of CSA characteristics known), and child-reported abuse stressors were tied to levels of maternal belief and/or emotional support. Maternal and family characteristics were unrelated to support. The child's age and whether the abuse occurred more than once remained robust predictors of both aspects of support in multivariate analyses. The amount of CSA information known to the mother predicted emotional support, which may signal the utility of increasing parental knowledge of the abuse to bolster their emotional support. Findings indicate that there are several factors that may influence levels of maternal support, and children who experience certain types of CSA may be at greater risk for lower levels of belief and support.

The nature in which a non-offending parent responds to a child's sexual abuse disclosure is likely paramount to the child. At best, a child's disclosure results in belief, reporting to law enforcement and protection from the perpetrator, empathy and concern for the child's well-being, and initiation of professional services and treatment if needed. At worst, the child is not believed, or believed but not protected from further abuse by the perpetrator, and the abuse continues. Lack of parental support following childhood sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure is related to recantation (Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007) and is an important determinant of whether the child is placed into child protective custody (CPS) (Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989). In instances in which the mother was supportive following CSA disclosure, the perpetrator has been significantly more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than when the mother was nonsupportive (Leifer, Kilbane, & Grossman, 2001). Many have posited that parental support plays an integral role in predicting children's trauma-related symptoms (Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Everson et al., 1989; Kendall-Tackett,

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Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993); however, the empirical evidence for this assertion is rather limited as indicated by a meta-analysis (Bolen & Gergely, 2015). Further, despite the importance placed on parental support, its predictors are not well understood and much of the parental support literature is mired in methodological weaknesses such as small sample sizes, use of measures without adequately reported psychometric properties, and inadequate operationalization of support. The lack of understanding of predictors of parental support is noteworthy as identification of families at risk for lack of support in the immediate aftermath of disclosure may lead to interventions to increase the parent's level of support and responses to the child, which may have an impact on the child's post-trauma functioning. The present study was therefore needed to better delineate what factors influence parental support.

1. Predictors of parental support

A parent's response to CSA disclosure is a complex reaction that is likely shaped by numerous factors, including child and family characteristics and aspects of the traumatic event. Child and family variables have been explored in a number of studies, and have yielded an array of findings. For instance, younger child age has been linked with higher levels of belief and support (Pintello & Zuravin, 2001; Sirls & Franke, 1989), whereas others did not find a relationship (Bolen & Lamb, 2002; Cyr, McDuff, & Hebert, 2013; Everson et al., 1989). Similarly, some studies have observed greater belief and support when the child was male (Bolen & Lamb, 2002; Pintello & Zuravin, 2001), albeit inconsistently (Everson et al., 1989). Household income has been inversely related to support (Cyr et al., 2013; Plummer, 2006). Although several studies have investigated whether maternal variables such as mother's abuse history, education level, mental health, and substance use influence belief and support, most have not found relationships (e.g., Coohy & O'Leary, 2008; Cyr et al., 2003; Deblinger, Stauffer, & Landsberg, 1994; Leifer et al., 2001; Runyan et al., 1992). However, Coohy and O'Leary (2008) did find that maternal history of domestic violence was related to belief. Nonetheless, it is heartening to note that, despite previous assumptions that many mothers with abuse histories would have difficulty supporting their children (Agosta and Loring, 1988; Friedrich, 1990), these mothers appear to demonstrate resiliency in supporting their children.

Maternal relationship to the perpetrator has been routinely found to be a predictor of both support and protection of the child following disclosure of CSA, with mothers being more likely to believe, support, and protect their children when the perpetrator is not a current partner (e.g., Cyr et al., 2003; Everson et al., 1989; Leifer et al., 2001; Pintello & Zuravin, 2001; Runyan et al., 1992). Specifically, Sirls and Franke (1989) found that mothers were more likely to believe their child when the perpetrator was the child's biological father, rather than when the perpetrator was a stepfather or cohabitating boyfriend. Runyan et al. (1992) observed that mothers were less likely to believe and support their child if they were currently romantically involved with the perpetrator. Other studies have found that mothers were less protective when the perpetrator was the child's biological father and their partner, rather than another relative or stranger (Faller, 1988; Salt, Myer, Coleman, & Sauzier, 1990). These combined findings suggest that the relationship between the mother and the perpetrator may be more influential on the mother's response than the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. However, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator should not be ignored, as other studies have found that victims received more support in instances in which the perpetrator was not a father figure (Bolen & Lamb, 2002).

The extant literature has identified various characteristics of abuse that may play a role in support following CSA, although few consistent patterns have emerged. Multiple studies have found that severity of the abuse was not related to whether mothers believed or protected their children following disclosure of CSA (Runyan et al., 1992; Bolen & Lamb, 2002; Cyr et al., 2003; Pintello & Zuravin, 2001; Salt et al., 1990). However, Feiring, Taska, and Lewis (1998) found that mothers were more supportive when the abuse was less severe. There are also inconsistent findings about the relationship between whether the CSA included penetration and parental belief that abuse occurred. Both Sirls and Franke (1989) and Heriot (1996) found that penetration was related to lower levels of parental belief, while other studies did not find a significant relationship between belief and penetration (Cyr et al., 2003; Pintello & Zuravin, 2001). Bolen and Lamb (2002) also reported that children with a more extensive abuse history (i.e. experienced multiple types of abuse throughout childhood), or who witnessed domestic violence received less parental support. Other abuse-related variables, such as use of force or threats during the abuse were not significant predictors of support (Bolen & Lamb, 2002). Although duration of abuse was not a significant predictor of maternal support in some studies (Bolen & Lamb, 2002; Runyan et al., 1992), Pintello and Zuravin (2001) found that longer abuse duration was related to decreased maternal belief and protection. Greater length of time since the abuse ceased has been tied to more support (Bolen & Lamb, 2002). Over time, mothers may learn to accept the reality of the CSA and, consequently, be better able to support their child. Conflicting findings have also emerged regarding how admission of abuse from the perpetrator affects the mother's belief and support of her child. While some studies found that denial of abuse from the perpetrator resulted in decreased belief from the mother (Cyr et al., 2003; Everson et al., 1989), others did not find a significant relationship (Pintello & Zuravin, 2001).

Taken together, it is unclear whether aspects of the CSA influence maternal support. While many child, family, and abuse-related variables have been examined in the context of parental response following CSA disclosure, many of these findings are inconclusive. The variance in findings across these studies may also be indicative of methodological errors, including small sample sizes and the use of measures without reported psychometric properties. Some of the prior literature operationalized support in a dichotomous manner (e.g., Bolen & Lamb, 2002; Leifer et al., 2001) rather than utilizing a continuous measure, thus potentially limiting the variability associated with varying degrees of support. Some studies examined belief rather than support, which are distinct constructs, and in some instances *consistent* belief was requisite (Coohy & O'Leary, 2008; Sirls & Franke, 1989). This is noteworthy as unwavering belief may be uncommon (Bolen & Lamb, 2004, 2007). Additional research that investigates support more thoroughly is needed to better understand how support may be linked with previously examined predictors.

Further, some potential predictors remain entirely unexplored. The child's experience of the abuse and abuse-related stressors

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