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Research article

Children's disclosures of sexual abuse in a population-based sample[☆]Hanna-Mari Lahtinen^{a,*}, Aarno Laitila^b, Julia Korkman^c, Noora Ellonen^d^a University of Eastern Finland, School of Educational Sciences and Psychology, P.O. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu, Finland^b University of Jyväskylä, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014, Finland^c Psychology at Åbo Akademi University, Helsinki University Hospital, Forensic Psychology Center for Children and Adolescents, 20500 Turku, Finland^d University of Tampere, School of Social Science and Humanities, 33014, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Most previous studies on disclosing child sexual abuse (CSA) have either been retrospective or focused on children who already have disclosed. The present study aimed to explore the overall CSA disclosure rate and factors associated with disclosing to adults in a large population-based sample. A representative sample of 11,364 sixth and ninth graders participated in the Finnish Child Victim Survey concerning experiences of violence, including CSA. CSA was defined as having sexual experiences with a person at least five years older at the time of the experience. Within this sample, the CSA prevalence was 2.4%. Children reporting CSA experiences also answered questions regarding disclosure, the disclosure recipient, and potential reasons for not disclosing. The results indicate that most of the children (80%) had disclosed to someone, usually a friend (48%). However, only 26% had disclosed to adults, and even fewer had reported their experiences to authorities (12%). The most common reason for non-disclosing was that the experience was not considered serious enough for reporting (41%), and half of the children having CSA experiences did not self-label their experiences as sexual abuse. Relatively few children reported lacking the courage to disclose (14%). Logistic regression analyses showed that the perpetrator's age, the age of the victim at the time of abuse, and having no experiences of emotional abuse by the mother were associated with disclosing to an adult. The results contribute to understanding the factors underlying children's disclosure patterns in a population-based sample and highlight the need for age-appropriate safety education for children and adolescents.

1. Introduction

A child's disclosure is often the prime evidence in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA). It is also crucial for ending the abuse, getting help for the child, and preventing other children from becoming victims (Bottoms, Peter-Hagene, Epstein, Wiley, Reynolds, & Rudnicki, 2016; Pipe et al., 2007a). Given the importance of disclosure, it is not surprising that there has been extensive research related to the subject in recent decades (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Consensus has been largely achieved, for example, on guidelines for interviewing children when abuse is suspected. However, disclosure rates in CSA cases and possible disclosure patterns have been the subject of considerable debate. Some researchers (Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, & Cederborg, 2007) have

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even referred to the debate as “the disclosure wars”. The origin of the war lies in the contradictory findings: disclosure rates vary as much as between 24% and 96% (London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008). This is a reflection of the many problems involved in studying the question. One explanation for the contradictory results is the varying sources of information used in different studies (London et al., 2008). The two main sources of information used in the research literature are retrospective surveys of adults reporting CSA experiences and children undergoing forensic evaluations of suspected CSA (London et al., 2008; Olafson & Lederman, 2006).

Another problem in comparing research results has been the variation in the definitions of both CSA and disclosure. CSA definitions have differed in the types and extent of behaviors included (Bottoms et al., 2016; London et al., 2007; Olafson & Lederman, 2006). For example, some studies have included unwanted sexual experiences with peers (e.g., Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Kogan, 2004), whereas others have excluded them (e.g., Lam, 2014; Helweg-Larsen & Larsen, 2006). Similarly, the definitions of disclosure have varied and have often been expressed implicitly in the research literature. The greatest differences in definitions of disclosure are between surveys and studies of child forensic interviews. In the latter, children are asked to tell about their experiences, and disclosure is referred to as telling about the experience in the interview situation. It is probable that a large number of children in such settings have in fact already revealed their experiences to someone (London et al., 2007; Hershkowitz et al., 2005). In contrast, in population-based surveys, whether the participants were ever asked about CSA prior to the survey is usually unknown. Also, some studies have differentiated between delayed disclosure and non-disclosure, whereas others have not (Pipe et al., 2007b; London et al., 2008).

1.1. Retrospective surveys

CSA disclosure rates in retrospective surveys have been quite congruent, varying mostly between 31% and 45% (London et al., 2008). Nevertheless, two exceptions report markedly higher disclosure rates. Both of these studies had representative samples of young adults (18-year-olds), whereas the mean age in most of the study samples in the London et al. (2008) review was over 30 years. Priebe and Svedin (2008), for example, reported a disclosure rate of 81% for girls and 69% for boys in a Swedish sample. Furthermore, in an earlier study by Fergusson, Lynskey, and Horwood (1996) in New Zealand, the disclosure rate for both boys and girls before the age of 18 years was 87%. Priebe and Svedin (2008) also examined disclosure patterns and concluded that the patterns were different for boys and girls. Attending a vocational educational program and living with both parents predicted non-disclosure among boys, whereas for girls, non-disclosure was predicted by a single occasion of abuse, contact abuse, and a familiar perpetrator (a family member, relative, friend, or acquaintance). For both genders, parental bonding was a significant factor related to disclosure. Children who perceived their parents as caring but not overprotective when growing up were more likely to disclose (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Furthermore, earlier retrospective studies of adults with self-reported CSA histories have found that children are often deterred from disclosing for fear of the possible negative consequences. In these adult samples, participants have described that as children they were afraid of revenge or of being punished or blamed for what had happened (e.g., Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Conte & Berliner, 1988; Herman & Hirschman, 1981; Palmer et al., 1999; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). A recent pilot study by Tashjian, Goldfarb, Goodman, Quas, and Edelstein (2016) showed that having also experienced emotional or physical abuse by a parental figure may delay the disclosure.

Although retrospective studies provide a population-based estimate of disclosure rates and factors related to disclosure, there are considerable methodological problems with the retrospective approach to CSA disclosures. First, problems related to memory bias are inevitable. It is possible, for example, that an adult may not recall having disclosed to someone as a child or fail to correctly recall when the disclosure happened. Adults may also have forgotten abusive experiences or, on the other hand, formed false memories of abuse; or they may falsely deny that abuse ever happened (London et al., 2008). Second, adults may reinterpret both the experiences they had and the reasons they might have had for non-disclosing as a child (Malloy et al., 2011).

1.2. Children evaluated for sexual abuse

Compared to retrospective studies of adults reporting CSA experiences, disclosure rates in the studies of children *evaluated* for suspected sexual abuse in forensic settings vary more: from 24% to 96%. Several possible factors, such as the age of the children interviewed, may account for the large variation. The lowest disclosure rates are found in samples that include greater proportions of young children (younger than 8 years old), boys, intra-familial abuse, or particular ethnic groups (London et al., 2008). An important source of variation in disclosure rates among children undergoing forensic evaluations is the strategy chosen for distinguishing between children who were abused but do not report it and children who were not abused and do not report it (Pipe et al., 2007b; London et al., 2007). Selecting only the cases where external (medical) evidence of abuse was available led Lyon (2007) to conclude that only about half of the sexually abused children disclosed when interviewed. On the other hand, London et al. (2007) analyzed substantiated cases of CSA, where children were formally interviewed, and concluded that children usually (from 76% to 96%, depending on the sample analyzed) disclosed if properly interviewed. Despite the different approaches, there is agreement that delayed disclosures are not rare and that there are children who do not disclose even when questioned directly about their CSA experiences (Pipe et al., 2007b).

1.3. Child victim surveys

Whereas retrospective surveys with adult samples have been carried out in several countries to assess CSA disclosure rates, only a few surveys have explored CSA disclosure within population-based samples of adolescents or children. Kogan (2004) conducted one

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