



Research article

A preliminary mapping of individual, relational, and social factors that impede disclosure of childhood sexual abuse[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Uncovering the pathways to disclosures of child sexual abuse (CSA) and the factors influencing the willingness of victims to talk about the abuse is paramount to the development of powerful practice and policy initiatives. Framed as a long interview method utilizing a grounded theory approach to analyze data, the objective of the current study was to provide a preliminary mapping of the barriers to CSA disclosures through an ecological systemic lens, from a sample of 67 male and female CSA adult survivors, all of whom had recently received counselling services. The current project led to the identification of three broad categories of barriers that were each comprised of several subthemes, namely: Barriers from Within (internalized victim-blaming, mechanisms to protect oneself, and immature development at time of abuse); Barriers in Relation to Others (violence and dysfunction in the family, power dynamics, awareness of the impact of telling, and fragile social network); and Barriers in Relation to the Social World (labelling, taboo of sexuality, lack of services available, and culture or time period). This study points to the importance of using a broad ecological framework to understand the factors that inhibit disclosure of CSA, as barriers to disclosure do not constrain solely the victims. Results are discussed in light of their implications for research, prevention and intervention programs, and social policies and media campaigns, as the burden is on the larger community to create a climate of safety and transparency that makes the telling of CSA possible.

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The sexual abuse of children and youth is a widespread problem that affects 1 out of 8 people worldwide (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). This alarming rate clearly calls for extensive and powerful policy and practice efforts; yet, the development of effective strategies to deal with child sexual abuse (CSA) is hampered by the fact that many victims are undetected and their needs unrecognized. Using a grounded theory approach and ecological framework lens, the aim of the current research is to advance this field of inquiry by mapping the factors that prevent CSA victims from coming forward with a disclosure, in order to develop powerful practice and policy initiatives that facilitate the telling of CSA.

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Literature Review

Victims of CSA often delay reporting of their experience of abuse, or never tell. Based on a review of contemporary studies of CSA disclosure rates, [London, Bruck, Wright, and Ceci \(2008\)](#) concluded that between 55 and 69% of CSA survivors did not disclose as children. Although measures of timing vary across studies, they also observed that disclosures mainly occurred either promptly (within one month of the event) or many years after the abuse. Results from population surveys conducted in Canada and the US show similar trends: 70–75% of respondents reporting CSA waited five years or more before disclosing the abuse, or had never disclosed prior to the survey ([Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, & Joly, 2009](#); [Smith et al., 2000](#)). In addition to delaying CSA disclosure, children may deny the abuse despite corroborative evidence such as medical findings ([Lawson & Chaffin, 1992](#); [Lyon, 2007](#)), or proof through videotapes of the abuse ([Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002](#)). In a study on alleged CSA victims, one third of those interviewed did not disclose abuse during forensic interviews, despite strong suspicion that abuse had occurred ([Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005](#)).

Disclosure can occur in various, potentially concomitant or sequential forms. [Alaggia \(2004\)](#) categorized the types of disclosure that adult survivors have made throughout their lives as purposeful, manifested through behaviours, intentionally withheld, or triggered by delayed memories. In examining CSA case reports, [Collings, Griffiths, and Kumalo \(2005\)](#) identified two broad dimensions of disclosure: Agency (child-initiated disclosure versus detection by a third party) and Temporal duration (event versus process). This process of disclosure is described as involving multiple dynamics, where victims actively withhold the secret, experience ambivalence between the wish to tell and the wish to keep it secret ('pressure cooker effect'), and eventually confide in the context of a trustworthy relationship ([McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2012](#)).

With regard to the choice of confidants, [Malloy, Brubacher, and Lamb \(2013\)](#) examined 204 forensic interviews of alleged sexual abuse of children aged 5–13 years and identified that mothers and peers were the most common recipients of disclosure, and that most children who disclosed had told more than one individual. [Priebe and Svedin \(2008\)](#) examined a sample of 1,505 girls and 457 boys who reported an experience of CSA and found that only 8.3% had talked to professionals about the abuse. In a study by [Easton \(2013\)](#) involving 487 male survivors (62% abused by priests), only 15.1% of cases were reported to authorities. [Ungar, Barter, McConnell, Tutty, and Fairholm \(2009\)](#) and [Hunter \(2011\)](#) suggested that disclosure is often indirect, including refusal to disclose, engagement in risk-taking behaviours, or acting out, or in some cases, possible attempts to draw attention to their situation to facilitate disclosure. A pattern among children and youth is to disclose less directly to non-professionals (perceived as less 'endangering'), and move towards more direct strategies of disclosure, such as disclosing directly to professionals mandated to intervene ([Alaggia, 2004](#); [Ungar, Barter, et al., 2009](#)).

Several attempts have been made to find a relationship between the victim or the abuse characteristics, and the timing of disclosure. Research findings generally indicate that younger age at the onset of abuse, being male, having a close relationship to the perpetrator, and more severe forms of abuse contribute to delayed disclosure, though some studies have found contradictory evidence (see review by [London et al., 2008](#)). Indeed, disclosure of traumatic events is a very complex, iterative life-long process ([Hunter, 2011](#)) that cannot be influenced solely by the victim or the abuse characteristics. While patterns or types of disclosure are well documented in research, [Ungar, Barter, et al. \(2009\)](#) question "why young people perceive the experience of disclosing traumatic events as threatening and why so many delay disclosure to authorities for years" (p. 344). Despite the societal assumption that it is in the best interests of victims and society to talk about CSA, as it may lead to successful legal interventions and prosecutions ([McElvaney, 2013](#)), several negative impacts of disclosure have been documented: not being believed, or the situation actually worsening as a result of telling ([Barter, 2005](#)), becoming the subject of gossip, and causing additional family rift and disruption ([Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005](#)). Other victims reported that they felt the situation spiral out of their control ([Barter, 2005](#); [Paine & Hansen, 2002](#)). [Hunter \(2011\)](#) reported that of the 22 adults she interviewed about their experiences of telling as a child, all "had experienced some form of disclosure-related trauma, either because nothing changed for the better or because they were not believed or supported" (p. 164). Based on semi-structured interviews with 122 Swedish female survivors of CSA, [Jonzon and Lindbald \(2004\)](#) concluded that for many victims, reporting CSA in childhood was a hazardous process, as the outcomes were uncertain or even negative (e.g., the abuse did not cease despite being revealed). [Ullman \(2007\)](#) concluded both from her review of the literature and her own research conducted among 733 college students that negative outcomes following CSA disclosure are more likely in childhood than adulthood.

The challenges associated with CSA disclosure have been understood using different theoretical orientations (see review by [Paine & Hansen, 2002](#)), but no theory has yet reached consensus in this field. Even the seminal work of [Summit \(1983\)](#) on the 'Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome' did not receive sufficient support in research (e.g. [London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005](#)). Despite the absence of a theory underlying the factors that impede CSA disclosure, several studies have provided empirical evidence of the barriers at play. These studies fall into three categories: information gathered through forensic interviews with children; interviews and surveys with children and adolescents; and retrospective interviews with adult survivors. Studies examining the barriers to disclosure published in peer-reviewed journals from the year 2000 onwards and listed in either PsycInfo or MedLine databases are briefly reviewed below, with a focus on dynamics other than those that pertain to victim characteristics (e.g., gender, age) or the abusive situation (e.g., intrafamilial versus extrafamilial abuse).

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