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# Disclosing adult wrongdoing: Maltreated and non-maltreated children's expectations and preferences



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### ABSTRACT

Little is known about the process by which children disclose adult wrongdoing, a topic of considerable debate and controversy. In the current study, we investigated children's evaluations of disclosing adult wrongdoing by focusing on children's preferences for particular disclosure recipients and perceptions of the consequences of disclosure in hypothetical vignettes. We tested whether children thought that disclosure recipients would believe a story child as a truth teller and what actions the recipients would take against the "instigator" who committed the transgression. Maltreated and non-maltreated 4- to 9-year-olds ( $N=235$ ) responded to questions about vignettes that described a parent's or stranger's transgression. Older children preferred caregiver recipients over police officer recipients when disclosing a parent's transgression but not a stranger's transgression. Maltreated children's preference for caregiver recipients over police officer recipients developed more gradually than that of non-maltreated children. Older children expected disclosure recipients to be more skeptical of the story child's account, and older children and maltreated children expected disclosure recipients to intervene formally less often when a parent, rather than a stranger, was the instigator. Results contribute to understanding vulnerable children's

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development and highlight the developmental, experiential, and socio-contextual factors underlying children's disclosure patterns.

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## Introduction

During recent years, increased attention has focused on understanding the process by which children disclose negative prior experiences, particularly maltreatment perpetrated by adults to whom children are closely related (London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008; Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, 2010; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007). Much of this attention stems from evidence indicating that children often delay disclosing maltreatment, fail to provide complete details about their maltreatment experiences, and sometimes retract prior allegations, all of which can profoundly affect the believability of children's claims and the outcome of legal proceedings. To intervene effectively and protect child victims, it is imperative to determine why children decide to disclose and what influences their decisions. More generally, it is important to understand how children reveal negative acts and the transgressions of others, including developmental changes and experiential and socio-contextual influences on that understanding.

The overarching purpose of the current study was to investigate the factors underlying children's decisions to disclose adult wrongdoing. We were specifically interested in children's perceptions of how disclosure recipients (individuals to whom disclosure may occur) would react to a story child's disclosure of an adult's wrongdoing, whether children's perceptions vary depending on a story child's relationship to the instigator (individual who committed the wrongdoing), and whether children's attitudes are related to their age and history of substantiated maltreatment. Surprisingly few studies have examined children's expectations concerning disclosure of adult wrongdoing directly, and even fewer have focused on maltreated children, a group of great interest for theoretical reasons and generalizability purposes. The current study helps to fill an important gap by focusing on to whom children prefer to disclose and their expectations concerning the consequences of disclosure.

As we review next, a sizable body of work has examined secrecy and nondisclosure in children using both naturalistic designs and experimental procedures. Findings reveal that children are often reluctant to disclose wrongdoing, that reluctance is related both to children's relationship to the instigator and to expectations concerning how disclosure recipients will react to disclosure, and that children's developmental level may influence their expectations. Finally, findings suggest that having a history of maltreatment may be related to children's expectations that recipients will react negatively to disclosure.

First, evidence indicates that children are often reluctant to disclose wrongdoing that they have witnessed or experienced. As mentioned, naturalistic studies indicate that many children delay reporting abuse for substantial periods of time, months or even years (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; London et al., 2008; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011), and that children sometimes recant former disclosures (Elliott & Briere, 1994; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007). Nondisclosure also appears in laboratory analogue studies, with children commonly failing to disclose their own transgressions (Bussey, Lee, & Grimbeek, 1993; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002), the transgressions of others (Bottoms, Goodman, Schwartz-Kenney, & Thomas, 2002; Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Ceci & Leichtman, 1992; Pipe & Wilson, 1994; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2004), and transgressions in which they are jointly implicated (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008).

Second, consistent with principles of classic social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), a primary motivation for secrecy among children is to avoid punishment (Last & Aharoni-Etzioni, 1995). As such, whether children disclose an adult's wrongdoing is likely related to the outcomes they expect for disclosing (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995). Wagland and Bussey (2005) tested this possibility by asking 5- to 10-year-olds about disclosure likelihood in relation to vignettes describing minor transgressions. Children, not surprisingly, predicted less disclosure when there were warnings not to tell and expectations

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