



Emotional Barriers to Children's Disclosure of Abuse

A Selected Bibliography

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Scope

This bibliography provides citations and abstracts to English language literature covering issues related to the fear of consequences related to child sexual abuse disclosure. This bibliography is not comprehensive.

Organization

This bibliography is arranged in date descending order. When possible, the abstracts that were included with the original publication are used in this bibliography. Links are provided to open access publications.

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Münzer, A., Fegert, J. M., Ganser, H. G., Loos, S., Witt, A., & Goldbeck, L. (2016). Please tell! Barriers to disclosing sexual victimization and subsequent social support perceived by children and adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(2), 355-377.

The present study examines barriers to disclosing sexual victimization and perceived social support after disclosure from the perspective of children and adolescents. Forty-two children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 years participated in semistructured interviews about their history of sexual victimization, the delay of disclosure, barriers to disclosure, informal and formal recipients of disclosure, as well as abuse-specific social support as perceived by the recipients. The participants disclosed their victimization with a delay of approximately 17 months, ranging from immediate reporting to 10 years of nondisclosure. The most frequent reasons to withhold the information were feelings of shame and threats by the perpetrator. A majority felt that people believed and supported them after disclosing, but a considerable proportion of study participants reported a lack of perceived protection against recurring victimization. The results underline the importance of educating children and adolescents about sexual victimization and of encouraging the immediate reporting of critical incidents. Possibilities to address the barriers identified in this study are discussed.

Collin-Vézina, D., De La Sablonnière-Griffin, M., Palmer, A. M., & Milne, L. (2015). A preliminary mapping of individual, relational, and social factors that impede disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 43*, 123-134.

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 net-work); 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. © 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Easton, S. D., Saltzman, L. Y., & Willis, D. G. (2014). "Would you tell under circumstances like that?": Barriers to disclosure of child sexual abuse for men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 15(4), 460-469.

Although public awareness is increasing in regard to the realities of child sexual abuse (CSA) for boys, male survivors often delay disclosure of the abuse for years or even decades. Little is known about the factors that impede or obstruct disclosure for sexually abused boys/men. Because disclosure is often a prerequisite to help-seeking and accessing resources for healing, the purpose of this study was to identify barriers to disclosure of CSA for male survivors. Using content analysis, the researchers conducted a secondary analysis of data obtained from a large, nonclinical sample of men with histories of CSA (N = 460) who completed an online survey. The data analyzed in this study included responses to an open-ended item on disclosure barriers. Our analyses identified 10 categories of barriers that were classified into 3 domains: sociopolitical (e.g., masculinity, limited resources), interpersonal (e.g., mistrust of others, abuser factors), and personal (e.g., internal emotions, naming the experience as sexual abuse). Based on our results, these domains were distinct yet interrelated. The implications for policy, clinical practice, and future research are discussed. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2014 APA, all rights reserved)

Foster, J. M., & Hagedorn, W. B. (2014). A qualitative exploration of fear and safety with child victims of sexual abuse. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 36*(3), 243-262.

Although child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive societal problem that is estimated to affect 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys before the age of 18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), little is known about CSA from the perspective of the victims themselves. To address this gap in the research, this study used a narrative approach to explore children's perceptions of their abuse experiences. Analysis of 21 narratives written during Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy revealed a meta-theme, which was entitled Fear and Safety. Children's descriptions of past and current fears and concerns about their safety and the safety of others were evident in all 21 narratives. The article delineates counseling interventions that mental health counselors can use to target fear and enhance safety.

Malloy, L. C., Quas, J. A., Lyon, T. D., & Ahern, E. C. (2014). [Disclosing adult wrongdoing: Maltreated and non-maltreated children's expectations and preferences.](#) *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 124*, 78-96.

Little is known about the process by which children disclose adult wrongdoing, a topic of considerable debate and controversy. In the present 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 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 over police officer recipients when disclosing a parent's, but not a stranger's, transgression. Maltreated children's preference for caregiver over police 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 stranger was the instigator. Results contribute to understanding vulnerable children's development and highlight the developmental, experiential, and socio-contextual factors underlying children's disclosure patterns.

Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., Adamson, G., Cruddas, S., & Houston, J. (2012). Memories of childhood threat, fear of disclosure and paranoid ideation: A mediation analysis using a nonclinical sample. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 21*(4), 459-476.

This study investigated whether associations between childhood memories of threat and adult paranoia could be partially mediated by factors associated with impeded interpersonal communication (concealment and fear of disclosure of personal and distressing information). University undergraduates (N = 179) completed a battery of psychometric scales. Mediation analysis identified a direct effect between early memories of threat and paranoid ideation (B = 0.11, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.14], p = .00). A mediated effect between these variables was also significant (B = .05, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.07], p = .01). However, although significant associations were identified between memories of threat and each of the mediating variables (self-concealment, fear of self-disclosure, anxiety, depression) only fear of self-disclosure displayed a significant association with paranoid ideation (B = .05, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.07], p = .01).

Malloy, L. C., Brubacher, S. P., & Lamb, M. E. (2011). Expected consequences of disclosure revealed in investigative interviews with suspected victims of child sexual abuse. *Applied Developmental Science, 15*, 8–19.

The current study explored the expected consequences of disclosure discussed by 204 5- to 13-year-old suspected victims of child sexual abuse during the course of investigative interviews conducted using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. Expected consequences were mentioned in nearly half of all interviews, with older children and those alleging multiple incidents more likely to do so. Most consequences were mentioned spontaneously by children and most consequences were expected to befall the children themselves. The most common consequences were *physical harm* and *feeling negative emotions* for the child and *jail/legal* consequences for the suspect. Expecting consequences for the child or another family member were associated with delaying disclosure, but expecting consequences for the suspect was not related to delay. Results provide insight into developmental and socio-motivational influences on children's disclosure of negative events and are of considerable practical interest to legal and clinical professionals who must interview, treat, and evaluate children alleging sexual abuse.

Hershkowitz, I., Lanes, O., & Lamb, M. E. (2007). Exploring the disclosure of child sexual abuse with alleged victims and their parents. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 31*(2), 111-123.

The goal of the present study was to examine how children disclosed sexual abuse by alleged perpetrators who were not family members. Thirty alleged victims of sexual abuse and their parents were interviewed. The children were interviewed using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol by six experienced youth investigators. The same principles were followed when the parents were asked to describe in detail what had happened since the abusive incidents. The statements made by the children and parents were then content analyzed. Major characteristics of the children's and parents' reported behaviors were identified by two independent raters. More than half (53%) of the children delayed disclosure for between 1 week and 2 years, fewer than half first disclosed to their parents, and over 40% did not disclose spontaneously but did so only after they were prompted; 50% of the children reported feeling afraid or ashamed of their parents' responses, and their parents indeed tended to blame the children or act angrily. The disclosure process varied depending on the children's ages, the severity and frequency of abuse, the parents' expected reactions, the suspects' identities, and the strategies they had used to foster secrecy. The children's willingness to disclose abuse to their parents promptly and spontaneously decreased when they expected negative reactions, especially when the abuse was more serious. A strong correlation between predicted and actual parental reactions suggested that the children anticipated their parents' likely reactions very well.

Gilligan, P., & Akhtar, S. (2006). Cultural barriers to the disclosure of child sexual abuse in Asian communities: Listening to what women say. *British Journal of Social Work, 36*(8), 1361-1377.

There is apparent under-reporting of child sexual abuse in Britain's Asian communities and a varied capacity amongst professionals to respond with cultural competence. Professional approaches originate in cultural contexts, which are often different from those of most British Asians. If the proportion of children and non-abusing carers from Asian communities who access relevant services is to increase, professionals need to develop better understandings of cultural imperatives which determine behaviour in those communities. Consultations with Asian women in Bradford reinforce the view that culturally competent practice and respectful dialogue are

essential to the protection of children. They also highlight a number of recurring themes. Members of Asian communities are aware of child sexual abuse, they recognize that the issue needs to be addressed by all communities and they report that many of those affected within their own communities have found it difficult to access relevant services. These consultations, like reports of similar work elsewhere, indicate that difficulties, which appear to arise from Asian women's fears about how agencies will respond, are frequently compounded by the impact of cultural imperatives arising from *izzat* (honour/respect), *haya* (modesty) and *sharam* (shame/embarrassment), which have a considerable influence on how many will behave.

Malloy, L. C., & Lyon, T. D. (2006). Caregiver support and child sexual abuse: Why does it matter?. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 15(4), 97-103.

Coohey's paper is a valuable investigation of the substantiation of mothers for failure to protect their children from child sexual abuse (CSA). Drawing on concerns regarding the possible inconsistency of decisions to substantiate, the author sought to determine the factors relied on by CPS investigators in the decision-making process. Multivariate analyses revealed the importance of maternal reactions to abuse, including whether the mother believed the child's allegations and whether she acted in a protective or supportive manner. We will put Coohey's findings in the context of other research that has documented the importance of nonoffending caregivers' reactions to sexual abuse. It is understandable that social workers consider the non-offending caregiver's reactions to the abuse as a means of assessing the child's family, because of the importance of caregiver belief and support in ensuring the child's future safety and wellbeing. However, we would emphasize that caregiver supportiveness is not a static quality that is simply subject to measurement but a dynamic quality that may be susceptible to intervention.

Crisma, M., Bascelli, E., Paci, D., & Romito, P. (2004). Adolescents who experienced sexual abuse: Fears, needs and impediments to disclosure. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 28(10), 1035-1048.

The objective was understanding the impediments that prevented sexually abused adolescents from disclosure to their family or to professionals, and analyzing the responses they received when they did disclose. In depth anonymous interviews were conducted in Italy through a toll-free telephone line with 36 young people who experienced sexual abuse in adolescence. A qualitative analysis was carried out of the adolescents' feelings, fears and needs, and of the help received, if any. The main impediments to disclose to a family member were fear of not being believed, shame, and fear of causing trouble to the family. The main impediments for not seeking services were ignorance of the existence/functioning of protective agencies, wish to keep the secret, lack of awareness of being abused, mistrust of adults and professionals, and fear of the consequences of disclosure. When they did disclose to professionals, the teens received very limited support. Adolescents need to receive proper information about the risk of being sexually abused and about the help they can receive from their social network and protective agencies. There is a crucial need for appropriate training of professionals.

Goodman-Brown, T. B., Edelstein, R. S., Goodman, G. S., Jones, D. P., & Gordon, D. S. (2003). Why children tell: A model of children's disclosure of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27(5), 525-540.

The present study investigated variables associated with delay of disclosure of child sexual abuse and tested a model of time to disclosure. Data were obtained for 218 alleged child sexual abuse victims whose cases had been referred to District Attorneys' Offices. Five variables were posited to influence the delay between an abusive event and children's disclosure of that event to a reporting adult: child's age, gender, type of abuse experienced (intrafamilial or extrafamilial), perceived responsibility for the abuse, and fear of negative consequences of disclosure. These variables were used to create a model of factors influencing childrens' disclosure of sexual abuse. Results indicated that age, type of abuse, fear of negative consequences, and perceived responsibility all contributed to predicting time to disclosure. There was significant support for the model, suggesting that children who were older, came from incestuous families, felt greater responsibility for the abuse, and feared negative consequences of disclosure took longer to

disclose. Children's cognitive appraisal of others' tolerance of disclosure of child sexual abuse, and their own perceptions of responsibility for the abuse, are crucial to the decision to disclose. When evaluating children for possible sexual abuse, developmental, cognitive, and socio-emotional factors need to be taken into consideration.

Quas, J.A., Goodman, G.S., & Jones, D.P.H. (2003). Predictors of attributions of self-blame and internalizing behavior problems in sexually abused children. *Journal of Psychology and Psychiatry, 44*(5), 723-736.

The purpose of the present study was to identify predictors of two potential sequelae of child sexual abuse, self-blame attributions and internalizing behavior problems. In the study, detailed information was collected on 218 victims of sexual abuse aged 4 to 17, involved in criminal cases, about their background, the abuse, and their mother's reaction following discovery of the abuse. Increased attributions of self-blame were predicted by the child having a close relationship with the perpetrator, experiencing severe sexual abuse (e.g., long-lasting abuse that involved penetration), perceiving the abuse as disgusting, and coping with the abuse by pretending it was not happening. Similar factors did not emerge as predictors of internalizing behavior problems. Results suggest that different child and abuse characteristics predict the two sequelae often associated with childhood sexual abuse. Thus, although self-blame attributions and behavior problems are often considered similar consequences of sexual abuse, there appears a need to distinguish the two types of outcomes following sexual victimization in childhood.

Paine, M. L., & Hansen, D. J. (2002). Factors influencing children to self-disclose sexual abuse. *Clinical Psychology Review, 22*(2), 271-295.

Self-disclosure by victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) is critical to initiate legal and therapeutic intervention. Unfortunately, research indicates that lengthy delays in disclosure and even nondisclosure are common. A comprehensive review of the clinical and research literature on CSA and an overview of related bodies of literature was conducted. Areas addressed include the context of sexual abuse as it relates to disclosure, the context and elements of children's disclosures, motivational factors inhibiting disclosure, and models of the disclosure process. Ancillary and

analogue research on secrecy and disclosure are also reviewed. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Somer, E., & Szwarberg, S. (2001). Variables in delayed disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(3), 332.-341.

In a study of 41 adult survivors (aged 16–56 yrs) of childhood sexual abuse, the level of childhood traumatization was found to have contributed to delayed disclosure of the abuse. Other delaying variables included: belief in the importance of obedience to grownups, mistrust of people, fear of social rejection, and fear of the criminal justice system. Variables such as media attention to similar cases and experiences of personal achievement were inversely related to the age at disclosure. Recommendations for policy are discussed. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2013 APA, all rights reserved)

Palmer, S. E., Brown, R. A., Rae-Grant, N. I., & Loughlin, M. J. (1999). Responding to children's disclosure of familial abuse: What survivors tell us. *Child Welfare*, 7(2), 259–282.

This study is based on the reports of 384 adults who were abused physically, sexually, and/or emotionally in childhood by family members. It describes the survivors' attempts, as children, to get help by disclosing the abuse to someone who might intervene; those who did not disclose explain their reasons. The results indicate that disclosure usually did not bring an end to the abuse, and that little action was taken to control the perpetrator, even after disclosure took place. The responses received by the children to their disclosure are linked to their levels of self-esteem and family functioning as adults.

Anderson, J., Martin, J., Mullen, P., Romans, S., & Herbison, P. (1993). Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse experiences in a community sample of women. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 32(5), 911-919.

Nearly one woman in three reported having one or more unwanted sexual experiences before age 16 years. A significant number of these experiences (70%) involved genital contact or more severe abuse, and 12% of those abused were subjected to sexual intercourse. The abusers were usually

known to the victim, being family members in 38.3% of cases and acquaintances in another 46.3%. Stranger abuse accounted for 15% of all abuse experiences. Most of the abusers were young men, disclosure of the abuse was infrequent, and only 7% of all abuse was ever officially reported. Prevalence rates showed no urban/rural differences, no cohort effect with subject age, and no age differences in disclosure rates.

Goodman, G. S., Taub, E. P., Jones, D. P., & England, P. (1992). Testifying in criminal court: Emotional effects on child sexual assault victims. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 57(5).

Child victims must cope not only with the emotional consequences of criminal acts but also with the potentially traumatizing effects of legal involvement. Dramatic increases in the reporting of child sexual abuse are bringing greater numbers of children into contact with the criminal justice system, raising fears that child victims of sex crimes will be further harmed by the courts. In the present study, the effects of criminal court testimony on child sexual assault victims were examined in a sample of 218 children. From this sample, the behavioral disturbance of a group of "testifiers" was compared to that of a matched control group of "nontestifiers" at three points following testimony: 3 months, 7 months, and after prosecution ended. At 7 months, testifiers evinced greater behavioral disturbance than nontestifiers, especially if the testifiers took the stand multiple times, were deprived of maternal support, and lacked corroboration of their claims. Once prosecution ended, adverse effects of testifying diminished. In courthouse interviews before and after testifying, the main fear expressed by children concerned having to face the defendant. Children who appeared more frightened of the defendant while testifying were less able to answer the prosecutors' questions; and later, after the cases were closed, they were more likely to say that testifying had affected them adversely. The two most pervasive predictors of children's experiences in the courtroom, however, were age and severity of abuse. Despite relevant laws, few innovative techniques were used to help the children testify. The results are discussed in relation to children's ability to cope with stressful situations, the interaction of the legal system with the child/family system, and debates about the need to protect child victims who testify in criminal court.

Lawson, L., & Chaffin, M. (1992). False Negatives in sexual abuse disclosure interviews: incidence and influence of caretaker's belief in abuse in cases of accidental abuse discovery by diagnosis of STD. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7(4), 532-542.

Verbal disclosure of abuse in a specialized interview was studied in a sample of 28 children, ages 3 to menarche, who presented with purely physical complaints later diagnosed as a sexually transmitted disease, in the absence of any known prior disclosure or suspicion of sexual abuse. Only 43% gave any verbal confirmation of sexual contact. Fifty-seven percent were “false negatives.” Disclosure was strongly associated with the attitude taken by the child's caretaker toward the possibility of abuse. Children whose caretakers accepted the possibility that their child might have been sexually abused disclosed at a rate almost 3.5 times as great as those whose caretakers denied any possibility of abuse (63% vs. 17%). The results suggest that caretaker attitude and support is a critical variable in the child's disclosure process and a valuable target for intervention and prevention efforts. In addition, it was found that, aside from their STD, many of these abused children presented as free from any specifically suspicious abuse symptoms, suggesting that reliance on single interviews and identification of “red flags” cannot be expected to identify many hidden victims.