Children’s Disclosure of Sexual Abuse: A Systematic Review of Barriers and Facilitators

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Outline

- Background and Introduction
- Purpose
- Methodology and Design
- Results
- Conclusions
- Questions
Background and Introduction

- 1 in 4 young adults experience some form of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) during childhood
- Serious negative consequences are associated with CSA
- We know delay in disclosure is common
- UK evidence indicates 1 in 3 children did not disclose their abuse (Reford et al 2011)
- Disclosure is complex and multi-faceted
Background and Introduction

- Disclosure allows access to support
- Disclosure enables protection
- Early access to support and intervention can limit the negative consequences associated with CSA
- Current evidence is growing
  But, factors are inconsistently reported
Purpose

- To evaluate and synthesise evidence that addressed factors affecting a child’s decision to disclose an experience of sexual abuse.
  - What factors affect a child’s decision to disclose an experience of sexual assault?
Design and Methodology

- Evidence from a child’s perspective
- Evidence from children <18
- Qualitative Research

- **Search Strategy:** Electronic search using a broad approach and free text and hand searching of key journals
- Reviewed in accordance with inclusion exclusion criteria.

- **Quality Appraisal** utilising Down and Walsh’s (2006) tool
Figure 1. The process and results of the systematic search and study selection

- Records identified through database searching (N=1,257)
- Duplicates removed (n=435)
- Title or abstracts screened (n=833)
  - Excluded by title or abstract (n=776)
  - Hand search of references (n=32)
    - Articles added to synthesis (n=0)
    - Full text articles assessed for eligibility (n=57)
      - Full text articles excluded (n=50)
      - Articles included in synthesis (n=7)
## Details of included studies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporting possible sexual abuse: A qualitative study on children’s perspectives and the context of disclosure”</td>
<td>20 families containing 22 children (15 girls, 7 boys). Age range 3-16 Recruited via adverts within mental health services.</td>
<td>How caregiver and child perceive the process of disclosure.</td>
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<td>Disclosure of sexual abuse by children and adolescents</td>
<td>38 children (6 males and 32 girls) Ages from 7 to 18</td>
<td>What are the rules those sexually abused report using to disclose about this crime? What are the rules those sexually abused report using to protect their privacy boundaries?</td>
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<td>Schaeffer, Leventhal &amp; Asnes (2011) Children’s Disclosures of Sexual Abuse: Learning from Direct Inquiry</td>
<td>191 child interviews from children attending child sexual abuse clinic due to suspicion of child sexual abuse. Age range 3-18</td>
<td>1) To add direct inquiry about the process of a child’s disclosure to a forensic interview protocol; (2) Determine if children will, in fact, discuss the process that led them to tell about sexual abuse; and (3) Describe the factors that children identify as either having led them to tell about sexual abuse or caused them to delay a disclosure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse by Adolescents: A Qualitative In-Depth Study</td>
<td>26 adolescents (23 girls, 3 boys) Age 15-18 Recruited via adverts and flyers on websites, in schools and services providing support and information about sexual abuse</td>
<td>To study the process of disclosure by examining adolescents from the general population who had experienced child sexual abuse (CSA).</td>
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<td>McElvaney, Greene &amp; Hogan (2013) To Tell or Not to Tell? Factors Influencing Young People’s Informal Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>22 young people and 14 parents. 16 girls and 6 boys Age range 7-18 Recruited following formal assessment for CSA with some accessing therapy</td>
<td>To understand the factors influencing informal disclosure of child sexual abuse experiences, taking account of dynamics operating prior to, during, and following disclosure.</td>
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<td>Foster &amp; Hagedorn (2014) Through the Eyes of the Wounded: A Narrative Analysis of Children’s Sexual Abuse Experiences and Recovery Process</td>
<td>21 written trauma narratives of children’s experiences of CSA 18 girls and 3 boys Age range: 6-17 Narratives accessed via support services for children who experienced CSA</td>
<td>This study aimed to address the gap in the literature about children disclosing sexual abuse and the impact of this event on their lives.</td>
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- **Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt & Tjersland (2005)**
- **Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005)**
- **Petronio, Reeder, Hecht & Ros-Medoza (2009)**
- **Schaeffer, Leventhal & Asnes (2011)**
- **Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schynder & Landolt (2012).**
- **McElvaney, Greene & Hogan (2013)**
- **Foster & Hagedorn (2014)**
Method of Synthesis:

- **Meta-Ethnography**
  - Effective and well established
  - Ability to take a set of single accounts and synthesise them
  - Maintains honesty and integrity to the original data

Seven Stages of Meta-Ethnography proposed by Noblitt & Hare (1988)

1. **Getting Started**
   - Is qualitative synthesis valid?
   - Do we need a synthesis on this topic?

2. **Deciding What is Relevant**
   - Systematic search?
   - Quality appraisal?
   - Search strategy?

3. **Reading the Studies**
   - What data do I extract and how?

4. **How are the Studies Related?**
   - How do I decipher a concept from description?

5. **Translating the Studies**
   - How do I develop conceptual categories?

6. **Sythesising the Translations**
   - How do I challenge my interpretations?

7. **Expressing the Synthesis**
   - How do I maximise the impact of the findings?

(Figure adapted from Toye et al, 2014, p. 8)
The Process of Analysis:

(Adapted from Toye et al, 2014, pg. 8)
Results:

- Six new super-ordinate themes were developed through the process of meta-ethnography and synthesis of the seven studies
- 1) Fear of what will happen
- 2) Others’ reactions: fear of disbelief
- 3) Emotions and impact of the abuse
- 4) An opportunity to tell
- 5) Concern for self and others
- 6) Feelings towards the abuser.
Fear of what will happen (7/7)

“It was one of the scariest things I’ve ever . . . thought of ever saying”

(McElvaney et al, 2013, pg. 9)

“This is bad but it’s better knowing what’s happening than (not) knowing what’s going to happen.”

(McElvaney et al, 2013, pg. 9)

“I love my oldest sister very much... When I look at both my sister and my Mom, I feel so much like telling them about my cousin, but they both cherish him... Would I get their support...? Would my sister love me as she does today knowing that he did it to me [raped me] more than once on her own bed? [...] I am more than sure that I will lose her or my Mom if I tell them about my abuse.”

(Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, pg. 1275)
G: “But they believed me right away, and he admitted it, so that really helped me a lot. I can’t even imagine what it would have been like if he had lied and said he didn’t do anything.”

I: “Were you surprised that your friend and mom believed you?”

G: “No I wasn’t surprised. I was counting on that. If I had thought that they wouldn’t believe me, then I wouldn’t have said anything.”

I: “You wouldn’t have said anything then?”

G: “No it would have made everything worse really. You experience a lot of shit, then you tell about it, and they don’t believe you, and think of you as a liar.”

(Jensen et al, 2005, pg. 1406)
Emotions and Impact of Abuse (6/7)

I: “Why didn’t you tell her sooner?”

P21: “I just felt so ashamed.”

(Schönbucher et al, 2012, pg. 17)

“...maybe I am bad for I brought it all onto myself”

(Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, pg. 1276)

“I think that as I got older I started to think... I couldn’t think of any reason why would he do that to me like I musta done something or I must just be a certain type of person.”

(McElvaney et al, 2013, pg. 9)
An opportunity to tell (5/7)

“I wanted to tell my mom when my sister [the alleged perpetrator] was not home, then I don’t get a chance because my mom’s always sleeping now and I’m always in school.”

(Shaeffer et al, 2011, pg. 349)

"It was at my house when I told her [mom]. Nobody else was around but just me and her."

(Petroni et al, 1996, pg. 190)

“Yes that’s how they found out. We were watching a program. There was a girl that was talking (about sexual abuse), and I felt really weird. I had to go to the bathroom, and I just couldn’t sit still. I sat in my own thoughts and had tears in my eyes and stuff like that. And then Mom saw that something was wrong; she asked me if I had done something wrong or if she had done anything. She kept asking and then she got to Dad, and then I started crying and then she understood. There has to be a connection.”

(Jensen et al, 2005, pg. 1408)
Concern for Self and Others (5/7)

“Although I searched for ways to stop the abuse, I feared of causing harm to members of my family, specially my sister. My mom has suffered enough in her life. I will never give her an additional burden... No, I will never tell her what her son is doing to me.”

(Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, pg. 1276)

“I thought like he could do that to me and I can’t tell anybody then . . . he can do it to them and they won’t tell . . . and if I hadn’t told and a few years later (his children) turned around and well he done [sic] that to me a year after what he done that to you I woulda never forgiven meself [sic].”

(McElvaney et al, 2013, pg. 11)

I: “Do you know why you didn’t tell anybody?”
P26: “I was scared of him. He said that he would kill me if I told anyone.”

(Schönbucher et al, 2012, pg. 17)
Feelings towards the Abuser (5/7)

“Why do you call it abuse? This is my father, not a criminal, and he loves me. I knew he was doing wrong things to me, but he is my father...”

(Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, pg. 1274)

“And then there was one time he had a talk with me. He said: ‘You must never tell anyone, it’s our secret, and if anyone finds out, I have to go to jail, and that’s the worst thing that could happen to anyone and then I’ll get beaten up in jail.’ He said all this stuff. And then it wasn’t very tempting to tell. After that it took even longer before I could tell.”

(Jensen et al, 2005, pg. 1405-1406)
Conclusions

“I am terrified”
The role of fear but how do we manage it?

“Will you believe me?”
Sensitivity to reactions and Interpretations

“I am bad”
Emotions, responsibility, beliefs and how to manage these?
Conclusions

‘When it feels safe to tell’
Consequence or cause of non disclosures?

‘Will people get hurt?’

‘But he is not a criminal’
Questions?