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Thomas D. Lyon & Elizabeth C. Ahern
University of Southern California

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Disclosure of child sexual abuse

Whether children are reluctant to disclose abuse is an important issue for child interviewers. If children are reluctant, then abused children may deny and recant abuse. If children are forthcoming, then denials and recantations prove that an abuse allegation is false. If children are reluctant, then interviewers must look for means of reassuring children or otherwise overcoming their resistance. If children are forthcoming, then interviewers should focus on eliminating questions that might suggest abuse to a nonabused child. The truth lies somewhat in the middle. There is good evidence for reluctance, but there is also good evidence that most children who have previously disclosed abuse need not be asked leading questions in order to elicit their disclosure.

While there is ongoing debate among researchers about these issues, this chapter will provide a synopsis of some generally accepted facts about the disclosure of child sexual abuse. We will briefly review a couple of literatures that have been extensively discussed by reviewers: studies of children substantiated as sexually abused and surveys of adults asking whether they were ever abused as children. The literature clearly supports the proposition that child sexual abuse victims often delay disclosure or fail altogether to disclose abuse, and that delays and non-disclosure are most common among children abused by a familiar person, especially a family member living in the child's household. The implications of the research are that inconsistencies and recantations in children's reports may be due to reluctance rather than a false allegation. We will then describe a literature that has been overlooked in discussions of abuse disclosure: research asking child sex offenders to describe their modus operandi. The literature further helps professionals to understand the dynamics underlying children's failure to disclose abuse, because offenders describe methods for soliciting the acquiescence of children over time without physical violence and without fear of detection.

The literature on disclosure also has value in that it suggests questions that interviewers can ask children disclosing abuse, questions that will reveal the processes by which offenders molested children, and help explain why children delay disclosing and why they might eventually recant. In the last section of this chapter we will advise child interviewers on how this information may be elicited without the use of direct or leading questions.

Child studies and what they tell us about disclosure

Many practitioners are familiar with Summit's paper on child sexual abuse accommodation (1983), which argues that sexually abused children's disclosures are delayed and inconsistent because of the dynamics of sexual abuse. It is important to be equally aware of a literature that criticizes accommodation and argues that accommodation is based on anecdote and not rigorous scientific evidence (Bradley & Wood, 1996; Gersten v. Senkowski, 2004; Kovera & Borgida, 1997; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Mason, 1995). Moreover, practitioners should be alert to concerns that some of the research appearing to find high rates of reluctance and recantation among sexually abused children (Gonzalez, Waterman, Kelly, McCord, and

Oliveri, 1993; Sorenson & Snow, 1991) was based on dubious claims of abuse (London et al., 2005).

In many ways, however, the disagreement is more apparent than real. London and colleagues reviewed the literature on children's disclosure of abuse and were critical of some components of accommodation, but nevertheless concluded that delays in disclosure are common among victims substantiated as abused (London, Bruck, Ceci & Shuman, 2005). Furthermore, their most recent review of the literature acknowledged that "a number of studies indicate that closer relationships are associated with longer delays and lower disclosure rates" (London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008, p. 37). Specifically "parentally abused children with low levels of family support" will exhibit lower disclosure rates and higher recantation rates than other abuse victims (London et al., 2008, p. 38; see Elliott & Briere, 1995; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992;; Lippert, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2009; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007). The finding that abused children commonly delay disclosing abuse (if they disclose at all), and that this delay is attributable to the influence of adults close to the child, is consistent with other reviews of the literature on abuse disclosure (Lyon, 2002, 2007; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

A major reason for the movement toward consensus is the publication of several studies with high rates of non-disclosure among children suspected of being abused that found clear relations among delays, non-disclosure and the child perpetrator relationship (Hershkowitz, 2006; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Pipe et al., 2007). Michael Lamb and his colleagues, who have conducted much of the recent research, emphasized the "motivational factors that make many children - more than a third of suspected victims and unknown numbers of children about whom no suspicions have been raised - reluctant to disclose abuse" (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008, p. 17). With respect to recantation, a study examining over 250 substantiated cases of sexual abuse in dependency court found that about a fourth of the children recanted at some point, and that recantations were more likely if the child was abused by a member of his or her household, if the non-perpetrator parent expressed disbelief or was otherwise unsupportive of the allegation, and if the child was under ten years of age (Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007). If recantations are reasons to believe that the allegations were false, then the recantation rate should be lower among cases with other evidence of abuse. The authors tested for this possibility, and did not find any evidence to support it. Although parental disbelief and the other factors influencing the rate of recantation vary widely across samples (London et al., 2008), the results clearly demonstrate that recantation appears to follow the same dynamic as disclosure, and that one should not assume that a recanting child who previously made a credible disclosure of abuse was not in fact abused.

Adult surveys and what they tell us about disclosure

There is also a consensus among researchers reviewing questioning representative group of adults about their childhood sexual experiences that "failure to disclose is common among sexually abused children" (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; see Lyon, 2002, 2009; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Delayed disclosures are frequent, and a large

percentage of adults across studies report never having told anyone about their abuse prior to the survey (Anderson, et al., 1993; Finkelhor, et al., 1990; Fleming, 1997; Laumann, et al., 1994; Smith, et al., 2000; Wyatt, et al., 1999). For example, Laumann and colleagues (1994) surveyed over 3,400 adults in the United States, and found that of those who reported contact sexual abuse before puberty, 74% of women and 78% of men did not tell anyone during their childhood. Because of the consistent findings, even critics of child sexual abuse accommodation have concluded that “the overall pattern is that many children simply do not willingly tell” (London et al., 2008).

Surveys also provide some insight into the factors that influence whether disclosure occurs. Four of the five representative surveys that tested for the effects of relationships on disclosure found that the relationship mattered, with closer relationships leading to lower rates of reported disclosure (Anderson et al., 1993; Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990; but see Fleming, 1997). Moreover, a study examining the same sample as Smith et al. (2000) found that reporting to the police was more likely when the perpetrator was a stranger (Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Best, 1999). Three of these studies utilized statistical methods that enabled the researchers to control for case characteristics that might obscure the association between relationship and disclosure (Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990).

Two of the nationally representative surveys asked respondents reporting abuse what factors deterred disclosure. The most common reasons were embarrassment and shame (25% in Anderson et al., 1993; 46% in Fleming, 1997), expectations that the disclosure recipient would blame them (29% in Anderson et al., 1993; 18% in Fleming, 1997) or that they would not be believed or not helped (23% in Anderson et al., 1993; 23% in Fleming, 1997). Respondents in Anderson and colleagues’ survey (1993) also mentioned concern for others: 24% stated that they didn’t want to upset anyone, and 14% wanted to protect the abuser. In contrast, only 11% mentioned their fear of the abuser. Finally, 18% stated that they were not bothered by the abuse.

Representative surveys have a number of advantages. First, they are able to identify former victims who have never previously disclosed their abuse unlike clinical samples, which enlist participants who already self-identified as former victims. Second, surveys are unlikely to include a large number of false allegations of abuse. Those who are skeptical of sexual abuse allegations have argued that parents and authorities will pressure children to disclose abuse (Ceci & Bruck, 2006). However, fewer than 10% of respondents who acknowledge abuse in population surveys state that their disclosure was reported to authorities (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Russell, 1983; Smith, et al., 2000). Therefore, respondent reports are unlikely to have been the product of having been suggestively questioned as children by biased adults (either officials or parents). Skeptics of sexual abuse allegations also argue that therapists can create false allegations (Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). Yet only a very small percentage (2%) of women in population surveys who acknowledge abuse report having remembered abuse with the help of a therapist (Wilsnack, Wonderlich, Kristjanson, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Wilsnack, 2002).

Although surveys identify large numbers of former abuse victims, there is good reason to believe that even surveys underestimate the prevalence of abuse and exaggerate the likelihood that abuse is reported to the authorities. The problem is simple: former abuse victims may be reluctant to disclose abuse, even when questioned years after the abuse and guaranteed anonymity by surveyors.

There are several lines of evidence that former victims remain reluctant to disclose abuse when questioned by surveyors, a problem called “survey reluctance” (Lyon, 2009). First, substantiated abuse is often subsequently denied by survey respondents. Reviewing the research on retrospective reports of childhood maltreatment, Hardt and Rutter (2004) concluded that “the universal finding [is] that, even with well-documented serious abuse or neglect, about a third of individuals do not report its occurrence when specifically asked about it in adult life” (p. 240). Second, more persistent questioning elicits more reports of abuse. In a nationally representative survey of American women, Wilsnack et al. (2002) found that the percentage of respondents reporting abuse doubled (from 15% to 31%) when they asked a greater number of specific questions about sexually abusive experiences. Several reviewers have noted that the most important determinant of prevalence rates in retrospective surveys appear to be the number of questions asked (Finkelhor, 1994; Hardt & Rutter, 2004), an observation formally confirmed in a meta-analysis by Bolen and Scannapieco (1999). Third, respondents surveyed repeatedly are often inconsistent in acknowledging that abuse occurred. Fergusson and colleagues questioned a nationally representative group of adults about sexual abuse when they were 18 and again when they were 21 (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000). Among the respondents who reported sexual abuse at 21, about half (45%) had failed to report abuse at 18 (37/83), and among the respondents who reported sexual abuse at 18 years of age, more than half (54%) failed to report abuse at 21 (54/100). In other words, over half of the respondents who reported abuse at some point did so in only one of the two interviews. Other studies have found similar inconsistencies in reporting across multiple interviews (Fry et al., 1996; McGee et al., 1995). The inconsistencies cannot be attributable to respondents’ uncertainties about whether the reported behaviors were in fact sexual abuse, as some have claimed (London et al., 2005), because respondents were, if anything, less consistent in their reports of more serious abuse (Fergusson et al., 2000; see also Fry et al., 1996; p. 727 [inconsistencies “even more striking when the reports of severe (contact) abuse are examined”]).

Why does it matter if many survey respondents fail to disclose childhood sexual abuse? Critics of sexual abuse accommodation acknowledge that surveys demonstrate that substantial numbers of abuse victims never disclose their abuse, but claim that non-disclosure says nothing about whether victims would have disclosed had they been asked (London, et al., 2008). Survey reluctance suggests that victims will deny abuse, even when directly asked, and even if guaranteed anonymity and questioned long after the abuse occurred.

Furthermore, survey reluctance will lead surveys to exaggerate the percentage of abuse that is disclosed to others (Lyon, 2009). This is a difficult point, and takes some explaining. The logic is that victims who never disclose as children are more likely to

remain silent about their abuse in adulthood. This will mean that former victims who do disclose when surveyed will disproportionately be those who previously disclosed.

The effects of survey reluctance explain the common finding that younger respondents in surveys report *lower* rates of sexual abuse and *higher* rates of prior disclosure (Lyon, 2009). For example, Fergusson and colleagues' (1996) survey of 18 year olds found a lower prevalence rate than surveys of older adults, and an unusually high rate of prior disclosure among those who acknowledged abuse (87%). The problem is that if many victims who had never told maintained their silence when questioned by the surveyor, the survey would both underestimate the prevalence of abuse and overestimate the likelihood that victims disclosed.¹

In sum, the adult surveys tell us a great deal about disclosure of abuse. Most abuse victims who reveal abuse to surveyors never told anyone about their abuse while they were a child, and many had not revealed the abuse to anyone before the survey. Many abuse victims will fail to report abuse to surveyors, or will report abuse inconsistently, evincing the difficulties victims have in disclosing abuse, even a long time after the abuse occurred. The likelihood of disclosure is affected by the closeness of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Victims' failure to disclose is sometimes motivated by fear of the perpetrator, but often includes self-blame or fears of being blamed for the abuse by others.

The modus operandi of child sex offenders and what it tells us about victims' secrecy

Across the adult and child literatures, a consistent factor is the importance of the relationships among the child, the alleged perpetrator, and other important people in the child's life, particularly the child's parents. These relationships hint at why a child would keep sexual abuse a secret, even extending into adulthood. When the child is abused by a parent or close relative, the child is likely to refrain from disclosing as much from love as from fear; love for the perpetrator and for the other parent. Although, disclosure may end the abuse, it will likely disrupt the child's relationships with some of the most important people in the child's life. However, most sexual abuse is not perpetrated by parents, and delays in disclosure are not limited to parental abuse. How should we think about the dynamics of disclosure when the abuser is not related to the child?

One means of better understanding the dynamics of disclosure is to move from the victims' to the child sex offenders' perspective. Research asking child sex offenders to describe their modus operandi dates back at least to the 1960s (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christensen, 1964), and a review published in 2009 surveyed the results of 19 studies (Leclerc, Proulx, & Beauregard, 2009). The research was largely motivated by

¹ An alternative explanation for the high rates of reported prior disclosure among young respondents acknowledging abuse is that younger respondents are less likely to have forgotten that they disclosed abuse (London et al., 2008). But if the issue is forgetting, young adults should report as much abuse as older adults and they should be highly consistent in reporting whether they were abused over time. The fact that they endorse less abuse and endorse abuse inconsistently is evidence that they are reluctant to disclose.

hopes that the findings could improve prevention and treatment efforts, and it is usually reviewed with that perspective in mind (Salter, 2003). Here, we review the literature on modus operandi as a means of understanding the reasons why victims delay disclosure, fail to disclose abuse, or appear inconsistent in their disclosures. The research provides insight into the means by which sex offenders choose their prospective victims, obtain access to children, befriend children, desensitize children to sexual touch, progress to more serious sexual activities with children, and convince children to keep the abuse a secret.

Two common themes stand out. First, sex offenders emphasize the extent to which they seduce their victims over time rather than commit isolated assaults. Although it is probable that they understate the level of coercion and sometimes violence in their acts of molestation, a point discussed at greater length below, most child molestation typically includes attempts to obtain the assent and cooperation of victims. Of course, with this level of planning and preparation, offenders are unlikely to abuse any victim on only one occasion; at least two-thirds maintain the same victim over time (Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Smallborne & Wortley, 2001).

Second, intrafamilial and extrafamilial sex offenders are remarkably similar. Although it was once believed that incest perpetrators are quite different than extrafamilial offenders (Becker, 1994), researchers have found that sex offenders often victimize children both within and outside their families (Abel et al., 1988), and the research on modus operandi finds more similarities than differences in their approach. Of course, because of their privileges and status with respect to children to whom they are related or who are under their care, intrafamilial sex offenders will enjoy access that extrafamilial sex offenders lack. Extrafamilial sex offenders must overcome children's hesitancy to trust strangers (much of it taught to them by family members) and often seek to become "like family."

Only a minority of sex offenses against children are perpetrated by strangers. In Smallborne and Wortley's (2001) survey of 182 child sex offenders, "only 6.5 percent of offenders had their first sexual contact with a stranger" (p. 4). Rather, child sex offenders either seek out or take advantage of opportunities to molest children with whom they are familiar. In an analysis of the offense patterns of different types of sex offenders, Beauregard and colleagues (Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, & Allaire, 2007) described two types of interest: the "sophisticated rape track" who work with or are involved with children, and the "family infiltrator." Those in the sophisticated rape track "because of their position and status, may appear nonthreatening to their victims. They benefit from a context that affords them the opportunity to be in the presence of potential victims and, therefore, to establish intimate relationships with some of them through manipulative strategies (e.g., seduction, tricks, games). Moreover, they can easily create situations that allow them to be alone with potential victims (e.g., staying after school, camping trips, movies) not only to gain the victim's trust but also to provide a favorable context for sexual activity" (p. 1080). Sullivan and Beech (2004) interviewed 41 perpetrators receiving treatment who molested children with whom they worked and found that 15% chose their profession *exclusively* to provide them access to victims;

another 42% acknowledged that this partially motivated their job choice. The family infiltrators “become acquainted with a family and offer different types of services, especially babysitting. Offenders specifically target women living alone with children...” (p. 1080-1081). In both types of cases the child’s parents are likely to view the sex offender favorably, because of the offender’s interest in the parents’ child. Indeed, in the family infiltrator scenario, the offender may appeal to the parent both as a surrogate father and as a friend or intimate partner.

Many sex offenders will acknowledge that they choose victims on the basis of their apparent vulnerability. Interviewing a small sample of 20 child sex offenders, Conte and colleagues (1989), found that offenders “claimed a special ability to identify vulnerable children. Vulnerability was defined both in terms of children’s status (e.g., living in a divorced home or being young) and in terms of emotional or psychological state (e.g., a needy child, a depressed or unhappy child)” (p. 299). 49% of the sex offenders interviewed by Elliott and colleagues (1995) stated that they targeted children who lacked self-confidence or self-esteem. Beauregard and colleagues (2007) noted that child sex offenders often targeted “a child with family problems, without supervision, always on the street and in need of help” (p. 455).

The first step for the sex offender is to befriend the child, typically before any kind of physical contact is attempted. Leclerc and colleagues’ review (2009) noted that child sex offenders adopt strategies “that are similar to prosocial behaviors which consist of demonstrating love, attention and appreciation” (p. 8). Both intrafamilial and extrafamilial sex offenders describe spending time with the child (Christiansen and Blake, 1990; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001) and giving the child gifts (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Kaufman et al., 1998), sometimes introducing children to alcohol and pornography (Kaufman et al., 1998). (Although the research sometimes finds differences in the rate with which intra- and extrafamilial offenders endorse particular techniques, there is little consistency across studies. For example, Budin and Johnson (1989) found that extrafamilial offenders were more likely than incest offenders to bribe children with toys, whereas Kaufman and colleagues (1998) found that incest offenders were more likely to endorse buying the child gifts.) The first sexual contact often does not occur for a substantial period of time, particularly long given the speed with which children, particularly younger children, can form attachments to adults. In Smallbone and Wortley’s (2001) study, 76% of the intrafamilial offenders, 28% of the extrafamilial offenders, and 39% of the mixed-type offenders knew the child for more than one year before initiating abuse.

When the sexual abuser is the child’s parent, the extra attention paid to the child not only has the effect of making the child feel special, but isolates the child and the offending parent from the other family members. Christiansen and Blake (1990) found that “[p]otential victims become alienated from the mothers because these daughters are placed by their fathers in their mothers’ traditional role of confidante, intimate friend, and sex partner. Alienation from siblings occurs because of the privileges and special favors potential victims receive” (p. 90).

The second step is to desensitize the child to sexual touch through progressively more invasive and sexual touch and talk. Kaufman and colleagues (1998) found this to be the most often endorsed means of obtaining the child's compliance by both intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sex offenders (see also Lang & Frenzel, 1988). This approach has several purposes. The offender can test the child's willingness to consent (Christiansen & Blake, 1990) and the likelihood that the child will disclose (Kaufman et al., 1988). If the child discloses at an early stage of the process, the offender can claim that the touch was merely affectionate, accidental, or otherwise non-sexual (Lang & Frenzel, 1988). As the abuse progresses, the offender can assure the child of the harmlessness and morality of the actions (Christiansen & Blake, 1990).

Third, the offender initiates overtly sexual acts. Offenders endorse a mixture of bribes and threats as a means of ensuring the victim's compliance, and the strategies are for the most part similar between intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders (Kaufman et al., 1998; Lang & Frenzel, 1988). Kaufman and colleagues found that giving gifts was the most common form of bribery, and that the most common threat, particularly among intrafamilial offenders, was to prey on the child's helplessness by threatening to "tell on them about having sex with [the offender] or by making them feel as if there was nothing they could do to stop it" (p. 355). Researchers have speculated that the efficacy of such a threat is founded on the desensitization process: "victims' repeated acquiescence early in the grooming process (e.g., to nonsexual touch) may lead victims to believe that they have granted permission for more intrusive sexual contact" (Kaufman et al., 1998, p. 356; see also Conte et al., 1989).

If bribes or threats fail, many offenders are willing to resort to physical coercion. In Lang and Frenzel's (1988) sample, two-thirds of the sex offenders "frightened the children in some way," and physical force was used in about the same proportion as bribery (p. 311). Most of the offenders in Elliott et al. (1995) claimed that if the child resisted, they would stop and try to initiate contact later (61%), but a substantial minority (39%) stated that they would then resort to threats or actual violence in order to complete the act. In Christiansen and Blake's (1990) sample of fathers who abused their daughters, less than one-fourth acknowledged using threats or physical punishment. As we'll discuss below, these percentages may be understated by offenders.

To some extent, however, the power and status differences between adult offenders and the children they victimize make overt use of force unnecessary. Kaufman and colleagues (1988) noted that in comparing adolescent to adult offenders, they found that adult offenders endorsed fewer strategies overall, and in particular were less likely to have threatened the child with a weapon. They pointed out that adults' "greater physical sizes, statuses afforded by their age (i.e., "When adults tell you to do something, you listen"), and greater perceived credibility may reduce the need for explicit threats to gain victim compliance in abusive sexual activity" (p. 356).

We have emphasized the extent to which non-physically forceful means of molesting children are available both to intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sex offenders. It is important to note, however, that although child sex offenders who choose

strangers as victims are less likely to resort to these strategies, they nevertheless do so to some extent. Beauregard and colleagues (2007) described the “hunting process” of 69 serial sex offenders who offended against strangers, and found that “[t]hree methods are used by sexual offenders specifically against children: seduction/persuasion (13%), money/gift (16%), and games (9%). These methods help offenders make contact with the victims slowly and to gradually estimate their chance of succeeding in getting the victim involved in sexual activities” (p. 456).

Once the acts are overtly sexual, the offender must confront the possibility that the child will disclose the abuse. The extent to which offenders reported asking or warning victims not to tell varies across the studies, but the types of positive and negative inducements are similar. Offenders often refer to serious consequences from disclosure. 61% of the offenders in Smallbone and Wortley (2001) threatened that they would go to jail or get in trouble. 43% of the incest offenders in Lang & Frenzel (1988) threatened that the family would split up. 24% of the offenders in Elliott et al. (1995) used anger and the threat of physical force.

However, offenders often emphasize the use of positive inducements, or the ways in which disclosure will deprive children of the benefits of the abusive relationship. Kaufman and colleagues (1998) reported that offenders most often endorsed strategies involving giving or withdrawing benefits, in which offenders would give children special rewards or privileges, tell children that they would not longer love them or spend time with them if they disclosed, or tell children that their parents would not longer love them. Similarly, Smallbone & Wortley (2001) found that offenders endorsed giving children special rewards or privileges (21%) and relied on children’s fear that they would lose the offenders’ affection (36%). In Elliott et al. (1995), 20% of the offenders threatened loss of love or stated that the child was to blame. Lang and Frenzel (1989) found that these sorts of threats were more common among incest offenders than among extrafamilial offenders, in particular expressing love for the child, giving the child special favors, and avoiding punishing the child, perhaps because the threats implied the use of parental authority and control.

One problem with interviewing offenders is that they may misrepresent or misremember their behavior, particularly when it is inconsistent with how they prefer to view the abusive relationship. Sex offenders appear particularly likely to understate their use of threats in order to induce compliance and in order to convince the child not to disclose the abuse. The percentage of offenders who report ever specifically instructing the child not to tell varies widely across the studies, and in many studies a majority of the offenders will deny uttering any threats to induce silence (Budin & Johnson, 1989 (25% acknowledged threats not to disclose); Elliott et al., 1995 (33% acknowledged telling child not to tell); Lang & Frenzel, 1988 (40% of extrafamilial offenders acknowledged telling child not to tell, though 85% of incest offenders did so). These percentages inevitably increase if one consults other sources, either the sex offenders’ therapists, or the victims themselves. Kaufman and colleagues (1988) compared what child sex offenders admitted in their interviews to what their therapists recalled from the offenders’ records (and prior admissions), and found that the sex offenders consistently

underreported their use of threats both to induce compliance and to induce secrecy. They found that the most underreporting involved threats to induce secrecy. Christiansen and Blake (1990) noted that “less than one-fourth of the perpetrators reported using threats or actual physical punishment [to induce compliance], yet almost half (45%) of the [incest] victims said that perpetrators did” (p. 96).

In sum, although child sex offenders will clearly exaggerate the extent to which they seduced rather than forcibly assaulted their victims, it is clear that most child molestation is a process whereby the offender elicits the compliance and often the cooperation of the child victim. This process helps to explain why the child does not cry out at the first opportunity, and both feels responsible for the abuse and fears being blamed should he or she disclose. In intrafamilial cases, the offender naturally takes advantage of family loyalties; in extrafamilial cases, the offender takes steps to be “like family.”

Implications of the research for child interviewers

Professionals who work with sexual abuse victims will agree that abused children are often reluctant to disclose abuse. At the same time, they will acknowledge that one rarely knows whether child sexual abuse has occurred *unless* there is a disclosure made by the victim. Professionals thus believe that children are reluctant to disclose at the same time that most victims with whom they work are willing to disclose. This reflects the fact that professionals never speak to the vast majority of sexual abuse victims. As noted above, adult surveys consistently find that less than 10% of the child sexual abuse acknowledged by survey respondents was ever reported to the authorities. Victims known to the system are not representative of sexual abuse victims in general, because most victims are not recognized as such.

This is a very important fact: child victims interviewed about abuse are not representative of victims in general. This fact has two related implications for good practice. First, professionals must be careful before making assumptions about victims in general based on victims who disclose abuse. For example, some researchers have argued that abused children will freely disclose abuse when questioned (Ceci, Kulkofsky, Klemfuss, Sweeney, & Bruck, 2007). They base their argument on studies examining known cases of child sexual abuse seen by clinicians, social services, and law enforcement. The problem is that abuse is usually suspected because a child discloses. Hence, non-disclosers will never be questioned about abuse. Moreover, in order to determine that abuse is true, professionals weed out cases in which the child fails to disclose or the disclosure is unconvincing. Hence, known cases will inevitably be overwhelmingly cases in which disclosure occurred. These problems, which have been called “suspicion bias” (abuse is usually suspected because of disclosure) and “substantiation bias” (abuse is usually substantiated because of disclosure) (Lyon, 2007), have now been acknowledged by researchers who question whether abused children are reluctant to disclose (London et al., 2008). The take home point is that one cannot assume that denial of abuse, inconsistencies in an abuse report, or a recantation is

compelling evidence that abuse is false. Substantiated cases contain few denials or recantations because denials or recantations reduce the likelihood of substantiation.

The second implication of the fact that victims interviewed are not representative of victims in general is the converse of the first. We cannot make assumptions about known victims based on victims in general. Many clinicians once assumed (and some may still assume) that children suspected of being abused will deny abuse and that it is critical to use all necessary tools in order to extract disclosures. They fail to realize that when suspicions are based on a prior disclosure, children have evinced a willingness to disclose, and are likely to disclose again. Disclosure rates are very high among children who have previously disclosed (London et al., 2008).

If children questioned about abuse have disclosed previously, it should not be necessary to resort to suggestive techniques in order to elicit a disclosure. Researchers have uncovered a number of useful strategies for questioning children about abuse that increase informativeness without decreasing accuracy. Interview instructions teach children interviewees the virtues of admitting ignorance, asking for clarification, and correcting the interviewer (See Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, this volume). Narrative practice, in which children narrate a non-abusive event before being asked about abuse, has been found to increase the productivity of children's abuse reports (Sternberg, et al., 1997), without any evidence that accuracy is compromised (Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004).

When interviewers use the NICHD investigative interview protocol, which utilizes both interview instructions and narrative practice, most disclosures are elicited with either "tell me why you are here," or through questions that referred to a prior disclosure without suggesting abuse (e.g., "I heard you talked to a policeman. Tell me what you talked about." (Sternberg et al., 2001). Of course, questions of this sort rely on the fact that most children questioned about suspicions of abuse have made some sort of previous disclosure. Additional details are more productively elicited through open-ended questions such as "tell me more about [action mentioned by the child]" and "what happened next" than by closed-ended questions (Lamb et al., 2008). Children's reports are also more productive if the interviewer uses neutral encouragement (e.g., "you are doing very well") or addresses the child by name (Hershkowitz, 2009).

When suspicions arise for other reasons, such as sexualized behavior, an interviewer should be very cautious, because there is a good probability that the suspicions are unfounded. Although sexualized behavior may be much more common among abused children than among non-abused children (and therefore evidence that abuse should be suspected), the majority of child who behave sexually have not been abused (Myers, 2005). The problem with some techniques thought necessary for eliciting disclosures from reluctant children (such as asking a series of yes/no questions specifically inquiring about abuse) is that they risk increasing the likelihood of false allegations, and, in a related way, that they make true reports difficult to distinguish from false reports. For example, by asking a direct yes/no question (did the man touch your vagina?) an interviewer guarantees that a true disclosure will look much like a false

disclosure; in either case a child is likely to simply say “yes” (see Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, this volume).

At the same time that practitioners now have a number of non-leading approaches to eliciting disclosures at their disposal, non-disclosure and recantation remain a major concern (Lamb, Lyon, & Myers, 2009), and children who are initially forthcoming about their abuse often become inconsistent or reluctant over the course of state intervention (Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007). Surprisingly little research has been conducted on effective and non-leading means of eliciting disclosure from reluctant victims. One potentially useful technique is a promise to tell the truth, which has been found to increase honesty without increasing errors (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002, 2004), even among maltreated children who have been coached to either falsely deny or falsely claim that events occurred (Lyon, et al., 2008). The extent to which this and other tools may reduce reluctance to disclose sexual abuse remains to be examined.

In the meantime, interviewers should focus on the fact that when children do disclose, and thus are capable and willing of describing their abuse, this provides a window of opportunity for eliciting convincing details of the abuse as well as facts that can explain pre-disclosure delays and post-disclosure inconsistencies and recantations. If a child subsequently recants abuse, the likelihood that the recantation is true or false can be assessed in light of the motivations and pressures that the child may have previously disclosed.

It may be possible to elicit details about the progression of abuse from non-sexual touching to sexual touching to more invasive acts. If the child narrates such a progression, this helps to explain why the child would delay disclosing abuse, and why the child might blame him- or herself for the abuse and expect recipients of disclosure to blame the child as well (“I let him do it so I can’t complain”). Unfortunately, interviewers often ask children about multiple abusive events by asking “how many times” abuse occurred. Asking for a number rather than details of individual events makes it difficult for the interviewer to elicit evidence of the progression of abuse over time. The NICHD investigative interview protocol recommends that interviewers ask the child if the abuse occurred “one time or more than one time,” and if the child responds that it occurred more than once, that the interviewer ask the child to “tell me everything that happened the first time,” “tell me everything that happened the last time,” and “tell me everything that happened the time you remember the most” (Lamb et al., 2008).

Asking about individual acts is preferable to asking for numbers for other reasons as well. Children have difficulties in providing numerical estimates, particularly if the abuse has occurred on multiple occasions over a long period of time (Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, this volume). Indeed, even an adult would have difficulty in answering such questions, and would have to resort to estimation that is little more than an educated guess (Bradburn, 2000). Furthermore, asking children about individual acts will often elicit details about idiosyncratic events, such as interruptions of the abuse due to another person or another event (e.g. the perpetrator stops because a parent is heard coming home

or coming into the room). Reporting of such events can lend credibility to the child's story, because they are unlikely to be the product of adult coaching or interview suggestiveness.

In order to understand the dynamics of the abuse, including the alleged perpetrator and the child's perspective, interviewers need not ask leading or direct questions. Interviewers can elicit how the alleged perpetrator justified abuse to the child by asking "what did he tell you about what he was doing" (Berliner & Conte, 1990), or "what did he say when/after he touched you." In order to elicit the child's perspective, interviewers can ask the child "how did you feel when he touched you" and "how did you feel after he touched you." If the feelings questions elicit physical feelings, the interviewer can then ask "what did you think when/after..." questions. (Conversely, if the interviewer seeks the child's physical reactions, he or she can follow-up a feelings question with "how did your body feel...") Again, these questions can be asked about individual abusive events as well as about abuse generally. For example, with respect to the first time sexual abuse occurred, children will often disclose that they were confused by the perpetrator's actions, or that they did not initially recognize that the actions were wrong (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Sas & Cunningham, 1995).

The interviewer can also elicit useful information by asking the child to describe her feelings about the alleged perpetrator more generally (e.g., "how did you feel about him when you first knew him/before he touched you?"). Interviewers should not be surprised to elicit a mixture of negative and positive feelings (Berliner & Conte, 1990), which will help explain acquiescence to abuse, self-blame, initial reluctance to disclose, motives to recant, and the negative effects that abuse may have on children's sense of trust in adults. On the other hand, eliciting feelings about the perpetrator may also help determine if there were motivations to make a false report.

The interviewer can also inquire into the child's prior disclosures and the child's reasons for disclosing (or for not disclosing sooner) (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). This information may be elicited by continuing to ask "what happened next" subsequent to the child's description of the last act of abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2007), or the interviewer can ask the child "who did you tell" "what did you say to them," and "when did you tell them" (Children will have difficulty in reconstructing the time that they told, but a "when" question does not necessitate a reference to a specific time; "when" questions will elicit information about what was happening before or at the time that the child disclosed.) In order to elicit the child's motivations, the interviewer can ask the child "why did you tell" or "what kept you from telling?"

The responses of the people to whom the child disclosed are very important. Children, particularly young children, are likely to disclose abuse first to a parent. As discussed earlier, children are less likely to disclose and more likely to recant when non-offending parents refuse to believe that abuse occurred or otherwise fail to support the allegation. On the other hand, children's reports are often doubted because of the assertion that a parent is influencing the child to make a false claim of abuse. Hence, the parent's reaction can play an important role in determining if the child's report is

consistent over time. The interviewer can ask the child about the disclosure recipient's reactions ("what did she do/say when you told her") and what the disclosure recipient has told the child about talking to the interviewer ("what did your mom tell you about talking to me"). The interviewer can also ask the child what the parent and other interested adults have said about the alleged perpetrator ("what has x said about y") and vice versa. This can reveal both pressures to accuse and pressures to deny that abuse occurred.

Finally, the child's current feelings are helpful in understanding the potential for future inconsistencies and recantation. The child can be asked "how do you feel about [the alleged perpetrator] now," "what happened to you since you told" and "how do you feel about what has happened to you." Children sometimes express regret that they disclosed abuse and unhappiness over the consequences of disclosing (Sas & Cunningham, 1995). These feelings can be useful in interpreting subsequent denials or recantations.

Although there is no research examining how recanting children can best be interviewed, our experience suggests that the same inquiries into the child's feelings and motivations and the motivations of others can be explored. The child can be asked why he or she originally alleged abuse, and why he or she is retracting the allegations now. The child's reasons for making a false allegation can be assessed for their plausibility. The child can also be asked open-ended questions designed to elicit as much detail as possible about the prior allegations. Recanting children are likely to answer in one of two ways when asked about prior disclosures. Many children, particularly younger children, will repeat the disclosures, and may revert to discussing the abuse as if it really happened (e.g., they will answer "how do you know" questions with "because I saw it"). Hence, a child will answer "no" if asked a direct question about abuse, but if asked about prior disclosures, may repeat a credible narrative of abuse. Alternatively, children may simply deny prior disclosures. If those disclosures were made to impartial observers and adequately documented, this suggests that the child is feeling pressured to deny everything. Clearly, however, the best methods for interviewing recanting children have yet to be developed, not to mention systematically evaluated.

In sum, a good understanding of the dynamics of sexual abuse and the disclosure process can help interviewers do a better job when questioning children about alleged sexual abuse. The research clearly justifies concerns about non-disclosure and recantation of true allegations of abuse. At the same time, we still know very little about how to elicit disclosures from children who are unwilling to disclose. The optimum strategy is to do what we can with what we have: children who allege abuse and are brought to the attention of the authorities. Careful and thorough questioning of these children utilizing the most up-to-date interviewing approaches is the best we can do.

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