
The Characteristics of Disclosure Among Children Who May Have Been Sexually Abused

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Seventy-six children (5 to 10 years old), who were referred because of concerns about sexual abuse, were interviewed as part of a larger study testing the efficacy of a computer-assisted interview in sexual abuse evaluations. Data from initial interviews were coded according to the presence of disclosure and the details revealed about sexual abuse. The presence and amount of corroboration were coded through case review. Although 56 children were coded as having disclosed prior to evaluation, only 44 subjects disclosed during the initial interview. Only 1 child disclosed spontaneously. An additional 8 children (11 %) disclosed possible sexual abuse in a second or later interview. Although girls disclosed at a higher rate than boys, children did not differ in the amount or types of information they provided about alleged sexual abuse. Findings are discussed in terms of the conceptualization of disclosure as a process. Implications for interviewing strategies are addressed.

Studies of adult survivors of child sexual assault indicate a striking tendency on the part of child victims not to tell anyone about their abuse experiences (Mendel, 1995; Russell, 1983). Yet, children's statements about sexual abuse are often the only available evidence that victimization has occurred (Reiser, 1991) and they provide the legal basis for child protection and criminal justice system intervention. In view of the critical importance of children's statements about sexual abuse, researchers and clinicians have attempted to understand the complexities of disclosure. In the current study, characteristics of and factors associated with disclosure were examined among children who received evaluations for possible sexual abuse.

The importance of children's statements in the evaluation of sexual abuse has been well established, although debate about the nature of children's disclosures continues. For example, whether and to what degree disclosure of sexual abuse is a process has significant implications of how child interviews should be conducted (Faller, Everson, & Lamb, 1997). Empirical findings are mixed. Some scholars have characterized disclosure as a distinct event in which a child makes a straightforward report of sexual abuse (Bradley & Wood, 1996; Ceci & Bruck, 1995). Such a disclosure may be accidental or deliberate (Sgroi, Blick, & Porter, 1982) but nonetheless is viewed as an identifiable and discrete occurrence. By contrast, others have conceptualized disclosure as a process of incremental revelations that may include denial or recantation. Some evidence exists that supports the process view of disclosure (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Koverola & Foy, 1993; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Sorenson & Snow, 1991; Summit, 1983).

If disclosure is a singular event, the child interview may be standardized and structured to elicit a narrative account of the sexual assault. The event conceptualization implies the minimal need for media such as dolls or drawings in child interviews. Furthermore, a single interview with only a few open-ended queries would be sufficient to obtain a coherent narrative account from most sexually abused children. How-

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ever, if the disclosure were a gradual unfolding, which may be accompanied by embarrassment, shame, or fear, interviewing strategies would need to be flexible in order to accommodate the dynamics of individual children. For example, multiple interviews and a flexible protocol may be necessary to fully assess what, if anything, has happened to a child. Furthermore, clinical skills, including rapport building, empathic responding, and careful attention to the pacing of the session, may be critical elements of the interview process.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DISCLOSURE

Empirical investigation of sexual abuse disclosure has indicated that children's willingness or ability to disclose is related to a variety of factors, such as age (Campis, Hebden-Curtis, & DeMaso, 1993; Sorenson & Snow, 1991), maternal support, threat or coercion (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992), offender-victim relationship (Faller, 1989), severity of abuse, and level of post-traumatic stress (Elliott & Briere, 1994; Koverola & Foy, 1993; Sauzier, 1989). For example, the relationship between the child and the alleged offender and the severity of sexual assault have both been found to be highly correlated with disclosure in several studies. In a sample of 157 cases of high likelihood sexual maltreatment, Faller (1989) concluded that the nature of the offender-victim relationship will affect not only the length of delay to disclosure, with children victimized by those closer to them taking longer to reveal the abuse, but also the duration of the sexual abuse and level of coercion employed, with less coercion found in more proximate relationships. Sauzier (1989) reached similar conclusions in a follow-up study of 156 sexually abused children, in which she found disclosure to be a more difficult process in victims who suffered longstanding abuse or abuse by family members, and whose abusers used attention and special favors as methods of gaining victim compliance.

In a recent study of disclosure during formal investigation, Elliott and Briere (1994) identified variables associated with varying levels of sexual abuse reporting. Of 248 children for whom sexual abuse could be substantiated, significant differences emerged between disclosing and nondisclosing victims in terms of maternal support, mandated reporting, and race. Consistent with Faller's (1989) findings, nondisclosing children, when compared to children who did disclose, were more likely to have nonsupportive mothers, more likely to have been victimized by a perpetrator in the home, and more likely to have experienced longer and more severe abuse. These authors

concur with other scholars that the child's willingness to disclose will be influenced by parental (typically maternal) support (Everson, Hunter, Runyan, Edelson, & Coulter, 1989; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992), which, in turn, is linked to the caretaker's relationship with the offender (Faller, 1989).

DISCLOSURE AS A PROCESS

In a seminal study, Sorenson and Snow (1991) analyzed children's patterns of sexual abuse disclosure. The authors first identified common elements of disclosure in 630 cases and hypothesized that "children would exhibit a disclosure progression from denial to tentative to active disclosure" (p. 4). The four phases of disclosure were described as denial, disclosure (tentative and active), recantation, and reaffirmation. From the larger sample, 116 high certainty cases of abuse (e.g., substantiated by offender confession, offender conviction, or compelling medical evidence) were analyzed retrospectively. Among these children, only 11% disclosed without any denial in the initial investigative interview, although 96% eventually revealed the abuse. According to the authors, tentative disclosure offered a middle ground between denial and active disclosure for most children. Significantly, in 22% of cases, children who eventually made active initial disclosures recanted their reports. Retraction was influenced by several factors, such as pressure from the offender or family, negative personal consequences, and judicial or investigatory proceedings. However, 92% reaffirmed their earlier allegations at a later point in the evaluation. The authors argue that, based on these findings, disclosure is a process and that a child victim's ability to describe his or her experiences in narrative form may vary over time, according to external circumstances.

In an unpublished study, Terry (1990) attempted to address the completeness of children's disclosures by comparing children's statements about abuse to a single offender's confession to the abuse of all the children in the sample. The author categorized both victim and offender disclosures according to the types of sexual activity, frequency of contact, and offender-victim sexual involvement. Although the sample is small ($n = 18$), in almost every category, children reported lower frequencies of sexual abuse incidents than the offender. Overall, the perpetrator admitted to about 22% more sexual involvement than children disclosed. This finding is consistent with research on children's memory in which errors of omission are the most commonly observed pattern in young children's recollections of experienced or witnessed events (Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan, 1991;

Steward, 1989). It may also be that children's disclosures were incomplete or had not reached an active phase at the time of the interviews.

More recently, Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) examined the impact of previous disclosure on statements during investigation of 251 children referred for sexual abuse evaluation. Their findings revealed developmental differences between children in terms of disclosure. For example, older children who had disclosed prior to investigative interviewing were likely to disclose again to the evaluator. However, 59% of children younger than 5, who had made an earlier disclosure, did not describe abuse during the interview. Although these authors discuss alternative explanations for this finding, such as misinterpretation of a child's disclosure statement prior to evaluation, they also suggest that professionally endorsed methods of interviewing that emphasize the exclusive use of open-ended questioning may be inadequate for young children.

Although the importance of disclosure is widely acknowledged, its complexities warrant further empirical attention. The current study provided an opportunity to describe and examine the characteristics of children's disclosures with specific attention to patterns of disclosure, case level, and interview-related factors associated with disclosure.

METHODS

The research presented here constitutes one aspect of a larger investigation of the efficacy of a newly developed computer-assisted interview (CAI), compared to a traditional interview (TI), in the evaluation of children who may have been sexually abused (Faller & DeVoe, 1995). The CAI program was developed on the basis of cognitive interviewing principles in which the provision of appropriate contextual cues is theorized to facilitate more accurate and elaborate narrative accounts of children's experiences without an increase in errors (Memon & Bull, 1991). It was hoped that CAI would enhance children's ability to provide accurate information regarding alleged abuse experiences. In addition to testing a new method of interviewing, this project presented a unique opportunity to describe aspects of the interview process.

Subjects

The sample consisted of 47 girls (62%) and 29 boys (38%), 5 to 10 years old, who were referred for evaluation of possible sexual abuse at a multidisciplinary clinic specializing in child abuse and neglect. Clinic referrals often include highly complex cases, cases in

which there are multiple allegations, or cases for which another opinion is sought. Recommendations from the clinic often are used to assist protective services or other professionals in case management, treatment planning, and placement determination. A letter describing the project was distributed to public child welfare agencies throughout the region. Criteria for inclusion in the study consisted of concern about possible sexual abuse, an age range between 5 and 10 years, and cognitive abilities that would allow the child to use the computer. All children referred between June, 1993, and April, 1995, were considered for the study. Children in the study received evaluations at no cost. Five children were excluded from the sample because of cognitive or developmental limitations (e.g., mental retardation, autism) that precluded the use of the computer or scheduling difficulties. Fifty-eight children participated in the experimental phase of the project. Because the focus of this study is on disclosure and not on the use of the computer, 18 children from the pretest phase of the study were included in the current analysis. Pretest interviews followed a similar interview structure as that employed during the experimental phase, except that the children were not assigned randomly to one condition or another. The types of questions employed, as well as the strategies for questioning, were comparable for pretest and experimental phase interviews (DeVoe & Faller, 1998).

The average age of the children in the study was 6.8 years ($SD = 1.5$ years), and nearly 87% of the sample were 8 years old or younger. Five-year-old girls were the largest subgroup ($n = 18$), and only three 10-year-olds participated (one girl and two boys). The racial and ethnic breakdown of the sample is as follows: 86.6% White ($n = 66$), 9.2% African American ($n = 7$), 2.6% Middle Eastern ($n = 2$), and 1.3% Latino ($n = 1$). Almost 70% of the children were referred for evaluation by protective services ($n = 32$) or a mental health agency ($n = 21$). The remainder of the sample was referred by a family member ($n = 11$), legal professional ($n = 7$), or other source ($n = 7$). Information provided at intake suggests that many children came from families reporting a variety of stressors, including multiple forms of family trauma. For example, 59 families (77.6%) had been involved with the child protection system, and 41 children (53.9%) had at least one substantiated report of maltreatment within the last year. Twenty-one children (27.6%) were living in foster care at the time of the first interview. When possible, parental difficulties were identified during intake procedures. More than half of the study families ($n = 41$) reported domestic violence, which, according to caretaker report, at least 27 children in

the study (35.5%) had witnessed. Thirty-seven families (48.7%) indicated a history of alcohol or substance abuse for at least one parent. Almost half of the parents ($n = 31$) reported underemployment or joblessness at the time of intake. In at least one quarter of the families, parental mental illness ($n = 20$) or criminal behavior ($n = 19$) were identified. Five children came from families who reported all of the above difficulties.

Characteristics of Sexual Abuse Allegations

Prior to evaluation, 109 allegations were documented among 76 children. In 49 cases (65.4%), a single allegation motivated the referral; however, two and three allegations were noted by the referring party for 21 and 6 children (27.6% and 7.9%), respectively. The suspected offender was known to the child in most cases ($n = 101$ allegations) and was identified as a relative or family member in 79 allegations (72%). Of alleged offenders, 89 (87.3%) were male. For 44 children (58%), an immediate family member was an alleged offender. In eight allegations, the alleged offender was ambiguous or unknown. The severity of alleged sexual abuse ranged from exposure to adult sexual activity to anal or vaginal intercourse. Noncontact or fondling behaviors were suspected in 17 cases (22.3%) and penetration (digital, oral, penile, object) was alleged in 40 cases (53.6%). One case was believed to involve child pornography. The type of alleged sexual victimization was ambiguous for 18 children (23.7%).

Procedures

Children referred for evaluation were assigned to the CAI or TI condition for the first interview. All but one child was interviewed at least twice, with the second interview on a different day from the initial evaluation. Two clinical social workers, trained specifically for this project, conducted all evaluations. A weekly team meeting was held to discuss clinical and case concerns and to address ongoing research issues.

Interview Structure

As much as possible, interview protocols for both the traditional and computer-assisted conditions were parallel. For both conditions, after separation from the caregiver or transporter, children were oriented to the playroom, one-way mirror, and video equipment. Children in the CAI condition received additional instruction in how to use the computer. In addition, all children were reminded to "tell only what happened" and to say "I don't know" or "I don't remember" when appropriate. A rapport-building phase followed the introduction in both conditions.

During this stage of the interview, the child was asked general questions about familiar topics in their own life, such as school, friends, and favorite things to do. If the child did not provide a natural lead into discussion of alleged abuse, the evaluator proceeded with focused inquiry. If the child disclosed possible abuse at any time, she or he was encouraged to describe the place or context in which the alleged abuse occurred.

Transcription and Coding

Each interview was transcribed verbatim from videotapes of the interview. A coding system for the types of questions interviewers asked, the amount and types of information the children provided, and the children's level of disclosure was developed. For abuse-related segments of the interview, each interaction between the interviewer and child (e.g., one interviewer question or statement and one child response) was coded as one event. Abuse-related topics were considered to include any discussion of the following: (a) alleged offender, (b) circumstances of possible abuse, (c) circumstances of disclosure, (d) alleged sexual activity, (e) function of body parts, and (f) the purpose of current and past investigations (e.g., interviews, court experiences, therapy, or medical examinations). Interrater agreement for coding interview data was determined among three primary members of the team. Reliability was calculated according to the number of actual agreements divided by the number of coded responses, with an overall reliability of .86.

Variables Related to Children's Disclosure

Disclosure was defined as a child's statement or demonstration that included an alleged offender, victim, and sexual act. *Partial or ambiguous disclosure* was defined as a description that included one or two components of possible abuse, such as an elaboration of sexual behavior and the identification of a victim, but not all three. *Previous disclosure* referred to a child's report of alleged sexual abuse at some point before the interview. *Disclosure during evaluation* referred to those children who gave full disclosures after the first interview.

The content of children's disclosures was coded according to the types and amount of information presented during the initial interview. *Pieces of information* were defined to be about alleged sexual behavior, the context of reported abuse, and the details of sexual activity; they were coded for every interviewer-child interaction during each child's first interview. The subcategories for pieces of information are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Categories of Pieces of Information about Sexual Abuse

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>	<i>Examples From Child Interview</i>
Sexual behavior	Noncontact Sexual Behavior	I sleep with my mom and dad and they boogie while I'm there.
	Contact sexual behavior	Daddy touched me in the private spot.
	Digital penetration	Mommy put her finger in my pee-pee this far.
	Penetration with object	Uncle Ben hurt me with a needle stick in my pee.
	Oral-genital contact	She sucked my pee-pee.
	Intercourse behavior	His thing went in my private.
Details of sexual acts	Pornography	He made a movie of me without my clothes on.
	Description of body position or genitalia	His thing was hairy and it "sticked" up.
	Physical or sensory experience of abuse	It felt like he was hammering me with a nail (anal intercourse).
	Emotional response	I was really scared and I cried and cried.
Context of abuse	Frequency of abuse	She did it four times. There were lotsa times—I can't count how many.
	Alleged offender(s)	He's the guy that drives the van at my church.
	Alleged victim(s)	My grandpa did the same thing to my sister.
	Information about clothing	I was wearing my teddy bear 'jamas—they come down to here.
	Location or time of abuse	It happened in my mom's bedroom and in my bedroom on the top bunk.
	Activity proximate to abuse	I was playing Sega when my brother came in my room. I was doing homework on my bed.
	Other's whereabouts during abuse	My mom was at her school. Everyone was downstairs doing the dishes.
	Use of threats or rewards by alleged offender	They said they'd kill my parents if I told, and they've been to my house.
	First or most recent abuse	It hasn't happened since I was this many (holds up four fingers).
	Information about telling	I told my aunt what he did when she put me to bed.

Variables Related to Corroboration of Sexual Abuse

Corroboration Scale

Because of concern that the CAI might elicit false positives, two crude measures of corroborative evidence of possible sexual abuse were constructed (Faller & DeVoe, 1997). Case material made available to the clinic, including records provided by referral sources and background information from caretakers, was used to identify the type and level of corroboration for each allegation. The amount and sources of data provided for each case were highly variable. The first type of corroboration was based on findings from sources other than the child or caretaker. The following data were considered the most reliable corroborator of possible sexual abuse: medical findings, material evidence (i.e., physical evidence gathered by law enforcement), offender confession, and offender conviction. Because these categories of corroborative data could overlap, each case was coded only for the presence or absence of corroborative information independent of reports of the child's prior statements.

Second, information about alleged sexual abuse was coded from reports of child statements in other contexts. Categories for corroborative information

from the case file parallel those developed for coding pieces of information from the first interview. In total, 14 types of information about sexual activity and the context of possible abuse were coded. For each child, a summary variable (corroboration summary) was created to sum pieces of information about corroboration across allegations. The corroboration summary score did not include information about possible abuse that became available during the course of the evaluation. Types and sources of corroborative data are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

Analysis Strategy

Case level and interview level data were analyzed in several steps. First, the presence of disclosure during the first interview or at any time during the evaluation was assessed. Second, differences between TI and CAI were analyzed. Findings indicate that a significant difference between interviews on the basis of experimental condition was that computer interviews were an average of 10 minutes ($M = 65$ minutes, $SD = 17$) longer than traditional interviews ($M = 55$ minutes, $SD = 14$), $t(74) = 2.75$, $p < .001$. This difference, however, is accounted for by the length of time required to teach the children how to use the computer (Faller & DeVoe, 1995). Consequently, group differences along other dimensions, including gender, age, disclosure

TABLE 2: Pieces of Information About Possible Sexual Abuse Derived From Case File (*n* = 109 allegations)

Type of Corroborative Detail	Number of Allegations Present (%)
Specific description of sexual acts	83 (76)
Information about range of sexual behaviors	73 (67)
Whether clothing was removed	68 (62)
Whether child told anyone	63 (58)
Whom child told	63 (58)
Where abuse occurred	58 (53)
Whereabouts of others	52 (48)
Consequences of telling	46 (42)
Information about frequency	39 (36)
What offender did or said to involve the child	39 (36)
When abuse occurred (season)	38 (35)
When abuse occurred (time of day)	33 (30)
Description of clothing worn or removed	31 (28)
Information about threats or rewards	27 (25)

TABLE 3: Types of Corroborative Information Independent of Reported Previous Disclosure (*n* = 76 cases)

Source of Corroborative Information	Number of Cases Present (%)
Medical findings	14 (18)
Confession	10 (13)
Police substantiation	7 (9)
Conviction	5 (7)
Material evidence	4 (5)
Cases with corroborative evidence	25 (33)

NOTE: Prosecution pending in nine cases.

status, and substantiation status, were analyzed. Logistic regression was conducted to examine factors associated with disclosure in the first interview only and disclosure at any time during the evaluation.

RESULTS

Although 56 children (74%) had made a disclosure prior to their evaluation, only 44 subjects (58%) fully disclosed during the first interview. Twelve children (16%) made partial or ambiguous disclosures. Despite similar rates of previous disclosure, girls disclosed at a higher rate than boys during the first interview (68% of girls vs. 41% of boys), $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 5.3, p < .05$, and at any time during the evaluation (81% of girls vs. 52% of boys), $\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 7.2, p < .01$. Those children who did disclose in the first interview did so, on average, in just over half an hour ($M = 32$ minutes, $SD = 16.4$). The earliest disclosure occurred after 5 minutes, but one child did not disclose fully until 78 minutes into the initial session. Many children also

TABLE 4: Rates of Disclosure (*n* = 76)

Disclosure	Number of Children	Percent of Sample (%)
Previous disclosure	56	73.7
First Interview		
No	20	26.3
Partial or ambiguous	12	15.9
Full disclosure	44	57.9
Second or later interview	8	11.0
Total full disclosures	52	68.0

NOTE: Full disclosure during evaluation is defined by the identification of offender(s), victim(s), and description of sexual activity. Partial or ambiguous disclosure is defined as the identification of one or two of these aspects of sexual abuse but not all three.

reported other types of possible family violence such as physical abuse ($n = 38$) and domestic violence ($n = 19$) during the course of the evaluation.

Although disclosure during the evaluation was largely consistent with previous disclosure status, children in the previous disclosure group did not overlap completely with those who discussed alleged sexual abuse in the first interview. Seventeen of the 56 (30%) children who had disclosed previously did not discuss alleged abuse in the initial interview, and five (25%) children disclosed for the first time in their initial evaluation session, $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 12.05, p < .01$. Eight children (11%), only one of whom had not disclosed previously, discussed possible sexual abuse at a later interview. For example, in one case, the older of two brothers did not disclose until his fourth interview. Despite numerous previous disclosures, both children were returned to their mother, who allowed them continued contact with the alleged offender. At the time of evaluation, the children were in protective custody, but they reported being fearful of being returned to their mother's care. In the older child's fourth interview, he disclosed fellatio by his mother's boyfriend and stated that he was afraid the alleged offender would kill him because he had told. Rates of disclosure are summarized in Table 4.

For 4 of the 32 children (13%) who did not disclose during the first interview, there was corroborative evidence of possible sexual abuse independent of reported previous statements, $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 10.4, p < .001$. However, for over half of the children ($n = 23$) who made disclosures of alleged abuse during the first interview, there was no independent corroboration of their possible sexual abuse. When the second type of corroborative information was considered, it was found that the number of pieces of information about possible abuse derived from case material (i.e., corroboration summary) was higher for children who disclosed at some time during the evaluation. For

TABLE 5: Pieces of Information About Alleged Sexual Abuse ($n = 76$ interviews)

	Number of Children Disclosing	Median Number of Mentions	Mean Number of Mentions (SD)
Type of sexual behavior			
Noncontact	13	13	23 (26.2)
Contact	37	54	56.9 (42.5)
Digital penetration	11	25	37.4 (30.2)
Penetration with object	3	29	36.3 (34.6)
Oral/genital contact	7	4	11.4 (18)
Anal/vaginal intercourse	13	34	44.9 (46.2)
Pornography	2	22.5	22.5 (24.8)
Total mentions of sexual behavior	46	66	79 (61.1)
Contextual information			
Where abuse occurred	47	5	7.2 (6)
Detail about place	26	2	2.9 (2.3)
Time of day	18	1	2.1 (1.6)
Time of year	34	4	4.7 (3.2)
Activity proximate to abuse	24	2	3.0 (1.9)
Who was present	18	1	1.7 (1.5)
Where others were	31	3	3.8 (3.1)
Details about sexual behavior			
Body parts/genitalia	46	8	12.9 (12.1)
Sensory experience	36	2.5	3.6 (3.0)
Emotional response	46	2	3.1 (2.4)
Frequency of abuse	38	1.5	2.1 (1.6)
Offender information	51	3	3.8 (3.2)
Other victim information	26	2	3.5 (3.4)
Clothing	44	4	5.4 (4.6)

NOTE: Totals may not match the number of full disclosures because of disclosure of multiple sexual behaviors and partial or ambiguous disclosures.

children who did not disclose during the evaluation, the mean number of pieces of corroborative information was 2.54 ($SD = 3.5$) compared to an average of 13.3 ($SD = 10$) for subjects who did disclose, $t(70.6) = -6.94$, $p < .0001$.

Disclosure Patterns

Forty-six children (62%) described sexual activity at some point during the first interview. Among these children, the mean number of mentions was 79 ($SD = 61.1$). Contact sexual behavior was the most commonly reported type of sexual abuse behavior ($n = 37$), whereas pornography was the least often disclosed ($n = 2$). In general, children said more about the details of possible abuse ($M = 24.4$, $SD = 23$) than about the context of abuse ($M = 14.5$, $SD = 12.6$). Children most often provided information about an offender in alleged sexual interactions and described where alleged abuse had occurred. The amount of information disclosed about sexual behavior, and the details and context of sexual abuse did not differ by age or sex. Information about sexual abuse, details, and context are summarized in Table 5.

Although a few children elaborated about alleged abuse with limited prompting, most children described pieces of their reported experiences or obser-

vations throughout the interview process. In the former category, one very bright 8-year-old girl reported that her dad was no longer a member of her family because he did "mean and scary" things. She then stated spontaneously that she had six mean and scary things to discuss and proceeded to provide a detailed narrative, along with drawings and demonstrations, of sexual abuse by her adoptive father. This child's disclosure may be an example of disclosure as a singular event, or of active phase disclosure (Elliott & Briere, 1994). By contrast, another child's disclosure unfolded after he stated that a cousin had hurt him.

Interviewer: So what would happen with your cousin?
 Child: He laid me down.
 Interviewer: He laid you down? Then what happened?
 Child: He'd touch my private parts.
 Interviewer: Can you click (on the computer figure) where the private parts are?
 Child: Uh-huh (clicks penis on boy figure).
 Interviewer: There? What do you call that part?
 Child: Penis.
 Interviewer: And what would happen with the penis?
 Child: He would rub it.
 Interviewer: He would rub it? What would he rub it with?
 Child: His hand.

Still other children were initially reluctant to discuss possible abuse, but they eventually did so. One 9-

year-old girl who was very attached to her offender father was hesitant to talk about what had happened to her, despite the fact that he had confessed. She reported that her father did not live with her because he "did something" to her and her sister, and expressed her belief that he would not "do it again because he promised." She did not disclose any specifics of sexual abuse until late in the interview, at which point she stated that her father had licked her in the private parts.

Substantiation Status

Given the presumed importance of children's statements in determining whether or not sexual victimization has occurred, the relationship of substantiation to case and interview characteristics, including disclosure, was examined. In 47 cases (62%), sexual abuse was substantiated by the clinic. Substantiation did not vary according to child's age, evaluator, or experimental condition; however, substantiated cases differed in several ways from inconclusive or unsubstantiated cases. First, substantiated cases contained more corroborative information from previous reports ($M = 14.1$ corroboration summary) than unsubstantiated cases ($M = 3.2$ corroboration summary), $t(67.3) = -6.52, p < .001$. Second, substantiated cases were more likely to include at least one allegation of severe abuse, $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 25.4, p < .0001$. Third, children's rates of disclosure differed across substantiation groups. Of 47 children with substantiated abuse, six (13%) did not disclose during the first interview, but only one child had not disclosed at some point during the evaluation, $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 46.2, p < .0001$. In the latter case, there were compelling reasons for the substantiation in the absence of disclosure. Specifically, the child informed the evaluator that she had already "told what happened" to another professional. Fortunately, the child's earlier statements were on videotape and could be reviewed by the evaluator. On the other hand, there were six cases in which children made disclosures that identified alleged victims other than themselves or disclosures that lacked enough detail or clarity for evaluators to reach a conclusion about whether or not sexual abuse may have happened.

Multivariate Analysis

Several logistic regressions were conducted in order to examine the relationship between case characteristics, interview variables, and disclosure. First, factors associated with disclosure in the first interview were assessed. Second, variables related to disclosure at any time during the evaluation were analyzed. Given the small sample size and strength of interac-

tions, the models are useful primarily for descriptive purposes only.

The corroboration summary score, which corresponds to the amount of information about alleged abuse from reports of previous statements, was the variable most significantly associated with disclosure in both the first interview and at any time during the evaluation. In fact, of the two corroboration variables, the corroboration summary was the stronger predictor of disclosure. Interactions between evaluator and test condition, and between child sex and test condition were also associated with disclosure in the first interview. However, when disclosure at any time during the evaluation is considered, only the corroboration summary remains significant. Interestingly, the presence of corroboration independent of previous child statements or caretaker information was not significantly associated with disclosure during the first interview or in later interviews. Results of logistic regression analysis for disclosure variables are displayed in Table 6.

The regression model predicting disclosure in the first interview suggests that evaluators had unequal results, in terms of children's disclosure, across interview conditions. Anecdotally, interviewers reported different levels of comfort with the use of the computer-assisted protocol that may have influenced outcomes of the first interview. Results of the model predicting disclosure at any time during evaluation indicate that whatever constraints were at work for evaluators in the first interview were not longer present in second or later sessions.

DISCUSSION

With one exception, children in this study did not disclose spontaneously about alleged sexual abuse nor did they provide detailed descriptions of possible abuse experiences in narrative form. These findings suggest that children required assistance with disclosure. The virtual absence of spontaneous disclosure and the necessity of focused inquiry in this sample are consistent with findings from other research with sexually abused children (Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Terry, 1990; Wood, Orsak, Murphy, & Cross, 1996).

In this work, findings related to disclosure are even more striking in light of the fact that almost three quarters of the children ($n = 56$) in the sample had disclosed previously. Children who had disclosed alleged abuse prior to evaluation might have been expected to discuss their experiences of possible abuse more readily than children who had not disclosed; however, this was not always the case. In contrast to earlier research (e.g., Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994), age was not

TABLE 6: Logistic Regression for Disclosure Variables

<i>Outcome Variable</i>	<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Significance</i>
First interview disclosure ^c	Evaluator	.6779	.9236	.46
	Sex of child	-.6064	.9512	.52
	Previous disclosure	1.564	1.012	.125
	Independent corroboration ^a	1.1337	.8513	.183
	Corroboration Summary ^b	.1849	.0752	.014
	Test condition	-.0245	1.22	.984
	Test condition by sex	4.381	1.817	.0159
	Test condition by evaluator	-3.877	1.75	.027
Disclosure at any time during evaluation ^d	Evaluator	.5037	1.0434	.6292
	Sex of child	.5613	1.0311	.5862
	Previous disclosure	1.8746	1.0268	.0679
	Independent corroboration ^a	.5299	1.055	.6154
	Corroboration summary ^b	.258	.1025	.0118
	Test condition	.7114	1.2601	.5724
	Test condition by sex	2.3502	1.8757	.2102
	Test condition by evaluator	-1.997	1.7454	.2519

a. Independent corroboration refers to the presence of medical evidence, material evidence, offender confession, or criminal conviction for alleged sexual abuse.

b. Corroboration summary refers to the number of pieces of information about possible sexual abuse derived from case material and records prior to evaluation.

c. From the model, the rate of correct classification for predicting disclosure in the first interview is 86.8%.

d. For predicting disclosure at any time during evaluation, the rate of correct classification is 90.8%.

a factor in the association between previous disclosure and current disclosure (although our sample did not include children younger than 5 years). Gender differences did emerge as evidenced by a higher rate of disclosure among girls. However, once boys disclosed, they provided as much detail about alleged abuse as girls did. These findings suggest that the boys may have had a longer warm-up period than the girls had, but were able to talk about alleged abuse once they were comfortable.

Children who made disclosures of possible abuse provided a variety of pieces of information about these experiences. General references to sexual behaviors were more frequent than descriptions of the context in which alleged abuse occurred or of the specific details of the alleged sexual interactions. Overall, contact sexual behavior (e.g., fondling or sexual touching) was the most common type of reported sexual abuse. Regarding contextual information, the identification of the place where alleged abuse occurred was identified most frequently. Given the interview protocol's dual focus on people involved in alleged abuse and the context of abuse, these findings may be an artifact of interview structure rather than a reflection of children's abilities or inclinations. With respect to details about possible sexual experiences, children most often described the body parts involved, an alleged offender, feelings during alleged abuse or disclosure or both, and information about

clothing. On average, however, children only disclosed a few pieces of information about the context of possible abuse or the specifics of sexual interactions. The amount of detail children provided in this study is similar to findings in the Wood, Orsak, Murphy, and Cross (1996) study in which about 12% of children's responses included detailed abuse-related disclosures. In addition, these results are consistent with developmental studies on children's memory, which indicate that children do not provide elaborate descriptions of their experiences during free recall (e.g., Hamond & Fivush, 1991; Kuebli & Fivush, 1994; Loftus & Davies, 1984).

Findings related to the content of children's disclosures offer important insights into what children are able or willing to tell us about their experiences of possible abuse. For example, the discrepancy between the number of general mentions of abuse and the amount of information about context and details children offer suggests that even though some children can articulate in a general sense that they may have been sexually abused (e.g., "She touched me in the private place"), they often have greater difficulty describing these alleged experiences in detail. Several hypotheses regarding these disclosure patterns come to mind. First, it may be that children's less well-developed descriptive abilities reflect a lack of understanding about what happened. Similarly, children may not have an adequate vocabulary for com-

municating about sexual activity. Alternatively, as one child acknowledged, motivational factors such as fear or embarrassment may interfere with children's abilities to describe alleged sexual abuse.

The case examples discussed in the results section illustrate an often uneven process of disclosure for many children, and the difficulty that some children had in describing their alleged victimization experiences. In addition, the children in this sample demonstrate the often idiosyncratic and incomplete nature of abuse disclosure. For example, in the excerpt described earlier, the child had been diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and had provided extensive disclosures earlier. Although his disclosures during the interview were elaborate, they were not as complete as those he had reported earlier. By contrast, the second child's disclosure included information that she had not disclosed previously (i.e., oral-genital contact by her father). In summary, children in this sample disclosed in a variety of ways, most of which included an unfolding of details and elaborations over the course of one or several interviews, and in response to focused inquiry.

The association between disclosure and the amount of corroboration suggests avenues for future inquiry. As noted, there was not complete overlap between disclosure prior to evaluation and disclosure in the evaluation process. It appears that the level of previous disclosure (as reflected in the corroboration summary) is an important factor in predicting disclosure during evaluation. It makes sense that children who reportedly provided more information about possible abuse prior to evaluation were more likely to have been abused, and therefore more likely to disclose during evaluation. By contrast, however, it is worrying that there were also several children for whom compelling evidence of alleged abuse existed but who did not disclose during the interviewing process. It is critical to learn more about this group of children.

Implications for Practice and Research

Findings from this study suggest that evaluation procedures that include the option of more than one interview by the same evaluator are warranted for many children. The fact that over 10% of the sample did not disclose until after the first interview is evidence that a second interview may be necessary in order to give children adequate time to clarify their experiences. Additional interviews may have allowed interviewers to assess the effectiveness of strategies employed during the initial interview and to revise their approaches accordingly. In a similar vein, more

than one interview may provide the time necessary for appropriate rapport building between the clinician and the child. Although we do not advocate endless interviewing for most children referred for evaluation of possible abuse, we agree with other scholars (e.g., Elliott & Briere, 1994) who endorse the option of multiple interviews, which is especially critical when other corroborating evidence is lacking and there exist significant concerns about sexual abuse. Continued research with children who may have been victims of sexual abuse will enhance our ability to respond to concerns about sexual victimization in a child-sensitive and legally defensible manner.

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