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Delay of Disclosure, Minimization, and Denial of Abuse When the Evidence Is Unambiguous: A Multivictim Case

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Controversy about whether and how children disclose that they have been abused has stoked a heated debate about the best way of obtaining information from those who appear reluctant to be informative. As indicated elsewhere in this book, although most alleged victims reveal that they have been abused within a first or second interview, many children do not (see chapters 3, 4, and 5). We do not know, however, why some children are reluctant to tell of their experiences, perhaps even denying that something has happened to them.

Memory related factors may be part of the explanation. Once encoded in memory, stressful and traumatic events can often be recounted in detail after considerable delays (Fivush, McDermott Sales, Goldberg, Bahrick, & Parker, 2004; Cordon, Pipe, Liat, Melinder, & Goodman, 2004). Traumatic or not, however, experiences differ from one another and their recollection and

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retrieval can be affected by many factors, including the number of times they were repeated, the age of the child, when the events happened, their personal significance, and whether they have been discussed in the interim (Cordon et al., 2004). Younger children are typically less informative than older children and appear to forget more rapidly (Baker-Ward et al., 1991; Ornstein, Gordon, & Larus, 1992; Schneider & Bjorklund, 1998). The delays between the abuse and interviews about it also affect retrieval (Salmon & Pipe, 2000) although recollection of stressful events does not appear to depend on when interviews occur following delays of up to six weeks (Meritt, Ornstein, & Spicker, 1994). With increasing age, children recall more information regardless of delay (Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 2000), and children who experience several similar events seem to recall more information than those who experienced single events (Hershkowitz et al., 1998; Powel & Thomson, 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996). Children may forget some traumatic experiences; however, memory is not the whole story, or perhaps even a large part of it. Several other factors influence children's willingness to disclose abuse.

To gain further insight into the determinants of (non)disclosure, we studied a Swedish case in which a pedophile had videotaped his abuse of twelve different children. A previous analysis of this case described a significant tendency among these children to deny and minimize their experiences (Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002). Sjöberg and Lindblad also reported that the children did not want to disclose, and that they could not adequately understand and describe what they had experienced. In this study, we explored some possible reasons for these findings. The prosecutor (one of the authors) and the police officers dealing with this case allowed us to study all of the documents from the investigative process, including the videotaped interviews with the children, the court files, and the actual videotaped abuse scenes.

In order to ensure that none of the victims can be recognized, every child is referred to as a boy, and each is identified by a number. All names, personal details, and places that may signal identity have been removed. These changes do not affect the conclusions reported here.

BACKGROUND

When the police officers discovered the perpetrator's sex crimes, he was living with a woman and her children in a middle-sized Swedish town. The man was a trained child care provider and had worked for several months at a day care center where he met three of the children. He systematically planned the sexual abuse of these children, and in an interview he said he had tried to do the least possible harm when abusing them. His crimes could have resulted in many years of imprisonment but because the court concluded that he was a pedophile, he was instead confined to a psychiatric institution for many years.

The perpetrator was convicted of having sexually abused 11 identified victims. Altogether, the police investigation identified 116 different videotaped

incidents of abuse involving the 10 children in this study. No child had disclosed abuse before the police investigation. Two were, for different reasons, not interviewed and are therefore excluded from this study. From a legal as well as a research perspective, this case is unique because the perpetrator videotaped his abuse of the children and kept the tapes in his study. The videotapes were found when the police officers raided the man's home for other reasons.

As shown in table 9.1, the children were between 3 and 11.1 years of age when abused and between 4.1 and 12.7 years when interviewed ($M = 6.11$). The mean delay between first incident and interview was 2.2 years and between last incident and interview, 1.2 years. The length of the recorded incidents of abuse ranged from 2 to 342 minutes and the number of videotaped incidents from 1 to 74. Four of the children were abused on tape only once, one was recorded twice, one 3 times, one 4 times, one 6 times, one 23 times, and one 74 times. As described more fully below, four of the children might not have categorized the abusive experiences as sexual abuse, and the abuse is thus described here as "not severe" (see table 9.1). In contrast, six of the children experienced incidents that should have been recognized by them as abuse, and these incidents are labeled "severe" in table 9.1.

The alleged crimes varied from filming the children's genitals in natural settings to forcible penetration of the children's anuses. Most of the incidents of abuse took place in or near the children's or the perpetrator's homes. Twenty of the incidents occurred in the children's homes, 59 in the perpetrator's home, 27 in or near the home of the perpetrator's parents, and 10 at the day care center where the perpetrator worked.

EVALUATION OF INFORMATIVENESS

The first analyses involved evaluation of 12 interviews with the 10 victims of sexual abuse (children 2 and 9 were interviewed twice). All interviews with the children were transcribed from video recordings and transcriptions were checked to ensure their completeness and accuracy. One native Swedish speaker identified substantive utterances (those related to the investigated incident) and tabulated the number of new details concerning the investigated event using a technique developed by Yuille and Cutshall (1986, 1989; Cutshall & Yuille, 1990) and elaborated by Lamb and his colleagues (1996). Details were defined as words or phrases identifying or describing individuals, objects, or events (including actions) related to the investigated incident. Details were only counted when they were new and added to an understanding of the target incidents and their disclosure. As a result, restatements were not counted.

The coder also reviewed the transcripts and categorized each interviewer utterance, defined by a "turn" in the discourse or conversation, using the

TABLE 9.1
Summary of the Children's Experiences

Child	Duration of videotaped abuse. minutes	Age when abused (yr.mo)		Age when interviewed (yr.mo)	Delay between abuse and interview (yr.mo)		Number of incidents	Nature of experience	Nature of relationship
		first	last		first	last			
1	4	3.0	—	4.8	1.8	1.8	1	not severe	relative
2	2	3.7	—	4.1	0.6	0.6	1	not severe	familiar
3	23	3.1	3.8	5.4	2.3	1.8	6	not severe	familiar
4	4	5.4	—	7.0	1.8	1.8	1	not severe	relative
5	342	4.2	5.3	5.9	1.7	0.6	74	severe	relative
6	15	6.8	7.6?*	7.8	0.10	0.2	2	severe	relative
7	33	6.0	6.0	7.8	1.8	1.8	3	severe	familiar
8	131	4.4	5.2	6.6	2.2	1.4	23	severe	familiar
9	9	6.	10	7.11	1.1	1.1	1	severe	familiar
10	188	4.6?	11.1	12.7	8.1?	1.6	4	severe	familiar
Total M =	751	4.9	5.8	6.11	2.2	1.2	116	severe	relative

? = unspecified

categories developed by Lamb et al. (1996). For the purpose of these ratings, we did not distinguish between questions and statements.

Interviewer statements made during the portion of the investigative interviews concerned with substantive issues were placed in one of the following categories (Lamb et al., 1996):

1. *Invitations. Utterances*, including questions, statements, or imperatives, prompting free-recall responses from the child. Such utterances do not delimit the child's focus except in a general way (for example, "Tell me everything that happened") or use details disclosed by the child as cues (for example, "You mentioned that he touched you. Tell me everything about the touching.>").
2. *Directive utterances*. These refocus the child's attention on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child has already mentioned, providing a category for requesting additional information using "Wh-" questions (cued recall).
3. *Option-posing utterances*. These focus the child's attention on details or aspects of the alleged incident that the child has not previously mentioned, asking the child to affirm, negate, or select an investigator-given option using recognition memory processes, but do not imply that a particular response is expected.
4. *Suggestive utterances*. These are stated in such a way that the interviewer strongly communicates what response is expected (for example, "He forced you to do that, didn't he?") or they assume details that have not been revealed by the child (for example, *Child*: "We laid on the sofa." *Interviewer*: "He laid on you or you laid on him?").

The rater, who was fluent in both Swedish and English, was trained on an independent set of English transcripts until she reached 90% agreement with

TABLE 9.2
Types and Number of Alleged Crimes per Child

Types of Crimes	Number of Incidents	Number of Children Involved
Filming genitals	5	3
Touching	7	4
Urinating	15	1
Emptying the bowels	5	1
Measuring the penis	1	1
Masturbation	34	7
Oral intercourse	40	5
Anal penetration	9	4
Total	116	

American raters regarding the identification of details and utterance types. This level of proficiency was reached before she began coding the Swedish transcripts included in the study. The Swedish rater remained reliable (> 95%) with American raters who independently coded transcripts of interviews in English during the period that the Swedish interviews were being coded.

The mean number of investigative utterances in the substantive portions of the interviews was 101.2. The relative prominence of the different utterance types is displayed in table 9.3.

The prosecutor in these cases had instructed the 5 (1 male, 4 female) police interviewers not to press the children for disclosure because he already had access to the perpetrator's video tapes and thus did not need to rely upon the children's testimony to prove that the abuse had taken place. Despite this, the police officers mostly used directive (52%) and option-posing (39%) prompts to elicit information from the children. There were few invitations (2%) but also few suggestive utterances (7%).

On average, the children gave substantive details in their interviews ($M = 144$), although the number of details varied from 624 to as few as 24 (see table 9.4). Two of the children, numbers 9 and 10, provided much more information than the others, and they were also the ones who were asked the most questions, mostly directive utterances, about their experiences. The proportion of details elicited by the different utterance types closely paralleled the proportion of interviewer utterances. On average, 2% of the details provided by the children were elicited by invitations. Most of the details (52%) came in response to directive utterances, 40% were elicited by option-posing questions, and 6% were elicited by suggestive prompts.

Variations in the amount of information provided may have reflected differences in the children's ages, differences in the number of incidents and type of abuse experienced, and differences in the children's motivation or willingness to discuss their abuse. To gain a deeper understanding of the children's motives for providing or not providing information, we looked more closely at each of the cases.

Examination of the Videotaped Abuse Scenes in Relation to Disclosure

This analysis involved an inductive, qualitative attempt to understand the children's informativeness in relation to their age, length of delay between the last known incident and the interview, the nature of the relationship with the perpetrator, and the nature of their experiences (see table 9.5). A qualitative analysis of all the videotaped abuse sequences was carried out by watching the films, transcribing all spoken words verbatim, and coding possible reasons for not disclosing in relation to the nature of the abuse. The transcribed police

and utterance types. Coding the Swedish transcripts remained reliable and transcripts of interviews were being

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1 male, 4 female) because he already had need to rely upon the place. Despite this, the missing (39%) prompts invitations (2%) but

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TABLE 9.3
Number and Proportion of Utterances of Each Type

Child	Invitations Number	%	Directives Number	%	Option-posing Number	%	Suggestive Number	%	Total Number	%
1	2	6%	17	48%	15	43%	1	3%	35	100%
2	0	0	31	62	8	16	11	22	50	100
3	0	0	12	31	24	61	3	8	39	100
4	1	2	22	37	35	59	1	2	59	100
5	0	0	54	67	24	30	2	3	80	100
6	1	2	39	62	23	36	0	0	63	100
7	1	3	13	34	20	53	4	10	38	100
8	3	2	114	60	62	33	9	5	188	100
9	12	6	122	59	53	26	19	9	206	100
10	5	2	153	60	79	31	17	7	254	100
Mean	2.5	2	57.7	52	34.3	39	6.7	7	101.2	100

TABLE 9.4
Total Number and Proportion of Details Provided by Each Child

Child#	Number	%
1	30	2
2	24	2
3	53	4
4	56	4
5	112	8
6	91	6
7	42	3
8	150	10
9	258	18
10	624	43
Mean	144	100

TABLE 9.5
Reasons for Minimization and Nondisclosure

Child #	Guilt-Shame	Secrecy Pact	Fear of Disbelief	Fear of Reprisals	Immaturity	Not memorable
1					X	X
2					X	X
3					X	X
4						X
5		X	X	X		
6		X	X	X		
7		X				
8		X				
9			X	X		
10	X					

interviews, documents from the police investigations and the court files were also studied.

As summarized in table 9.5, this analysis made clear that there were several reasons why the children may have failed to provide more information about their experiences.

Child #1, a boy, was 3 years old when he was exploited briefly on a single occasion during which the perpetrator filmed the boy's genitals while instructing him how to swim safely. The boy was a relative of the perpetrator and he disclosed very little in the interview, which took place more than a year and a half after the abuse. Because of his youth and immaturity, the boy may not have understood that he was being abused. The incident may not have been salient. In

by Each Child

%
2
2
4
4
8
6
3
10
18
43
100

sure	aturity	Not memorable
X	X	
X	X	
X	X	X

addition, the lengthy delay between incident and interview may have allowed the child to forget the incident.

Child #2 was 3.7 years old when abused on a single occasion and 4.1 when interviewed. The boy was familiar with the perpetrator who masturbated the boy while asking him if he needed to urinate. The abuse lasted less than two minutes. In the interview, the boy confirmed that he had been touched. The child's age may explain the small number of details he provided. In addition, the abuse did not appear unpleasant and the incident was brief. As a result it may not have been very memorable.

Child #3 was between 3.2 and 3.8 years of age when he was abused six times. About two years passed before he was interviewed at 5.4 years of age. In the first recorded incident, the boy was masturbated by the perpetrator at the day care center while the perpetrator was changing his diaper. The boy was lying on a changing table and his face was hidden behind a cloth. The next abusive events happened over four consecutive days when the perpetrator was babysitting. The perpetrator told the boy that he wanted to see if the child had any grit on his penis or if it was injured.

This boy disclosed very little in the interview. When asked if the man had done something he did not like, he said "No". As with the first two children, these incidents were not unpleasant and the child may well not have understood that he was being abused. In addition, there was an extended delay between the incidents and the interview and this, too, may contribute to the explanation of why this child provided so little information and denied that he had been abused.

Child #4 was abused once when he was 5.4 years old. He was interviewed 1.8 year later. In the recorded incident, the child was bathing naked outdoors when the perpetrator invited him to visit his house nearby in order to find some equipment. Filming him from behind when the boy was searching for some equipment, the perpetrator briefly touched the boy's genitals while talking to him in a friendly manner. When interviewed, however, the boy provided little information and did not mention being filmed or touched. Again, it is possible that this incident happened so long before and was so brief and benign that it was not memorable.

Child #5, in contrast, was subjected to 74 different videotaped incidents of abuse over a period of slightly more than one year. This child was between 4.2 and 5.3 years of age during this period of abuse. The interval between the first incident and the interview was 1.7 years, and between the last incident and the interview, 6 months. Judging from the videotapes, many of the experiences should have been memorable, especially those in which the child was coerced to participate as well as threatened. At least eight times, the perpetrator was recorded telling the child to keep the abuse secret. The child did not

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disclose a great deal in the interview about what he experienced and he denied that the perpetrator had been unkind to him.

This child's parents did not meet his needs for parental support and the perpetrator, who was a relative, largely controlled and cared for him. Fearing punishment and perhaps further abuse if he told anyone, the boy appeared to have chosen not to tell more than he did.

Child #6 was abused twice when he was 6.8 and about 7.6 years old. The delays between the two incidents and the interview were 10 and 2 months respectively. It is possible that the boy did not perceive the first videotaped sexual abuse as such because he was simply filmed while bathing naked. The second time, however, the child was severely abused. Although he was quiet and the film did not show his face, it seems unlikely that he was asleep. In one of the interviews, interestingly, the perpetrator said the boy "had pretended" to be asleep.

In the interview, the child was reluctant to disclose and said that the perpetrator had told him not to tell. Like child number 5, this child was dependent on the perpetrator and had been punished during the years he had known him without being supported by his single mother. The perpetrator told him not to discuss his experiences. The boy may have feared not being believed by his parent and being punished by the perpetrator if he told.

Child #7 was 6 years old when he was abused three times on two consecutive days. He was interviewed when he was 7.8 years old. The boy first met the perpetrator at day care and this man later served as babysitter. It is not certain that this boy knew what was happening on the first occasion because the perpetrator, while abusing him, talked about the need to remove grit from the child's penis. The second time, however, when being masturbated, the child was instructed twice not to tell anyone about the perpetrator's conduct. This boy, apparently, did what the man told him to do.

During the interview the boy continued to deny that anything exceptional had happened even when the police officer explicitly asked him about details of abuse. In this case, the boy had been instructed not to talk and this may have prevented him from telling.

Child #8 was exploited over a year long-period when he was between 4.4 and 5.2 years of age and was videotaped 23 times. The delay between the first incident and the interview was 2.2 years and between the last incident and the interview 1.4 years.

The child was first abused at day care and thereafter abused while the perpetrator was babysitting in the child's home. The child was bribed and told that the perpetrator loved him at the same time as he was being subjected to painful abuse. Additionally, the child was told that the activities were forbidden. The perpetrator was recorded seven times telling the child not to tell anyone about the perpetrator's activities. The instructions may have prevented the child from saying more than he did.

In the case of **Child #9**, the perpetrator was babysitting the child, who was 6.10 years old at the time of the single, nine-minute-long filmed incident. The boy was interviewed 1.1 year after this incident. The boy was familiar with the perpetrator and the perpetrator cared for him frequently. The perpetrator's masturbation of the child was obvious and they communicated about what was going on. At times during the incident the boy told the perpetrator that he did not want to participate but he seemed coerced to follow the perpetrator's instructions.

In the first interview, when he was 7.11 years old, the boy said the perpetrator was stupid and had slapped him when he was disobedient. The boy admitted that the perpetrator had filmed his penis one time but he did not say anything about the masturbation even when the police officer tried to get him to tell more.

The child's minimized version can be explained by the fact that he had reasons to fear reprisals from the perpetrator and that this child could not rely on his parents' support. For unrelated reasons, this child was taken into the custody of the local social agency after the sexual abuse incident six months before being interviewed about the sexual abuse.

Child #10 was a relative who was abused for the first time when he was about 4.6 years of age, and the perpetrator was 13 years of age. The delay between the first incident and the interview was more than eight years. Altogether, the child participated in four different videotaped incidents that involved oral intercourse and anal penetration. The child was almost 11 years old when the perpetrator (then aged 20 years) videotaped the last three abuse acts. The last time this boy was abused was about one and a half years before the interview.

This boy was the one who gave the most details when interviewed although he was not specific about what happened on each occasion and instead blended information from the different incidents. He underestimated both the length of the incidents and what actually happened each time. He said he did not think about telling, he did not dare to tell, he was afraid and did not know how to tell either. He said he tried to forget his experiences.

The boy considered the perpetrator to be a "fairly good friend" and described the experiences as unpleasant. Nine times during the interview, he said he did not want to participate in the sexual abuse, and he said ten times that he did not understand what was going on between him and the perpetrator. During the actual incidents, however, the boy also played an active role, even offering suggestions about what they should do.

Even though this boy gave the most details, he still revealed little about his actual experiences. This minimization appeared to reflect the boy's assumption of responsibility for what happened—he appeared to feel ashamed because of his active role in the incidents.

DISCUSSION

This study helps explain why some children minimize, delay disclosure, and even deny their experiences of sexual abuse. At least six of the children we studied experienced abusive incidents which should have been memorable. Some of them refused to admit that sexual abuse had occurred, however. Four children seem to have been unaware of what happened and could not "remember" or provide specific details about their abuse. These four were also young when abused, and this too may have affected their ability to understand and encode the events. They may have been enticed to participate without realizing they were being abused.

Close relationships with the perpetrator may have prevented the children from disclosing; consistent with this, children may be less likely to disclose abuse the more closely related they are to the perpetrator (DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). All of the children knew this man and were dependant on him in important ways. He was a powerful figure in their lives. Of the six children who experienced memorable or severe abuse, three were relatives and three were familiar with the perpetrator after he cared for them at day care or as a babysitter at home. Bussey, Lee, and Grimbeek (1993) have shown that children can refrain from describing their experiences when they fear reprisals by the perpetrator, and this appeared to be true for three of the children.

The perpetrator also concealed his intentions by frequently arranging his activities so that the children could not understand what he was doing. Children may also resist disclosure when they feel responsible and thereby guilty or ashamed for having participated in sexual activities. The perpetrator undoubtedly made use of his power as an adult in order to satisfy his objectives, but in one case (number 10) the interactions with the boy were negotiated, and the boy even made suggestions about how he and the perpetrator might behave. Even if he did not want to participate, the boy may afterwards have felt responsible for what he had experienced. Only two years after the last incident, when the boy became aware that he was viewed by the authorities as a victim rather than as a responsible participant, did this boy feel comfortable describing some of the sexual abuse.

Instructions to keep a secret can have a powerful effect on 5- to 6-year old children (Bottoms, Goodman, Schwartz-Kenney, & Thomas, 2002; Pipe & Wilson, 1994), and three of the children who had memorable experiences were encouraged by the perpetrator to keep their interactions secret. These three were between 5 and 6 years of age when the last abuse happened. A fourth child told the police that he was instructed to keep the activities secret, but an examination of the data suggested that he was really at risk for being punished by the perpetrator. In this case, as in the case of child number 5, the combination of fear and demands to secrecy could have induced the children to minimize their abuse.

SUMMARY

We know from research that children can give accurate, detailed, and reliable information about their experiences of abuse (Orbach & Lamb, 1999; Lamb & Fauchier, 2001; Bidrose & Goodman, 2000), but we cannot be sure they will be motivated enough to disclose their experiences. Even when reports are delayed or inconsistent, furthermore, we should not consider them to be unreliable (Bottoms et al., 2002; Pipe & Goodman, 1991). Our findings show that children can have different reasons for not specifically reporting their experiences. It is important that interviewers recognize that they cannot expect children to disclose when they are not mature enough to understand what they experienced or when the incidents were innocuous and not especially memorable. Children may also minimize, delay disclosure or deny abuse when they are in a secrecy pact with the perpetrator, when they feel responsible for participating, or if they fear punishment by the perpetrator if they tell about their experiences. They may also fear not being believed by their parents.

Children are as unique as their experiences. Elicitation of information depends on understanding individual circumstances in order to facilitate disclosure. In order to obtain accurate and complete information, interviewers must adapt their techniques to the circumstances and motivations of individual victims. In addition, children who have been threatened with reprisals by a manipulative perpetrator and fear their parents will not be supportive must be reassured that they will be protected if they do disclose what has happened to them.

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