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## Individual and Family Variables Associated with Disclosure and Nondisclosure of Child Abuse in Israel

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When alleged victims fail to report their abuse when questioned about it, it is more difficult to protect both them and other children from further victimization, provide appropriate mental health services when those are warranted, or punish perpetrators. As a result, it is extremely important to determine both how often and why suspected victims do not disclose abuse when interviewed and also what distinguishes those who do disclose from those who do not. Estimates of the number of suspected victims who are actual victims vary widely, however, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, most studies involve small, selective, and unrepresentative samples, and this impedes generalization, particularly because the results reported by different researchers are often widely discrepant (London et al., chapter 2, this volume). Secondly, the way children are interviewed may powerfully influence whether they make allegations. For example, there is convincing evidence that leading and coercive practices, repeated questioning, or reliance on anatomically detailed dolls substantially

affect what children say (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995). Most studies of disclosure and nondisclosure do not provide sufficient information about the types of interviewing involved, but some professionals (e.g., London et al., chapter 2, this volume; Poole & Lindsay, 1998) have sharply criticized the interviewing procedures used in some of the most widely cited studies (Gonzalez, Waterman, Kelly, McCord, & Oliveri, 1993; Sorensen & Snow, 1991) arguing that they make it hard to determine whether the disclosures were valid. The present study is distinguished by its reliance on a complete national data set comprising all investigations conducted during a five-year period using a single standardized investigative interview protocol.

In the last decade, researchers have learned a great deal about the factors and conditions that influence the accuracy and reliability of children's reports of abuse (see Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Esplin, 2004, and Poole & Lamb, 1998, for reviews). This progress has facilitated attempts to develop investigative protocols that guide interviewers to employ "best practices" when interviewing alleged victims. One of those protocols, the NICHD investigative interview protocol (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000), was partially developed and field-tested in Israel, and its use has been mandatory nationwide for investigations of child sexual abuse since 1995 and for investigations of physical child abuse since 1998.

The NICHD protocol guides interviewers in detail through all phases of the investigative interview. In the introductory phase, the interviewer introduces himself or herself, clarifies the child's task, and explains the ground rules and expectations. The rapport-building phase that follows comprises two sections. The first is designed to create a relaxed, supportive environment for children and to establish rapport between the child and the interviewer. In the second, children are prompted to describe at least one neutral experienced event in detail so that the child understands his or her role as a crucial informant and can become familiar with the open-ended investigative strategies and techniques used to explore the alleged abuse.

The "getting the allegation" phase initiates the substantive parts of the interview using a graded series of prompts, progressing if necessary from open to focused, in an effort to identify the target event or events under investigation. The free recall phase follows as soon as the child mentions an incident that might be considered abusive. This phase begins with the main invitation ("Tell me everything that happened, from the beginning to the end, as best you can remember"). Follow up open-ended prompts and paired invitations are then used to elicit details about the alleged incident or incidents from free recall memory. Only after the open-ended questioning has been exhausted do interviewers move to focused questions. Suggestive utterances, which communicate what response is expected, are avoided throughout the interview.

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### A NATIONAL DATA BASE

The results reported below involve all child abuse investigations conducted in Israel between January 1, 1998, and December 31, 2002, during which time all youth investigators used the NICHD protocol in the course of their investigations. A total of 26,325 3- to 14-year-old alleged victims of sexual and physical abuse were involved. All the children were interviewed using the 1998 version of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol described by Orbach et al. (2000). A total of 140 experienced and trained youth investigators conducted all the investigative interviews.

#### FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DISCLOSURE AND NONDISCLOSURE

Just under two-thirds (17,174, 65.2%) of the children interviewed made an allegation during the investigative interview whereas a little over a third (9,151, 34.8%) did not. Children were significantly less likely to make allegations when physical (9,362, 60.9%) rather than sexual (7,813, 71.3%) abuse was suspected ( $p < .0001$ ). Table 4.1 summarizes the data on sexual abuse cases as a function of the variables explored in this study while table 4.2 summarizes the data on physical abuse cases.

##### Children's Age and Gender

Rates of disclosure varied significantly depending on the children's gender. In general, boys (36.9%) were slightly more likely than girls (32.9%) not to make a disclosure when interviewed ( $p < .0001$ ), but a closer examination of the data revealed that the difference was only significant when sexual abuse was suspected ( $p < .002$ ). Even more impressive than the gender differences were the differences by age ( $p < .0001$ ). More than half (52.4%) of the 3- to 6-year-olds interviewed made no allegation, compared with nearly a third (32.9%) of the 7- to 10-year-olds, and about a quarter (26.4%) of the 11- to 14-year-olds. Age differences were evident with respect to both physical and sexual ( $p < .0001$  for both) abuse suspicions.

##### Children's Level of Intellectual Functioning

Allegation rates also varied depending upon the children's perceived level of mental functioning ( $p < .0001$  for both sexual and physical abuse) which was evaluated by the interviewers using the following categorical scale: above average, average, below average, and very deviant. Nonallegation rates were lowest for "above average" children: 19.0% for sexual and 25.1% for physical abuse. The corresponding rates for "average" children were 27.6% and 39%; for "below average" children, 38.5% and 43.9%; and for "very deviant"

TABLE 4.1  
Allegation and Nonallegation Rates of Sexual Abuse in Relation to  
Individual and Family Characteristics

		<i>No Allegation</i>		<i>Allegation</i>		<i>Total</i>
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>
Age	3-6	1,160	52.5	1,049	47.5	2,209
	7-10	1,208	28.1	3,095	71.9	4,303
	11-14	808	18.1	3,668	81.9	4,476
Gender	Male	1,052	30.8	2,366	69.2	3,418
	Female	2,125	28.0	5,452	72.0	7,577
Child's mental functioning	Above average	62	19.0	264	81.0	326
	Average	2,519	27.6	6,610	72.4	9,129
	Below average	501	38.5	801	61.5	1,302
	Very deviant	82	46.6	94	53.4	176
Previous sexual abuse	Previous abuse	214	25.3	633	74.7	847
	No previous abuse	800	18.5	3,528	81.5	4,328
	Unknown	2,150	37.2	3,629	62.8	5,779
Sibling order	Oldest	2,160	36.0	3,838	64.0	5,998
	Middle	2,267	39.9	3,421	60.1	5,688
	Youngest	1,618	43.8	2,074	56.2	3,692
Family structure	Two parents	1,194	25.4	5,853	74.6	7,847
	Other	1,183	37.6	1,965	62.4	3,148
Displacement from home	No displacement	2,780	28.2	7,095	71.8	9,875
	Displacement	387	35.6	700	64.4	1,087
Relationship to suspect	Parent	2,312	79.1	612	20.9	2,924
	Nonparent	865	10.7	7,206	89.3	8,071

children, 46.6% and 53.9%. Evidently, there was a clear association between level of functioning and the children's tendency to allege that they had been abused: Children with the most pronounced mental handicaps were least likely to make allegations whereas those perceived to be most competent intellectually were most likely to do so.

#### Previous Experiences of Abuse

Children who had and had not made allegations in the past also differed with respect to the likelihood that they would make allegations when formally questioned, although there were important differences between those whose

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TABLE 4.2  
 Allegation and Non-Allegation Rates of Physical Abuse in Relation to  
 Individual and Family Characteristics

<u>Total</u> N			<u>No Allegation</u>		<u>Allegation</u>		<u>Total</u>
			n	%	n	%	N
2,209	Age	3-6	1,924	52.4	1,739	47.5	3,663
4,303		7-10	2,572	36.4	4,493	63.6	7,065
4,476		11-14	1,565	33.4	3,127	66.6	4,692
3,418	Gender	Male	3,503	39.5	5,366	60.5	8,869
7,577		Female	2,560	39.0	3,996	60.5	6,556
326	Child's mental functioning	Above average	91	25.1	272	74.9	363
9,129		Average	5,113	39.0	8,014	61.0	13,127
1,302		Below average	756	43.9	967	56.1	1,723
176		Very deviant	84	53.9	69	45.1	153
847	Previous physical abuse	Previous abuse	776	23.0	2,602	77.0	3,378
4,328		No previous abuse	979	37.5	1,629	62.5	2,608
5,779		Unknown	4294	45.6	5,115	54.4	9,409
5,998	Sibling order	Oldest	1,125	29.5	2,695	70.5	3,820
5,688		Middle	1,104	26.0	3,143	74.0	4,247
3,692		Youngest	917	32.2	1,933	67.8	2,850
7,847	Family structure	Two parents	3,845	40.5	5,648	59.5	9,493
3,148		Other	2,218	37.4	3,714	62.6	5,932
9,875	Displacement from home	No displacement	5,640	39.5	8,633	60.5	14,273
1,087		Displacement	405	36.3	710	63.7	1,115
2,924	Relationship to suspect	Parent	5,665	39.5	8,681	60.5	14,346
8,071		Nonparent	398	36.9	681	63.1	1,079

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alleged maltreatment involved sexual abuse and those whose alleged abuse involved physical abuse. Specifically, children who had previously alleged sexual abuse were less likely to make new allegations than other children (74.7% vs. 81.5%;  $p < .0001$ ), whereas children who had made previous allegations of physical abuse were more likely to make new allegations than other children (77.0% vs. 62.5%;  $p < .0001$ ).

Birth Order

Of the family variables studied (family structure, displacement from home, birth order), sibling status accounted for the greatest proportion of variance in

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allegation rates ( $p < .0001$  for both sexual and physical abuse), even after controlling for the children's age. Last-born children failed to make allegations more frequently (43.8% for sexual and 32.2% for physical abuse) than middle (39.9% and 26%) or first-born children (36% and 29.5%). Children without siblings failed to disclose suspected sexual abuse more often (37.9%) than children living in larger families (27.2%–27.9%;  $p < .0001$ ). When physical abuse was suspected, however, only children failed to disclose less often (35.8%) than children with siblings (38.6%–40%;  $p < .005$ ).

### Family Structure

The likelihood that children would make allegations also varied depending on family structure ( $p < .0001$  for sexual and physical abuse). Whereas about a quarter of the children living with both parents failed to disclose sexual abuse when interviewed, more than a third of the children living in other family configurations failed to disclose, and almost half of the children whose parents were divorced failed to disclose sexual abuse when this was suspected. When physical abuse (typically by parents) was suspected, children living with both parents failed to disclose slightly more often (40.5%) than children living in other family configurations (37.4%). Children living with their fathers and partners were much more likely to disclose physical abuse; only 28.3% of them failed to make allegations when interviewed.

### Displacement From Home

Children who had been removed from their homes and were thus no longer living with one or both parents failed to disclose more frequently (35.6%) than children living at home (28.2%;  $p < .0001$ ) when sexual abuse was suspected but less frequently (36.3%) than children living at home (39.3%;  $p < .019$ ) when physical abuse was suspected.

### Relationship Between Children and Suspects

The likelihood that children would make allegations when interviewed also varied dramatically depending on the relationship between the children and the suspects, although it was inherently difficult to identify suspects when the children failed to make allegations. The data provided here reflect the investigators' attempts to identify the likely suspects using all available information. When the investigators suspected that children had been abused by their parents but the children made no allegations, the cases were referred to the Child Protection Agency, which only has jurisdiction when within-family abuse is suspected. When the children did not identify suspects, as a result, we used referral to CPA as the criterion when defining suspects as either parents or nonparents.

Most suspects were parents (including stepparents, adoptive parents, and foster parents), and children were much more likely to make allegations when

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the suspect was not a parent or parent figure. Small cell sizes prompt caution generalizing from these results, but the data also show greatest unwillingness among the youngest children to make allegations against parents or parent figures ( $p < .0001$ ). The unwillingness to make accusations about parents or parent figures as opposed to other suspected perpetrators was especially marked when the alleged offenses were sexual in nature ( $p < .0001$  for sexual and  $p < .036$  for physical abuse), although in both cases the willingness to make allegations increased with age ( $p < .0001$  for both types of abuse; log linear  $p < .0001$ ).

In each age group, boys were less likely than girls to make allegations when sexual abuse by parents or parent figures was suspected, whereas there were no gender differences where physical abuse was concerned. Rates of sexual abuse disclosure by sons were 12.9%, 16.9%, and 11.9% for the 3- to 6-, 7- to 10-, and 11- to 14-year-old age groups, respectively, compared with 18.4%, 23.3%, and 32%, respectively, for daughters in the same age groups ( $ps < .017$ ,  $.009$ ,  $.0001$ , respectively). Gender differences in disclosure rates were largely accounted for by this unwillingness on the part of sons (especially adolescent sons) to make allegations of sexual abuse by their parents or parent figures. Again, however, caution is warranted when interpreting these data because suspects were often not clearly identified when children did not make allegations.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the statistics reported here, about two-thirds of the interviews with young suspected victims of abuse yielded allegations of abuse. Once suspicions were reported to the authorities, in other words, alleged victims were quite likely to provide reports that substantiated those suspicions. Especially impressive is the disclosure rate for sexual offenses—a little over 71% of these suspicions were confirmed when the alleged victims were formally interviewed by youth investigators. Compared to previous studies involving cases in which suspicions were not substantiated in other ways, this rate is at the high end of the range (percentile = 94) with just one study reporting a slightly higher disclosure rate (74%, Gordon & Jaudes, 1996).

In many of those other studies, the forensic interviews were presumably not as carefully structured as those we studied. Indeed, the relatively high disclosure rate obtained in the current study may reflect, at least in part, the nationwide reliance on a single empirically validated investigative tool, the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. The protocol includes a systematic effort to establish rapport with children and prepare them for their role as witnesses, thereby enhancing their willingness and capacity to be informative. Compared with interviews not guided by the protocol, protocol-guided interviews yield information that is more likely to be accurate (Orbach et al., 2000, Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001) and facilitate judgments

regarding credibility or validity (Hershkovitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, in press). As a result, it is possible that nationwide use of the NICHD protocol enhanced the willingness of children included in this study to disclose abuse.

The high disclosure rate reported here is also consistent with findings from another recent study conducted in the United States. Examining data compiled by a single agency, Pipe and her colleagues (2003) reported that 81% of the suspected victims interviewed using the NICHD protocol disclosed abuse.

The statistics reported here indicate that rates of disclosure vary systematically depending on a number of factors. Overall, children were less likely to make allegations when physical rather than sexual abuse was suspected, and in the case of both physical and sexual abuse, children were extremely unwilling to accuse their parents or parent figures. Because parents or parent figures were the suspected perpetrators in about one quarter of all alleged sexual abuse incidents, compared with almost all (93%) of the physical abuse incidents, the desire to avoid making allegations against parents or parent figures may well explain why children were less likely to make allegations when physical abuse is suspected.

Gender differences in disclosure rates were also affected by the alleged perpetrators' identity. Specifically, although there was no gender difference in the disclosure of physical abuse, boys were more reluctant than girls to make allegations of sexual abuse. Similar gender differences have been reported by other researchers (Ghetti, Alexander, & Goodman, 2002; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996).

Likewise, other researchers have reported that rates of disclosure vary depending on the age of the children interviewed, with preschoolers less likely to make allegations than older children (DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Gries et al., 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Wood, Orsak, Murphy, & Cross, 1996). We were able to confirm this trend in the large national data set available to us and showed that the relationship between age and disclosure rate continues into adolescence. Regardless of the type of abuse suspected or the relationship with suspected perpetrators, adolescents and pre-adolescents were more likely to disclose abuse than school-aged children, who were in turn, less reluctant than preschoolers.

A surprisingly large proportion of young (3- to 6-year-old) children did not allege abuse when questioned. Although it is possible that some of these interviews were triggered by unwarranted suspicions, the magnitude of the age differences we found suggests that both cognitive and motivational factors may be involved as well. In particular, it may be that the youngest children are disproportionately likely to misunderstand the purpose and focus of the investigative interview or the abuse itself, thereby failing to report abuse experiences that they remember and would be willing to discuss if they recognized the investigators' interest. This possibility is supported by the link we found between the children's level of functioning and their tendency to disclose abuse when questioned. Nonallegation rates were higher for children



whose cognitive functioning appeared poorer than for children who seemed more competent intellectually.

The fact that the very young children more readily make allegations against familiar nonfamily members and strangers while avoiding allegations about parents or stepparents, however, suggests that many of the nonallegations may indeed be motivated, perhaps by threats or fears about possible repercussions. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that older children likewise avoided making allegations of sexual abuse against parents or parent figures.

The data presented here also highlight differences in family structure that are associated with variations in the rates of disclosure and non-disclosure, especially rates of disclosure of physical abuse by parents or guardians. Specifically, these Israeli children were less willing to disclose abuse when they lived at home with their biological parents rather than in other settings (e.g., foster families, boarding schools, institutions); children living with both parents were least likely to disclose. The greater dependence of such children on their parents, the children's greater sense of responsibility for protecting the integrity of the family, or direct and indirect pressure by the parents may all explain why children living with their parents are least likely to disclose abuse.

The presence of siblings seems to further motivate children to avoid disclosing physical abuse, with children especially unlikely to allege abuse when they have older siblings. In part, this finding may reflect the age differences discussed earlier, but in addition it appears that older siblings may be perceived by younger children as authorities who inhibit disclosure in much the same way that parents do.

Although the large sample size and the fact that all interviews were conducted in a standardized fashion increase the reliability of the findings reported here, their interpretation is still limited because we do not know how valid the children's allegations and nonallegations were. As a result, we do not know how likely real victims are to report their abuse, or how often false allegations are made. In addition, our analyses only involved cases that had come to the attention of official agencies, so we have no idea how many or how few cases of abuse take place without ever triggering any kind of official investigation.

Despite these limitations, the findings are noteworthy because they include all reported cases in an entire country (Israel) over a five-year period and thus provide more representative data than any other report to date. In particular, our study yielded invaluable information about the frequency with which suspected child abuse victims disclosed abuse when interviewed, and about the characteristics of suspected victims who were more or less likely to make disclosures when interviewed. As discussed earlier, we found that nearly two-thirds of suspected victims made allegations when questioned and that children were more likely to make allegations when sexual rather than physical abuse was suspected, perhaps in part because physical abuse was more likely than sexual abuse to involve the parents as suspected perpetrators, and

children of all ages were unlikely to name parent perpetrators. We also found a clear association between age and the likelihood that allegations would be made, with preschoolers most unlikely to make allegations when interviewed. Further research is clearly needed to determine why these developmental differences exist, and thus whether different interviewing strategies might be necessary when suspicions about young children arise.

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