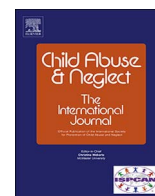


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Research article

Preschoolers' disclosures of child sexual abuse: Examining corroborated cases from Swedish courts



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ABSTRACT

Young victims of child sexual abuse can – for a range of developmental, motivational and contextual reasons – have difficulties disclosing their experiences. In the present study, corroborated court cases concerning 57 preschoolers' disclosures of sexual abuse were examined using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Together, the cases involved 53 girls and 4 boys between 2–6 years ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.2$) during the (first) incident of abuse. The children were between 3–7 years ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.2$) during their police interview. Analyses showed that many children could provide at least one central detail about the abuse to; i) informal disclosure recipients, and ii) during their police interview. However, the time up until their first disclosure was often delayed. A range of barriers for disclosing were observed in the court cases, and many young victims were assessed as reluctant during their police interview. Repeated sessions, direct questions, and other reassurances could at times facilitate the disclosure process. Other suggestions on actions and future research that may help young child abuse victims are discussed.

1. Preschoolers' disclosures of child sexual abuse: examining corroborated cases from swedish courts

A disclosure can be vital for the identification of child sexual abuse (CSA). It is therefore unsettling that international studies reveal widespread problems with underreporting and delayed disclosures (London, Bruck, Wright & Ceci, 2008). Children might carry the burden for years, or in some cases, a life-time (Lippert, Cross & Walsh, 2009). The consequences of not identifying CSA can be severe, as victims might suffer untreated physical or psychological symptoms from the abuse (Maniglio, 2009). Further, the child or other children could be endangered if the perpetrator reoffends (Paine & Hansen, 2002). During recent decades, collective research efforts have expanded our knowledge of factors surrounding children's disclosure tendencies. However, less is known in regards to the youngest and most vulnerable group of victims: preschoolers.

The present study aimed to examine CSA disclosures among young children in court cases with strong corroborative evidence substantiating the allegation. Focused was placed on two important phases in the disclosure process: the children's first disclosure and their formal disclosure to the police. Using quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches, we investigated disclosure rates, delays until disclosure, facilitating aspects and barriers for disclosing, and court assessments of the children's disclosure (or non-disclosure) during their police interviews. From an applied perspective, continuing to expand our insights into CSA disclosures can help focus police resources and policy decisions. Likewise, it can be of guiding value for credibility assessments in court, in the development of preventative programs, and as a resource to help victims and their families cope in the aftermath of abuse.

In cases involving young children, the allegation typically comes to the police attention through other processes than a direct

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report from the victim (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach & Esplin, 2008). The preliminary investigation can, for example, be initiated from findings of child pornography, a confession from the suspect to a lay person (such as a parent or other caregiver) or a witness testimony. Noticeable symptoms, such as the display of an overly sexualized behavior or signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, might also be a cause for concern. More commonly, the child discloses some piece of information to an adult, either spontaneously or after prompting, who thereafter contacts the police (Lippert et al., 2009). This will henceforth be referred to as an informal disclosure. Research shows that children who give an informal disclosure are more likely to disclose during a police interview than children who have not disclosed informally (e.g., London et al., 2008). However, the reaction and response given by the confidant can moderate this relationship. Distrust can, for example, decrease the likelihood that the child will disclose to the police (McElvaney, Green & Hogan, 2012). This is troublesome, especially as a recent study found that many children interviewed about CSA experienced strong emotional reactions (36%) and disbelief (32%) from their informal disclosure recipient (Ahern & Lamb, 2016).

A substantial proportion of child victims delay their disclosure, and some keep the abuse a secret for longer periods of time (London et al., 2008). Landberg et al. (2015), for example, reported that 33% of Swedish adolescents, who stated that they had been victims of sexual crimes, had never talked about their experiences before participating in the study. Researchers have identified a range of contextual, motivational, and developmental barriers that can hinder or delay children from telling someone. The perpetrator might use secrecy pacts, bribes, threats of violence, or other negative consequences as strategies to inhibit a disclosure (Lamb et al., 2008; Schaeffer et al., 2011). Furthermore, a child might conceal the crime due to feelings of shame, self-blame, guilt, a fear of being disbelieved, or concern for future consequences (Diesen & Diesen, 2009; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; McElvaney et al., 2014). A close relationship to the perpetrator has also been identified as a risk factor for longer delays and non-disclosures. These findings could, at least in part, be explained by the added complexity involved in intra-familial abuse, such as the fear of upsetting the family as well as the child's loyalty and dependence upon the abuser (e.g., Schaeffer et al., 2011; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002).

The disclosure rate among preschoolers is estimated to be lower than among school-aged children (Leach, Powell, Sharman, & Anglim, 2016). For younger children, a limited understanding of the crime and police investigation can for example impede their likelihood of disclosing (Schaeffer et al., 2011). It is also important to consider developmental limitations. Children are generally able to give basic reports of autobiographical memories around the age of three (e.g., Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Goodman & Melinder, 2007; Poole, Brubacher & Dickinson, 2015). Rapid changes occur thereafter; as children are quickly expanding both their vocabularies as well as their cognitive and social skills during the preschool years (e.g., Lamb et al., 2008; Lamb et al., 2011). In addition, their memory retrieval strategies are developing and preschoolers therefore require more external support and prompting to search for memory information (Poole et al., 2015). By examining abuse cases where the allegation can be substantiated by other evidence, researchers have started to investigate children's accuracy during police interviews (e.g., see review by Paz-Alonso, Ogle, & Goodman, 2013). Studies on corroborated cases show that child victims are generally accurate in their reports and can often describe a number of details relating to their experiences right before and after the assault, but tend to leave out sensitive information about the abusive act during their police interviews (e.g., Leander, Granhag, & Christianson, 2005; Orbach & Lamb, 1999). These findings are unlikely to reflect memory amnesia, but instead a conscious reluctance to disclose the most sensitive of details (Leander, 2010). Furthermore, preschool-aged victims have particular difficulties disclosing substantiated sexual abuse. For instance, Leander, Christianson and Granhag (2007, p. 127) reported that the youngest victims (3–5 years) in a stranger abduction case frequently responded to the interviewer's questions with "I don't want to talk about it" or "I don't remember". Sjöberg and Lindblad (2002) described that five out of ten preschoolers who had fallen victims to repeated abuse by the same perpetrator did not disclose during their police interviews. These children's reluctance could be due to young age, memory difficulties (e.g., long retention intervals), loyalty and direct dependence upon the abuser, as well as requests to keep it a secret (Cederborg, Lamb, & Laurell, 2007). However, previous studies investigating substantiated abuse against preschoolers have primarily been limited to single cases with few child victims (Cederborg et al., 2007; Leander et al., 2007; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002). Thus, there is a need to examine the phenomena in larger and more diverse samples to further increase our knowledge of preschoolers' disclosures. The present research aimed to contribute towards filling this gap by examining corroborated legal cases of CSA against preschoolers over a five-year period in Sweden. The purpose was to examine young children's disclosure rates and delays until first disclosure, as well as explore motivational aspects surrounding preschoolers' informal and formal disclosures.

2. Method

The present archival study examined corroborated Swedish court cases of sexual abuse against preschoolers tried during January 2010 to December 2014. In Sweden, judges need to produce an official statement (here referred to as a written verdict) including detailed information that constitutes the basis for their judicial decision (Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure, chapt. 30 par. 5). For CSA cases, this typically involves information about the police investigation, assessments of the complainant's, the defendant's, and witnesses' testimonies, as well as descriptions of the evidence presented in court. By quantifying this material, the aim was to provide an overview of the preschool-aged child victims' disclosure tendencies (i.e. disclosure rates and delays up until first disclosure) and to test a set of hypotheses using inferential statistics. Our first hypothesis was that children who had made an informal disclosure before their forensic interview would be more likely to disclose the abuse to the police. Our second hypothesis was that victims of repeated abuse would delay their first disclosure for longer periods of time compared to victims of a single occasion of abuse. Our third hypothesis was that an intra-familial relationship with the perpetrator (i.e. parent, caregiver, sibling or close relative) would be associated with longer delays compared to an extra-familial relationship. For the qualitative analysis, we formulated three central research questions; i) *What external factors, described by the courts, could facilitate the preschoolers to disclose*, ii) *What barriers, described by the courts, could hinder the preschoolers from disclosing*, and iii) *According to the written verdicts, how did the preschoolers report the*

abuse during their forensic interviews?

2.1. Data collection

The court cases were extracted from a data set containing 177 Swedish verdicts on child sexual against preschoolers issued between January 2010 to December 2014. An extensive data collection procedure had been carried to collect court cases through contact with all Swedish District Courts ($n = 48$) and Courts of Appeal ($n = 6$), as well as manual searches of legal databases. The data set is likely to reflect the clear majority of cases tried during the five-year period. A set of inclusion criteria was created to meet the aims of the current study; 1) the complainant was between 3 and 7 years old during the police interview, 2) the defendant was convicted of child sexual abuse 3) the case contained at least one piece of corroborative evidence in the form of video-recordings or pictures depicting the abuse, DNA evidence, conclusive medical examinations supporting the allegation, a direct eyewitness observation or a detailed suspect confession. A total of 37 District Court verdicts concerning 57 preschool-aged children fulfilled the three criteria listed above (with an adjacent Court of Appeal verdict in 15 of the cases). Said verdicts were geographically spread across Sweden, representing 25 out of the total 48 District Courts. A suspect confession was found in 61.4% of the cases, child pornography of the abuse in 38.6%, a direct witness observation in 26.3%, DNA evidence in 14% and a conclusive medical examination supporting the abuse allegation in 7% of all cases. See the supplementary material for a detailed overview of the corroborative evidence in each case.

2.2. Legal cases

Of the 57 victims, 53 (93%) were girls and 4 (7%) were boys. The mean age at the onset of abuse was 4.3 years ($SD = 1.2$), with ages ranging from 2–6 years. During the forensic interview, the children were between 3–7 years ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.2$). Detailed age information was missing in three cases but it was clear from the context that the child was a preschooler. See Table 1 for a more

Table 1
Case characteristics sectioned after frequency of abuse.

Characteristics	Type of Abuse		Total $n = 57$
	Single occasion $n = 20$	Repeated abuse $n = 37$	
Gender			
Girl	19 (95%)	34 (91.9%)	53 (93%)
Boy	1 (5%)	3 (8.1%)	4 (7%)
Age at the onset of abuse			
2 years	0 (0%)	4 (10.8%)	4 (7%)
3 years	3 (15%)	8 (21.6%)	11 (19.3%)
4 years	5 (25%)	8 (21.6%)	13 (22.8%)
5 years	5 (25%)	10 (27%)	15 (26.3%)
6 years	6 (25%)	6 (16.2%)	11 (19.3%)
No information	2 (10%)	1 (2.7%)	3 (5.3%)
Age at the child interview			
3 years	2 (10%)	4 (10.8%)	6 (10.5%)
4 years	4 (20%)	4 (10.8%)	8 (14%)
5 years	4 (20%)	9 (24.3%)	13 (22.8%)
6 years	7 (35%)	11 (29.7%)	18 (31.6%)
7 years	1 (5%)	8 (21.6%)	9 (15.8%)
No information	2 (10%)	1 (2.7%)	3 (5.3%)
Relationship to perpetrator			
Biological father	0 (0%)	2 (5.4%)	2 (3.5%)
Stepfather	2 (10%)	4 (10.8%)	6 (10.5%)
Close relative	2 (10%)	7 (18.9%)	9 (15.8%)
Friend of the family	3 (15%)	6 (16.2%)	9 (15.8%)
Preschool personnel	12 (60%)	9 (24.3%)	21 (36.8%)
Doctor	0 (0%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (1.8%)
Stranger	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
No information	0 (0%)	8 (21.6%)	8 (14%)
Location of the (first) incident of abuse			
Preschool	12 (60%)	9 (24.3%)	21 (36.8%)
Victim's home	5 (25%)	15 (40.5%)	20 (35.1%)
At friend/relative	2 (10%)	7 (18.9%)	9 (15.8%)
Other	1 (5%)	3 (8.1%)	4 (7%)
No information	0 (0%)	3 (8.1%)	3 (5.3%)

detailed description of the current case characteristics. A total of 37 different men were convicted for sexual abuse of one or several of the children. Thirty (81.1%) of the verdicts concerned one preschooler. Four men (4%) were convicted for crimes against two children and two men (2%) for abusing three children. The remaining fourteen victims had been abused by the same perpetrator, who had worked at their preschool. The men ranged in age from 15 to 72 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.7$, $SD = 16.7$) and the majority received a jail sentence ($n = 24$, 65%) with a median sentencing length of 30 months ($M = 40.4$, $SD = 38.4$, range = 3 – 144 months). The remaining defendants received juvenile treatment ($n = 10$, 27%) or closed psychiatric care ($n = 3$, 8%).

2.3. Quantitative measures

The court documents were coded following a coding manual containing 142 different variables for each District court case and 62 variables for Court of Appeal cases. The variables derived from previous court verdict research and studies on children's witness abilities (see [Ernberg, 2016](#); for a more detailed description). Five variables were used as central measures in the current inferential analyses; informal disclosure rate, formal disclosures rate, relationship to the perpetrator, frequency of abuse, and delay until first disclosure. Disclosure rates were examined from two dichotomized variables (0 = No, 1 = Yes) reflecting if the child had disclosed some central piece of information concerning the abuse i) informally, and ii) during their police interview. That is, if the verdict contained quotations from the child's testimony concerning at least one detail relating to the abuse (e.g., "He touched my wee-wee") or stated that the child had provided abuse-related information to a witness or the police (e.g., "The child described the abuse in detail during their police interview"). If the child had not reported the abuse, this was generally stated in the verdict (e.g., "The child did not provide any information relating to the abuse allegation during their police interview") and coded as a non-disclosure. Relationship to the perpetrator was coded as intra-familial if the perpetrator was a caregiver (biological or step-parent), sibling or close relative. Frequency of abuse was coded as either repeated abuse or a single occasion of abuse. Delays until first disclosure were initially coded as: *disclosed directly/within six months/within one year/within two years/within three years/after more than three years*. A delay until disclosure variable for use in the inferential analyses was thereafter created involving two scale steps: *the child disclosed within one year or after more than one year*.

2.4. Inter-rater reliability

Initially, the first and second author separately coded 25% ($n = 25$) randomly selected court case documents from the larger data set. Coder agreement for each variable in the coding manual was calculated as instances of agreement divided by possible instances of agreement ([Ernberg, 2016](#)). Taken together, the inter-rater agreement reached an agreement level of 0.92. Disagreements were examined and resolved through discussion. The first and second author thereafter coded the remaining court documents.

2.5. Qualitative analysis

To qualitatively examine the preschoolers' disclosures of sexual abuse, we conducted a thematic multiple-case study. This method aims to provide a better understanding of the general phenomenon by comparing patterns of detail similarities between cases ([Willing, 2013](#)). Information in the court documents concerning the children's disclosures was extracted and analyzed following a realistic epistemological approach, meaning that we assumed that the descriptions in the written verdicts in large reflected the evidence presented in court and the judges' experiences of real phenomena. It is, nonetheless, important to keep in mind that the verdicts were written retrospectively and could have been affected by different biases and memory errors.

Initially, all information in the verdicts concerning 1) *the initiation of the police report*, 2) *the child's informal disclosures*, 3) *the forensic interview* and 4) *barriers and facilitating factors for disclosing* was identified and marked with code labels. The verdicts were thereafter reread two times by the first author to identify additional descriptive codes from the data (see [Miles & Huberman, 1994](#) for a more detailed description of the present coding process). During this phase of the coding, additional interpretative codes were added (e.g. *Initially reluctant to disclose the abuse*; *Emotionally difficult to disclose*) and the initial descriptive codes that contained similar information were merged together (see [Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)).

Overviews of the disclosure process in each individual case were created in the form of flowcharts (see [Fig. 1](#) for an example). The purpose was to follow the chain of events, from the reason behind the initiation of the police investigation and up until the case reached the court room. These were used as contextual reference points during subsequent interpretations to try to maintain a holistic approach. Separate written summaries with all information pertaining to the three central research questions (e.g., barriers for a disclosure) were created for each case from all details and codes extracted within the verdicts. The individual summaries were closely compared and grouped together under different broader categories based on their shared characteristics and code patterns. For example, all cases where the child reluctantly disclosed the abuse to the police were sorted together (Thematic category: "Reluctant disclosures"). These subcategories were thereafter discussed between the authors, and checked against the verdicts and flow charts to assure that the findings reflected the original data. Lastly, quotations that captured relevant aspects for each category were chosen, translated (by the first author), and edited to facilitate reading.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The data collection was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Committee Board in Gothenburg, Sweden. All identifiable markers have been omitted or edited to protect the identities of the involved parties.

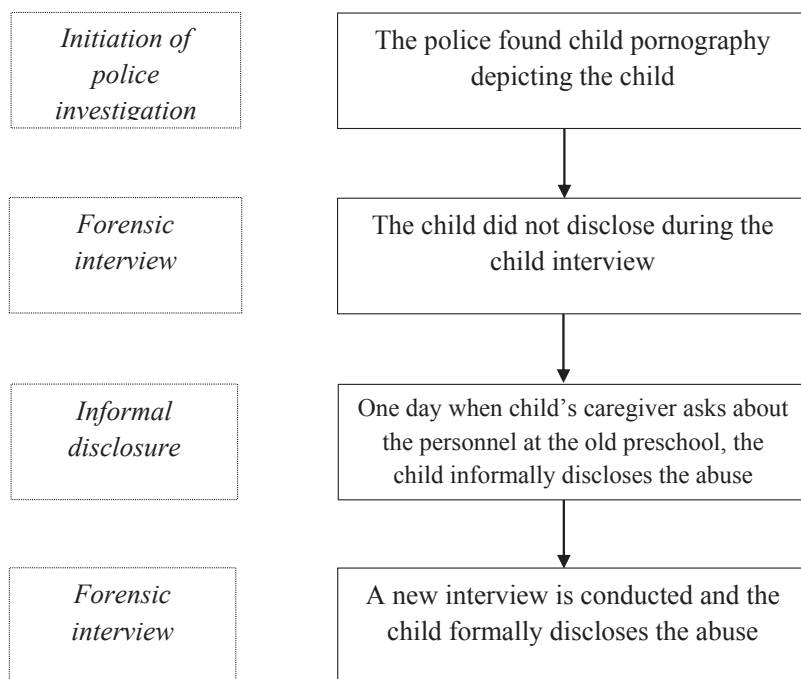


Fig. 1. Example flow chart of a disclosure process (girl, 4 years).

3. Results

3.1. Part I: quantitative analysis

3.1.1. The children's informal disclosures

Of 47 cases that contained information on the children's informal disclosures, a total of 31 victims (66%) told someone about the abuse before their police interview and 7 victims (14.9%) after their police interview. Nine children (19.1%) had not made an informal disclosure at the time of the court hearing. A Fisher's exact test was conducted to test if giving an informal disclosure before the interview was associated with more formal disclosures to the police (Hypothesis 1). The relation was statistically significant, $p = 0.001$.

The clear majority of children who disclosed informally, either before or after the interview, first confided in their mother (24 children, 63.2%) or to both parents (6 children, 15.8%). Four victims (10.5%) disclosed to their preschool teacher, two children told a peer (5.3%), one told her psychologist (2.6%) and one child chose to confide in her father (2.6%). Among the thirty-one children who disclosed before the interview, 18 (58.1%) had told someone spontaneously and 13 (41.9%) after prompting. These proportions changed, if considering the frequency of abuse. Of the victims who had been abused on a single occasion, 69.2% ($n = 9$) disclosed spontaneously and 30.8% ($n = 4$) after prompting. In cases of repeated abuse, 50% ($n = 9$) told someone spontaneously and 50% ($n = 9$) after being asked. See Table 2 for a description of time delays in cases where the child disclosed the abuse before the police interview.

Table 2
Time delays for informal disclosures made before the police interview.

Delay before disclosure	Type of Disclosure		Total $n = 31$
	Disclosed spontaneously $n = 18$	Disclosed after question $n = 13$	
Directly	6 (33.3%)	2 (15.4%)	8 (25.8%)
Within 6 months	5 (27.8%)	3 (23.1%)	8 (25.8%)
Within 1 year	2 (11.1%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (9.7%)
Within 2 years	3 (16.7%)	2 (15.4%)	5 (16.1%)
Within 3 years	1 (5.6%)	3 (23.1%)	4 (12.9%)
No information	1 (5.6%)	2 (15.4%)	3 (9.7%)

Note. These frequencies (and proportions) only concern the children who disclosed informally before their police interview.

3.1.2. The children's formal disclosures

In the verdicts that included a description of the child's testimony ($n = 49$), forty-one preschoolers (83.7%) had disclosed some piece of information concerning the sexual abuse allegation and eight children (16.3%) had remained silent about their victimization. Among the children that disclosed, the corroborative evidence showed that seven children omitted to report separate incidents of abuse that could be verified (e.g. from videos of the crime). That is, the victim could, for example, report being abused last week, but leave out a previous incident of abuse that happened several months ago. Of the verdicts that reported the number of child interviews conducted by the police ($n = 45$), just above half had been interviewed once (23 children, 51.1%). Thirteen children were interviewed twice (28.9%), five children were interviewed three times (11.1%), three children four times (6.7%) and one child was interviewed on six separate occasions (2.2%). Some verdicts included information regarding the judges' assessments of the child interviewer's performance. In five cases, the interviews were deemed to be of low or partially low quality. The occurrence of leading questions was mentioned in ten verdicts and the absence of leading questions in seven verdicts.

3.1.3. Delays before the first disclosure

Forty-three children (75%) disclosed at least one central piece of information about their abuse informally and/or to the police. Eight out of those children (18.6%) disclosed directly after the first incident of abuse and twenty children disclosed within a year (46.5%). However, fifteen of the preschoolers (34.9%) delayed their first disclosure for more than one year's time and for eight children, it took three years or longer before they told someone. As can be seen in Table 3, the children who had been victims of repeated abuse tended to delay their disclosures for longer time periods (Hypothesis 2). A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the predicted association between frequency of abuse and delays until first disclosure. The association was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 43) = 5.62, p = 0.018$. Based on the odds ratio, children who had fallen victims to repeated abuse were 6.5 times more likely to disclose for the first time after more than one year. A Fisher's Exact Probability test was also conducted to examine whether intra-familial abuse cases were associated with longer delays before disclosure compared to extra-familial abuse cases (Hypothesis 3). There was a significant association between the relationship to the perpetrator and delay before disclosure, $p = 0.01$. The odds ratio indicated that children were 8 times more likely to wait more than one year before disclosing in cases of intra-familial abuse compared to extra-familial abuse.

Table 3
Time delays before first disclosure divided by type of abuse.

	Frequency		
	Single Occasion $n = 15$	Repeated Abuse $n = 28$	All cases $n = 43$
Directly	8 (53.3%)	0 (0%)	8 (18.6%)
Within 6 months	4 (26.7%)	12 (42.9%)	16 (37.2%)
Within 1 year	1 (6.7%)	3 (10.7%)	4 (9.3%)
Within 2 years	1 (6.7%)	6 (21.4%)	7 (16.3%)
Within 3 years	1 (6.7%)	4 (14.3%)	5 (11.6%)
> 3 years	0 (0%)	3 (10.7%)	3 (7%)

Note. The frequencies (and proportions) concern the time duration up until the children's first disclosure (either informally or formally).

3.2. Part II: qualitative analysis

The qualitative findings are organized according to the themes identified for each of the three central research questions. First, facilitating aspects for a first disclosure and barriers that could hinder or delay a disclosure are outlined. Second, three themes identified from the courts' descriptions of the children's disclosure during their police interview are described; direct disclosures, reluctant disclosures and non-disclosures. Shared characteristics found in each of the three disclosure themes are organized into subcategories and exemplified in more detail.

3.3. Facilitators and barriers behind the first disclosure

An overview of the factors extracted in the verdicts that could facilitate preschoolers to disclose the abuse, and the barriers that could hinder or delay their first disclosures will be presented in categorical form (see Table 4).

3.3.1. Facilitating aspects

A number of young children delayed their disclosure up until someone asked them. As seen in Table 4, being asked was a trigger for disclosure discussed in sixteen of the reviewed verdicts. The reasons behind this question varied between cases. Behavioral changes (e.g., reoccurring nightmares, wetting the bed, starting to distance themselves from peers and adults, overly sexualized behavior) or a clear reluctance towards meeting the perpetrator could be causes for concern. Knowledge about the suspected abuse against another victim was also a factor for prompting frequently found when the abuse had taken place at the child's preschool. In some cases, an adult directly witnessed the abuse and talked to the child in connection to this. Disclosing the abuse after prompting

Table 4
Overview of subcategories for facilitating aspects and barriers to disclose.

Thematic category	Subcategory	Number of cases
Facilitating aspects	Someone asked the child	16
	Support from another victim	4
Barriers	Perpetrator asked them to keep it a secret	17
	The child tried to tell but was not believed	6
	Internal feelings (shame, guilt, self-blame)	5
	Fear of upsetting their care giver	4
	Loyalty towards the perpetrator	4
	Language or verbal difficulties	4

Note: The number of cases reported for different characteristics can contain the same case multiple times (e.g. a child can have experienced a fear of upsetting their parent *and* had language difficulties).

was often described as emotionally difficult. At times, the child needed a direct question or other reassurances before being able to tell:

The child asked her caregiver if children could go to jail. She answered no and asked why the child was wondering. The girl did not respond and got clearly distressed. The caregiver tried to comfort her and asked what had happened. Eventually, she said that X did things to her. That he had touched her wee-wee.

Support and concern from another victim was also a facilitator for disclosure. Four children had disclosed after hearing another victim talk about sexual abuse by the same perpetrator. One child, for example, spontaneously described the repeated abuse from her family member after overhearing her big sister disclose a similar incident to their caregiver. In another case, the victim disclosed to a preschool teacher after a friend who had been abused by the same perpetrator had convinced the child to tell. A lack of understanding for the crime was sometimes discussed, in which the court reasoned that the child inferred that abuse should be revealed first after hearing another victim disclosing.

3.3.2. Barriers

A range of barriers were identified by the courts that could hinder or delay the child from telling someone. Seventeen verdicts revealed that the perpetrator had tried to convince the child to keep the abuse a secret. This factor was often found in cases with longer delays before a disclosure. At times, the child's motivation behind telling an adult was driven by their wish to relieve their secret. In other cases, the child spontaneously told an adult that they had a secret with the perpetrator. This was, in turn, a cause for concern and lead the recipient to ask follow-up questions to the child, whom then disclosed the abuse. One verdict concerning prolonged abuse for several years described:

The child has always had a good relationship to him and he always told her that she cannot tell anyone. He said to her that it is a secret and she knows what a secret is. In a few other cases, the court stated that the child had decided to ignore the perpetrator's request and tell directly:

The child says that the defendant told them not to tell the teacher, but he did it anyway. When another child asked him why he told the teacher, he explained that he thought one should do that.

In six verdicts, the child had tried to tell someone about the abuse but was either misunderstood or disbelieved. Their young age could hinder adults from taking the allegation seriously. Not being believed could in turn keep the child from disclosing informally or during their police interview:

The mother asked the child why she was naked but the girl did not answer. She then came to think about a previous time when the girl had said that X had touched her wee-wee. She had then accepted X explanation and assumed it was fantasies.

Internal feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame were also assessed as factors that could hinder or delay young children from disclosing. Several verdicts stated that internal feelings may explain the victim's difficulties telling someone about their experiences:

She blames herself and feels a lot of guilt and shame for what has happened. She is unwilling to talk and says that her tummy hurts and that she is too ashamed to tell when her caregiver asks her. Similarly, some judges concluded that children had delayed their disclosures or omitted information about the abuse to protect their non-abusive care giver. Four verdicts stated that the children feared that an allegation would upset someone close to them:

The mother describes that she thinks the child is trying to talk down the severity of the experiences to protect her. The child feels guilty after seeing how sad she became and has asked for forgiveness for telling her about the abuse. One perpetrator had used threats about upsetting the mother as a strategy to inhibit the child from talking about the abuse. Four verdicts also identified loyalty to the perpetrator as a barrier to disclosure. The child could fear that the perpetrator would go to jail or that he would dislike them for sharing their secret:

She said several times that she didn't want to talk more about it. In the beginning, there was a lot of guilt. She could defend the

perpetrator and say that “X probably didn’t know what he was doing”.

The last barrier identified in the material concerned preschool children’s verbal abilities to disclose the abuse. Four children had been strategically targeted because they were less likely to tell due to young age (between 2 and 3 years) or language difficulties:

The defendant explained that he targeted the child in part because she did not speak Swedish and therefore had fewer opportunities to tell someone.

3.4. The police interview

The courts’ descriptions of the children’s disclosures during their police interview were also analyzed thematically. Forty-three verdicts contained richer descriptions about the police interview. These cases were categorized into three different types of disclosures; direct disclosures, reluctant disclosures and non-disclosures. See [Table 5](#) for an overview of the findings.

3.4.1. Direct disclosures

In eleven cases, the courts expressed that the children disclosed during the first forensic interview without clear signs of reluctance. Notably, the children had told someone informally in all cases except one (that did not contain any information about informal disclosures). The police investigations were typically initiated directly after these informal disclosures. Some children understood beforehand that their task was to explain what had happened to the police:

During the first interview, the child was concentrated and started to tell on her own initiative. It was clear that someone has explained the purpose of the interview to her.

Several verdicts containing direct disclosures described that the child had spontaneously delivered central details of value for the investigation. Furthermore, three children were assessed to have been exposed to leading questions from the interviewer, but remained resistant to these suggestions and maintained their testimony:

There was no hesitation in her details about the events. She has, on the contrary, corrected the interviewer when he or she misunderstood her. When she was unsure or asked questions regarding unrelated events, she clearly showed her uncertainty and avoided to answer.

Testimonies from a direct disclosure were assessed as highly reliable by the courts. However, a few children had felt questioned when they were called to a second interview and asked the same questions. This resulted in poor interviews that did not contribute any more information, and it could leave the child feeling sad or upset.

3.4.2. Reluctant disclosures

Reluctance during the disclosure of abuse was a common theme in the courts’ assessments of the preschool children’s testimonies. In seventeen verdicts, the court mentioned emotional difficulties and distress as factors that were present during the forensic interviews. One District court for example described the struggles of a young child who had been repeatedly abused by a close relative:

The child did not want to talk about the defendant during the first child interview. When asked questions about him, the child became quiet//During the next interview, the child spoke reluctantly and briefly about the incident and tried to lead the conversation towards other topics. There is nothing in the testimony that gives the impression of being fabricated, but rather that she has experienced something that is difficult to talk about. This for example becomes evident when the child wants to cover her ears when talking. The reluctant disclosures were often described as brief and in short bursts. Several children indicated that they were

Table 5
Overview of subcategories for disclosure tendencies during child interviews.

Thematic category	Subcategory	Number of cases
Direct disclosures (<i>n</i> = 11)	Disclosed without reluctance during the first interview	11 (100%)
	Sensitive details were delivered spontaneous	7 (64%)
	The child was clearly resistant to leading questions	3 (27%)
	Had a negative experience of the second interview	3 (27%)
	Displayed emotional difficulties disclosing	17 (71%)
Reluctant disclosures (<i>n</i> = 24)	Did not disclose all of the verified occasions of abuse	6 (25%)
	Several interviews were required before disclosure	4 (16%)
	Required other reassurances	4 (16%)
	A direct question was required before disclosure	3 (13%)
	Did not tell anyone before or after the interview/-s	5 (63%)
Non-disclosures (<i>n</i> = 8)	Had been strategically targeted by the perpetrator	4 (50%)
	The child was asleep/did not comprehend the situation	2 (25%)

Note: The number of cases reported for different characteristics within each category can contain the same case multiple times (e.g. a child can display emotional difficulties disclosing *and* require multiple interviews).

uncomfortable with the interview situation and/or that they wanted to leave:

It is clear that the child does not want to talk about the events she described in the former interview, nor the information she disclosed to her teacher. When questioned about it, she turns to her teddy bear and starts to whisper to it. It is obvious that the child wants to be left alone.

Six victims disclosed some, but not all, of the verified incidents of abuse. When confronted about this by the interviewer, some denied the event or said that they did not remember. Several children had required multiple interviews before they disclosed the abuse. Other reassurances or techniques could also be required. This, for example, included informing the child that his or her caregiver could not overhear what was said in the interview room, and that it was okay to talk about the crime:

She answered the questions that were asked in an avoidant manner ('I don't know' and 'I don't remember'). It was first after she had asked and been reassured that the interviewer would not be angry at her that she started to talk about the abuse.

Three verdicts furthermore emphasized that direct prompting was required from the interviewer before the child disclosed. Unlike the children who made a direct disclosure, few who made a reluctant disclosure had spontaneously disclosed the abuse to someone. The police investigation was instead most commonly initiated after an adult had suspected abuse and asked the child, whom then disclosed. Delayed disclosures, ranging from a few months to several years, were present. Moreover, nearly 80% of the children who made a reluctant disclosure had fallen victims to repeated abuse by the same perpetrator.

3.4.3. Non-disclosures

In eight cases, the child did not disclose the abuse to the police. Three victims had told someone else about the abuse. Hence, the majority had not told anyone neither before nor after the police interviews. Four children had been strategically targeted according to the perpetrator, whom assumed that their developmental and/or language barriers would hinder a disclosure. In two cases, the court reasoned that the child had been asleep or abused for a very brief length of time, and might therefore not have encoded the situation into their long-term memory.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate preschoolers' disclosures of sexual abuse in court cases with strong corroborative evidence. Using quantitative measures, the children's disclosure rates and delays until first disclosure were examined. A total of 43 children (75%) had disclosed some detail about their victimization informally and/or to the police. In line with previous research (e.g., Lamb et al., 2008; London et al., 2008), children who made an informal disclosure were more likely to disclose the abuse during their forensic interview. Delays between the (first) incident of abuse and the first disclosure were common. For approximately one third of the children who did disclose, the delay was longer than one year and several preschoolers kept the abuse a secret for more than half of their young lives. Victims of repeated abuse tended to withhold their first disclosure for longer periods of time. Importantly, as a disclosure can be vital for the identification of suspected abuse, children who did not report the abuse directly might be at a higher risk of repeated victimization (Diesen & Diesen, 2009). Similar to previous findings on risk factors for delays and non-disclosures (e.g., Goodman-Brown, 2003), the present analysis showed that children abused by a family member or close relative were more likely to delay their first disclosure. This is concerning, as preschoolers are particularly vulnerable to prolonged intra-familial abuse in their home environment (Fischer & McDonald, 1998).

While many preschoolers did provide information in regards to their victimization, the path to disclosure could be filled with hurdles. Support from another victim and questions from concerned adults could facilitate the young children towards disclosing the abuse. Promises of keeping the crime a secret and loyalty towards the perpetrator could, on the other hand, hinder or delay the child from telling. Likewise, internal feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame as well as a fear of upsetting their (non-abusive) caregiver were other common barriers observed by the courts. Tragically, a few children had tried to reveal the abuse but were either misunderstood or distrusted by their first recipient. Furthermore, and in line with previous research (McElvaney & Culhane, 2015), preschoolers often waited with disclosing until someone asked them and hence, provided them with the opportunity to tell. The qualitative analysis also indicated that, although many children could provide some piece of information about the abuse to the police, their disclosure process was often perceived as emotionally demanding. Repeated interviews, direct questions, and reassurances regarding the children's individual fears could at times facilitate this process. Children who had disclosed directly could, on the other hand, display distress when called to a second interview and asked the same questions.

The current findings highlight that preschoolers often have their own fears and barriers for telling. Young children might not understand the purpose of the interview, the crime they have been victims to, or the consequences of disclosing. Preschoolers thus need to be informed about the legal process and the police interview need to be adjusted to fit the child's developmental level (see Lamb et al., 2008 and Marchant, 2013; for more information and concrete advice on this subject). Young children might also need to hear that they can talk about things that make them feel sad. Practitioners could, for example, ask the children about their thoughts and concerns to identify potential misconceptions and barriers for disclosure. Likewise, some children needed external support and direct questions before and during their disclosure. Developmental psychology research do stress that preschoolers still have limited memory retrieval strategies and can therefore require more guidance (Poole et al., 2015). Asking more focused questions might thus be necessary during interviews with the youngest children. It is, nonetheless, important to avoid suggestive or pressuring questions, as these can both cause distress for the victim and elicit false details (e.g., Bruck & Ceci, 1999). In unfounded cases of suspected abuse, improper interview techniques and pressure to obtain a disclosure from the child might furthermore increase the risk of obtaining a

false allegation (Lamb et al., 2008; Poole et al., 2015).

4.1. Limitations

Some methodological concerns need to be addressed. First, the currently employed inclusion criteria excluded all cases where the child was older than seven during the police interview. As such, cases of prolonged abuse after the age of seven or with longer disclosure delays could not be captured by the present analyses. Second, we focused on court cases where the crime was corroborated by other evidence. This criterion was necessary to, with some certainty, verify that the abuse had taken place. However, most CSA investigations lack strong corroborative evidence (Diesen & Diesen, 2009) and the present cases may therefore differ from cases without evidence. Notably, the current sample included a large proportion of abuse cases involving preschool personnel (36.8%), which might imply that these cases are more likely to contain strong corroborative evidence. Furthermore, having knowledge of the existence of corroborative evidence might affect both the children's tendencies to disclose (e.g., the child knows that the perpetrator has confessed and has, for example, broken their pact of secrecy) or the behavior of the police and prosecutors (e.g., employing more direct or leading questions, conducting several child interviews, confronting the child with the evidence). Third, the cases were analyzed from written verdicts concerning court assessments produced post hoc by judges. This type of archival data could consequently be affected by different memory errors and cognitive biases. On the other hand, the court documents enabled us to examine the children's disclosures from different perspectives, as the verdicts typically included descriptions of the courts' assessments of both the child's, the defendant's, and informal disclosure recipients' testimonies. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from analyzing both police interview transcripts and court files.

5. Conclusions

The current study contributes to the growing literature on preschoolers' disclosure tendencies in child sexual abuse cases. Considering that young children rely on adults to listen and make contact with the police and social services, educational programs may benefit from targeting preschool personnel and primary caregivers. Furthermore, actions need to be taken to protect preschool-aged children from experiencing secondary traumatization as a consequence of the legal process. Likewise, practitioners working with sexually abused preschoolers need to be aware of the difficulties involved in their disclosure process. While some barriers might be difficult to overcome, future research could help by finding new ways for the legal system to facilitate young children in these tragic and heart-breaking situations. Following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCR, 1989), the child's unique needs and concerns should be prioritized.

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Appendix C. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.05.018>.

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