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DISCLOSURE & AFTERMATH

The discovery of the abuse was the beginning of the children's experience in the court system. In the original sample, only 16 percent of the children had made an immediate disclosure to someone who informed the authorities. The remainder had either disclosed immediately but were not believed, thought about it for a short while before they told, waited a very long time before they told anybody, or never disclosed at all. However, all the cases of child sexual abuse that we studied had, at some point, come to the attention of a child protection and/or law enforcement agency, usually as a result of a child-initiated disclosure.

We had some information about each abuse disclosure documented in Project files. These data were presented in Chapter Three. Briefly, we had found that:

- ! an immediate disclosure after one abusive incident was the exception rather than the rule among this group;
- ! the majority of the abuse disclosures were delayed;
- ! the abuse was discovered by the authorities following a child-initiated disclosure in 60 percent of the cases;
- ! almost one quarter of the children disclosed only after being directly asked about the possibility they had been abused;
- ! use of force to obtain compliance or overt threats of harm during the abuse was more likely to lead to child-initiated disclosures;
- ! prior to the occasion when the authorities had discovered the abuse, 23 percent of the children had told someone about the abuse, either in confidence or in an unsuccessful attempt to get assistance;
- ! the relationship between the child and the abuser was highly associated with the manner in which the abuse was discovered; and,
- ! boys were less likely to initiate disclosures than girls and more likely to disclose after being confronted, and they were more likely to experience post-disclosure parental support.

THE DISCLOSURE PROCESS

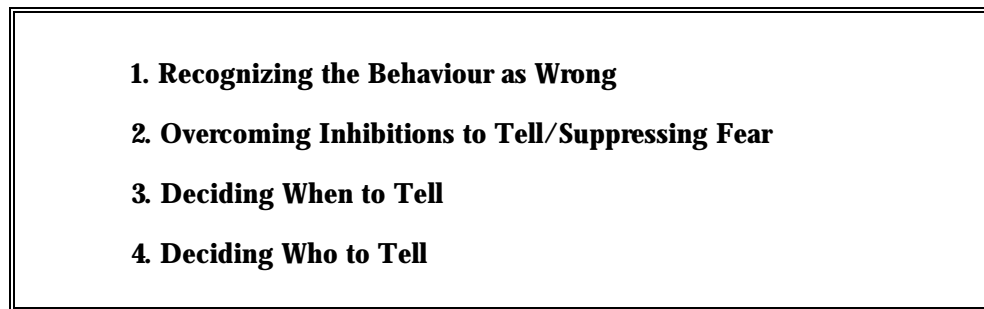
As part of the follow-up interviews, the children and their parents were asked about their respective memories of the disclosure of the abuse and the events that immediately followed this revelation. We wanted to learn about the experience from the children's point of view. How did the abusers convince them not to tell? What did they think would happen if they did tell? How did they decide to disclose? Did they know that the police would be called?

There were many powerful factors at work to prevent disclosure: the adult/child power imbalance, the child's training to defer to elders, the existence of a trust and/or dependency relationship, exhortions to keep the secret, implied or imagined negative consequences of telling, and feelings of guilt, self-blame, stigmatization

and isolation. That any child could overcome these obstacles was remarkable, especially in the context of a dependency relationship. Disclosing abuse by a family member was much more difficult than disclosing extrafamilial abuse. Sexual abuse disclosure as described by the children was not a single event as much as a process, involving at least four decision-making hurdles (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Disclosure: Four Decision-Making Stages



RECOGNIZING THE BEHAVIOUR AS WRONG

The first stage in the disclosure process involved the child's emotional and cognitive responses to the abuse. Early in the 'grooming process' of long-term abuse, child sexual abuse can be very subtle and insidious and, especially for children, initially difficult to identify as inappropriate until the behaviour escalates. For many, an act of sexual abuse is so alien to their experience that they can question whether it had actually even happened. Others are not able to recognize at first that the act was wrong. Most, however, identify the abuse as something that made them uncomfortable and distressed even when they were not sure why.

OVERCOMING INHIBITIONS

In many cases, the child's residual feelings of guilt or shame over being chosen or being partially responsible worked to delay disclosure. Frequently, these ideas had been fed by the abuser's overt or implied instruction to view the abuse as a secret and the threat of negative consequences for the child should the secret be discovered. Moreover, in the context of a dependency relationship, disclosure by a child involved the risk of losing the relationship with the abuser, a relationship that usually was valued. We also found that many children felt that they would be rejected by their families in general, especially their mothers, so great was the feeling that they themselves had done something wrong. Other children had realistic fears of personal harm. The second stage in the disclosure process, therefore, involved suppressing these fears and disclosing. At least at first, few were able to do this.

DECIDING WHEN TO TELL

The next step was deciding the right time to tell. Timing of the disclosure was associated with the abuser's identity. Intrafamilial abuse victims were more likely to have delayed the disclosure (79 percent) or never to have disclosed at all (ten percent) than were victims of extrafamilial abuse, 53 percent of whom delayed disclosure and only one percent of whom never disclosed ($\chi^2=27.5$, $df=4$, $p=.00002$). Ten percent of intrafamilial abuse victims made immediate disclosures, but for only 20 percent of them was the allegation believed and responded to by the notification of authorities. More victims of extrafamilial abuse disclosed immediately (28 percent) and these disclosures were almost always responded to by the notification of authorities. Looked at another way, 93 percent of immediate disclosures involved extrafamilial abuse.

Breaking it down further, it became apparent that the delay and reluctance to disclose pertained most especially to cases where the abuser was a father figure. For example, there were no immediate disclosures for cases involving biological fathers or stepfathers. In fact, in 92 percent of these cases, the disclosure was delayed for more than one year. In contrast, disclosure delays of greater than one year were found in only 30 percent of cases involving other relatives and 27 percent of cases involving non-family members ($\chi^2=30.0$, $df=4$, $p=.00001$).

The use of force during the abuse more often led to an immediate disclosure (28 percent) and less often to a delayed disclosure (53 percent) than when force was not used (14 percent and 74 percent; $\chi^2=9.6$, $df=4$, $p=.05$). Abuse involving force to obtain compliance, however, was quite different than abuse that was perpetrated by a man who had historically been violent within the home. In the latter cases, the threat of harm was usually implied and the children had good reason to believe that physical harm could result if they did not cooperate or if they told. Although historical exposure to family violence was not itself strongly associated with timing, when the sexual abuser was a father figure who was violent in the home, all 18 children waited more than one year to disclose ($\chi^2=26.3$, $df=4$, $p=.00003$). They may have been, as a group, reluctant to disclose since they rarely initiated the disclosure.

We also found that boys were more likely to have delayed the disclosure (81 percent) than were girls (58 percent). One quarter of girls made immediate disclosures while the same was true of only eight percent of boys. On the other hand, all the follow-up boys had eventually disclosed, whereas six percent of the girls never did.

DECIDING WHOM TO TELL

Some children told us that they told the first available person or that the first recipient of the disclosure was dictated by the circumstance rather than the result of a conscious choice. However, for the remainder of the children, the fourth stage in the disclosure process was to find a willing recipient of the disclosure. As can be seen in Table 9, parents were the people most likely to receive abuse disclosures, but two thirds of the children did not tell their parents first. Almost half of those who told someone other than a parent told us they did so because they chose someone whom they felt was more likely to believe them, with whom they would be less embarrassed, or who was seen by them as potentially more understanding.

The response of the first disclosure recipient was, for nine percent, to urge the child to tell someone. These recipients did not themselves relay the information to anyone else. Someone with a legal mandate to take action was the recipient of the first disclosure in 17 percent of the cases. In contrast, the response of the disclosure recipient for 13 percent of the children was to do nothing (Table 10). This reaction was sometimes at the request of the child and sometimes because the allegation was not believed or because the person had not fully understood what the child had said.

As we described in Chapter Three, dead-end disclosures were common and some of these involved unsuccessful attempts by the children to inform someone of the abuse. However, what the children saw as disclosures could be rather vague or ambiguous to adult ears. The children, unaccustomed to using explicit sexual language, typically used euphemistic phrases, such as "messing around" or "bothering me." For example, one boy made a comment over the dinner table to the effect that his teacher was a "pervert." This suggestion was so firmly dismissed by his parents that the boy did not elaborate on his comment to reveal the abuse.

Table 9
Recipients of First Abuse Disclosure

	Number	Percent
Parents	23	29.9
Siblings	3	3.9
Same-Age Peers	15	19.5
Teachers	5	4.0
Social Worker/Therapist/CAS	8	10.4
Police	7	6.3
Other Adult	8	10.4
No One (No Disclosure)	8	10.4
TOTAL	77	100.0

Table 10
Action Taken by First Person to Receive Disclosure

	Number	Percent
Did Nothing/Did not Believe	9	12.9
Urged Child To Tell	6	8.6
Told Someone (e.g., Parent)	17	24.3
Sought Advice from Doctor	2	2.9
Called CAS or Police	26	37.1
Laid Charges (i.e., CAS or police received disclosure)	10	14.3
TOTAL	70	100.0

OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO DISCLOSURE

Contrary to the prevailing belief that disclosure always brings about a sense of relief and catharsis in a child victim, it was often the case that the disclosure brought a host of pressures, many of which the child was unprepared for. Furthermore, once the disclosure was made, any feelings of personal control or sense of taking charge soon dissipated. The fleeting, empowered position of the child vis-à-vis the abuser dissolved as reaction to the disclosure took on a life of its own. The next stage in the disclosure process was the interrelationship that developed among the mandated agencies, the child and the family, and the determination of whether criminal charges were laid. The fears that had inhibited disclosure did not typically materialize for the children, but most child victims had not fully appreciated how protracted and intrusive the official response to the disclosure would be. In fact, many had not even realized that there would be an official response.

CHILDREN'S MEMORIES OF DISCLOSURE

Children could disclose soon after one abusive incident or wait a very long time and suffer repeated abuse, but most did eventually tell, in one way or another. We asked each child to recall the time when they disclosed the abuse and to describe what they had been thinking and feeling at each stage in the disclosure process.

WHY DID YOU TELL SOMEONE RIGHT AWAY?

"I never thought about doing anything else."

"My friend and my mother could both see I was upset. They kept asking and I felt I had no option but to tell. They would know if I lied. I didn't want to tell, I partly blamed myself. I was too friendly with everyone."

"I didn't like what he did, I was angry. The guy was a pervert."

"I thought about it on the way home. I wasn't going to tell [my mother]. At first, I thought it was my fault. I decided to tell her when I realized I might get too angry if I didn't."

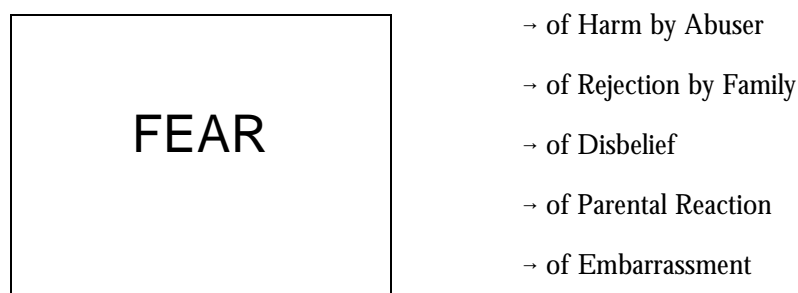
TIMING OF DISCLOSURES

For those fifteen children whose abuse was discovered by authorities after an immediate disclosure, their reasons for disclosing were varied. The most frequently-cited reason was that the abuse had bothered them sufficiently that they had to tell someone. In other words, they could not tolerate what had happened to them and were bothered by not telling. Spontaneous disclosures occurred when the child did not stop to think about what he/she was doing but just knew that telling was the right thing to do. It is interesting that this type of disclosure was reported by only two children. Two others summoned assistance through 911 after sudden and violent attacks. Two disclosed immediately because they appeared upset and were asked what was wrong. One child said that he knew the abusive behaviour was against the law and therefore alerting the authorities was the obvious course of action for him. As was reported above, abuse involving force was likely to be disclosed very soon and almost all immediate disclosures followed extrafamilial abuse.

REASONS FOR DELAYING DISCLOSURE

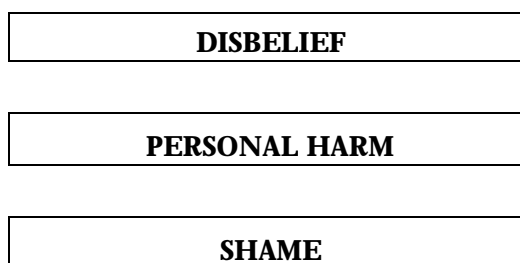
Those who had not disclosed immediately either lived with the memory of the abuse or, more commonly, endured further abuse that typically escalated in severity over time. Delayed disclosers most frequently described a fear of the abuser or a fear of not being believed as the principal reason (see Figure 3). These fears were the same anticipatory fears that children described with respect to testifying that we observed at the time of their original referral. Threats made by the abuser were cited by 21 percent as the most significant factor that delayed disclosure, but generalized fears about rejection and disbelief by significant others were cited by 30 percent. In nearly 20 percent of the cases, the children had worried about negative parental reaction (e.g., anger) and, in approximately ten percent of the cases, embarrassment over their part in the abuse was the greatest factor that prevented them from disclosing. One girl said her father had promised never to do it again.

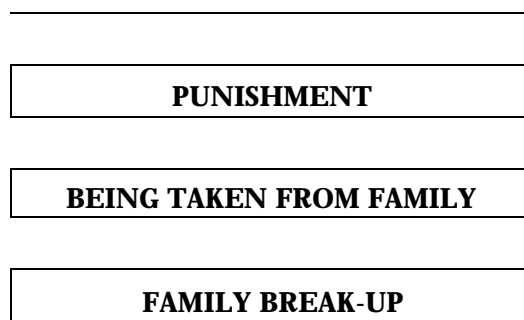
Figure 3
Children's Stated Reasons for Delaying Disclosure



We asked what their worst fear had been, what they most worried would happen after disclosing. The most common responses were that they were afraid of disbelief (26 percent), personal harm (24 percent), feeling shame (13 percent), themselves being punished (eight percent) or apprehended (eight percent), and the break up of the family (five percent). These fears had been real enough to maintain both the children's silence and, in some cases, their acquiescence with continued abuse. The interrelationship between family violence and the silence around the children's sexual abuse was obvious in some cases as fears for personal safety, and for the safety of their mothers, were well grounded. However, it was apprehension about the reaction of a non-offending parent or the consequences for the family that more than one third of the children said inhibited their disclosures. These fears of disbelief, rejection and punishment were usually planted in the children's minds by their abusers.

Figure 4
Children's Anticipatory Concerns About Disclosure Aftermath

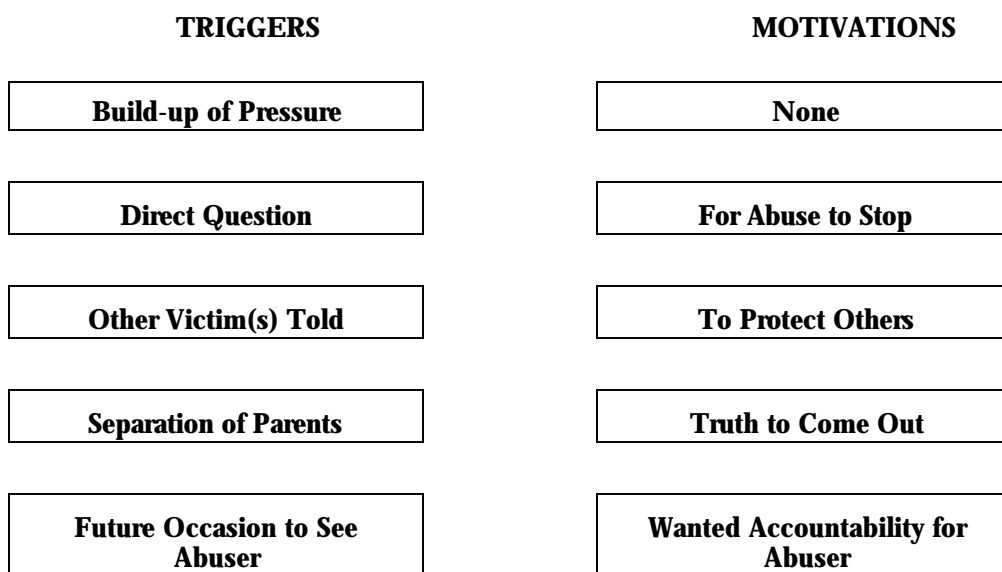




TRIGGERS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR DISCLOSURES AFTER INITIAL DELAY

Almost two thirds of those who did not tell right away told us that they hoped someone would figure out that they were being abused, so they themselves would not have to tell. When asked what it was that finally triggered their disclosure after the initial delay, they most often cited the build up of pressure (23 percent), the fact that they were questioned directly about the possibility that they had been abused (20 percent) and the fact that another victim had already come forward so they decided to tell as well (20 percent). Those who disclosed after having been questioned about the possibility of abuse were typically children who had been abused by a teacher, babysitter, or neighbour, about whom another child had already disclosed. Four children (13 percent) had disclosed because of an up-coming occasion where they would be in contact with the abuser. One girl cited the separation of her parents as the most important factor that facilitated her disclosure of abuse by her father. However, delaying disclosure until a marital separation was observed in several other cases, especially those where the abuser had been violent within the home (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Triggers and Motivations for Disclosure After Initial Delay



One third could not articulate a motive for finally telling. The disclosure had been, for them, an end in itself. Twenty-seven percent of those who told after a delay, however, said they had told because they wanted the abuse to stop. A girl who saw her father on access visits told us: "I was hoping that I could get someone to just go over and tell him to stop or give him a warning. I loved him." Nineteen percent had reported the abuse to protect potential victims, as in the case of a girl who learned that her former stepfather had remarried a woman with a young daughter.

There was a group of children whose abuse was revealed by someone they had told in confidence. As we stated in the previous chapter, such disclosures were often made to friends who kept the secret. Some children, however, indicated that they told friends in confidence, with the vague hope that the information would be carried on to someone who could intervene. For example, one girl said: "In a way it was good. Even though I made her promise not to tell anyone, I kinda expected that she would tell someone and I was glad 'cause it saved me having to do it."

CHILDREN'S RECOLLECTION OF IMMEDIATE PARENTAL REACTION TO ABUSE DISCLOSURE

Among the children, only 62 percent could say that at least one parent believed that the abuse had occurred, once they learned of the disclosure (Table 11). Two children recalled that their mothers were angry with them after the disclosure and one girl was physically assaulted by her mother. Three children recalled that their mothers had blamed them for the situation. Overall, however, the majority had positive memories of their mothers' reactions to the revelation about the abuse. Almost all (94 percent) said that they thought their mothers would agree, in retrospect, that disclosing the abuse had been a good thing.

Of the children who reported that their mothers had not believed that the abuse occurred, all were girls and all but one were victims of intrafamilial abuse. Boys as a group were unwilling or unable to describe their mother's belief in one quarter of the cases but none of them reported that their mother had not believed them. One quarter of the girls said that their mothers had not believed them, had reservations or had ambivalent reactions. Only half of the victims of intrafamilial abuse were able to say that their mothers believed them while the same was true for 73 percent of the victims of extrafamilial abuse.

WHY DID YOU NOT TELL ANYBODY AT FIRST/WHAT WAS YOUR WORST FEAR OF TELLING?

"I thought Mom and Dad would be angry with me."

"My dad [the abuser] told me if I told, my mum would not like me."

"I was scared that he'd find out I told someone. He hit us a lot."

"[I was scared] that if someone else found out that my father would believe that we had told and that he would kill our mother."

"I was scared that he'd come after me."

"I was worried that I wouldn't be believed and that if I told my mum she would go to his wife."

"I don't know. I never did consider it. I was brought up not to talk about my problems when I was younger so I never did."

"My mom didn't believe me two years previously when I tried to disclose. [My worst fear was] that my mother would not believe me again."

"I was afraid. When it happened, he behaved as if it never happened — he made me doubt myself. [My worst fear was] that I would embarrass my father [the abuser] and be a shame to his family."

"I was little — I didn't know any better. He threatened me with CAS [that she would be taken from her mother] or death."

"I didn't know it was wrong."

"[My worst fear was that] I would spoil my mom's life."

"I was embarrassed, worried, especially as I was a boy, I was being molested by a man. I thought people might think I was gay or my parents might not believe me."

"When I told my friend initially, I saw no reason to tell anyone else. [My worst fear was] that maybe my mom would think I brought it on myself."

"[My worst fear was] that I'd be put through hell. Everyone would blame me, it would all come back on me."

"I don't know. I just felt like I couldn't tell anyone. He threatened especially that I would lose my dad."

HOW DID YOU FINALLY DECIDE TO TELL SOMEONE?

"I told my cousin to protect her. He [the abuser] wanted her to sleep over and he planned to abuse her too."

"I told my sister in confidence. I trusted my sister, but in the long run it was good that she told. It built up and I didn't know what else to do."

"The police telephoned [after the disclosures of two other victims]. I would never have told if my parents hadn't been contacted by the police."

"To protect his little girl of his new marriage."

"I over heard my cousin talking to a girl on the phone saying kids should tell and I decided to tell my mom."

"It felt like a burden — I needed to get it off my chest."

"Seeing him hit my younger sister."

"My father [the defendant] told me he was going to take me to England and we would be alone for two weeks."

"It was mostly pressure from [my foster parents] and the cop, otherwise I'd have kept the secret."

"I wanted to get it off my chest. It was eating me inside."

"[My mom's friend] almost forced it out of me. I didn't think she'd lay off until I told."

"Mom guessed from my behaviour because she had been abused herself. She waited for me to tell her."

"On TV it showed what was happening to me and it said you should tell a close friend."

Table 11

Children's Recollection of Initial Parental Belief in Abuse Allegation

	Number	Percent
Did Not Believe Allegation	7	12.7

No Belief at First, Did Later	2	3.6
Believed with Reservations	3	5.5
Totally Believed	34	61.8
Cannot Describe Parental Belief	9	16.4
TOTAL	55	100.0

HOW DID YOUR [NON-OFFENDING] PARENT(S) REACT?

"She said, 'We're going to get through this'."

"My mom was surprised in a way because she knew him. He had tried to strangle her and had nearly killed her."

"My dad still doesn't know. I don't want him to know."

"At first, her face dropped and she said, 'I didn't know.' But she promised she'd do something and she got herself beat for it."

"I don't remember her reaction. All I remember is that she listened and thanked me for telling."

"She believed me, she was supportive. She talked to me, reassured me, told me not to worry."

"She didn't say anything. She asked me if it was true. She cried. After the police and CAS left, she blamed me."

"She put her hands on my cheeks and said, 'What that man did to you was not your fault'... [My father] wanted to kill him. Once, when he was drunk, he went to the man's house with a knife — his brother stopped him."

"She asked why I didn't tell her sooner. I told her. She reassured me, she was supportive."

"She made sure I was alright and then she phoned the police. She told me to cry. I did."

"She was shocked, apologized to me. She said, 'It's not your fault. What if it's my fault? What if I am not satisfying him?' She wouldn't go on either side, she supported both of us."

"She comforted me, cried with me and said she was going to make things better. She let me sleep with her in her room that night."

"She didn't want to believe it. My mom always doubted my honesty and said it would be up to the court to judge."

"To start with, my mom said, 'you're lying — [he] isn't like that. How could you say such a thing about my brother?'"

PARENTS' RECOLLECTION OF REACTION TO ABUSE DISCLOSURE

The parents whom we interviewed were asked to recall how they had felt about the abuse allegations when they first became aware of the discovery of the abuse by authorities. Their recollections were somewhat different than those of the children. Almost all (83 percent) said that they believed the veracity of the allegations, although 14 percent reported mixed feelings and three percent admitted that they had not believed their children upon first hearing the allegation.

There was a small number of cases where parental responses to this question were at variance with their actions at the time, as observed by Project staff and recorded in the files. In retrospectively relating these events, these mothers portrayed themselves as being supportive of their children and acknowledging the veracity of the allegation when, at the time, they had not. It should be noted that by the time of the follow-up, any allegiances with the abusers had lessened (two, in fact, were dead) and parents had the benefit of much more information (in some cases criminal court convictions).

In the 43 cases where we interviewed both the parent and the child, there was a high correlation between their responses ($\chi^2=13.0$, $df=4$, $p=.01$). When the mothers said they had believed their children, the children gave the same response in 80 percent of the cases. When mothers indicated that they had ambivalent feelings or reservations, the children were able to recognize and to articulate to us this memory in most cases. When the children said their mothers had believed the allegation, the parents gave the same response in 93 percent of the cases, suggesting that the children were more accurate as a group. As described below, the children's recollections correlated highly with the ratings of parental reaction assigned by Project staff.

INITIATION OF POLICE AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Because this group of child sexual abuse victims had been drawn from a court sample, all the disclosures eventually had led to police involvement. The group that most frequently initiated the police involvement was the Children's Aid Society (29 percent) and in another nine percent of cases the police received the disclosures themselves. Parents called the police directly in about one quarter of cases.

OPINIONS OF POLICE INVOLVEMENT AND CHARGING

Most parents who were interviewed (91 percent) indicated that they felt police involvement had been an appropriate response to the disclosure, whether or not they themselves had called. Twenty percent of the parents reported that they had not been present at the time that the police had been summoned and first met their children. Ten percent said that the police had consulted with them and given them the option of whether or not to proceed with charges. A further 70 percent said that they had been there but were not consulted about the laying of charges. Some resented the lack of consultation, particularly when the suspect was a family member. The majority, however, appreciated the fact that the police took charge of the situation because they themselves were fairly confused and upset. More than half of them indicated that they had been physically absent, confused, or emotionally unable to participate during the initial stages of the police investigation.

The children as a group recalled being less enthusiastic about police involvement than the parents recalled themselves as being. Of the children, 41 percent said they had supported police involvement, 26 percent had opposed it, and the remainder expressed ambivalent feelings. If boys had been reluctant to disclose, we found that girls were reluctant to involve the police. All of the children who said that they had felt at the time that police involvement was a bad idea were girls. In fact, 55 percent of the girls had been against police involvement or had ambivalent feelings about it. As well, only 14 percent of intrafamilial abuse victims had felt at the time that police involvement was a good idea ($\chi^2=17.2$, $df=3$, $p=.0006$).

The parents whom we interviewed also indicated differences in their willingness to have the police involved, depending on whether the abuse had occurred within or outside the family confines. All parents of child victims abused by perpetrators outside of their family agreed with the police being notified of the allegations, whereas 20 percent of the parents of intrafamilial victims were ambivalent. Furthermore, whereas nearly three quarters of the parents of extrafamilial victims wanted charges laid, only 40 percent of parents of intrafamilial victims agreed with charges being laid. Although we did not interview them, we would assume that the offending parents had disagreed with the police being called and this opinion would have been made known to the children.

KNOWLEDGE OF POLICE INVOLVEMENT AT TIME OF DISCLOSURE

The vast majority of the children (63 percent) said they had no idea that the police would be called when they disclosed. This was true of nearly 80 percent of the intrafamilial abuse victims but not quite half of the extrafamilial abuse victims ($\chi^2=6.6$, $df=2$, $p<.04$). Half of the boys said that they had realized the police would be called compared with one quarter of the girls. More than one third of the girls (68 percent) had no idea that the police would be called.

One fifth of the children (21 percent) said they had regretted their disclosure after learning that the police were going to be called. All the children who reported such regret were girls and all but one were victims of intrafamilial abuse. Most (82 percent) of extrafamilial abuse victims had no regrets about disclosure compared with only 40 percent of intrafamilial abuse victims ($\chi^2=9.4$, $df=2$, $p=.009$). This is, perhaps, not surprising because extrafamilial abuse victims, as a group, had anticipated the involvement of the police and the courts. Their disclosures had a more instrumental quality in that they more fully recognized that the act of disclosing had consequences that had to be followed through with. Disclosures of intrafamilial abuse, on the other hand, tended to have a more explosive quality. Those children, to the extent that they thought about it, saw the disclosure as an end point of an ordeal rather than the starting point of another ordeal, as it turned out to be.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT HAVING THE POLICE INVOLVED/WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE POLICE?

"They were really nice. They comforted me, they were concerned. That's what I remember, the tone of their voices."

"Yes, [I wanted the police to be called] but I didn't want them to talk to me, just to him."

"Yes, probably [I would have disclosed if I had known the police would be involved] if it had just been the police, but the court thing got overwhelming."

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF LAYING CHARGES

At this point in the process, everyone was starting to come to grips with their role in a criminal prosecution. One way they did this was by selecting rationales that helped them accommodate to their new role and justify to themselves their participation in the process. We asked the children and their parents to recall what their principal rationale had been for agreeing with the laying of charges. One third of the children said it been accountability or just deserts for the criminal behaviour. One quarter focused on personal safety in that they felt the charges would keep them safe from the abuser. Seventeen percent said they felt that future victims could be spared the experience they had endured if charges were laid. Almost one quarter recalled still being against the prosecution. Most parents identified accountability or concern for future victims as the principal rationale for wanting charges laid. Only two of the parents we talked with recalled not wanting charges laid at the time. Two parents relied upon the judge to determine for them the veracity of the allegation.

RATINGS OF POLICE INTERACTION WITH THE CHILDREN

The children had generally good recollections of the investigating officers with whom they dealt. On a scale of zero to ten, they rated the overall police performance as 8.8 on average. Mean ratings for police patience (8.2), helpfulness (8.4) and trustworthiness (8.8) were also high. Parents gave the police similar ratings and the feeling overall was that cases were investigated with sensitivity and professionalism. In fact, parents gave the police the highest rating (8.9) for politeness.

Only about two thirds of the children (68 percent) reported to us that they were able to tell the police the entire story. Among those who could not, embarrassment or fear were typically the reasons. However, one child reported that much had been blocked from memory until later. Five children had no memory of the police investigation when we spoke with them at the follow-up.

Some children appreciated that the investigating officer had involved them in the decision to lay a charge. This left them better able to cope with the stresses and disappointments of the process because they knew that their participation had not been coerced. Other children, however, appreciated when someone else took control and made the decisions. Some of them would have opted out at the time although, in retrospect, they were glad charges were laid. In their eyes, by laying a charge the police acknowledged that what had happened to them was a serious matter. This was important for those children who were minimizing the severity of the abuse and feeling that they were not worth the bother.

Greta complained that her disclosure had been coerced by an overly-zealous police officer. She had been firmly against disclosing and said of the police involvement that "it bugged me because I didn't have any control." Her resistance stemmed from knowledge of the consequences of disclosing. A few months before, her older sister Helen had disclosed about sexual abuse by their stepfather and she had been forced to leave the family home. Helen was extremely praising of the police role and the especially supportive relationship that the investigating officer provided. According to Helen, the abuse was long-term and intrusive and took place within a rigid, restrictive and isolated home environment. Her stepfather coerced her silence and compliance by threats of death and threats that she would lose her family and be abandoned by her mother. Some of his threats were prophetic. Her mother rejected her following her disclosure as she did later with Greta, who was also forced to leave home. Their mother made it clear that she did not believe Greta and Helen and that she would maintain her relationship with her husband.

ROLE OF THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY

Fifty-six percent of the follow-up children had never previously been involved with the Children's Aid Society (CAS) at the time of their abuse disclosures. This meant that almost one half had been known to the CAS prior to the disclosure, a proportion far higher than in the general population of children. This may be because people under the supervision of the CAS may have been easier to find for the follow-up and may have been more compliant with the request to participate. Alternately, it may be because abuse disclosures by children under CAS supervision are highly likely to result in police involvement. In London, the CAS works very closely with the police and a large proportion of the abuse disclosures that they receive eventually result in criminal charges.

One quarter of the follow-up group had been active clients of CAS at the time of the disclosure. The children who had been the subjects of open CAS files at the time of disclosure had most often been part of a voluntary family-supervision arrangement, true of 11 children. Three children were the subjects of supervision orders and three were Crown wards at the time they disclosed. The issues that had brought these children to the attention of the child protection system were varied, but the most common were: previous sexual abuse; previous physical abuse; behaviour management; and, parenting assistance.

When the allegation of child sexual abuse had fallen under the legal mandate of a child protection agency — true of 61 percent — the agency undertook an investigation of the allegation, alone or jointly with the police. After confirming the allegation, the agency either took no further action themselves (29 percent of the total follow-up sample), undertook involvement with the family (23 percent), or continued the previous level of

involvement (14 percent). They eventually had to take four children into care (five percent). These children were taken into care because they had been rejected by their mothers, who had chosen to disbelieve the allegation and continue living with their partners, the alleged abusers.

PARENTAL REACTION TO DISCLOSURE AND AFTERMATH

Disclosure precipitates a crisis for parents and children,⁵⁶ especially when the abuse occurs within the family. Parental reactions to disclosure (belief, sympathy, and protective action) are likely to be important mediators of children's post-abuse well-being and how well the child can negotiate the court process. There are obvious buffering effects of maternal support which operate as protective factors for child victims of sexual abuse. To find that maternal support is important for emotional recovery would be consistent with findings in the general literature on mother support for social problems. For these reasons, we measured parental support to assess its validity for predicting emotional adjustment in the years after court. These results are presented in Chapter Ten.

We have reported the responses of the children and their parents when asked for their recollections of the parental reaction to the discovery of the abuse. As an indicator of our own evaluation, we used the Parental Reaction to Abuse Disclosure Scale (PRADS), as discussed in Chapter Two. This scale, presented in Figure 6, involves four dimensions to parental reaction: belief in child's report of abuse; emotional support of child; action toward perpetrator; and, use of professional services. As it turned out, attempts to learn about parental reaction yielded almost no information on *paternal* reaction. We, therefore, could not fully examine the role of both parents. Instead, we had to select the parent who took the greatest role in the child's life after the disclosure and who was most involved in the court preparation process. In all but two cases, this was the mother. Our measures of parental reactions were, therefore, actually measures of *maternal* reaction.

After reviewing file data on the parent's statements and actions toward the child in the pre-court period, a PRADS score was assigned for each of the 71 follow-up children who had contact with a parent at the time of disclosure. The mean scores for each PRADS category were as follows: (A) belief in report of abuse: 3.3; (B) emotional support of child: 2.8; (C) action toward perpetrator: 3.2; and, (D) use of professional services: 2.8. When the four scores were summed, the results ranged from a low of zero to a high of 16, the full range of possible scores. The mean score for all 71 cases was 12.1. Overall, therefore, the mothers as a group were rated quite highly.

Our ratings of belief as measured by the PRADS were highly associated with the children's recollections of whether their mother believed the abuse allegation ($F=37.6$, $p<.0001$). Moreover, two of the PRADS subscales were correlated with pre-court scores on the self-report Child Depression Inventory: belief in report of abuse ($r=-.32$, $p<.05$) and emotional support ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$). In other words, higher levels of depression were associated with lower levels of maternal belief and emotional support.

⁵⁶ R.C. Summit (1983). The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 7: 177-193.

Figure 6

Parental Reaction to Abuse Disclosure Scale (Everson *et al.*, 1991)

A. BELIEF IN CHILD'S REPORT OF ABUSE	
4	Makes clear, public statements of belief
3	
2	Wavers in belief or is undecided
1	
0	Totally denies abuse occurred
B. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT OF CHILD	
4	Strongly committed to child and provides emotional support
3	
2	Vacillates in ability and/or desire to support child
1	
0	Is threatening, hostile or rejecting
C. ACTION TOWARD PERPETRATOR	
4	Clearly demonstrates disapproval of perp.'s abusive behaviour
3	
2	Remains passive; refuses to take sides
1	
0	Chooses perpetrator over child at child's expense
D. USE OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	
4	Takes active role in securing info. and services for self/child
3	
2	Is passive about securing information and services
1	
0	Unaccepting/uncooperative toward services that are offered
Total PRADS Score _____	

The breakdown of scores for each four categories is presented in Table 12. The four were highly intercorrelated ($\alpha=.93$); but, there were interesting distributions illustrating that there are dimensions to the concept of maternal support following disclosure that are somewhat independent. For example, belief that the abuse occurred was not always translated into emotional support of the child. The value of verbal assurances could be undone if the accompanying behaviour was inconsistent. Some of the children described an unsettling, paradoxical experience of having a mother verbalize support, and yet continue to see the accused before court. However, there appeared to be a subgroup of mothers who were rated poorly in all four categories. Ambivalent, unsupportive or hostile behaviour on the part of a parent often translated into an increased need for agency involvement and support.

Table 12

Parental Reaction to Abuse Disclosure Scale, Breakdown of Scores for Each Category

	Belief in Allegation	Emotional Support	Action to Perpetrator	Use of Professional Services
0	3 (4.2)	3 (4.2)	4 (5.6)	4 (3.2)
1	2 (2.8)	7 (9.9)	2 (2.8)	5 (7.0)
2	11 (15.5)	14 (19.7)	9 (12.7)	18 (25.4)
3	10 (14.1)	22 (31.0)	19 (26.8)	16 (22.5)
4	45 (63.4)	25 (35.2)	37 (52.1)	28 (39.4)
	71 (100%)	71 (100%)	71 (100%)	71 (100%)

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MATERNAL SUPPORT

In an attempt to explain and understand the varying levels of maternal support that we observed, we examined several possible correlates.

Relationship with the Abuser: The PRADS scores were significantly lower when the abuse was intrafamilial rather than extrafamilial. Specifically, the mothers of intrafamilial victims were rated lower on belief in the allegation ($t=-3.01$, $df=55.7$, $p=.004$), emotional support of the child ($t=-2.81$, $df=64.5$, $p=.007$), action toward perpetrator ($t=-3.85$, $df=54.1$, $p<.001$), use of professional services ($t=-2.45$, $df=63.4$, $p=.017$), and total PRADS score ($t=-3.36$, $df=57.4$, $p=.001$).

Analyses of variance revealed that the mean PRADS scores varied as did the social distance between the abuser and the mother. The means were lowest when the defendant was a family member, higher when he was an acquaintance, and highest if a stranger. There were significant differences for all the PRADS categories, most strongly for maternal action toward perpetrator ($F=7.3$, $p=.001$). Moreover, when the abuser was a father figure, the mean scores were lower than when he was another relative and significantly lower than when he was not a family member. This was true for all categories: belief ($F=5.7$, $p=.005$); emotional support ($F=3.8$, $p=.03$); action toward perpetrator ($F=7.6$, $p=.001$); use of services ($F=3.5$, $p=.04$); and total PRADS score ($F=6.0$, $p=.004$). Scores did not vary significantly by whether the father was a biological or a stepparent, but the PRADS scores were lower when the abuser was a stepfather compared with the scores for when the abuser was a biological father.

History of Family Violence: The prevalence of violence in the homes of the children in the follow-up

sample was distressingly high. For 61 percent, we had child and/or parent self-reports that their mothers had been victims of physical violence in their homes prior to the referral to the Child Witness Project (see Table 13). This included current and/or prior conjugal partners. The PRADS score for mothers in the violence-exposure group was significantly lower ($t=2.2$, $df=69$, $p=.031$). Specifically, they provided lower levels of emotional support than mothers who had never lived with a violent partner ($t=2.58$, $df=69$, $p=.012$).

Table 13
History of Family Violence in the Homes of the Child Victims

	Number	Percent
History of Violence by Defendant	17	22.1
History of Violence by Other Father Figure	26	33.8
History of Violence by Both Defendant & Other	1	1.3
History of Violence by Both (Non-Offending) Parents	3	3.9
No Known History of Violence	30	39.0
TOTAL	77	100.0

Moreover, for one quarter of the children, the sexual abuser had himself been physically abusive within the home, usually to the mother and sometimes to the child. For these children, the mothers had lower mean PRADS scores than either the mothers in the no violence group or those in the non-defendant violence-exposure group. This was true for total PRADS score and for all categories except emotional support. The mothers who had experienced violence by a partner gave lower levels of emotional support and there was no difference if the physically-abusive person was the sexual abuser of the child or another prior/current marital partner.

Maternal History of Sexual Victimization: Another area examined was maternal history of childhood sexual victimization. Again, this was a self-report measure and probably subject to some degree of underreporting. The mothers of more than one quarter of the children (28 percent) reported that they themselves had experienced sexual abuse as children. In the majority of these cases (71 percent), the abuse had been intrafamilial. Their childhood experiences could make the emotional impact of their children's abuse even more devastating because so many had unresolved feelings about their own victimization. Mothers who admitted a history of child sexual abuse had received lower PRADS scores in every category, especially emotional support of the child, although none of the differences was significant.

It was enlightening to compare their experiences as child victims of many years ago with the experiences of their children in the late 1980s. Most of the mothers had not disclosed their abuse as children, for many of the same reasons that the follow-up children told us had caused their delay in disclosing. Several mothers had experienced disbelief by a parent. Others continued to be troubled by the fact that the family remained intact even after their own mother had learned of the abuse by the father, because there were few other options available at the time. The majority indicated that they would have welcomed the opportunity to take their case to court although there were others who preferred to keep the secret, even to this day. One mother had testified as a seven-year-old girl after a brutal rape. The offender received a 25 year sentence. At the time of follow-up, one mother was herself in the process of testifying against a family member for child sexual abuse.

Table 14
History of Child Sexual Abuse of Child Victims and Their Mothers

	Number	Percent
Child's Mother Sexually Abused as Child	15	21.1
Child Previously Sexually Abused	10	14.1
Both Child's Mother and Child Sexually Abused	5	7.0
No History Known	41	57.7
TOTAL	71	100.0

As a child, Mrs. Jones had been sexually abused by an uncle over many years. She did not disclose the abuse, she said, because it would have torn apart the family, an eventuality she felt to be worse than enduring the abuse. Instead, she convinced herself that she had control over the abuser because she knew a secret about him. She said she "used" him to get gifts and treats and once she reached a certain age, she told him to stop and he did. She developed a friendly relationship with him and was able to participate in family functions where he was present. Eventually, he died. At age 29, during an argument with her parents, she blurted out a disclosure because she was angry about something else and wanted to hurt them and make them feel guilty. The issue was not mentioned after that. Although she was glad that her child disclosed and had the chance to take the case to court, she was certain that she would not have wanted to prosecute her uncle and she still felt that not disclosing was the best thing for her.

The history of multiple victimization and intergenerational victimization in some of these families is illustrated in Table 14. Fifteen of the children we interviewed at follow-up (21 percent) reported that they had been sexually abused prior to the abuse about which they had been testifying when first referred to the Child Witness Project. Again, the mothers of these children received lower PRADS scores, most pronounced for emotional support of the child, but there were no statistically significant results. Sporadically, we were able to learn of the sexual abuse of the fathers of these children and it is an area that we view as important for future research efforts, especially as their histories of victimization may relate to their sexual offending.

Gender Differences in Post-Disclosure Support: Level of maternal support was also associated with the gender of the victim. The mothers of male victims received higher PRADS scores for belief in the report of abuse ($t=2.49$, $df=56$, $p=.016$), use of professional services after disclosure ($t=2.68$, $df=43.7$, $p=.010$), and total score ($t=2.49$, $df=43$, $p=.017$). These results suggest that it was more likely that sons were believed than daughters about the abuse allegations. This finding, however, may be confounded by the fact that male children were less likely to be abused by a father figure, rendering the situation easier to deal with emotionally for the mothers.

SUMMARY

In asking children about their sexual abuse disclosure, we came to see that it is a complex process rather than a simple event. Many factors were at work to inhibit disclosure, principally fears planted in the children's minds of maternal disbelief and abandonment. Disclosures were facilitated by the presence of someone whom the child perceived to be understanding. Immediate disclosures were not common and typically followed extrafamilial abuse. After an initial delay, the most common trigger of disclosures was the fact that other victims came forward or that the abuse was suspected for some other reason and the child was asked about it directly.

Our results show that the victims of intrafamilial abuse were more likely to delay disclosure or not disclose at all. Moreover, any immediate disclosures by intrafamilial victims were very likely to have been met with disbelief by the recipient. A desire to maintain the family homeostasis and fear of the consequences for the family were some of the factors which prevented these children from coming forward. We were able to conclude that it was far more difficult for children to disclose abuse when it involved a person in their family, with whom they had a dependent relationship, especially when it was a father figure. Unfortunately, their inhibitions against disclosing made it common for intrafamilial abuse to go on for a long time and, therefore, to escalate in severity. Overall, we found that the more closely related the abuser was to the child, the more reluctant he or she was to disclose. The situations most likely to result in a delayed disclosure involved father-figure perpetrators who were violent within the home.

The children who delayed disclosure often selected a disclosure recipient who they felt would be most understanding and sympathetic. Parents were the group more likely than anyone else to have received the disclosures that led to police involvement; however, two thirds of the children first told someone other than their parents. Mandated agencies such as the CAS and police often received disclosures directly from children. Only about five percent of the disclosures were made to school teachers. Overall, the role of the school was negligible, which is somewhat surprising given the prevalence of sexual abuse prevention programs and the daily contact between children and teachers.

We found that boys tended to be more reluctant to disclose their abuse than girls. It is quite likely that the difficulty boys experience in disclosing may account for the lesser numbers of males relative to females who have charges laid on their behalf. Finkelhor⁵⁷ discusses several factors that may contribute to the under-reporting by boys of sexual abuse. He describes the "male ethic of self-reliance" and the circumstances under which boys may have to "grapple with the stigma of homosexuality" surrounding the sexual abuse of boys by men in our society.

Girl victims of intrafamilial abuse especially told us that they had not realized at the time they were disclosing that the police would be called. When they found out, many had regretted that they had disclosed, as the matter took on a life of its own and was no longer the child's to control by silence. The child's disclosure represented a vehicle through which control shifted from the abuser via the victim to other systems, most notably the criminal justice system, and the family. The child victim's attempt to gain control through reporting, and thus ending the abuse, was transitory and, from our perspective, illusory. By disclosing, children could pass from a situation that — although abusive — they could comprehend and anticipate, into a situation that was unfamiliar and unpredictable. Paradoxically, they could have mixed feelings about the official response at the same time that observers would expect them to be relieved to have ended the abuse. Even those who had anticipated the involvement of the police and had certainly not been able to appreciate how intrusive — and lengthy — official intervention would be.

The results of the follow-up study suggest that there was great variability in the parental response to abuse disclosure. Specifically, when the abuser was a father figure who had been physically abusive to the child's mother, the mother was less able to provide effective emotional support, despite evidencing high levels of belief in the veracity of the allegation. Overall, the disclosures of girls and the disclosures of intrafamilial abuse victims were far more likely to be followed by hostility or ambivalence by non-offending parents than were the disclosures of boys or of children abused by acquaintances or strangers.

HIGHLIGHTS

! 93 percent of immediate disclosures followed abuse by someone outside the family;

⁵⁷ D. Finkelhor (1984). *Child Sexual Abuse*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 156-157.

- ! 63 percent of disclosures were delayed;
- ! half of the children had not made their first effective disclosure until more than one year after the first abusive incident;
- ! timing of disclosure was related to relationship between the abuser and child: delayed disclosures were more likely in cases of intrafamilial abuse and there were no immediate disclosures in cases involving biological-father or stepfather abusers;
- ! the situations most likely to result in a delayed disclosure involved father-figure perpetrators who had been violent within the home;
- ! fear of disbelief and parental rejection was the most commonly-cited reason for delaying disclosure, followed by threats of harm by the abuser;
- ! almost two thirds of those who did not disclose right away had hoped that someone would figure out that they were being abused so they would not have to disclose;
- ! the most commonly-cited triggers for disclosure after an initial delay were a build up of pressure, another victim coming forward, or being asked a direct question about the possibility that they had been abused;
- ! the most commonly-cited motivation for disclosure after an initial delay was wanting the abuse to stop;
- ! male victims were more reluctant to disclose than female victims;
- ! 63 percent of the children had not realized that the police would be called following their disclosure;
- ! at the time, only 41 percent of the children had felt that calling the police was a good thing, all the children who had been against police involvement were girls and almost all were victims of intrafamilial abuse;
- ! one fifth of the children regretted disclosing after they learned that the police would be involved and all of these were girls;
- ! 68 percent of the children reported that they were able to tell the police the entire story at the time of initial investigation;
- ! 62 percent of the children described their mothers as believing their disclosures;
- ! the ability of a mother to be supportive following an abuse disclosure was associated with the identity of the perpetrator and history of violence within the home;
- ! mothers of male victims were rated by Project therapists as more likely to believe their children's disclosures and to seek necessary services than mothers of female victims;
- ! the children gave the investigating officers high ratings for patience, helpfulness and trustworthiness; and,
- ! contrary to the prevailing belief that disclosure always brings about a sense of relief for children, we found instead that disclosure brought about a host of pressures.