

The Process of Disclosing Sexual Abuse of Minors: Forensic Perspectives

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The disclosure of sexual abuse in minors is a complex process that poses many challenges. This review examines the findings of several qualitative studies investigating the experiences and perspectives of sexually abused children, as well as the contexts in which they choose to disclose their experiences. The research examines the emotional, environmental and psychological barriers children face when considering talking about sexual abuse. They highlight the specific fears, needs and concerns that influence their decision to disclose abuse. The results of these studies underline the crucial importance for forensic professionals of understanding the perspectives of child victims and the factors that influence their ability to disclose sexual abuse. This understanding will improve forensic interventions and the protection of vulnerable children.

Keywords: sexual abuse, children, fears, child victims.

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INTRODUCTION

Disclosure of sexual abuse in minors is a crucial step in the process of forensic intervention and protection of child victims. Understanding the circumstances and factors that influence the disclosure of such abuse is of paramount importance to forensic professionals, in order to improve assessment and intervention practices.

Qualitative studies in this area have explored children's perspectives and the contexts in which they choose to disclose their experiences of possible sexual abuse. For example, Jensen *et al.*, [1], conducted an in-depth study of children's perspectives and the context of disclosure, highlighting the emotional and environmental challenges children face when considering talking about sexual abuse. This study revealed a complex range of feelings, fears and considerations that influence the disclosure process.

In addition, research such as that conducted by Melville *et al.*, [2], has examined trauma symptoms and self-blame in children during the medical assessment of suspected sexual abuse. These studies highlighted the importance of considering children's emotional reactions and the impact of family responses on their psychological well-being during forensic assessment.

Other works, such as those by Schaeffer *et al.*, [3], and Crisma *et al.*, [4], have explored the barriers to

disclosure in adolescent victims of sexual abuse, highlighting the specific fears, needs and concerns that impede the disclosure process.

This review will draw on an in-depth analysis of these studies and other relevant work to provide a comprehensive overview of the process of disclosure of sexual abuse in minors, with a particular focus on forensic perspectives and practical implications for forensic professionals.

In the following section, we will review the key findings of these studies, highlighting key themes and important conclusions for forensic practice.

METHODOLOGY

This methodological review synthesizes the findings of several recent qualitative studies investigating the disclosure of child sexual abuse, based on empirical data collected using a variety of research methods. Among these studies, Jensen *et al.*, [5], conducted in-depth interviews with alleged child victims of sexual abuse and their families to examine the context of disclosure, highlighting in particular the difficulties encountered by children in finding situations conducive to disclosure and the factors facilitating the disclosure process. Melville *et al.*, [6], carried out a medical assessment of children suspected of sexual abuse, highlighting symptoms of trauma and self-blame, as well as the importance of this assessment in the care of

victims. Schaeffer *et al.*, [7], investigated directly with suspected child victims of sexual abuse to gather their narratives and understand the motives for disclosure, highlighting the impact of social interactions and family contexts on the disclosure process. Priebe and Svedin [8], conducted an epidemiological study of sexual abuse disclosures among adolescents, highlighting the characteristics of disclosure cases and the factors associated with disclosure of such abuse. Finally, Hershkowitz *et al.*, [9], explored sexual abuse disclosures with alleged victims and their parents to understand barriers and facilitators, underlining the importance of a sensitive and adapted approach in listening to and supporting child victims. Through their methodological rigor and diversity of approaches, these studies offer an in-depth perspective on the complex process of child sexual abuse disclosure, highlighting the crucial importance of understanding the factors that influence children's ability to talk about their traumatic experiences.

RESULTS

The results of the studies reviewed highlight a series of significant obstacles to the disclosure of sexual abuse among minors. Among these obstacles, fear of not being believed and shame figure prominently. Many children expressed concern about the reaction of those around them, fearing that they would be judged or rejected if they revealed their traumatic experience. In addition, fear of causing problems for the family is another major barrier to disclosure, with children dreading the potential repercussions on family dynamics and their own safety [5-12].

Another major barrier is a lack of awareness of the protective services and help agencies available. Many children are unaware of the resources available to help them in the event of sexual abuse, limiting their ability to seek help and disclose their experiences. In addition, a lack of trust in adults and professionals can deter children from disclosing abuse, as they fear not being listened to or taken seriously [8-10].

Alongside these barriers, children expressed a crying need to receive appropriate information about the risks of sexual abuse and the help available. They stressed the importance of being educated about the signs and consequences of sexual abuse, as well as the steps to take if help is needed. In addition, the children expressed their desire to receive adequate support from their social network and protection agencies. They stressed the importance of being surrounded by people they can trust and who can support them in their healing process [7].

In summary, the results of these studies highlight a series of complex barriers to the disclosure of sexual abuse among minors, as well as the urgent need to provide children with adequate information and appropriate support to help them overcome these barriers. These findings underline the crucial importance

for forensic professionals and child protection workers to understand these barriers and adapt their interventions accordingly to ensure the safety and well-being of sexually abused children [5-9].

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the results of the studies reviewed highlights several significant barriers to disclosure of sexual abuse in minors, as well as important implications for forensic practice and child protection intervention. Firstly, the findings highlight the profound impact of fear of not being believed and shame on children's ability to disclose their traumatic experience, as also observed by Crisma *et al.*, [13], and Hershkowitz *et al.*, [17]. These complex emotions can be exacerbated by the fear of negative reactions from those around them and the risk of social stigmatization, making it even more difficult for children to break the silence about the abuse they have suffered.

Furthermore, the results highlight the crucial role of the family and environmental context in the process of disclosing sexual abuse. As Crisma *et al.*, [13], and Jensen *et al.*, [15], point out, lack of family support and fear of causing problems for the family can discourage children from talking about their experiences, underlining the need to involve families in the support and intervention process. Similarly, lack of knowledge about protective services and available resources can limit children's access to the help they need, as observed by Crisma *et al.*, [13], and Priebe and Svedin [6].

Furthermore, the results highlight the need for increased awareness and preventive education to help children recognize the signs of sexual abuse and seek help when needed, as suggested by Crisma *et al.*, [13], and Priebe and Svedin [14]. In addition, it is essential to strengthen children's trust in adults and professionals to foster a supportive and listening climate, as advocated by Hershkowitz *et al.*, [17], and Schaeffer *et al.*, [16].

Finally, the findings underline the crucial importance of a holistic and sensitive approach to addressing the needs of sexually abused children, taking into account their specific concerns and individual experiences. As suggested by several studies reviewed [13-17], a child-centered approach, which recognizes children's rights, wishes and needs, is essential to ensure effective and respectful intervention.

In summary, discussion of the findings highlights the urgent need for improved awareness, preventive education and support to help child victims of sexual abuse overcome barriers to disclosure and access the help they need. Forensic professionals and child protection workers have an essential role to play in creating a safe and caring environment where children can express themselves in confidence and receive the support they need to recover.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the studies reviewed highlight the many challenges faced by sexually abused children when considering disclosing their traumatic experiences. These barriers include fear of not being believed, shame, fear of causing problems for the family and lack of knowledge of available protection and support services. In response to these challenges, it is crucial for forensic professionals and child protection workers to adopt a sensitive and tailored approach, providing children with appropriate information, adequate support and a safe environment to help them overcome these obstacles and heal from their traumas. By better understanding the perspectives and needs of sexually abused children, professionals can help improve forensic interventions and ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children.

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