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Article

Novel Forms of Reluctance Among Suspected Child Sexual Abuse Victims in Adolescence

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Abstract

Adolescents tend to be neglected in research examining child sexual abuse (CSA) interviews, yet are often said to be particularly reluctant. This study examined reluctance among 119 10- to 17-year-old females questioned about suspected CSA (n = 25,942 responses), utilizing a scheme identifying previously overlooked types of reluctance in commercially sexually exploited (CSE) youth. In contrast to the CSE youth in a prior study, in which 26% of responses were reluctant, only 8% of CSA victims' responses expressed reluctance. Reluctance was unrelated to age, abuse characteristics, and don't know (IDK) responding. Greater reluctance (but not IDK responding) was related to disclosure of fewer characteristics of abuse. Virtually all youth (93%) had disclosed prior to the interview, in contrast to previous studies examining reluctance among adolescent victims of internet-initiated sexual abuse and CSE. The way in which abuse is discovered may better explain reluctance than the age of the alleged victims.

Keywords

adolescent victims, childhood sexual abuse, disclosure, forensic interviews

Although a great deal of research has examined how to effectively interview child sexual abuse (CSA) victims, little research focuses specifically on adolescents (Cronch et al., 2006). Adolescents tend to disclose abuse purposefully and without outside prompting (McElvaney et al., 2020), giving them greater control over who they disclose to and what information they choose to divulge. Some researchers have argued that adolescents are particularly reluctant to disclose (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), making it important to assess both whether and how they exhibit reluctance when interviewed about abuse. Using a novel scheme for assessing reluctance originally applied to adolescent victims of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE; Henderson et al., 2021; Nogalska et al., 2021), this study examined 119 10- to 17-year-old female adolescents questioned about suspected CSA, and assessed associations among age, information disclosed, and reluctance. In what follows, we review prior research on adolescent disclosure.

Adolescent Victims' Reluctance to Disclose Sexual Abuse

Studies examining parental knowledge of their adolescent children's activities have demonstrated that adolescents' decision-making regarding disclosing information to parents signals a maturity of reasoning that is deliberate and responsive, as well as self- and other-oriented (Hunter et al., 2011). Similarly, research focusing on adolescent CSA victims' disclosures shows that they usually anticipate the consequences that disclosure will entail, both for themselves and for others (Crisma et al., 2004; Schönbucher et al., 2012). Older children are often aware that disclosing abuse leads to the involvement of child protective services and may be a catalyst for legal proceedings (Crisma et al., 2004). Adolescents report fears that disclosure will dismantle the family unit, negatively impact their parents, or bring about negative consequences for the suspected perpetrator (McElvaney et al., 2014; Schönbucher et al., 2012). Additionally, adolescent victims are cognizant of the stigma and shame surrounding sexual abuse, especially regarding intrafamilial sex abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Kogan, 2004). Many report delaying disclosure due to self-blame and fears that they will

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not be believed or will be blamed for the abuse (Crisma et al., 2004; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Lemaigre et al., 2017). Such factors increase adolescents' reluctance to disclose abuse initially and may further contribute to reluctance when victims are prompted to provide details during subsequent interviews.

Studies examining specific types of adolescent victims often find high rates of reluctance. Examining 20 11- to 14-year-old victims of internet-initiated sexual abuse, Katz (2013) found that 8 of the 20 victims (40%) refused to cooperate with the interviewers, even rejecting efforts at rapport building. In a sample of 52 11- to 17-year-olds victimized online, Katz et al. (2021) found that 20 victims (38%) "refused to disclose anything" (p. NP5095), though an unspecified number ultimately gave some information. Studies examining interviews with adolescent CSE victims also find that reluctance is common. Lindholm et al. (2015) found that 17% of sex trafficked youth's responses were either evasive (11%) or unresponsive (6%). Noting that trafficked adolescents appeared to use more nuanced reluctance strategies than those identified in prior research (predominantly studying CSA victims), Henderson et al. (2021) developed a novel coding scheme identifying 16 distinct types of reluctance, including both overt and covert tactics. Overt reluctance tactics upend the power dynamic of the interview and include challenging, critiquing, and interrupting the interviewer. Covert reluctance tactics resemble cooperative responding but are only minimally (if at all) informative, including minimization, underinformativeness, and quasi-acquiescence (see Table 1). In a small sample of CSE adolescents questioned by the police (n = 8; 1558 question/answer pairs), Henderson et al. (2021) identified reluctance in 26% of victims' responses.

Reluctance and How Abuse is Discovered

Although the research on internet-initiated sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation suggests that adolescents may be particularly reluctant to disclose, it is important to consider the way in which different types of abuse victims are discovered. Adolescent victims of internet-initiated sexual abuse are usually discovered through online chats, images, or other corroborative evidence (Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021; Leander et al., 2008). In Katz (2013) none of the adolescent victims had disclosed abuse before the formal interview, and other studies have found similarly small percentages of prior disclosure (Katz et al., 2021: 6%; Leander et al., 2008: 4%). Comparably, CSE victims are typically discovered through involuntary contact with law enforcement (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014), as were the CSE adolescents studied by Henderson et al. (2021; Nogalska et al., 2021). In contrast, CSA victims are likely to come to the attention of the authorities following a disclosure by the child (Rush et al., 2014), and in most clinical samples of children and adolescents questioned about sexual abuse, a majority of victims had disclosed before the formal interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019).

If abuse is suspected and substantiated based on the child's disclosure, then children who never disclose abuse will not come to the attention of authorities, and even children who disclose informally but deny abuse when formally questioned will not be identified as abused. Nationally representative surveys of adults inquiring into child sexual abuse have found that the typical victim does not disclose abuse during their childhood (Hébert et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2000). Clinical samples of child sexual abuse victims are thereby unrepresentative of child sexual abuse victims in the population because they exclude most children who never formally disclosed abuse (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Lemaigre et al., 2017; London et al., 2008; Lyon, 2007). Instead, clinical samples of CSA victims include a disproportionate number of victims willing to disclose.

On the other hand, because internet-initiated sexual abuse victims and CSE victims are usually suspected of being abused because of external evidence and because their abuse can often be substantiated without disclosure, neither suspicion nor substantiation is dependent upon their willingness to disclose. They may feel pressured to disclose because of the external evidence (Evans & Lyon, 2019), but unless or until disclosure occurs, they are likely to resist providing details of their abuse. In sum, adolescents may have expressed more reluctance in prior research not because of their age, but because their abuse was discovered without their decision to disclose.

IDK and Denials

There is some uncertainty about whether certain types of responses should be considered reluctant, specifically IDK responses and responses that deny assertions made by the interviewer. Henderson et al. (2021) did not classify IDK responses as reluctant, in contrast to several studies examining reluctance in children and adolescents (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). Omissions, defined as a victim failing to report information despite having the opportunity to do so, often include IDK responses. In some studies, omissions comprise a majority of responses classified as reluctant (Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2015), and one study has found that they are correlated with overt reluctance (Blasbalg et al., 2018). However, interviewers are taught to encourage children and adolescents to indicate when they don't know the answer (Lamb et al., 2018; Lyon, 2014), and IDK answers could reflect honest ignorance. Indeed, other research has failed to find a correlation between reluctance and IDK responses (Andrews et al., 2017; Earhart et al., 2014). With respect to denials of assertions by the interviewer, these were classified as reluctant by Henderson et al. (2021), and denials comprised a substantial percentage of reluctant responses (15%). However, as with don't know responses, interviewers are taught to encourage interviewees to contradict the interviewers' mistakes (Lyon, 2014). We followed Henderson et al.

(2021) in excluding IDK responses and including denials of assertions in our examination of reluctance. However, we tested whether IDK responses were correlated with the measure of reluctance and assessed how often children uttered denials.

Current Study

The current study measured reluctance among 10- to 17-year-old female adolescents questioned about CSA. The cases were drawn from the caseloads of Child Advocacy Centers in Southern California, who receive CSA referrals from law enforcement and child protective services, but do not question victims of trafficking. We used the measure of reluctance developed by Henderson et al. (2021) for analyzing CSE adolescents' reluctance in response to police questioning. Using this measure provided a sensitive test for reluctance, because Henderson and colleagues' measure identified types of reluctance overlooked in prior research. Furthermore, this enabled us to compare adolescent CSA victims to CSE victims and explore differences between how CSA and CSE victims expressed reluctance during the formal interview.

In order to understand how abuse was suspected, we descriptively assessed whether children had disclosed abuse before the interview. We analyzed whether reluctance was related to age, abuse characteristics (severity, relationship to suspect, frequency of abuse), and the amount of information disclosed about abuse characteristics. We separately analyzed "don't know" (IDK) responses, in order to explore whether IDK responses serve as a proxy for reluctance.

We predicted that (1) adolescent CSA victims would express substantial amounts of reluctance (albeit less often than in the CSE adolescent sample previously examined by Henderson et al., 2021); (2) older adolescents would express more reluctance; (3) reluctance would be positively related to IDK responding; (4) reluctance and IDK responding would be negatively associated with the amount of information disclosed about abuse characteristics. We did not make any predictions with respect to the relation between abuse characteristics and reluctance. If reluctance affects the availability of abuse characteristic information, this could undermine any associations. In addition to quantifying reluctance, we descriptively assessed how adolescents expressed their reluctance, comparing the subtypes of reluctance in our sample to the commercially sexually exploited adolescents in Henderson et al. (2021), and comparing older and younger adolescents within our sample.

Methods

Sample

We examined 119 forensic interview transcripts in which 10- to 17-year-old female adolescents were questioned about suspected child sexual abuse, consisting of a total of 25,942 responses. The interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2013 at one of five different Child Advocacy Centers in Southern California. Most referrals came from law enforcement but did not include youth identified as commercially sexually exploited; these children were (and still are) exclusively interviewed by law enforcement in the jurisdictions from which these cases were drawn. Most of the interviewers would have received the California Forensic Interview Training, a statewide program that provides interviewers the 10-Step Protocol (Lyon, 2014), a revision of the NICHD protocol (Lamb et al., 2018). Interviewers are taught to include instructions on the desirability of don't know responses and of correcting the interviewer. The training focuses both on the utility of invitations (broad input-free requests for recall) and the need to avoid recognition questions (which include yes/no or forced-choice questions), and interviewers are encouraged to tailor their approach to suit their needs. However, the training is not equipped to provide ongoing supervision and refresher training, which research has found to be important for the maintenance of interviewing skills (Lamb et al., 2018).

With the consent of the parent or legal guardian, the interviews were transcribed and anonymized for training purposes. Because the transcripts were anonymized, use of the transcripts for research was approved by the Institutional Review Board as exempt (45 CFR Section 46.014(d)(4)(ii)). In order to minimize the number of cases for which suspicions of abuse were unwarranted, we included children who either disclosed abuse during the interview (n = 110) or failed to disclose but for whom other evidence indicated abuse had indeed occurred (prior disclosure, eyewitness, medical evidence; n = 9). Interviews were also excluded if the interview was conducted in Spanish. Participants were female (n = 119), ranging in age from 10 to 17 years (m = 12.45; SD = 2). Because preliminary descriptives showed a non-linear association between age and reluctance, children were categorized into five age groups, ensuring that each age group had a sufficient sample size: 10-year-olds (n = 23), 11-year-olds (n = 24), 12-year-olds (n = 20), 13- to 14-year-olds (n = 29), and 15- to 17-year-olds (n = 23). The 10-year-old age-group was set as the baseline group in analyses.

For the CSE comparison sample, Henderson et al., (2021) examined 8 police interview transcripts (n = 1558 responses) conducted with female victims of commercial sexual exploitation aged 15–17 years old (M age = 16.29). The victims were associated with the same sex trafficker and were thus interviewed by the same group of police officers. The case was tried by a jury in Los Angeles County in 2017, and the defendant was found guilty of 15 counts, including human trafficking of a minor by force or fear (Pen. Code §236.1, subd. (c)(1)); pandering by procuring a minor under the age of 16 to be a prostitute (§266i, subd. (b)(2)); pimping a minor under the age of 16 (§266h, subd. (b)(2)); and assault by means of force likely to produce great bodily injury (§254, subd. (a)(4)).

Coding

Reluctance Coding

We coded the forensic interview transcripts for 16 types of reluctance (Table 1; Henderson et al., 2021). All utterances during the interview were coded with the exception of responses made after the interviewer concluded substantive questioning and moved to a neutral topic for closing ($n = 657$ responses). Victims' responses could contain multiple forms of reluctance (e.g., "Y'all keep asking me the same questions, and I'm irritated" contains both "question is repetitive" and "expresses frustration"). As well, reluctant and responsive statements were not mutually exclusive; thus, responses that informatively answered the interviewers' questions could still contain reluctance (e.g., "Yes, he was there. Why do you keep asking me about this?"). For analyses exploring associations with reluctance, all 16 reluctance types were collapsed into a dichotomous "reluctant" variable. Additionally, we coded children's IDK and uncertain responses (e.g., "I'm not sure"), including unelaborated "no" responses to "Do you know/remember" questions (hereafter referred to as "IDK" responses). The IDK responses contained no elaboration beyond echoing words from the preceding question (e.g., "What was his name?"/"I don't remember his name").

Table 1. Victim Reluctance Codes.

Type	Definition	Example
Unresponsive		
A. Silence	Victim does not respond for 10+ seconds after being asked a question	Questioner: "So is that something you're willing to do?" [21 second pause]
B. Silence with Response	Victim does not respond for 10+ seconds but ultimately responds to the question within the question-answer turn	"Um [15 second pause], he touched me."
C. Sidetrack	A question or response that is *overtly* off topic	"Oh there's a camera, I really see it right now"; "I like your necklace"
D. Uninvited Question	Victim responds to the interviewers' question with another question. Clarification-seeking questions, rhetorical questions, or questions recounted in dialogue were excluded	"Is he in jail right now?"; "How long is this going to take?"
Expressing Reluctance		
A. Don't Like/Want	Saying they "don't want" to answer or they "don't like" to talk about it	"I don't like to say it"; "I don't want to talk about it anymore"
B. Expresses Discomfort	Victim is hesitant to answer and gives an explanation that they are uncomfortable, it is hard emotionally, or they are fearful	"That's why it's hard for me to say stuff"; "I'm upset that I have to say this again and again and again"
C. Expresses Frustration	Exclamative or vocalization of current exasperation or frustration	"If I tell you this one thing, can I just stop?"; "This is not cool"
Status Shift		
A. Challenge Motivation	Victim expresses lack of trust or skepticism in interviewers' motivation	"But you said you wouldn't ask me those weird questions"
B. Challenge Question	Victim *explicitly* challenges why the interviewer asked that question, or why the victim has to answer. This also includes challenges of the question being "dumb" or "stupid."	"Do I have to explain it?"; "Do I need to answer that?"
C. Question is Repetitive	Victim states that the questions asked during the current interview are repetitive. This does not include comments about repetitive questions across multiple interviews	"You want me to repeat everything over?"; "It's difficult to keep saying the same thing over and over again"
D. Answer is Unnecessary	Victim believes that the interviewer should already know the answer or could ask another source for that information	"I told him everything that happened, why can't he tell you?"
Denies Assertion	Victim challenges accuracy of interviewers' information, or denies an assertion of fact made by the interviewer. This does not include denial of queried content.	Q. "And how do you know your dad was rubbing your thing?" A: "He's not my dad"
Underinformative		
A. Quasi-acquiescence	Victim does not confirm or deny with an explicit yes/no response but gives a less explicit answer. This does not include expressions of uncertainty or estimation (e.g., "I think so")	Q: "And how about before? In the past?" A: "Yeah, you can say there was"

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

B. Uninformative	The answer can be implied from the question	Q: "No. Why not?" A: "Because"
C. Echo	The most extreme version of an underinformative response where the victim exclusively repeats content from the previous question	Q: "On the floor where?" A: "On the floor"
D. Minimize	Victim downplays their answer or seems to "dance around" the question	Q: "But tell me more about bleeding" A: "I was just bleeding. What's more to it?"
E. Maximize	Victim response is so vague or broad that it is not truly informative. This does not include every use of "every" but only when "everything" etc. is not plausible or informative	Q: "What has made your life more miserable?" A: "Basically everything"
Profanity	The use of profanity, excluding when the victim is recounting dialogue	"When I got older, I figured out what the hell he was doing"; "F***ing disgusting bastard"
Control Shift		
A. Refusal to Answer	Victim states that he/she will not answer a question	"I can't tell you"; "I'm not gonna say it"
B. Interrupt	Victim interrupts the questioner, so that the question is clearly incomplete. Does not include victim's use of back-channel utterances[a]	Q: "Okay, did you just-" A: "He always leaves us in the car"

[a]Back-channel utterances are victims' interjections during the interviewers speaking turn (e.g., mm-hmm).

Abuse Characteristics Coding

Child-level coding captured three abuse characteristics that were elicited from the child: abuse severity, child-suspect relationship, and abuse frequency, and we created a count variable for the number of abuse characteristics disclosed (0–3) by each child. Severity was classified dichotomously as penile/oral sex (49%; $n = 58$), which included penile penetration of the vagina or anus and oral copulation; or touching/kissing (41%; $n = 49$), which included digital penetration, fondling, kissing, or other. If a child described both types, the abuse was coded as penile/oral sex. In 10% of the cases ($n = 12$), the child did not provide enough description to determine severity. Relationship was classified dichotomously as father figure (45%; $n = 53$), which included the biological father, stepfather or mother's boyfriend, and foster father; or non-father figure (48%; $n = 57$), including other family members, acquaintances, and strangers. In 8% of the cases ($n = 9$), the child did not disclose a suspect. For children who disclosed two suspects ($n = 18$), we examined the suspect who was closest to the child, based on their relationship (e.g., family member is closer than neighbor). No child disclosed more than two suspects. Frequency of abuse was classified dichotomously as once (19%; $n = 22$) or more than once (68%; $n = 81$). In 13% of the cases ($n = 16$), frequency could not be determined.

Inter-rater Reliability

Reluctance coding reliability was analyzed amongst three independent coders. Cohen's Kappa may indicate poor reliability in studies with a low prevalence of individual codes, reflecting the nature of the sample rather than poor interrater agreement. Thus, researchers have recommended that Kappa interpretation should be adjusted for prevalence bias, using Prevalence-Adjusted Bias-Adjusted Kappa (PABAK) (Byrt et al., 1993). We report this statistic, as well as the prevalence index (i.e., the absolute difference between the agreements on the positive classification and the agreements on the negative classification, divided by the sum of agreements and disagreement), and the percent agreement. PABAK exceeded 0.90 for all variables and percent agreement exceeded 94% for all variables; the prevalence index for individual variables was high (> 0.72). All disagreements were resolved by discussion. Reliability for abuse characteristics showed adequate agreement for severity ($k = .92$), suspect relationship ($k = .95$), and frequency ($k = .82$).

Analysis Plan

We first report descriptives for the percentage of adolescents who disclosed abuse prior to the current interview. Testing the hypothesis that CSA victims would exhibit substantial amounts of reluctance (albeit less than CSE adolescents; Hypothesis 1), we next describe the percentage of CSA victims' responses that exhibited reluctance and compare them to the percentage of CSE victims' responses exhibiting reluctance in Henderson et al. (2021). In order to test the hypothesis that reluctance would increase with age (Hypothesis 2), and to explore the relation between reluctance and abuse characteristics, a Generalized Linear Mixed Model (GLMM) examined the association among reluctance, age, and abuse characteristics. Because some children did not disclose abuse characteristics, truncating the sample, we also examined whether age alone was related to reluctance.

To test the hypothesis that reluctance would be related to IDK responding (Hypothesis 3), a GLMM examined whether victims' rates of reluctance (proportional variable consisting of number of reluctant utterances/total utterances; e.g., 5/100 = .05) and age were associated with IDK responding. Testing the

hypothesis that reluctance and IDK responding would be positively related to the disclosure of abuse characteristics (Hypothesis 4), GLMMs examined whether the number of disclosed abuse characteristics (count variable ranging from zero to three) and age were associated with victims' reluctance or with IDK responding.

In all models, a victim variable was included as a random effect in order to control for the different number and type of questions asked of each victim and individual victim's response tendencies. Models were cross-validated regarding all fixed and interaction effects in order to identify the best-fit model. Model-fitting was computed using the *anova* function in the R stats package (Core Team, 2013). Analyses were performed using the *glmer* function in the R package *lme4* with the bobyqa optimizer (Bates et al., 2015). In order to control for inflation of Type II error among multiple comparisons, pairwise comparisons utilized Tukey's HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test. Adjusted means were computed using the *emmeans* function in the R package *emmeans* (Lenth, 2020). The results from the best-fit models are reported below, accompanied by the unstandardized fixed effect estimates (β), standard errors of the estimates (*SE*), estimates of significance (*Z* and *p* values), and adjusted means.

Results

Disclosures of Abuse Prior to the Forensic Interview

Information on prior disclosures was available for 97% of the sample ($n = 115$). According to the available records, 93% ($n = 107$) of adolescents had disclosed abuse prior to the forensic interview. In 63% of these cases ($n = 73$), information was available regarding whether the adolescent had spoken to a legal professional (e.g., police or child services). In all but one of these cases, a disclosure had been made to the police or children's services prior to the current forensic interview ($n = 72$). Eight adolescents failed to disclose abuse *prior* to the current forensic interview; however 50% of these adolescents ($n = 4$) disclosed abuse during the current interview. Nine adolescents failed to disclose abuse *during* the current forensic interview (8% of the sample) despite the fact that nearly 50% of these adolescents ($n = 4$) had previously disclosed.

Regarding the CSE comparison sample, Nogalska et al. (2021) examined the same victim sample as Henderson et al. (2021) and reviewed the victims' individual experiences with both the criminal justice system and the trafficker. They found that only one of the victims willingly cooperated with law enforcement, and that "all of the victims had been previously arrested, either for probation violations, open warrants, and/or solicitation of prostitution (before Safe Harbor Laws were enacted), but none of the victims were prosecuted for their actions in the current case" (Nogalska et al., 2021, pg. 331). Furthermore, the CSE victims expressed an unwillingness to be involved in criminal proceedings and concern about being labeled a "snitch" (Nogalska et al., 2021).

Hypothesis 1: CSA Victim's Reluctance

In the CSA forensic interviews, 8% of total responses ($n = 25,942$ responses) contained at least one form of reluctance ($M = 16$ utterances per interview), ranging from <1% - 61% of utterances per interview. All victims expressed reluctance at least once: the number of responses expressing reluctance ranged from 2 to 103 utterances per interview. CSE victims in Henderson et al. (2021) exhibited a much higher rate of reluctance (26%).

Inspection of how CSA and CSE victims expressed their reluctance suggested several differences between the groups (Table 2). CSA victims were more inclined to interrupt the questioner (41% of reluctant utterances, compared to 16% of the CSE victims' utterances), and similarly likely to be

Table 2. Proportion of Reluctance Tactics in CSA and CSEC Interviews.

	CSA		CSEC (Henderson et al., 2021)	
Tactic Type	*N*	%	*N*	%
Unresponsive	**708**	**32%**	**138**	**25%**
A. Silence	66	3%	4	1%
B. Silence with Response	124	6%	NA	NA
C. Sidetrack	142	6%	36	7%
D. Uninvited Question	376	17%	98	18%
Expressing Reluctance	**237**	**11%**	**13**	**2%**
A. Don't Like/Want	79	4%	6	1%
B. Expresses Discomfort	83	4%	1	<1%
C. Expresses Frustration	75	3%	6	1%
Status Shift	**106**	**5%**	**65**	**12%**
A. Challenge Motivation	8	<1%	27	5%
B. Challenge Question	29	1%	19	3%
C. Question is Repetitive	52	2%	11	2%
D. Answer is Unnecessary	17	1%	8	1%
Denies Assertion	119	5%	83	15%
Underinformative	**68**	**3%**	**65**	**12%**
A. Quasi-acquiescent	3	<1%	29	5%
B. Uninformative	27	1%	3	1%
C. Echo	33	2%	10	2%
D. Minimize	3	<1%	16	3%
e. Maximize	2	<1%	7	1%
Profanity	29	1%	61	11%
Control Shift	**918**	**42%**	**118**	**22%**
A. Refusal to Answer	29	1%	32	6%
B. Interrupt	889	41%	86	16%
Total Reluctance	**2185**		**543**	

[a]Silence with response was not included in Henderson et al., 2021 due to differences in transcription protocol. Percentages reflect proportion of all reluctance coded. CSEC percentages are derived from Henderson et al., 2021, calculated out of the total number of reluctant responses (n = 543; sum of all reluctance categories) rather than the number of responses containing one or more types of reluctance (n = 411; presence/absence of reluctance) to reflect the proportion of all reluctance coded.

unresponsive (32% of reluctance, compared to 25% of CSE victims' reluctance). Interruptions and unresponsiveness appear consistent with both reluctance to describe the abuse and reluctance to acknowledge that the abuse occurred. The other differences, however, suggested CSA victims' reluctance concerned describing the abuse rather than acknowledging whether it occurred. Overt expressions of reluctance (e.g., by mentioning their discomfort) were more common among CSA victims (11% vs. 2% of CSE victims' reluctant responses). On the other hand, CSA victims were less likely to deny assertions (5% vs. 15% of CSE reluctance), challenge the motivation of the questioner (<1% vs. 5% of CSE reluctance), or provide underinformative responses (3% vs. 12% of CSE reluctance), which included minimizing or quasi-acquiescent responses (e.g., "if you say so").

Hypothesis 2: Reluctance, Age, and Abuse Characteristics

Rates of reluctance were similar across the five age groups (8–11%, $M = 13.1$-14.8; Table 3). A GLMM including the victim's age, severity, relationship to suspect, and frequency of abuse found no significant association between age or any of the abuse characteristics and reluctance. This model was fit to include the 103 victims who disclosed all three abuse characteristics during the forensic interview ($n = 23{,}101$). Surprised by the absence of age findings, we conducted exploratory analyses comparing early adolescence (ages 10–12) and late adolescence (ages 13–17) in the entire sample. The GLMM found no significant association between age (early adolescence vs. late adolescence) and reluctance.

Hypothesis 3: Reluctance and IDK Responding

IDK responses comprised 2.5% of total responses within the sample (659/25,942). The next GLMM examined the relation among reluctant responding, age, and IDK responding, and found no relation between reluctance and IDK responding ($B = -0.47$, $SE = 1.20$, $Z = -0.39$, $p = .69$). However, age was related to IDK responding, such that 10-year-olds ($M = 2.6\%$, $SE = 0.44$) gave more IDK responses than 13- to -14-year-olds ($M = 1.6\%$, $SE = 0.27$; $B = -0.47$, $SE = 0.24$, $Z = -1.95$, $p = .05$) and 15- to 17-year-olds ($M = 1.3\%$, $SE = 0.25$; $B = -0.70$, $SE = 0.26$, $Z = -2.68$, $p = .019$). Post-hoc analyses found a marginally significant difference in rates of IDK responding when comparing 10-year-olds to 15- to 17-year-olds ($OR = 2.01$, $SE = 0.52$, $Z = 2.68$, $p = .057$).

Hypothesis 4: Reluctance, IDK Responding, and Disclosure of Abuse Characteristics

The next analyses examined whether abuse characteristics were associated with children's reluctance and IDK responding. The model for reluctant responding found a significant effect for the number of abuse characteristics disclosed ($B = 0.63$, $SE = 0.20$, $Z = 3.24$, $p = .001$). Post-hoc analyses showed that adolescents who only disclosed one abuse characteristic were significantly more reluctant (19%, $SE = 6.22$) than adolescents who disclosed all three abuse characteristics (6%, $SE = 0.38$; $OR = 0.27$, $SE = 0.11$, $Z = -3.21$, $p = .007$). Adolescents who disclosed two abuse characteristics (8%, $SE = 2.40$) and those who did not disclose any (10%, $SE = 2.06$) did not significantly differ.

Separate analyses confirmed an association between reluctance and disclosure of each abuse characteristic: severity non-disclosure ($B = 0.75$, $SE = 0.21$, $Z = 3.56$, $p < .001$), suspect non-disclosure ($B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.24$, $Z = 3.41$, $p < .001$), and abuse frequency non-disclosure ($B = 0.64$, $SE = 0.19$, $Z = 2.25$, $p = .02$) were all significantly associated with reluctance. Post-hoc analyses replicated the difference for all three models. Victims who did not disclose abuse severity were significantly more reluctant (12%, $SE = 2.09$; $OR = 0.47$, $SE = 0.09$, $Z = -3.56$, $p < .001$), than those who did (6%, $SE = 0.38$). Victims who did not disclose the identity of the suspect

Table 3. Reluctance Categories by Age Group.

Age	10		11		12		13–14		15–17		Early Adolescence		Late Adolescence	
Tactic Categories	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Unresponsive	184	42	147	36	186	39	98	24	93	21	517	39	191	22
Expressing Reluctance	15	3	47	11	61	13	55	13	59	13	123	9	114	13
Status Shift	15	3	27	7	28	6	17	4	19	4	70	5	36	4
Denies Assertion	29	7	23	6	19	3	10	2	11	2	71	5	48	6
Underinformative	9	2	23	6	15	3	10	2	11	2	47	4	21	2
Profanity	0	0	3	1	7	1	6	1	13	3	10	1	19	2
Control Shift	182	42	143	35	161	34	208	50	224	50	486	37	432	50
Total Reluctance	434	9	413	8	477	11	413	7	448	9	1324	9	861	12

Note. Tactic category reflects the percentage of reluctant responses within each age group that fall into that subtype (e.g., 184 of 10-year-olds' answers were unresponsive, out of 434 total reluctant responses given by 10-year-olds). Total reluctance reflects the percentage of the total reluctant responses within an age group, out of the total number of responses given by that age group (e.g., 434 of 10-year olds' responses were reluctant, out of 5100 total responses given by 10-year-olds). Profanity and Denies assertion were not grouped into tactic categories.

were significantly more reluctant (10%, *SE* = 2.16; *OR* = 0.58, *SE* = 0.14, *Z* = -2.25; *p* = .02) than those who did (6%, *SE* = 0.40). Victims who did not disclose the frequency of abuse were significantly more reluctant (10%, *SE* = 1.66; *OR* = 0.53, *SE* = 0.10, *Z* = -3.41; *p* < .001), than those who did (6%, *SE* = 0.39).

We then assessed whether the number of IDK responses was related to the number of abuse characteristics disclosed. There were no significant effects. Separate analyses confirmed the lack of association between IDK responding and non-disclosure of severity, perpetrator relationship, or abuse frequency.

Exploratory Analyses Regarding Denials of Assertions

Just as IDK responses could reflect honest ignorance rather than reluctance, leading us to exclude IDK responses from our measure of reluctance, denials of assertions could reflect honest corrections of the interviewer's incorrect assumptions. However, consistent with Henderson et al. (2021), denial of an assertion was coded as a reluctant response. Coding denials as reluctant enabled us to make a clearer comparison between our results and those of Henderson et al. (2021) but may have inflated our estimates of reluctance. Treating IDK responses and denials of assertions separately when assessing CSA cases is sensible because forensic interviewers often encourage children and adolescents to indicate when they don't know an answer and to correct the interviewer. Review of the transcripts in this study indeed found that interviewers gave some form of the IDK instruction in 93% of the interviews (111/119) and some form of the "correct the interviewer" instruction in 82% (98/119).

Taking into consideration that ground rule instructions given at the start of a forensic interview may influence a victims' inclination to deny statements, we assessed the rates of reluctance we would have obtained had we excluded denials of assertions. As noted above, only 5% of victims' expressions of reluctance in this study were denials of assertions, such that excluding them would reduce the rate of reluctance overall only slightly, from 8.4% to 7.9%. In contrast, 15% of victims' expression of reluctance in Henderson et al. (2021) were denials of assertions, such that excluding them would reduce the rate of reluctance from 26% to 21%. Therefore, however one interprets denials does little to change our conclusions, including the fact that the rate of reluctance is much higher among the CSE victims in Henderson et al. (2021). If one omits denials, 21% of CSE responses exhibited reluctance compared to 8% of CSA responses.

Discussion

Adolescent victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) have largely been overlooked in prior forensic interviewing research, and some research has suggested that adolescents are particularly reluctant (Henderson et al., 2021; Katz, 2013; Leander et al., 2008; Lindholm et al., 2015). This study examined reluctance and IDK responding in 119 female adolescents from 10 to 17 years of age questioned about suspected sexual abuse. We compared younger to older adolescents and assessed the relation between reluctance and case characteristics. We used a novel scheme for identifying reluctance that was first used with commercially sexually exploited (CSE) adolescents (Henderson et al., 2021).

Virtually all adolescents had disclosed abuse before the current interview (93% of adolescents for whom records were available). Only 8% of responses expressed reluctance, compared to 26% of CSE responses in Henderson et al. (2021). Contrary to our prediction that older adolescents would exhibit more reluctance, we failed to find any increase of reluctance with age. However, reluctance was related to the amount of information children provided about their abuse, consistent with our prediction; children who disclosed more case characteristics exhibited lower rates of reluctance. Of children who disclosed all case characteristics, there was no relation between reluctance and abuse severity, child-suspect relationship, or abuse frequency.

We found little evidence that IDK responding reflected reluctance. Our measure of reluctance was unrelated to the frequency of IDK responding. Younger children gave more IDK responses than older children, in contrast to a lack of age differences in reluctance. Furthermore, IDK responding was not related to the number of case characteristics disclosed. In what follows we discuss the implications of the findings for understanding reluctance in adolescent victims of CSA.

Reluctance and How Abuse is Discovered

Research examining adolescent reluctance in internet-initiated sexual abuse and in CSE cases has focused on adolescents who had not disclosed prior to investigation and who often continued to deny abuse when questioned (Katz, 2013; Katz et al., 2021). Conversely, most research examining CSA victims has focused on children and adolescents who had disclosed prior to the formal interview (Azzopardi et al., 2019). Hence, heightened reluctance rates of adolescent victims in prior research may be attributable to the way in which abuse is discovered, rather than age differences in reluctance to disclose. Reluctance will likely be higher among both children and adolescents who did not disclose abuse before the current interview. Here, virtually all of the victims in the sample had disclosed abuse before being forensically interviewed, in contrast to the Henderson sample in which only one of the victims willingly cooperated with law enforcement (Nogalska et al., 2021). This difference between the samples may explain why the overall rate of reluctance was substantially lower than that identified in CSE adolescents (Henderson et al., 2021). Comparing the types of reluctance expressed by the two groups suggested that whereas CSA victims in this study were more inclined to express reluctance to describe abuse, CSE victims in Henderson et al. (2021)

communicated an unwillingness to acknowledge the abuse occurred.

At first glance, one might also attribute the higher rates of reluctance in Henderson and colleagues (2021) to the fact that the interviewers were U.S. police officers. These officers are trained to use coercive interviewing tactics such as maximization, which is a "hard-sell" technique that uses negative incentive tactics such as identifying inconsistencies in the interviewees' story or emphasizing the seriousness of the charges and the strength of the evidence (Kassin & McNall, 1991). Maximization has been associated with increased reluctance (Nogalska et al., 2021). However, Nogalska et al. (2021) also found that supportive statements elicited higher rates of reluctance. Moreover, other studies identifying reluctance in CSE and internet-initiated abuse have analyzed interviews conducted in different settings, thereby examining other types of interviewers (Katz, 2013; Leander et al., 2008; Lindholm et al., 2015).

Reluctance, Abuse Characteristics, and IDK Responding

Unsurprisingly, greater reluctance led to fewer identifiable case characteristics. Reluctance reduces the amount of information available about the abuse, consistent with prior research (Lewy et al., 2015). When children did disclose case characteristics, those characteristics were not related to reluctance. That is, children alleging more severe abuse, the perpetrator of abuse being a father figure, or abuse occurring more than once did not exhibit different rates of reluctance. Associations between reluctance and case characteristics may be obscured by non-disclosure. That is, when reluctance is greatest, the child fails to disclose any information, thereby masking case characteristics that may increase reluctance.

A lack of association between reluctance and IDK responding is consistent with prior field studies that have failed to find a relation (Andrews et al., 2017; Earhart et al., 2014). The higher rate of IDK responding among the youngest children may be due to developmental differences in memory and indicative of a genuine failure to recall the requested information. There is evidence that children sometimes resort to IDK responding in contexts in which they are reluctant to respond, such as when interviewers first move into the allegation phase (Hughes-Scholes & Powell, 2013) or when they ask about potentially incriminating information (Evans & Lyon, 2012). However, because IDK responses also often reflect true memory failure, it appears to be a poor proxy for reluctance.

Limitations and Future Directions

The sample was limited to female victims. There is some evidence that male CSA victims may be more reluctant to disclose abuse, in part because of its implications for their sexual identity (Alaggia, 2010). Another limitation is that we excluded interviews that were conducted entirely in Spanish. We did so because we were concerned with potential miscommunication and mistranslations that could affect our estimates of reluctance. In doing so, however, we may have overlooked cases in which adolescents were particularly reluctant given their cultural background or immigrant status (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). As in most observational research, we could not determine ground truth, so it is unclear how the possibility of false allegations would affect rates of reluctance. Children who are falsely disclosing CSA might exhibit less reluctance, because they are willing to disclose, on the other hand, they may be ambivalent and feel pressured by others, and this may manifest itself as reluctant responding.

In order to obtain a better understanding of possible age differences in reluctance, future work should examine children and adolescents whose abuse was discovered in similar ways, so that prior disclosure rates are similar. With respect to the sample studied here, an obvious step would be to measure reluctance in younger children to determine the age at which the different types of reluctance emerge. Similarly, research examining internet-initiated abuse should examine reluctance among younger children whose abuse was discovered prior to any disclosure by the child. Only by controlling for sampling differences can we truly understand the dynamics of adolescents' decisions about disclosing abuse and identify the most effective methods for encouraging adolescent disclosure.

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