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## 12. Disclosure of child sexual abuse.

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## Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse

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### *Implications for Interviewing*

*Thomas D. Lyon and  
Elizabeth C. Ahern*

**W**hether children are reluctant to disclose sexual abuse is an important issue. If children are reluctant, then abused children may deny and recant abuse. On the other hand, if abused children readily disclose, then denials and recantations may prove that an abuse allegation is false. If abused children are reluctant to disclose, then interviewers must look for means of reassuring children or otherwise overcoming their resistance. If abused children are forthcoming, then interviewers should focus on eliminating questions that might suggest abuse to a nonabused child. The truth lies somewhat in the middle. There is good evidence for reluctance, but there is also good evidence that most children who have previously disclosed abuse need not be asked leading questions to elicit their disclosure.

This chapter provides a synopsis of generally accepted facts about the disclosure of child sexual abuse (CSA). We review research on: (1) disclosure by children substantiated as sexually abused and (2) surveys of adults asking whether they were sexually abused as children. The research supports the proposition that CSA victims often delay disclosure or fail altogether to disclose abuse and that delays and nondisclosure are most common among children abused by a familiar person, especially a family member living in the child's household. The implications of the research are that inconsistencies

and recantations in children's reports may be due to reluctance rather than a false allegation.

We also review a literature that has been overlooked in discussions of abuse disclosure: research asking child sex offenders to describe their *modus operandi* (method of operating). Offenders describe methods for obtaining the acquiescence of children over time, often without physical violence and without fear of detection. The literature on offender *modus operandi* helps professionals understand the dynamics underlying children's failure to disclose abuse.

## Child Studies and What They Tell Us About Disclosure

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Professionals are familiar with Summit's paper on CSA accommodation (1983), which argues that sexually abused children's disclosures are delayed and inconsistent because of the dynamics of sexual abuse. It is important to be equally aware of a literature that criticizes accommodation and argues that accommodation is based on anecdote rather than scientific evidence (Bradley & Wood, 1996; *Gersten v. Senkowski*, 2004; Kovera & Borgida, 1997; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Mason, 1995). Moreover, professionals should be alert to concerns that some of the research finding high rates of reluctance and recantation (e.g., Gonzalez, Waterman, Kelly, McCord, & Oliveri, 1993; Sorenson & Snow, 1991) was based on dubious claims of abuse (London et al., 2005).

London and colleagues reviewed the literature on children's disclosure of abuse and were critical of some components of accommodation but nevertheless concluded that delays in disclosure are common among victims of substantiated abuse (London et al., 2005). Furthermore, London's most recent review of the literature acknowledges that "a number of studies indicate that closer relationships are associated with longer delays and lower disclosure rates" (London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008, p. 37). Specifically, London writes, "parentally abused children with low levels of family support" will exhibit lower disclosure rates and higher recantation rates than other abuse victims (London et al., 2008, p. 38; see Elliott & Briere, 1994; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Lippert, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2009; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007). The finding that abused children commonly delay disclosing abuse (if they disclose at all), and that this delay is attributable to the influence of adults close to the child, is consistent with other reviews of the literature on abuse disclosure (Lyon, 2002, 2007; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

Several studies with high rates of nondisclosure among children suspected of being abused found clear relations among delay, nondisclosure, and the child perpetrator relationship (Hershkowitz, 2006; Herskowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Pipe et al., 2007). Michael Lamb and his colleagues have conducted much of the recent research and emphasize the "motivational factors that make many children—more than a third of suspected victims and unknown numbers

of children about whom no suspicions have been raised—reluctant to disclose abuse” (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008, p. 17).

With respect to recantation, a study examining over 250 substantiated cases of sexual abuse in dependency court found that about a fourth of the children recanted at some point and that recantations were more likely if the child was abused by a member of his or her household, if the nonperpetrator parent expressed disbelief or was otherwise unsupportive of the allegation, and if the child was under 10 years of age (Malloy et al., 2007). If recantations are reasons to believe that the allegations are false, then the recantation rate should be lower among cases with other evidence of abuse. The authors tested for this possibility and did not find any evidence to support it. Although parental disbelief and the other factors influencing the rate of recantation vary widely across samples (London et al., 2008), the results demonstrate that recantation appears to follow the same dynamic as disclosure and that one should not assume that a recanting child who previously made a credible disclosure of abuse was not, in fact, abused.

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## Adult Surveys and What They Tell Us About Disclosure

There is consensus among researchers who survey representative groups of adults about their childhood sexual experiences that “failure to disclose is common among sexually abused children” (London et al., 2005; see Lyon, 2002, 2009; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Delayed disclosures are frequent, and a large percentage of adults across studies report never having told anyone about their abuse prior to the survey (Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Fleming, 1997; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt, Loeb, Solis, Carmona, & Romero, 1999). For example, Laumann and colleagues (1994) surveyed over 3,400 adults in the United States and found that of those who stated they experienced contact sexual abuse before puberty, 74% of women and 78% of men did not tell anyone during their childhood. Because of the consistent findings, even critics of CSA accommodation conclude that “the overall pattern is that many children simply do not willingly tell” (London et al., 2008).

Surveys provide insight into factors that influence whether disclosure occurs. Four of the five representative surveys that tested for the effects of relationships on disclosure found that the relationship mattered, with closer relationships leading to lower rates of disclosure (Anderson et al., 1993; Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990; but see Fleming, 1997). Moreover, a study examining the same sample as Smith et al. (2000) found that reporting to the police was more likely when the perpetrator was a stranger (Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Best, 1999). Three of the studies utilized statistical methods that enabled

the researchers to control for case characteristics that might obscure the association between relationship and disclosure (Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990).

Two of the nationally representative surveys asked respondents reporting abuse what factors deterred earlier disclosure. The most common reasons were embarrassment and shame (25% in Anderson et al., 1993; 46% in Fleming, 1997), expectations that the disclosure recipient would blame the child (29% in Anderson et al., 1993; 18% in Fleming, 1997) or that they would not be believed or not be helped (23% in Anderson et al., 1993; 23% in Fleming, 1997). Respondents in Anderson and colleagues' survey (1993) also mentioned concern for others: 24% stated that they did not want to upset anyone and 14% wanted to protect the abuser. In contrast, only 11% mentioned fear of the abuser. Finally, 18% stated that they were not bothered by the abuse.

Representative surveys have a number of advantages. First, they identify former victims who have never previously disclosed their abuse. Research on clinical samples, by contrast, enlists participants who already self-identified as former victims. Second, surveys are unlikely to include a large number of false allegations of abuse. Those who are skeptical of sexual abuse allegations have argued that parents and authorities pressure children to disclose abuse (Ceci & Bruck, 2006). However, fewer than 10% of respondents who acknowledge abuse in surveys state that their disclosure was reported to authorities (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Russell, 1983; Smith et al., 2000). Therefore, respondent reports are unlikely to have been the product of having been suggestively questioned by biased adults.

Skeptics of sexual abuse allegations argue that therapists can create false allegations (Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). Yet only a very small percentage (2%) of women in surveys who acknowledge abuse report having remembered abuse with the help of a therapist (Wilsnack, Wonderlich, Kristjanson, Vogelanz-Holm, & Wilsnack, 2002).

Although surveys identify large numbers of former abuse victims, there is good reason to believe that surveys underestimate the prevalence of abuse and exaggerate the likelihood that abuse is reported to authorities. The problem is simple: Former abuse victims may be reluctant to disclose abuse, even when questioned years after the abuse and when guaranteed anonymity by surveyors.

There are several lines of evidence suggesting that former victims remain reluctant to disclose abuse when questioned by surveyors, a problem called "survey reluctance" (Lyon, 2009). First, substantiated abuse is often subsequently denied by survey respondents. Reviewing the research on retrospective reports of childhood maltreatment, Hardt and Rutter (2004) concluded that "the universal finding [is] that, even with well-documented serious abuse or neglect, about a third of individuals do not report its occurrence when specifically asked about it in adult life." Second, more persistent questioning elicits more reports of abuse. In a nationally

representative survey of American women, Wilsnack et al. (2002) found that the percentage of respondents reporting abuse doubled (from 15% to 31%) when researchers asked a greater number of specific questions about sexually abusive experiences. Several reviewers have noted that the most important determinant of prevalence rates in retrospective surveys appears to be the number of questions asked (Finkelhor, 1994; Hardt & Rutter, 2004), an observation formally confirmed in a meta-analysis by Bolen and Scannapieco (1999). Third, respondents surveyed more than once are often inconsistent in acknowledging that sexual abuse occurred. Fergusson and colleagues questioned a nationally representative group of adults about CSA when they were 18 and again when they were 21 (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000). Among the respondents who reported sexual abuse at 21, about half (45%) had failed to report abuse at 18 (37 out of 83), and among the respondents who reported sexual abuse at 18 years of age, more than half (54%) failed to report abuse at 21 (54 out of 100). In other words, over half of the respondents who reported abuse at some point did so in only one of the two interviews. Other studies have found similar inconsistencies in reporting across multiple interviews (Fry, Rozewicz, & Crisp, 1996; McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Carnochan, 1995). The inconsistencies cannot be attributable to respondents' uncertainties about whether the reported behaviors were in fact sexual abuse, as some have claimed (London et al., 2005), because respondents were, if anything, less consistent in their reports of more serious abuse (Fergusson et al., 2000; Frye et al., 1996).

Why does it matter if many survey respondents fail to disclose childhood sexual abuse? Critics of sexual abuse accommodation acknowledge that surveys demonstrate that substantial numbers of abuse victims never disclose their abuse but claim that nondisclosure says nothing about whether victims would have disclosed had they been asked (London et al., 2008). Survey reluctance suggests that victims will deny abuse, even when directly asked and even if guaranteed anonymity and questioned long after the abuse occurred.

Furthermore, survey reluctance leads surveys to exaggerate the percentage of abuse that is disclosed to others (Lyon, 2009). This is a complex point and takes some explaining. The logic is that victims who never disclose as children are more likely to remain silent about their abuse in adulthood. This means that former victims who do disclose when surveyed will disproportionately be those who previously disclosed.

The effects of survey reluctance explain the common finding that younger respondents in surveys report *lower* rates of sexual abuse and *higher* rates of prior disclosure (Lyon, 2009). For example, Fergusson, Lynskey, and Horwood's (1996) survey of 18-year-olds found a lower prevalence rate than surveys of older adults and an unusually high rate of prior disclosure among those who acknowledged abuse (87%). The problem is that if many victims who had never told maintained their silence



when questioned by the surveyor, the survey would both underestimate the prevalence of abuse and overestimate the likelihood that victims disclosed.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, surveys of adults tell us a great deal about disclosure of abuse. Most abuse victims who reveal abuse to surveyors never told anyone about their abuse while they were a child, and many had not revealed the abuse to anyone before the survey. Many abuse victims will fail to report abuse to surveyors or will report abuse inconsistently, evincing the difficulties victims have in disclosing abuse, even a long time after the abuse occurred. The likelihood of disclosure is affected by the closeness of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Victims' failure to disclose is sometimes motivated by fear of the perpetrator but often includes self-blame or fears of being blamed by others.

## **The Modus Operandi of Child Sex Offenders and What It Tells Us About Victims' Secrecy**

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Across the adult and child literatures, a consistent factor is the importance of the relationship among the child, the alleged perpetrator, and other important people in the child's life, particularly the child's parents. These relationships hint at why a child would keep sexual abuse a secret. When the child is abused by a parent or close relative, the child is likely to refrain from disclosing as much from love as from fear—love for the perpetrator and for the other parent. Although disclosure may end the abuse, it will likely disrupt the child's relationships with some of the most important people in the child's life. Most sexual abuse is not perpetrated by parents, however, and delays in disclosure are not limited to parental abuse. How should we think about the dynamics of disclosure when the abuser is not related to the child?

One means of better understanding the dynamics of disclosure is to move from the victims' to the offenders' perspective. Research asking child sex offenders to describe their modus operandi dates back at least to the 1960s (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christensen, 1964), and a review published in 2009 surveyed the results of 19 studies (Leclerc, Proulx, & Beauregard, 2009). Research on offender modus operandi was largely motivated by the hope of improving prevention and treatment efforts (Salter, 2003). Here, we review the literature on modus operandi as a means of understanding the reasons why victims delay disclosure, fail to disclose abuse, or appear inconsistent in their disclosures. The research provides insight into the means by

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<sup>1</sup>An alternative explanation for the high rates of reported prior disclosure among young respondents acknowledging abuse is that younger respondents are less likely to have forgotten that they disclosed abuse (London et al., 2008). But if the issue is forgetting, young adults should report as much abuse as older adults, and they should be highly consistent in reporting whether they were abused over time. The fact that they endorse less abuse and endorse abuse inconsistently is evidence that they are reluctant to disclose.

which sex offenders choose their prospective victims, obtain access to children, befriend children, desensitize children to sexual touch, progress to more serious sexual activities with children, and convince children to keep the abuse a secret.

Two common themes stand out. First, sex offenders emphasize the extent to which they seduce their victims over time rather than commit isolated assaults. Although it is probable that they understate the level of coercion and sometimes violence in their acts of molestation, a point discussed at greater length next, most child molestation includes attempts to obtain the assent and cooperation of victims. Of course, with this level of planning and preparation, offenders are unlikely to abuse a victim on only one occasion; at least two thirds of offenders maintain the same victim over time (Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Smallborne & Wortley, 2001).

Second, intrafamilial and extrafamilial sex offenders are similar. Although it was once believed that incest perpetrators are quite different than extrafamilial offenders (Becker, 1994), researchers have found that sex offenders often victimize children both within and outside their families (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman, & Rouleau, 1988), and the research on modus operandi finds more similarities than differences in approach. Because of their privileges and status with respect to children to whom they are related or who are under their care, intrafamilial sex offenders enjoy access that extrafamilial sex offenders lack. Extrafamilial sex offenders must overcome children's hesitancy to trust strangers and often seek to become "like family."

Only a minority of sex offenses against children are perpetrated by strangers. In Smallborne and Wortley's (2001) survey of 182 child sex offenders, "only 6.5 percent of offenders had their first sexual contact with a stranger" (p. 4). Rather, child sex offenders either seek out or take advantage of opportunities to molest children with whom they are familiar. In an analysis of the offense patterns of different types of sex offenders, Beauregard and colleagues (Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, & Allaire, 2007) described two types of interest: the "sophisticated rape track" who are offenders who work with or are involved with children and the "family infiltrator." Those in the sophisticated rape track,

because of their position and status, may appear nonthreatening to their victims. They benefit from a context that affords them the opportunity to be in the presence of potential victims and, therefore, to establish intimate relationships with some of them through manipulative strategies (e.g., seduction, tricks, games). Moreover, they can easily create situations that allow them to be alone with potential victims (e.g., staying after school, camping trips, movies) not only to gain the victim's trust but also to provide a favorable context for sexual activity. (p. 1080)

Sullivan and Beech (2004) interviewed 41 perpetrators receiving treatment who molested children with whom they worked and found that 15%

chose their profession *exclusively* to provide access to victims; another 42% acknowledged that this partially motivated their job choice.

The family infiltrators “become acquainted with a family and offer different types of services, especially babysitting. Offenders specifically target women living alone with children” (Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, & Allaire, 2007, pp. 1080–1081).

In both types of cases, the child’s parents are likely to view the offender favorably because of the offender’s interest in the child. Indeed, in the family infiltrator scenario, the offender may appeal to the parent both as a surrogate father and as a friend or intimate partner.

Many sex offenders acknowledge that they choose victims on the basis of their apparent vulnerability. Interviewing a small sample of 20 child sex offenders, Conte, Wolf, and Smith (1989), found that offenders

claimed a special ability to identify vulnerable children. Vulnerability was defined both in terms of children’s status (e.g., living in a divorced home or being young) and in terms of emotional or psychological state (e.g., a needy, depressed, or unhappy child). (p. 299)

Forty-nine percent of the sex offenders interviewed by Elliott and colleagues (1995) stated that they targeted children who lacked self-confidence or self-esteem. Beauregard, Rossmo, & Proulx (2007) noted that child sex offenders often targeted “a child with family problems, without supervision, always on the street and in need of help” (p. 455).

The first step for the sex offender is to befriend the child, typically before any kind of physical contact is attempted. Leclerc and colleagues’ review (2009) noted that child sex offenders adopt strategies “that are similar to prosocial behaviors which consist of demonstrating love, attention and appreciation” (p. 8). Both intrafamilial and extrafamilial sex offenders describe spending time with the child (Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001) and giving the child gifts (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Kaufman et al., 1998), sometimes introducing the child to alcohol and pornography (Kaufman et al., 1998). Although the research sometimes finds differences in the rate with which intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders endorse particular techniques, there is little consistency across studies. For example, Budin and Johnson (1989) found that extrafamilial offenders were more likely than incest offenders to bribe children with toys, whereas Kaufman and colleagues (1998) found that incest offenders were more likely to endorse buying the child gifts.

The first sexual contact often does not occur for a substantial period of time—particularly long given the speed with which children, especially young children, can form attachments to adults. In Smallbone and Wortley’s (2001) study, 76% of the intrafamilial offenders, 28% of the extrafamilial offenders, and 39% of the mixed-type offenders knew the child more than a year before initiating abuse.

When the sexual abuser is the child’s parent, the extra attention paid to the child not only has the effect of making the child feel special but isolates the

child and the offending parent from other family members. Christiansen and Blake (1990) found that

[p]otential victims become alienated from the mothers because these daughters are placed by their fathers in their mothers' traditional role of confidante, intimate friend, and sex partner. Alienation from siblings occurs because of the privileges and special favors potential victims receive. (p. 90)

The second step is to desensitize the child to sexual touch through progressively more invasive sexual touch and talk. Kaufman and colleagues (1998) found this to be the most often endorsed means of obtaining a child's compliance by both intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sex offenders (see also Lang & Frenzel, 1988). This approach has several purposes. The offender can test the child's willingness to consent (Christiansen & Blake, 1990) and the likelihood that the child will disclose (Kaufman, Hilliker, Lathrop, & Daleiden, 1988). If the child discloses at an early stage of the process, the offender can claim that the touch was merely affectionate, accidental, or otherwise nonsexual (Lang & Frenzel, 1988). As the abuse progresses, the offender can assure the child of the harmlessness and morality of the actions (Christiansen & Blake, 1990).

Third, the offender initiates overtly sexual acts. Offenders endorse a mixture of bribes and threats as a means of ensuring the victim's compliance, and the strategies are for the most part similar between intrafamilial and extrafamilial offenders (Kaufman et al., 1998; Lang & Frenzel, 1988). Kaufman and colleagues (1998) found that giving gifts was the most common form of bribery and that the most common threat, particularly among intrafamilial offenders, was to prey on children's helplessness by threatening to "tell on them about having sex with [the offender] or by making them feel as if there was nothing they could do to stop it" (p. 355). Researchers have speculated that the efficacy of such a threat is founded on the desensitization process: "victims' repeated acquiescence early in the grooming process (e.g., to nonsexual touch) may lead victims to believe that they have granted permission for more intrusive sexual contact" (Kaufman et al., 1998, p. 356; see also Conte et al., 1989).

If bribes or threats fail, many offenders are willing to resort to physical coercion. In Lang and Frenzel's (1988) sample, two thirds of the sex offenders "frightened the children in some way," and physical force was used in about the same proportion as bribery (p. 311). Most of the offenders in Elliott et al. (1995) claimed that if the child resisted they would stop and try to initiate contact later (61%), but a substantial minority (39%) stated that they would resort to threats or actual violence in order to complete the act. In Christiansen and Blake's (1990) sample of fathers who abused their daughters, less than one fourth acknowledged using threats or physical punishment. As we discuss next, these percentages may be understated by offenders.

To some extent, the power and status differences between adult offenders and the children they victimize make overt use of force unnecessary. Kaufman

and colleagues (1998) noted that in comparing adolescent to adult offenders, they found that adult offenders endorsed fewer strategies overall, and in particular were less likely to have threatened the child with a weapon. They pointed out that adults' "greater physical sizes, statuses afforded by their age (i.e., 'When adults tell you to do something, you listen'), and greater perceived credibility may reduce the need for explicit threats to gain victim compliance in abusive sexual activity" (Kaufman et al., 1998, p. 356).

We have emphasized the extent to which nonphysically forceful means of molesting children are available both to intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sex offenders. Offenders who choose strangers as victims also sometimes employ nonforceful methods. Beauregard, Rossmo, and Proulx (2007) described the "hunting process" of 69 serial sex offenders who offended against strangers, and found that

[t]hree methods are used by sexual offenders specifically against children: seduction/persuasion (13%), money/gift (16%), and games (9%). These methods help offenders make contact with the victims slowly and to gradually estimate their chance of succeeding in getting the victim involved in sexual activities. (p. 456)

Once the offender's acts are overtly sexual, the offender must confront the possibility that the child will disclose the abuse. The extent to which offenders reported asking or warning victims not to tell varies across studies, but the types of positive and negative inducements are similar. Offenders often refer to serious consequences from disclosure. Sixty-one percent of the offenders in Smallbone and Wortley (2001) threatened that they would go to jail or get in trouble. Forty-three percent of the incest offenders in Lang and Frenzel (1988) threatened that the family would split up. Twenty-four percent of the offenders in Elliott et al. (1995) used anger and the threat of physical force.

Offenders often describe the use of positive inducements or the ways in which disclosure will deprive children of the benefits of the abusive relationship. Kaufman and colleagues (1998) reported that offenders most often endorsed strategies involving giving or withdrawing benefits, in which offenders would give children special rewards or privileges, tell children that they would no longer love them or spend time with them if they disclosed, or tell children that their caregiver(s) would no longer love them. Similarly, Smallbone and Wortley (2001) found that offenders endorsed giving children special rewards or privileges (21%) and relied on children's fear that they would lose the offenders' affection (36%). In Elliott et al. (1995), 20% of offenders threatened loss of love or stated that the child was to blame. Lang and Frenzel (1988) found that these sorts of threats were more common among incest offenders than among extrafamilial offenders, in particular expressing love for the child, giving the child special favors, and avoiding punishing the child, perhaps because the threats implied the use of parental authority and control.

One problem with interviewing offenders is that they may misrepresent or misremember their behavior, particularly when it is inconsistent with how they prefer to view the abusive relationship. Sex offenders appear particularly likely to understate their use of threats in order to induce compliance and in order to convince the child not to disclose the abuse. The percentage of offenders who report ever specifically instructing the child not to tell varies widely across the studies, and in many studies, a majority of offenders deny uttering any threats to induce silence. In Budin and Johnson (1989), 25% acknowledged threats not to disclose. In Elliott et al. (1995), 33% acknowledged telling the child not to tell. In Lang and Frenzel (1988), 40% of extrafamilial offenders acknowledged telling the child not to tell, whereas 85% of incest offenders did so. These percentages inevitably increase if one consults other sources, either the sex offenders' therapists or the victims themselves. Kaufman and colleagues (1988) compared what child sex offenders admitted in interviews to what their therapists recalled from offenders' records (and prior admissions) and found that the sex offenders consistently underreported their use of threats both to induce compliance and to induce secrecy. Kaufman and colleagues (1988) found that the most underreporting involved threats to induce secrecy. Christiansen and Blake (1990) noted that "less than one-fourth of the perpetrators reported using threats or actual physical punishment [to induce compliance], yet almost half (45%) of the [incest] victims said that perpetrators did" (p. 96).

In sum, although child sex offenders clearly exaggerate the extent to which they seduced rather than forcibly assaulted their victims, it is clear that most child molestation is a process whereby the offender deliberately elicits the compliance and often the cooperation of the child victim. This process helps to explain why the child does not cry out at the first opportunity and both feels responsible for the abuse and fears being blamed should he or she disclose. In intrafamilial cases, the offender takes advantage of family loyalties. In extrafamilial cases, the offender takes steps to be "like family."

## Implications of the Research for Interviewing Children

Professionals who work with sexual abuse victims understand that many victims are reluctant to disclose. As previously noted, surveys of adults consistently find that less than 10% of CSA was reported to authorities. At the same time, professionals realize that most of the children who come to official attention have disclosed their abuse. Because most victims do not disclose and are not recognized as victims, victims officially recognized as such are not recognized as victims in general.

This fact has two implications for practice. First, professionals must be careful before making assumptions about victims in general based on victims who disclose abuse. For example, some researchers argue that abused children will

freely disclose abuse when questioned (Ceci, Kulkofsky, Klemfuss, Sweeney, & Bruck, 2007). These researchers base their argument on studies examining known cases of CSA seen by clinicians, social services, and law enforcement. The problem is that abuse is usually suspected because a child discloses. Victims who do not disclose generally are not questioned. Moreover, in the process of determining whether abuse occurred, professionals weed out cases in which children fail to disclose or in which the report is unconvincing. As a result, known cases are overwhelmingly cases in which disclosure occurred. These problems, which have been called “suspicion bias” (abuse is usually suspected because of disclosure) and “substantiation bias” (abuse is usually substantiated because of disclosure) (Lyon, 2007), have now been acknowledged by researchers who question whether abused children are reluctant to disclose (London et al., 2008).

The take-home point is that one cannot assume that denial of abuse, inconsistencies in an abuse report, or a recantation is compelling evidence that abuse did not occur. Substantiated cases contain few denials or recantations because denials or recantations reduce the likelihood of substantiation.

The second implication of the fact that victims coming to official attention are not representative of victims in general is the converse of the first. We cannot make assumptions about known victims based on victims in general. Many professionals once assumed (and some may still assume) that children suspected of being abused will deny abuse and that it is critical to use all necessary tools in order to extract disclosures. These professionals fail to realize that when suspicions are based on a prior disclosure, children have evinced a willingness to disclose and are likely to disclose again. Disclosure rates are high among children who previously disclosed (London et al., 2008).

If children questioned about abuse have disclosed previously, it should not be necessary to resort to suggestive techniques in order to elicit a disclosure. Researchers have uncovered a number of useful strategies for questioning children about abuse that increase informativeness without decreasing accuracy. Interview instructions teach child interviewees the virtues of admitting ignorance, asking for clarification, and correcting the interviewer (see Chapter 20). Narrative practice, in which children narrate a nonabusive event before being asked about abuse, has been found to increase the productivity of children’s abuse reports (Sternberg et al., 1997) without evidence that accuracy is compromised (Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004).

When interviewers use the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) investigative interview protocol, which utilizes both interview instructions and narrative practice, most disclosures are elicited with either “tell me why you are here” or through questions that referred to a prior disclosure without interviewers suggesting abuse (e.g., “I heard you talked to a policeman. Tell me what you talked about”) (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). Of course, questions of this sort rely on the fact that most children questioned about suspicions of sexual abuse have made some sort of previous disclosure. Additional details are more productively elicited through open-ended questions such as “tell me more about [action

mentioned by the child]” and “what happened next” than by closed-ended questions (Lamb et al., 2008). Children’s reports are also more productive if the interviewer uses neutral encouragement (e.g., “You are doing very well”) or addresses the child by name (Hershkowitz, 2009).

When suspicions of abuse arise for reasons other than disclosure, such as sexualized behavior, interviewers should be very cautious, because there is a good probability that the suspicions are unfounded. Although sexualized behavior may be much more common among abused children than among nonabused children (and therefore evidence that abuse should be suspected), the majority of children who behave sexually have not been abused (see Chapter 22). The problem with some techniques thought necessary for eliciting disclosures from reluctant children (such as asking a series of yes/no questions specifically inquiring about abuse) is that they risk increasing the likelihood of false allegations and, in a related way, make true reports difficult to distinguish from false reports. For example, by asking a direct yes/no question (“Did the man touch your vagina?”) an interviewer guarantees that a true disclosure will look much like a false disclosure; in either case, a child is likely to simply say “yes” (see Chapter 20).

At the same time that professionals have a number of nonleading approaches to elicit disclosures, nondisclosure and recantation remain a major concern (Lyon, Lamb, & Myers, 2009), and children who are initially forthcoming about their abuse often become inconsistent or reluctant over the course of intervention (Malloy et al., 2007). Surprisingly little research has been conducted on effective and nonleading methods of eliciting disclosure from reluctant victims. One potentially useful technique is a promise to tell the truth, which has been found to increase honesty without increasing errors (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002, 2004), even among maltreated children who have been coached to either falsely deny or falsely claim that events occurred (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008). The extent to which this and other tools may reduce reluctance to disclose sexual abuse remains to be examined.

Interviewers should focus on the fact that when children do disclose, and thus are capable of and willing to describe their abuse, this provides a window of opportunity for eliciting convincing details of the abuse as well as facts that can explain predisclosure delays and postdisclosure inconsistencies and recantations. If a child subsequently recants abuse, the likelihood that the recantation is true or false can be assessed in light of the motivations and pressures that the child disclosed.

It may be possible to elicit details about the progression of abuse from non-sexual touching to sexual touching to more invasive acts. If the child narrates such a progression, this helps to explain why the child would delay disclosing abuse and why the child might blame himself or herself for the abuse and expect recipients of disclosure to blame the child as well (“I let him do it, so I can’t complain”).

Unfortunately, interviewers often ask children about multiple abusive events by asking “how many times” abuse occurred. Asking for a number



rather than details of individual events makes it difficult for the interviewer to elicit evidence of the progression of abuse over time. The NICHD investigative interview protocol recommends that interviewers ask the child if the abuse occurred “one time or more than one time,” and if the child responds that it occurred more than once, the interviewer asks the child to “tell me everything that happened the first time,” “tell me everything that happened the last time,” and “tell me everything that happened the time you remember the most” (Lamb et al., 2008).

Asking about individual acts is preferable to asking for numbers. Children have difficulty providing numerical estimates, particularly if the abuse occurred on multiple occasions over a long period of time. Indeed, even an adult would have difficulty answering such questions and would have to resort to estimation that is little more than an educated guess (Bradburn, 2000).

Asking children about individual acts often elicits details about idiosyncratic events such as interruptions of the abuse due to another person or another event (e.g. the perpetrator stopped because a parent was heard coming home). Reporting such events can lend credibility to the child’s story because idiosyncratic details are unlikely to be the product of adult coaching or interview suggestiveness.

In order to understand the dynamics of abuse, including the alleged perpetrator’s and the child’s perspectives, interviewers need not ask leading or direct questions. Interviewers can elicit how the alleged perpetrator justified abuse by asking, “What did he tell you about what he was doing?” (Berliner & Conte, 1990) or “What did he say when/after he touched you?” In order to elicit the child’s perspective, interviewers can ask the child, “How did you feel when he touched you?” and “How did you feel after he touched you?” If the “feelings questions” elicit physical feelings, the interviewer can then ask, “What did you think when/after. . . ?” questions. Conversely, if the interviewer seeks the child’s physical reactions, he or she can follow up a feelings question with “How did your body feel. . . ?” These questions can be asked about individual abusive events as well as about abuse generally. For example, with respect to the first time sexual abuse occurred, children often disclose that they were confused by the perpetrator’s actions or that they did not initially recognize that the actions were wrong (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Sas & Cunningham, 1995).

The interviewer can elicit useful information by asking the child to describe her feelings about the alleged perpetrator more generally (e.g., “How did you feel about him when you first knew him, before he touched you?”). Interviewers should not be surprised to elicit a mixture of negative and positive feelings (Berliner & Conte, 1990), which helps explain acquiescence to abuse, self-blame, initial reluctance to disclose, motives to recant, and the negative effects that abuse may have on children’s sense of trust in adults. On the other hand, eliciting feelings about the perpetrator may also help determine if there were motivations to make a false report.

The interviewer can inquire into the child’s prior disclosures and the child’s reasons for disclosing (or for not disclosing sooner) (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). This information may be elicited by asking, “What happened

next?” subsequent to the child’s description of the last act of abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2007), or the interviewer can ask the child, “Who did you tell?” “What did you say to them?” and “When did you tell them?” Children have difficulty in reconstructing the time that they told, but a “when” question does not necessitate a reference to a specific time. “When” questions elicit information about what was happening before or at the time the child disclosed. In order to elicit the child’s motivations, the interviewer can ask the child, “Why did you tell?” or “What kept you from telling?”

The responses of the people to whom a child disclosed are important. Children, particularly young children, are likely to disclose first to a parent. As discussed earlier, children are less likely to disclose and more likely to recant when nonoffending parents refuse to believe that abuse occurred or otherwise fail to support the child. On the other hand, children’s reports are often doubted because of the assertion that a parent is influencing the child to make a false claim of abuse. Hence, the parent’s reaction can play an important role in determining if the child’s report is consistent over time. The interviewer can ask the child about the disclosure recipient’s reactions (“What did she do/say when you told her?”) and what the disclosure recipient told the child about talking to the interviewer (“What did your mom tell you about talking to me?”). The interviewer can ask the child what the parent and other interested adults have said about the alleged perpetrator (“What has x said about y?”) and vice versa. This can reveal both pressures to accuse and pressures to deny that abuse occurred.

Finally, the child’s current feelings are helpful in understanding the potential for future inconsistencies and recantation. The child can be asked, “How do you feel about [the alleged perpetrator] now?” “What happened to you since you told?” and “How do you feel about what has happened to you?” Children sometimes express regret that they disclosed abuse and unhappiness over the consequences of disclosing (Sas & Cunningham, 1995). These feelings can be useful in interpreting subsequent denials or recantations.

Although there is no research examining how recanting children can best be interviewed, our experience suggests that the same inquiries into the child’s feelings and motivations and the motivations of others can be explored. The child can be asked why he or she originally alleged abuse and why he or she is retracting the allegations now. The child’s reasons for making a false allegation can be assessed for their plausibility. The child can be asked open-ended questions designed to elicit as much detail as possible about the prior allegations.

Recanting children are likely to answer in one of two ways when asked about prior disclosures. Many children, particularly younger children, repeat the disclosures and may revert to discussing the abuse as if it really happened (e.g., they will answer “how do you know?” questions with “because I saw it”). Hence, a child will answer “no” if asked a direct question about abuse but if asked about prior disclosures, may repeat a credible narrative of abuse. Alternatively, children may simply deny prior disclosures. If those disclosures were made to impartial observers and adequately documented, this suggests

that the child is feeling pressure to deny. Clearly, however, the best methods for interviewing recanting children have yet to be developed.

## Conclusion

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In sum, a good understanding of the dynamics of sexual abuse and the disclosure process can help interviewers do a better job when questioning children about alleged sexual abuse. Research clearly justifies concerns about nondisclosure and recantation of true allegations of abuse. At the same time, we still know very little about how to elicit disclosures from children who are unwilling to disclose. The optimum strategy is to do what we can with what we have: children who allege abuse and are brought to the attention of the authorities. Careful and thorough questioning of these children utilizing the most up-to-date interviewing approaches is the best we can do.

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