Utah State University
DigitalCommons@USU

Undergraduate Honors Theses | Honors Program

5-1-2012

Influences of Disclosure Among Child Sexual Abuse Victims

Michelle Jones
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/honors

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Jones, Michelle, "Influences of Disclosure Among Child Sexual Abuse Victims" (2012). *Undergraduate Honors Theses.* Paper 107.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact becky.thoms@usu.edu.

INFLUENCES OF DISCLOSURE AMONG CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMS

by

Michelle Jones

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

Social Work
in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology

Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor Dr. Shannon Browne	**Departmental Honors Advisor** Dr. Terry Peak

Director of Honors Program
Dr. Christie Fox

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

Spring 2012

Abstract

Child forensic interviews are essential in eliciting disclosures in child abuse cases. Due to the nature of abuse and the child victims, barriers are inevitable to obtaining a full disclosure. This research describes the barriers as well as the factors that increase the likelihood of eliciting a disclosure during child forensic interviews. Previous research has found that factors more likely to induce a disclosure are having a supportive primary caregiver, an investigation which was instigated by the child victim, and if the victim is an older female. Barriers preventing disclosure include threats made by the perpetrator, fear, lack of opportunity to disclose, lack of understanding of the abuse, and a close relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. For this research, qualitative interviews were conducted with child protection workers, social service staff and law enforcement who regularly conduct child forensic interviews to better understand the factors that increase the likelihood of disclosure among children, as well as the barriers that prevent disclosure. Findings from this research obtained from local practitioners indicate that factors that help elicit a disclosure include a child-friendly environment, caregiver support, and connecting and rapport building between the interviewer and the child. The greatest barrier preventing disclosure was found to be the lack of caregiver support and the fear of the outcomes of disclosure. From this research we can better improve the way practitioners interview their child clients through providing a child-friendly environment, ensuring support from caregivers, and the possible expansion to the NICHD child forensic interview protocol to better meet the needs of reluctant children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……2

INTRODUCTION……4

LITERATURE REVIEW……6

METHODS……14

FINDINGS……15

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION……22

REFERENCES……25

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY……29

Introduction

In the United States, it is relatively unknown exactly how many children are victims of sexual abuse. A major reason for this lack of data is due to the fact present estimates of the incidence of child abuse are primarily based on reports received and validated by child protection agencies. These figures do not reflect the number of unreported cases or the number of cases reported to other types of agencies (London et al, 2005). In addition, child abuse generally occurs in secret, leaving the victim and their perpetrator the only witnesses to the abuse. Because there are not always outward, physical signs of abuse, it is feared that many cases go unrecorded. Based on interviews with adults, some researchers conclude that more than half of child victims do not disclose sexual abuse at the time it occurs, and many never do (Berliner & Elliott, 2002). As Roland Summit stated, "Treated, reported or investigated cases are the exception, not the norm." (Summit, 1983, pg 11)

Finkelhor (1994) in a summary of 19 retrospective victimization studies asking adults to report on their own childhood experiences of sexual abuse, estimated that the rate of victimization for women is at least 20% and between 5% and 10% for men. If the rates of sexual abuse that are reported by adults on their childhood are accurate, it would mean that there would be approximately 500,000 new child sexual abuse cases per year (McCoy & Keen, 2009). This is drastically higher than official reports on child sexual abuse. A 2003 estimate based on a national aggregation of cases that were investigated and substantiated by state child protection agencies account an estimated 78,188 child sexual abuse cases in 2003 (National statistics on child abuse and neglect, 2005). Other data based on cases that are known to law enforcement agencies in 18 states show that approximately 225,000 sex crimes against children were

reported to the police nationwide in 2001 (National Incidence-Based Reporting System, 2001). These CPS and police report data are considerably lower than victimization reports and strongly support the wide belief that children frequently do not disclose their experiences of abuse.

Furthermore, research even suggests that retrospective victimization reports are even lower than the actual incidence of abuse. One researcher (Williams, 1994) did a follow-up study of 129 females who had been treated for sexual abuse as young children at an emergency room. When Williams interviewed the victims 17 years later, 38% of the women did not disclose the abuse. Therefore, the rates of child sexual abuse may be even higher than those reported in Finkelhor's retrospective victimization studies.

There are various reasons as to why children give only a partial disclosure, give no disclosure, or even deny abuse which in reality took place. Often the victim is threatened by their perpetrator, the victim is fearful that they will be blamed, the victim may lack the verbal or mental capability, and some children simply do not realize that what is happening is wrong. As a result of these factors, it is normal that children will not tell someone about abuse that is occurring.

However, children's statements on abuse, particularly sexual abuse, often are the only available evidence that victimization has occurred (Reiser, 1991), and they provide the basis for legal investigation. Considering the critical importance of child's statements on abuse, researchers have attempted to understand the difficulty and complexity of disclosure. These reasons for not disclosing are of particular importance for effectively conducting child forensic interviews because the purpose of child forensic interviews is to evaluate abuse claims and to give the child the opportunity to disclose abuse. Errors in disclosure can result in severe

negative consequences for both the child and the alleged perpetrator. Either perpetrators will be free to commit further abuse, or innocent people are imprisoned.

As evidenced by the data from victimization surveys and police reports on child disclosure, we can acknowledge we can not anticipate for children to spontaneously disclose abuse, openly talk about it in a child forensic interview, or even maintain their disclosure without recanting what they previously said. Therefore, determining the context in which children disclose abuse and the possible reasons of withholding a disclosure both before and during a forensic interview is the purpose of this research.

Review of the Literature

Previous studies have examined how child gender, child age, perpetrator relationship to child, caregiver support, and initial disclosure relate to child disclosure at a forensic interview. These topics will be discussed below.

Child Sex

Though many studies have generated conflicting predictors of disclosure of child abuse, several studies have concluded that the sex of the child has been found to have an effect on the likelihood of a disclosure during a child forensic interview. DeVoe and Fuller (1999) in a sample of seventy six children, who were referred because of concerns on sexual abuse, discovered that girls disclosed at a higher rate than boys. However, once boys disclosed, they provided as much detail about alleged abuse as girls did, which suggest that boys may have had a longer warm-up period than the girls had, but were able to talk about alleged abuse once they were comfortable. Gries (1996) similarly found in a sample of 96 children aged 3-17 that females

made significantly more disclosures than males who were also referred due to suspicion. Likewise, Finkelhor et al.'s (1994) national survey of adults showed that a higher percentage of adult men, versus women, reported sexual abuse experiences that they had never disclosed. Another study specifically focused on sexually abused boys, including the prevalence, characteristics, and psychological consequences of abuse, found that because of the stigma against homosexuality, boys are less likely to disclose the abuse than girls when perpetrated by a male (Valente, 2005). While this study suggests that boys who are sexually abused by males as a result fear homosexuality, another study suggests that boys who are sexually abused by females, due to social and cultural factors, may overlook sexual contact as abuse (Peluso, 1996).

Child Age and Development

The age of the child at the time of the abuse has also been shown to affect the rate at which children disclose abuse. For example, Hershkowitz et al. (2005) studied rates of disclosure by dividing their sample into three age groups and found that rates of disclosure increased as children grew older, with 50% of the 3-6-year olds, 67% of the 7-10-year olds, and 74% of the 11-14-year olds. Similarly, Pipe et al. (2007) reported the following rates of disclosure in their research: 63% (4-5-year olds), 76% (6-8-year olds), and 85% (9-13-year olds). These data suggest that studies with relatively older samples of children will produce higher disclosure rates than studies with relatively younger samples. London (2005) discussed two major interpretations of the higher disclosure rates among older children. The first is that younger children may not have the linguistic or cognitive abilities necessary to recognize the abuse as wrong or to recognize the purpose of the forensic interview and convey their experiences during the interview. London's second possibility for the age differences in

disclosure rates is due to the fact there is a higher rate of unfounded cases among younger children who are brought in for interviews where abuse is suspected. He suggested this higher rate of unfounded cases could occur because younger children often make ambiguous statements that seem to have sexual relevance but are misinterpreted by adults (London, 2005). Because of these reasons, it is expected that younger children will not disclose as readily as older victims.

Initial Disclosure

An initial disclosure might be expected to predict a child's disclosure at a forensic interview because it may reflect the child's readiness to disclose the abuse or decrease the child's fear of disclosing to an authority figure (London et al., 2007). Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) studied disclosures among children aged 3 to 17 who were referred to a children's hospital for sexual abuse and found that a pre-investigation disclosure was highly predictive of a disclosure during a forensic interview. Children who gave a prior disclosure of abuse disclosed during the forensic interview at a rate of 86% compared to 14% of children without a prior disclosure. Similarly, DiPietro et al. (1997) found that 72% of their sample who gave a prior disclosure disclosed at the forensic interview versus 7% of children without a prior disclosure.

Child Relationship to the Perpetrator

Lipert (2009) suggests it would seem likely that children abused by extrafamilial perpetrators would show an increased propensity to disclose their abuse, as their caregivers might be more supportive of their disclosures and children might feel less loyalty and protectiveness toward the perpetrator. Several studies have confirmed this idea. One study, Goodman Brown et al. (2003), which examined disclosure at a forensic interview, found that

children with an intrafamilial perpetrator disclosed later than children with an exrafamilial perpetrator, with the core reason for the delayed disclosure being the children's fear of negative consequences.

Caregiver Support

Many studies provide strong evidence that caregiver support is a critical factor enabling children to disclose abuse. The apprehension of a negative reaction from a caregiver may cause a child to choose not to disclose their abuse. One study found that children had a lower rate of recanting disclosures of abuse when their caregivers were supportive (Elliot and Briere, 1994). Similarly, Lawson and Chaffin (1992) studied disclosure among a sample of children with sexually transmitted infections and found that children whose caregivers were classified as being supportive disclosed at a rate 3.5 times higher than those children without supportive caregivers. Other research has shown that children's willingness to disclose abuse decreased when they anticipated negative reactions from their caregivers (Hershkowitz Lanes et al., 2007).

Other research has looked at the relationship between caregiver support and the relationship of the perpetrator to the child. Hershkowitz et al. 2007 studied 30 cases of abuse that occurred outside the family and found that when the perpetrator was unknown to the family, 75% of caregivers were supportive of their children's disclosures. When the perpetrator was known to the family, only 11% of caregivers were supportive.

Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome

The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS) was formulated by Roland Summit in 1983 and describes in depth a child's fears of disclosing abuse and how the child responds to the reactions and pressures from adults after the disclosure (Summit, 1983).

Summit describes CSAAS as the most typical way sexual abuse and disclosure occur, of which the first two categories are “preconditions to the occurrence of sexual abuse” and the remaining three are “sequential contingencies which take on increasing variability and complexity.” These categories are (1) secrecy, (2) helplessness, (3) entrapment and accommodation, (4) delayed, unconvincing disclosure, and (5) retraction (Summit, 1983). Understanding the internal struggle a child faces on whether to disclose, and the process in which a child will typically eventually disclose, helps us to understand the barriers children face which would cause them to choose not to disclose abuse. Arthur Garrison articulated this struggle in a paper on incorporating CSAAS into criminal trials by stating,

> “The fear of a child that she will not be believed should not be viewed as unreasonable, because a child knows what types of claims will cause difficulty within the family. If a child hesitates to confess that she broke a favored piece of furniture for fear of repercussions, it is easy to understand why she would hesitate to tell her mother that her father or stepfather is having sexual contact with her. Even a small child knows that such news will not be accepted with joy and total belief by her mother. Another way to consider the problem of sexual abuse disclosure is to picture yourself in a room full of strangers where you are asked to state in detail your last sexual encounter with your wife or husband. If you think it would be at least slightly difficult to tell a room of strangers how your husband undressed you and touched you and what it felt like, then you have an idea of what a small child would feel about describing sexual matters in regard to her father's activities.” (Garrison, 1997, para. 9)

This example helps to illustrate the difficulty and complexity of a sexual abuse disclosure from a child. The process and barriers to disclosure according to Summit will be discussed below.

Secrecy

Sexual abuse, more so than any other form of abuse, occurs in secret. It is normal for children to be told by their perpetrator not to tell anyone, possibly accompanied by threats if they do disclose. As Summit stated,

> "However gentle or menacing the intimidation may be, the secrecy makes it clear to the child that this is something bad and dangerous. The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety: 'Everything will be all right if you just don't tell.' The secret takes on magical, monstrous proportions for the child. A child with no knowledge or awareness of sex and even with no pain or embarrassment from the sexual experience itself will still be stigmatized with a sense of badness and danger from the pervasive secrecy." (Summit, 1983, Pg 5-6)

Therefore, according to Summit, the secrecy of the abuse alone gives the child reason to fear revealing the abuse, even if the child does not understand that what is happening is wrong. This secrecy, however, is generally compounded with multiple other barriers.

Helplessness

There is an obvious power imbalance between a child victim and the perpetrator, which according to Summit (1983), often leads the child to endure the abuse, rather than fighting it. This helplessness is intensified if the perpetrator is a guardian. The child has the societal expectation to obey their parents.

Entrapment and Accommodation

Summit points out that within a dependent relationship sexual abuse is typically not a onetime occurrence. He states, "The only healthy option left for the child is to learn to accept the situation and to survive. There is no way out, no place to run. The healthy, normal, emotionally resilient child will learn to accommodate to the reality of continuing sexual abuse" (Summit, 1983, pg 9). Summit articulates the struggle the child faces on whether to disclose by stating, "In the classic role reversal of child abuse, the child is given both the power to destroy the family and the responsibility to keep it together" (pg 10).

Delayed, Unconvincing Disclosure

Though sexual abuse is often never disclosed, for the cases that are, the disclosure is most often triggered by family conflict, incidental discovery by a third party, or outreach and community education by child protective agencies (Summit 1983). Summit states,

> "After an especially punishing family fight and a belittling showdown of authority by the father, the girl is finally driven by anger to let go of the secret. *She seeks understanding and intervention at the very time she is least likely to find them.* Authorities are alienated by the pattern of delinquency and rebellious anger expressed by the girl. Most adults confronted with such a history tend to identify with the problems of the parents in trying to cope with a rebellious teenager. They observe that the girl seems more angry about the immediate punishment than about the sexual atrocities she is alleging. They assume there is no truth to such a fantastic complaint, especially since the girl did not complain years ago when she claims she was forcibly molested. They assume she has invented the story in retaliation against the father's attempts to achieve reasonable control and discipline. The more unreasonable and abusive the triggering punishment, the more they assume the girl would do anything to get away, even to the point of falsely incriminating her father" (Summit, 1983, pg 11).

Therefore, it is typically the anger within the child created by a family fight, not the actual abuse, that will eventually trigger a disclosure. Arthur Garrison (1997) stated in an article on using CSAAS for criminal trials: "Clearly, the wrong time to disclose that her father has been having sex with her for perhaps years is right after a fight over a curfew on whether she can see her boyfriend." This knowledge, together with the strong evidence for the need of caregiver support to induce a disclosure, provides support for the idea that when children are faced by a disbelieving caregiver, they would seem more likely to recant the disclosure.

Retraction

Summit states, "Whatever a child says about sexual abuse, she is likely to reverse it" (pg 13). If disclosed in this heat of the moment fashion, the child's disclosure is typically accompanied by guilt and the obligation to preserve the family. According to Summit the child victim bears the responsibility of choosing whether to preserve the family, with the "bad"

choice being to tell the truth and the “good” choice being to capitulate and restore a lie for the sake of the family. The most typical thing for children to do in this situation, especially if accompanied by unsupportive caregivers or threats from their perpetrator, is to recant their own disclosure. A child’s lack of credibility, as viewed from society, was summarized by Summit when he spoke concerning the recantation of a disclosure:

> “This simple lie carries more credibility than the most explicit claims of incestuous entrapment. It confirms adult expectations that children cannot be trusted. It restores the precarious equilibrium of the family. The children learn not to complain. The adults learn not to listen. And the authorities learn not to believe rebellious children who try to use their sexual power to destroy well meaning parents.” (pg 14)

This process of disclosure as explained by Roland Summit captures the difficulty and complexity that accompanies a sexual abuse disclosure, and most importantly, it suggests that disclosure cannot be anticipated to occur spontaneous, readily, or even at all. As indicated in an article on The National Children’s Advocacy Center’s forensic evaluation model articulated: “For many children, abuse disclosure is a process, not an event” (Carnes, 2000, p. 21).

These influences of disclosure that previous research have examined are extensive and include (1) child characteristics, such as age and sex, (2) outside influences, such as caregiver support, the child’s relationship to the perpetrator, and the fear of the reception of the disclosure, and (3) the internal struggles a child faces, as demonstrated by the child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome as synthesized by Roland Summit. However, certain limitations in the current research nevertheless persist.

The research presented in this literature review addressing the influence of the child’s sex, age, caregiver support and initial disclosure demonstrate a heavy reliance on quantitative methods. Various other studies have provided helpful information through retrospective

designs to discover individual information from adults on their experiences of abuse as children. An overwhelming majority of qualitative designs on the topic have conducted interviews with victims who are interviewed later in their adulthood. These studies have neglected interviewing those who interact with the child through the disclosure process. This research uses a qualitative design, drawing from local practitioners in the field, to determine what they have encountered firsthand to be the greatest barriers of disclosure when conducting child forensic interviews.

Methods

To answer this research question, a sampling frame was developed of all the local agencies that routinely conduct child forensic interviews. These agencies were then contacted in order to identify the practitioners personally involved in conducting forensic interviews. Seven practitioners were interviewed for this research. Two participants were detectives, three respondents were investigators with the Division of Child and Family Services, and the remaining two practitioners interviewed work with the Children's Justice Center; a local agency that provides a child friendly environment where all local child forensic interviews are conducted. Though the latter two workers do not conduct child forensic interviews, they are required to observe each interview conducted at the Children's Justice Center, and therefore have observed over hundreds of child forensic interviews. The names of those interviewed for this research have been kept anonymous.

All seven interviews were conducted in person at the respondents' place of work. Interview questions ranged from their specific training in interview techniques, their awareness

of the challenges of forensic interviewing, and specific case examples of the factors and context surrounding the interview. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded verbatim. Five follow up interviews with these practitioners have been conducted, that asked about their experiences on what they have witnessed to be the greatest factors in eliciting a disclosure, and the greatest barriers preventing disclosure in child forensic interviews. Once the interviews were completed, common themes were analyzed concerning the context in which children disclose and the respondents' perceptions on barriers preventing disclosure.

Findings

The practitioners participating in the original interviews were asked, "Can you describe a recent case in which you conducted a child forensic interview?" followed with additional questions, including "Where did the interview take place?", "Were the parents supportive?", and "Overall do you think the interview was a successful interview? Why or why not?" Major themes on these questions were extracted from the transcriptions to determine the context in which children disclose in child forensic interviews. Findings from these interviews reveal that several factors play an important role that increases the likelihood that children will choose to disclose. These are creating a child friendly environment, caregiver support, and rapport building between the interviewer and the child. In addition, certain barriers were found to prevent the likelihood of obtaining a full disclosure. These barriers are the child's development, and the fear of the outcomes of disclosure, including the potential lack of caregiver support and possible threats made by the perpetrator.

Context of Disclosure: Themes	Key words or phrase: Quotes
Child friendly environment	"Environment is a huge factor; that's why we have the Children's Justice Center." "The CJC is designed to look like grandma's house." "We'll say, 'I don't understand what you meant by that' and we'll pull out an anatomical sheet and have [the child] circle what they meant."
Caregiver support	"Parent support is huge. Or the person [the child] trusts" "If the parent is trying to help then interviews go better." "Parents can influence the way the child reacts." "If the parents are supportive and want [their child] to tell the truth and has said that to the child, then child will usually tell the truth."
Connecting with and building rapport	"I don't like to read straight off [the interview protocol] because it can be distracting." "We'll let the child decide who they want to talk to; for example If they feel more comfortable talking to DCFS." "I try not to make the interview process sound mechanical."

Child Friendly Environment

All seven cases that were described by the practitioners were conducted at the Children's Justice Center, which is a child friendly atmosphere, "designed to look like grandma's house," as the director of the local center described it. Because of the naturally intimidating environment of police stations, the Children's Justice Center exists to help children feel safe and comfortable and to assist in the difficult and frightening event of disclosing. Several of the practitioners explicitly mentioned the importance of having a child friendly atmosphere when conducting child forensic interviews. A local detective stated, "It's not ideal to interview kids at the school, the hospital, or the sheriff's office because they're either scared of what kids will think, scared of receiving a shot, or scared of getting arrested. You rarely see a child who is scared to be [at the CJC]. It's not an intimidating environment."

In addition to providing a child friendly location, practitioners also expressed the importance of attending to the developmental needs of their child clients to create a child friendly atmosphere. Children's vocabulary often needs clarification, as expressed by most of the practitioners. These interviewers accommodate for these developmental needs through showing pictures, asking questions, and using simple vocabulary the child can understand. A local detective expressed the need for clarifying details with the child: "There are so many different words for the same body part that we need to clarify what [the child] is referring to. Also, most young kids don't know the words for certain body parts. I interviewed a young girl who referred to her penis and so we had to use body language to communicate what she meant." An investigator with the Division of Child and Family Services said, "We'll say to the

child, ‘I don’t understand what you meant by that’ and we’ll pull out an anatomical sheet and have [the child] circle what they meant.”

These measures taken by child forensic interviewers accommodate both for the child’s development needs by using simple vocabulary and clarifying for understanding, and the child’s fear and intimidation by providing a child friendly location.

Child Age and Development

Interestingly, the age of the alleged victim was found to be either a barrier to disclosure or factor to increase the likelihood of disclosing, depending on the age of the child. Very young children lack the verbal ability and understanding necessary to disclose abuse, while older children begin to understand the morality of the abuse and the possible outcomes that result from disclosure. Young children either (1) do not fully comprehend that the abuse that has occurred is wrong, or (2) do not understand the consequences that result after they disclose. The latter was articulated by a program manager at the Division of Child and Family Services: “younger kids don’t understand the outcomes and so they are more likely to talk about it.” While this factor alone increases the likelihood a child will disclose, older children were viewed as not as likely to disclose based on this factor alone, assuming they understand the outcomes and consequences of their disclosure. The program manager at DCFS suggested that because older children have an increased understanding of the abuse, older children are more likely to be embarrassed from talking about it. She stated, “Teens don’t want to talk about sex. It’s very embarrassing to them to talk about vaginas and penises.” This demonstrates clear developmental and maturity differences among different age groups. Older children are more likely to become embarrassed and aware of the ramifications of disclosure.

Furthermore, older children's awareness of the outcomes of abuse is intensified when the perpetrator is a family member. A DCFS investigator stated, "No matter what a child has been through or what has been done to them, they still love their parents. Kids ask about what will happen to a family member….There are loyalty ties when the parent is the perpetrator." A staff member at the Children's Justice Center expressed specifically that children may be reluctant to disclose because of their awareness of the consequences to their family stability: "Kids aren't stupid. They know what's going on. They're terrified about what's going to happen to their family. They know if their breadwinning dad goes to jail the family will be ruined."

These statements illustrate that older children posses the capacity to analyze the outcomes of a disclosure and can deliberately choose not to disclose more so than younger children.

Caregiver Support

The critical importance of caregiver support was seen as a nearly unanimous theme stated by the practitioners interviewed. In three of the case examples described by practitioners where the child disclosed abuse, the practitioner reported both that the parent was supportive and the interview was successful. An investigator with DCFS stated, "The success of getting a disclosure depends in a large part on how the parent has handled it. If the parent is trying to help, then the interview goes better." In all five of the follow-up interviews, in which practitioners were asked what they see to be the greatest factor to elicit a disclosure, caregiver support was unanimously thought to be the greatest positive factor to encourage children to disclose. Similarly, three of the five practitioners encountered lack of caregiver

support, and in some cases even the threats made by caregivers, to be the greatest barrier to an abuse disclosure. An investigator with DCFS stated,

> "The greatest barrier to disclosure is fear; what's going to happen if they tell… Kids worry they are going to get in trouble for telling, or worry that something will happen to their family. The fear for their family can be two sided. It can be threats directed toward the family by the perpetrator, or the perpetrator could be a family member and so [the child] understands disclosure could ruin their family."

The director of the Children's Justice Center stated, "Before a child discloses they are constantly wondering if their caregiver is going to side with them… They need to know that their mom can handle the information and unless they are sure of this they want to protect them from [the knowledge of the abuse]." A staff member at the Children's Justice Center stated, "If parents are supportive and want [the child] to tell the truth and has said this to the child then the child will usually tell the truth."

Furthermore, one detective expressed disdain towards the common procedure of not allowing the caregiver to be in the room during the forensic interview, as it both transforms the parent into a witness and can be heavily scrutinized by defense attorneys. As this detective put it, "How do we know the parents didn't coach them during the break? If the parent is in the room a defense attorney will jump all over it and the interview is thrown out." He provided a specific case example of an unsuccessful interview involving a three year old child who cried the entire interview, and whose parents were not able to be in the room. This officer viewed this policy as a contradiction to the important knowledge children need to have that they are receiving support from their caregiver.

However, the director of the Children's Justice Center viewed the absence of the parent in the room as a factor increasing the likelihood a child will disclose abuse. She stated,

> "Unless [the child] is sure [their mom can handle the information of the abuse] they want to protect them from [this knowledge]… Having the mom present during the interview can make some scared their mom will have reaction and so sometimes it's not best to have caregiver present. The child won't want their mom to hear the details because they don't want them to be concerned for them."

Rapport Building

Generally, the recent interviews described by practitioners that were viewed as being successful also mentioned using rapport building as a key element to a child forensic interview. Rapport building was commonly expressed throughout the interviews as a critical section in the NICHD child forensic interview protocol. During this section the interviewer lets the child know he or she wants a chance to get to know the child better, and the interviewer asks the child safe or neutral questions, such as things the child likes to do. Practitioners viewed this section as essential to helping the child feel safe and comfortable and to lessen the fright of talking to a stranger about difficult topics.

Along with reading through the rapport building section in the NICHD protocol, several practitioners stated they use additional rapport building techniques when conducting child forensic interviews not specified in the protocol. An investigator with DCFS expressed this need to make the interview process comfortable, as did a manager at DCFS. They said, respectively, "I try not to make the interview process seem mechanical," and "I don't like to read straight off [the interview protocol] because it can be distracting."

Several forensic interviewers also expressed the desire they have to accommodate for the special needs and wishes of their child clients. A detective stated that when they assign cases, they look at specific details of the case, rather than a random assignment: "When assigning cases we determine what's best in the situation to make things as comfortable as

possible." This need to help the child feel comfortable was echoed by another detective who said, "We try to let the child decide who they want to talk to… For example if they feel more comfortable talking to DCFS."

These findings indicate that a child who is in a child-friendly environment, has an interviewer who builds rapport with them, and a supportive care giver increase the likelihood that a child will not holdback disclosures of abuse. They also reveal possible reasons as to why children choose not to disclose. These reasons are the developmental ability to understand the abuse, the reluctance to destroy family stability, fear of outcomes of disclosure, and threats from the perpetrator.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify the context in which children disclose abuse and the factors local practitioners perceive as increasing the likelihood of disclosure along with the barriers which prevent it. Findings from these interviews reveal that several factors play an important role that increases the likelihood that children will choose to disclose. These are creating a child friendly environment, caregiver support, and rapport building between the interviewer and the child. In addition, certain barriers were found to prevent the likelihood of obtaining a full disclosure. These barriers are the child's development, and the fear of the outcomes of disclosure, including the potential lack of caregiver support and possible threats made by the perpetrator.

The finding that indicated that caregiver support is a major factor in inducing a disclosure, along with the finding of lack of caregiver support and fear of reactions by caregivers

as a major barrier preventing disclosure, illustrate the importance for social workers, law enforcement, and other social service staff to encourage caregivers to support and remain supportive throughout the investigation process. Differing views from practitioners concerning the benefits and harms regarding the policy for parents to be separated from their child during a child forensic interview suggest this policy can benefit from evaluation. Though currently scrutinized by defense attorneys, the vital importance of support from caregivers indicates that it may be beneficial to have them present when soliciting a disclosure.

In addition, social workers, law enforcement, and other social service staff who are involved in child forensic interviews should be cognizant of the importance of providing a child-friendly environment and seek to ensure a comfortable environment throughout the interview process. A child-friendly environment can go beyond simply providing a safe and comfortable location for the interview. Practitioners conducting child forensic interviews should recognize the developmental level and needs of the child they are interviewing and seek to ensure they are accommodating the child in this respect through using simple vocabulary and clarifying what the child is saying.

Forensic interviewers should also be aware of the importance of the rapport building process, as found to be a critical element in the NICHD interview protocol, and remember not to rush through rapport building, which could decrease the likelihood the child chooses to disclose abuse. Furthermore, implications for adjusting the NICHD protocol include expanding or enforcing the use of the rapport building section and expanding the protocol to better interview reluctant children who do not wish to disclose.

Implications from this research can extend to measures taken before the actual forensic interview as well. A local detective stated, “We live in a society where children aren’t allowed to speak. When deciding between a child’s word and an adult’s word, society will side with the adult.” In recognizing the complex and difficult process of a child disclosure, it is critical for those who are involved in the process, from caregivers, to teachers, to practitioners to provide support and trust in the child’s word, and not to let this trust quickly vanish when faced against the word of an adult.

References

Berliner, L., & Elliott, D. M. (2002). Sexual abuse of children. *The APSAC handbook on child maltreatment.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Carnes, C. N., Nelson-Gardell, D., Wilson, C., & Orgassa, U.C. (2001). Extended forensic evaluation when sexual abuse is suspected: A multisite field study. *Child Maltreatment, 6,* 230–242.

DeVoe, E. R., & Faller, K. C. (1999). The characteristics of disclosure among children who may have been sexually abused. *Child Maltreatment*, *4*, 217-227.

DiPietro, E. K., Runyan, D. K., & Fredrickson, D. D. (1997). Predictors of disclosure during medical evaluation for suspected sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *6*, 133-142.

Elliott, D. M., & Briere, J. (1994). Forensic sexual abuse evaluations of older children: Disclosures and symptomatology. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, *12*, 261-277.

Finkelhor, D. (1994). Current information on the scope and nature of child sexual abuse. *The Future of Children,* 4(2), 31-53.

Garrison, A. (1997). Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome: Issues of Admissibility in Criminal Trials. *Institute for Psychological Therapies*, 10.

Goodman-Brown, T. B., Edelstein, R. S., Goodman, G. S., Jones, D. P. H., & Gordon, D. S. (2003). Why children tell: A model of children's disclosure of sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *27*, 525-540.

Gries, L. T., Goh, D. S., & Cavanaugh, J. (1996). Factors associated with disclosure during child abuse assessment. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *5*(3), 1-19.

Hershkowitz, I., Horowitz, D., & Lamb, M. (2005). Trends in children's disclosure of abuse in Israel: A national study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *29*, 1203-1214.

Hershkowitz, I., Lanes, O., & Lamb, M. E. (2007). Exploring the disclosure of child sexual abuse with alleged victims and their parents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *31*, 111-123.

Keary, K., & Fitzpatrick, C. (1994). Children's disclosure of sexual abuse during formal investigation. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *18*(7), 543-548.

Lawson, L., & Chaffin, M. (1992). False negatives in sexual abuse interviews. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *7*, 532-542.

Lippert, T., Cross, T. P., Jones, L., & Walsh, W. (2009). Telling interviewers about sexual abuse: Predictors of child disclosure at forensic interviews. *Child Maltreatment*, *14*(1), 100-113.

London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. J., & Shuman, D. W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law*, *11*, 194-226.

London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. J., & Shuman, D. W. (2007). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: A review of the contemporary empirical literature. Pg 11-39.

McCoy, M. & Keen, S., (2009). Child Abuse and Neglect. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group.

National Incidence-Based Reporting System, *Statistic calculated by staff at the Crimes against Children Research Center*. 2001.

Peluso, E., & Putnam, M. (1996). Case study: Sexual abuse of boys by females. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *35*, 51-54.

Pipe, M., Lamb, M. E., Orbach, Y., Stewart, H., Sternberg, K. J., & Esplin, P. (2007). Factors associated with nondisclosure of suspected abuse during forensic interviews.

Reiser, M. (1991). Recantation in child sexual abuse cases. *Child Welfare*, 70, 611-621.

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

United States Administration for Children & Families, *Child Maltreatment 2003: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems – National statistics on child abuse and neglect*. 2005.

Valente, S. (2005). Sexual abuse of boys. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, *18*, 10-16.

Williams, L. M. (1994). Recall of childhood trauma: A prospective study of women's memories of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 62(6), 1167-1176.

Author's Biography

Michelle Jones was born and raised in Providence, Utah. She graduated from both Mountain Crest High School and Utah State University with her Associates of Science in May of 2009. She began at Utah State University the following fall, majoring in social work, with three minors in political science, management, and sociology. At Utah State Michelle spent significant time working as a supplemental instructor for both sociology and political science, and as a student athlete tutor for various subjects. During her last year of school, Michelle was an intern for the Utah courts first district Guardian ad Litem, and an advocate on CAPSA's mobile crisis team. After graduation, Michelle plans to find work as a child protection worker before pursuing a law degree. She will then focus on a career in public interest law.