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DELAYED DISCLOSURE

A FACTSHEET BASED ON CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH ON CHILD SEX ABUSE
For victims of child sex abuse, it is remarkable to disclose abuse at all, regardless of their age. Data from the Department of Justice suggests that 86% of child sexual abuse goes unreported altogether. However, when victims of child sex abuse do report, a high percentage of them delay disclosure well into adulthood. The delay in disclosing child sex abuse happens for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons. Child victims face many barriers that prevent disclosure. Among other barriers, children often lack the knowledge needed to recognize sexual abuse, lack the ability to articulate that they've been abused, don't have an adult they can disclose their abuse to, don't have opportunities to disclose abuse, and aren't believed when they try to disclose. Trauma that results from the abuse, power differentials between the child victim and adult perpetrator, and institutional power dynamics all impact the delay.

Even in the rare instances when child victims do disclose abuse, disclosures are often ineffective. In other words, most disclosures fail to reach individuals who can report the situation and stop the predator from continued abuse. Research shows that, when child victims do disclose, a large percentage of the disclosures are to peers instead of parents or authority figures. Very few disclosures, typically between only 6% and 15%, are made to legal authorities. As a result, child sexual abuse is largely hidden from the adult society, especially from professionals in the legal system.
It is critical to understand the science behind delayed disclosure because it influences society’s perception of child sex abuse survivors. After disclosing that they were abused, survivors often face an array of questions casting doubt on their allegation. Many of these questions hinge on the fact that the survivor did not disclose the abuse as a child. Without an understanding of the evidence-based pattern of delayed disclosure, it is difficult for individuals—whether they be loved ones, legal authorities, lawmakers etc.—to comprehend why victims would wait years before telling their story.

Additionally, delayed disclosure impacts the path to justice for victims. By the time most victims are able to come forward about their abuse, the arbitrary deadlines for filing legal claims—known as statutes of limitation (“SOLs”)—have expired. Because many laws fail to account for the medical fact that child sex abuse victims delay disclosure, the courthouse doors are locked and most victims of child sexual abuse are denied their day in court. However, this is changing. In 2019, 23 states and Washington D.C. amended their SOLs to expand opportunities for victims to access justice.[9] Shining light on the evidence-based pattern of delayed disclosure is a crucial component in the fight for SOL reform nationwide.

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While it may seem intuitive that a survivor would disclose abuse when it happened, data reveals a different reality. In a study of over 1,000 survivors, the average age at the time of reporting child sex abuse was about 52 years.[7] This delay is particularly relevant in light of the fact that research indicates that history from the victim "remains the single most important diagnostic feature in coming to the conclusion that a child has been sexually abused."[8] Statistically, disclosures of abuse are more telling than even medical examinations of abused children.[8]
WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

The majority of child sex abuse victims who disclose their abuse delay disclosure until adulthood

- 82.9% did not report any of the rapes they experienced during childhood. (Hanson et al. 1999) [1]
- 60%-70% of adults do not recall ever disclosing their abuse as children. (London et al. 2005) [1]
- 55-69% of adults indicated that they never told anyone about the sexual abuse during childhood. (London et al. 2008) [1]
- Disclosure rates are between 31% and 41% for disclosure during childhood and between 58 and 72% for lifetime disclosure (Priebe and Svedin 2008) [4]

A large portion of abuse victims never disclose abuse at all

- About 1 survivor out of 5 had never disclosed the abuse (Hébert et al. 2009) [10]
- 28% stated that they had never told anyone about this sexual assault (Smith et al. 2000) [3]
- 62% remained silent about their abused experience. (Tang 2002) [3]
- There is clear support for the proposition that a large proportion of abuse victims never disclose (Lyon 2009) [11]

The nature of child sex abuse makes disclosure a complex, often life-long, process

- Research indicates that lengthy delays in disclosure and even nondisclosure are common (Paine and Hansen 2002) [11]
- Disclosure is almost always an ongoing process (Browne 1991) [12]

Research indicates that the following factors may impact the ability or willingness of victims to disclose abuse

- **Age** - Younger children are at a higher risk for longer delays and less disclosure overall [13]
- **Gender** - Males are more reluctant to disclose abuse and take longer to make full disclosures [14]
- **Intellectual Ability** - Children with intellectual/communication deficits face increased challenges [15]
- **Fear, Shame, Embarrassment** - Are inhibitors that often outweigh the desire to disclose abuse [16]
- **Cultural Norms and Race** - Membership in noticeable minority groups or collectivist cultures may increase disclosure delays [17]
- **Dysfunction in Family** - The presence of domestic violence, substance abuse, and a lack of familial support in the home all inhibit disclosure [18]
- **Relationship to Perpetrator** - One of the primary barriers related to a child’s willingness to disclose [19]
- **Nature of Abuse** - More severe abuse [20], long durations of abuse [21], and higher numbers of perpetrators [22] are related to a lower willingness to disclose
References

1. Youth Victimization, Prevalence and Implications, Department of Justice, 2003 Page ii
5. Priebe and Svedin (2008) (“The frequency of incidents reported to the authorities is usually in the range between 6% and 15%,” citing Arata, 1998; Hanson et al., 1999; Helweg-Larsen & Larsen, 2005; Smith et al., 2000; Tang, 2002.).
14. London et al. 2005, at 204 (“there are some data on gender differences, suggesting that boys may be more reluctant to disclose than girls (e.g., DeVo & Faller, 1999; Goodman-Bronn, Eldelstein, Goodman, Jones & Gordon, 2006; Gries, Goh & Cavanaugh, 1996; Sas & Cunningham, 1995; Stroud, Tattens, & Barker, 2000; but see DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1999, who report null gender findings). However, as Goodman-Bronn et al. (2003) discuss, gender differences in disclosure rates may be suppressed by other abuse-related variables associated with gender (e.g., prior disclosure or relationship to perpetrator.”); Hershkowitz et al. 2005, at 1206 (“In general, boys (62.9%) were slightly less likely than girls (66.8%) to make a disclosure when interviewed (p < .0001).”); 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, 107 (“Girls were significantly more likely to make a full disclosure than boys.”); O’Leary, P. J., & Barber, J. (2008). Gender differences in silencing following childhood sexual abuse. Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 17(2), 133, (“found that boys were significantly less likely than girls to disclose the abuse at the time it occurred and also took significantly longer to discuss their childhood experiences later in life.”).
15. Brandon M., Sidebotham P., Ellis C., Bailey S.,BLEDENS 2011 Child and Family Practitioners Understanding of Child Development: Lessons from a small sample of serious case reviews. Department for Education, Research Report DFE-RR110, 4 (“There are some recurring themes in agencies’ faltering responses to potential warning signs of abuse and neglect that could be seen to link to the child’s development, or to an understanding of the child’s likely developmental capacity.”); Murray M., &


17. Tang S., Freyd J., Wang M. (2008) What do we Know About Gender in the Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse. Journal of Psychological Trauma 6(4) 21, (“Cultural differences have also emerged, particularly in the area of reasons for disclosure. Being a member of a collectivist culture may inhibit disclosure by placing the needs of the family and community before those of the individual.”); Fontes, L. A., & Plummer, C. (2010). Cultural issues in disclosures of child sexual abuse. Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 19, 491–518, (“Our research and clinical work lead us to the conclusion that culture stands prominently as a factor in all cases in which children are considering disclosing or being asked to disclose and not solely in cases in which children are from noticeable minority groups.”); Hanson R.F., Kievet L.W., Saunders B.E., Smith D., Kilpatrick D., Resnick H., Ruggeriero K. (2003). Correlates of Adolescent Reports of Sexual Assault: Findings from the National Survey of Adolescents. Child Maltreatment 8(4), 266, (“Significant racial/ethnic differences were also found... European American adolescents were more likely to disclose than were African American adolescents... or adolescents who reported Other racial/ethnic categories... However, rates of disclosure for European American adolescents did not differ from Hispanic adolescents, nor were significant differences found between Hispanic and African American adolescents.”).

18. Alaggia R., Collin-Vezina D., Lateef R. (2017). Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Disclosures: A Research Update (2000-2016). Trauma Violence Abuse 20(2): 277. doi: 10.1177/15248380166797312, (“Families with rigidly fixed gender roles, patriarchal attitudes, power imbalances, other forms of child abuse and domestic violence, chaotic family structure, dysfunctional communication, and social isolation have been found to suppress disclosure.”); Kogan, S. (2004). Disclosing unwanted sexual experiences: Results from a national sample of adolescent women. Child Abuse & Neglect, 28, 157, (“The final model predicting disclosure latency are presented... having a drug-abusing household member had significant effects on disclosure latency.”); Allnack & Miller (2013), at 2 (“A significant proportion of the young people (n=27, 5per cent) described feelings of isolation in childhood, often stemming from poor family relationships and adverse family circumstances.”); Mei-Hua Hu, Go-Shine Huang, Jing-Long Huang, Chang-Teng Wu, AnShine Chao, Fu-Sung Lo, Han-Ping Wu. (2018). Clinical characteristic and risk factors of recurrent sexual abuse and delayed reported sexual abuse in childhood. Medicine 97(14), (“Of those in the delayed reported CSA group, 73.7% victims had poor family support.”).

19. 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, 120, (“The relationship between the child and alleged perpetrator is one of the most important factors and barriers related to the child’s willingness to disclose.”); Hershkowitz et al. 2005, at 1208 (“children were much more likely to make allegations when the suspect was not a parent or parent figure.”); Smith et al. 2000, at 281 (“being related to the perpetrator was associated with longer delays before telling, whereas having no relationship with the victim was related to more rapid telling.”).
20. Lev-Wiesel R., First M. (2018). Willingness to disclose child maltreatment: CSA vs other forms of child abuse in relation to gender. Child Abuse & Neglect, 79, 189, (“the results revealed that the greater the severity of the CSA (with physical contact), the lower the willingness to disclose.”); Hershkowitz, I. (2006). Delayed disclosure of alleged child abuse victims in Israel. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 76(4), 446, (“Delayed disclosure was significantly more likely as the intensity of the alleged acts increased from sexual exposure (35.9%) to sexual touch (54.7%) to sexual penetration (67.8%; see Table 3.”).

21. Smith et al. 2000, at 273-280, (“Experiencing a series of rapes were associated with disclosure latencies... Of the crime variables analyzed, only whether the rape was a single event versus series of assaults was related to group membership, with the Long Delay group more likely to experience series rapes.”); Mei-Hua Hu et al. 2018, (“Of those in the delayed reported CSA group, 54.4% experienced recurrent assaults.”).

22. Allnock & Miller (2013), at 6 (Those that were abused by “a number of perpetrators had a difficult time disclosing the abuse.”).