



The Continuum of Disclosure: Exploring Factors Predicting Tentative Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse Allegations During Forensic Interviews and the Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

Gwendolyn D. Anderson

To cite this article: Gwendolyn D. Anderson (2016) The Continuum of Disclosure: Exploring Factors Predicting Tentative Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse Allegations During Forensic Interviews and the Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 25:4, 382-402, DOI: [10.1080/10538712.2016.1153559](https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2016.1153559)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2016.1153559>



Published online: 06 Jun 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 27



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Continuum of Disclosure: Exploring Factors Predicting Tentative Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse Allegations During Forensic Interviews and the Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

Gwendolyn D. Anderson

School of Social Work, University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota, United States

ABSTRACT

When a child sexual abuse investigation ensues, many children do not disclose readily to professionals. Defining disclosure beyond the disclosure versus nondisclosure dichotomy is essential, yet little research exists on factors associated with a continuum of disclosure, including active and tentative disclosure. Through the coding of 196 forensic interviews using content analysis and subsequent regression analysis, findings suggest that children of color, children abused by adults, unintentional initial disclosure, and those lacking family support were more likely to tentatively disclose in this study. Implications include a need to understand tentative disclosure as part of a normal continuum of disclosure within court proceedings and investigations of abuse allegations.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 September 2015
Revised 12 January 2016
Accepted 14 January 2016

KEYWORDS

child advocacy centers; child sexual abuse disclosure; content analysis; forensic interviews; process of disclosure model; social exchange theory

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive social problem. Perpetrators are usually known to the child and can be a related family member or another trusted adult or peer. For child survivors of sexual abuse, the decision to disclose abuse is complicated, and children may perceive the possibility of negative outcomes after disclosure as being too great and, therefore, keep quiet. In the United States, as many as 1 in 10 children are estimated to be sexually abused before the age of 18 (Townsend & Rheingold, 2013). A meta-analysis of more than 330 prevalence studies worldwide showed rates of 20% for girls and 8% for boys (Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). In the United States, more than 60,000 new cases of child sexual abuse were reported annually to child protection agencies in recent years (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). Since these cases only represent substantiated cases, and only 17.5% of reported maltreatment cases are substantiated (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013), this statistic does not represent an accurate portrayal of how many cases of child sexual abuse actually occur. With such a small percentage of cases actually being reported and substantiated, it is clear that not all children

who experience sexual abuse will have the opportunity to participate in a forensic interview or may not receive services they may need to recover.

To understand the complexity of disclosing child sexual abuse, research has largely focused on factors related to initial disclosure. Expanding the current standard definition of disclosure as a continuum rather than just a dichotomy of disclosure versus nondisclosure is important, yet little exists within the literature on differentiating between different types of disclosure. Disclosure within this article is characterized not as a “yes” or “no”^v but as a continuum or process. Underlying the current understanding of disclosure are serious implications for children who have reported sexual abuse allegations. Because the current child protection and legal system relies on a disclosure versus nondisclosure model, children who disclose tentatively, or somewhere in between a disclosure and nondisclosure, may not be viewed as credible and reliable in their statements. Investigations may be closed without further support, and court proceedings may discount the child’s statement if they don’t provide full details right away. See [Table 1](#) for full definitions and examples of active and tentative disclosure and other variables used in the current study. Furthermore, little research has examined the factors related to this continuum of disclosure, referred to as active or tentative disclosure in this article, within the context of forensic interviews, including the importance of family support. The purpose of the current study is to understand whether child characteristics, abuse-related factors, and the level of family support significantly predict how children disclose sexual abuse during forensic interviews.

Background

Definition of child sexual abuse

First, it is important to clearly define child sexual abuse (CSA). While definitions of CSA can differ depending on the program, organization, or policy, the most inclusive definitions include facets of coercion and power dynamics between a child and the perpetrator. Sexual abuse is defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as:

The employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children (Children’s Bureau, 2010).

The definition included within CAPTA contains these elements as well as touch and nontouch behaviors. As the first federal legislation that addressed child abuse and neglect prevention, CAPTA sets precedence for intervention,

**Table 1.** Description of Coded Outcome and Predictor Variables.

Name of Variable	Definition
Disclosure Outcomes	
Active Disclosure	Based on Sorensen and Snow (1991) definitions of active and tentative disclosure, active disclosure is when a child makes a full statement with supportive details corresponding to the reported abuse allegation and the following: (a) readily identifying the alleged perpetrator and alleged abuse when invited to disclose by the interviewer, (b) providing contextual details when asked or as part of a narrative statement regarding the abuse with few to no statements such as "I don't know" or "I don't want to talk about it," and (c) generally displaying little to no reluctance or hesitation in discussing the abuse or providing details.
Tentative Disclosure	Tentative disclosure is when a child displays avoidance or reluctance in identifying the alleged perpetrator or abuse allegation when invited to talk about why they are there and the following: (a) shows great reluctance or hesitation in naming the alleged perpetrator or providing details of the alleged abuse when invited by the interviewer to disclose; (b) makes a partial, incomplete disclosure or minimizes the reported allegation by excluding significant details related to the abuse allegation; (c) makes several statements such as "I don't know," "I don't remember," "I forgot," or "I can't/don't want to talk about it" when invited to disclose or to provide contextual details about the abuse allegation; and (d) generally avoids questions or purposefully tries to distract or redirect the conversation without providing answers when asked or provides minimal details about the alleged abuse.
Child Demographics	
Age	Numerical age (year and month) of the child at the time of the interview
Gender	Male or female
Race	African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, multi/biracial, or other (includes American Indian, African, Asian, or unknown)
Identified Disability or Mental Health	Developmental/cognitive, ADHD, other (includes learning disability, deaf/hard of hearing, and chronic medical), mental health diagnosis
Diagnosis	(includes depression, anxiety, PTSD, injurious or suicidal behavior), or none.
Abuse-Related Factors	
Sexual abuse allegation	Exposure (forcing child to look at perpetrator or to view pornography) and fondling (touching the child either over or under clothing), oral (performing oral sex on child or forcing child to do so on perpetrator), and penetration (penetrating child's genital or anal area with alleged perpetrator's hands or genitals). Perpetrators related to the child biologically or through marriage (siblings, cousins, father, grandfather, uncle, stepfather), or unrelated.
Relationship of perpetrator to child	
Perpetrator age	Adults included alleged perpetrators 18 years old and older; peers were under 18.
Threats, bribes, and/or manipulation by perpetrator to child	Threats are if alleged perpetrator told the child they would physically, emotionally, or otherwise harm the child, themselves, or a child's family or friends if the child told anyone about the abuse. Bribes include actions by the alleged perpetrators to keep the child quiet such as giving the child gifts or taking them on special outings. Manipulation is any other verbal or behavioral action by the alleged perpetrator to keep the child from talking about the abuse, such as telling the child the abuse is her or his fault or that no one will believe the child if she or he tells.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Name of Variable	Definition
Type of disclosure prior to the forensic interview	Verbal disclosure (told someone who reported it), witnessed or perpetrator confession (someone witnessed the abuse and reported it or the perpetrator confessed), other (report made based on concerning behavior by child or a medical test indicating a pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection).
Delayed or not delayed disclosure of abuse	Delayed was when a child delayed the initial disclosure of abuse to anyone 7 days and longer after the abuse started. Not delayed was when the child made an initial disclosure immediately to 6 days after the abuse occurred or began.
Family Support	
High	Based on the definition by Everson and colleagues (1989) for family support and CSA disclosure, family support was divided into three categories: high support, some support, and no support. High family support by parents or guardians to initial disclosure includes fulfilling all four criteria of (a) believing the child; (b) providing emotional support, including encouraging the child to talk to investigators; (c) taking action to protect the child from the perpetrator, such as removing the perpetrator from the home or from accessing the child; and (d) reporting the abuse.
Some	Some support includes some supportive action by parents or guardians but is missing one or two of the four criteria of a highly supportive family.
None	Unsupportive family reaction to initial disclosure includes failing to fulfill two or more of the main criteria for a highly supportive reaction plus did not report or seek outside assistance.

mandated reporting, and prevention policy. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the definition of CSA as set forth by CAPTA is the most appropriate.

Multiple disclosures and “testing the waters”

Children and adolescents may choose several people to disclose to initially, starting with someone whom they perceive will be the most supportive emotionally. According to Ungar, Barter, McConnell, Tutty, and Fairholm (2009), adolescents will commonly seek to disclose abuse to several persons and will continue in the disclosure process if they have received supportive responses and only if they were confident that the formal system would be effective in helping them. This disclosure process indicates that children and adolescents “test the waters” before making a disclosure to someone who may be able to provide a fully supportive response.

Disclosure during forensic interviews

If children and adolescents do disclose sexual abuse allegations and the allegations are reported and substantiated, they may participate in a forensic interview. Forensic interviews can occur at police stations, at child protection offices, in hospitals, or at child advocacy centers (CACs), conducted by a professional trained as a forensic interviewer. The forensic interview seeks to obtain as much accurate, autobiographical information as possible from the child as it pertains to the allegation of abuse (National Children’s Advocacy Center, 2015). In the CAC model, care is taken to limit the number of interviews a child is subject to, minimizing if not eliminating redundant interviewing and perceived negative consequences for the child in terms of undue stress or retraumatization (National Children’s Advocacy Center, 2015). It is important to note that for children, disclosing within the context of a forensic interview is a very different experience than initial disclosure for several reasons, including the abuse has already been disclosed or reported at least once already, the disclosure occurs with a professional the child has not met, and ramifications for disclosure during a forensic interview may seem more serious.

Child characteristics and disclosure during forensic interviews

While fewer in number as compared with the body of research on initial disclosure, some factors of disclosure have been examined in the context of forensic interviews. Age is a significant factor in the disclosure of sexual abuse in the context of forensic interviews or formal investigations, with older children being less likely to fully disclose immediately as compared with younger children (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, &

Gordon, 2003; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). In both studies, the authors attributed the older children's reluctance to disclose as being more aware of the potential consequences of a disclosure in the context of a formal investigation.

The influence of a child's race/ethnicity and culture has scarcely been examined in research on disclosure of sexual abuse within forensic interviews. Only one study exploring race/ethnicity and disclosure during forensic interviews could be located. It is also one of the only other studies exploring tentative disclosure during forensic interviews. In a sample of 220 cases in which children participated in forensic interviews, Springman, Wherry, and Notaro (2006) found that African American children interviewed by an African American interviewer were more likely to offer a tentative disclosure. However, overall, Caucasian children were more than twice as likely to tentatively disclose as compared with the African American children.

Abuse-specific factors and disclosure during forensic interviews

If the alleged perpetrator is a family member or lives in the home, research has found that children and adolescents are less likely to disclose during a forensic interview (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2007). The type of initial disclosure and disclosure during forensic interviews has also been examined often, although the research has varied considerably in the exact relationship that has been explored. Pipe and colleagues (2007) found that when children initially disclosed immediately, they disclosed both more often and with more details during forensic interviews. Previous research on factors such as the type and severity of abuse allegations (Arata, 1998) and perpetrator threats, bribes, and manipulation (Schaeffer, Leventhall, & Asnes, 2011) have been examined only within the context of initial disclosure and not within the context of forensic interviews. However, these relationships will be explored within the current study.

Family support and disclosure during forensic interviews

Finally, the issue of family support and disclosure within forensic interviews is one that has been largely overlooked within this small body of literature. In the previously mentioned study by Hershkowitz and colleagues (2007), the authors suggest that children are more likely to disclose directly and purposefully in the context of a forensic interview or investigation when they anticipate family support. Goodman-Brown and colleagues (2003) found that children who had been abused by a relative and who feared that their disclosure would result in negative consequences for themselves or the perpetrator took longer to disclose during a forensic interview. However, the study did not specifically examine family support as a separate factor.

According to Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, and Coulter (1989), a fully supportive response requires three elements: believing the child, providing emotional support, and taking action to protect the child from the perpetrator, such as removing the perpetrator from the home or from accessing the child. The authors found that most of the nonoffending mothers whose children disclosed sexual abuse to them offered emotional support and told the children they believed them, although less than half of the mothers took action to protect the children from the perpetrator. Other research examining disclosures of male survivors of CSA found that most did not receive emotionally supportive responses (Easton, 2013). Both studies highlight reasons why children and adolescents may hesitate to disclose abuse to parents or professionals; first they want to make sure they will receive a fully supportive response.

Frameworks to understand CSA disclosure in forensic interviews

The current study drew on two established models related to the process of CSA disclosure: Sorensen and Snow's (1991) process of disclosure model and Leonard's (1996) application of social exchange theory to CSA disclosure. These models are briefly summarized here.

Sorensen and Snow's process of disclosure model

Within the body of literature previously reviewed, most studies examining disclosure within the context of a forensic interview concentrate on whether a child discloses or does not disclose. However, because there is wide variation between a full "active" disclosure and a less detailed, reluctant, "tentative" disclosure, it is important to recognize and further examine this difference. Disclosure can be understood, then, not as a "yes" or "no" but as a continuum or process. A widely recognized model of the process of disclosure of CSA is by Sorensen and Snow (1991). In the model, Sorensen and Snow describe a three-step disclosure process in which children may progress from denial, to tentative, and then active disclosure. This model of disclosure illustrates that children experience disclosure as a process and not a one-time event. See [Table 1](#) for full definitions of active and tentative disclosure used in the current study, based on Sorensen and Snow's definitions.

Social exchange theory and CSA disclosure

While Sorensen and Snow's model offers insight into the difference between types of disclosure on a continuum, it doesn't examine reasons as to why some children may disclose differently due to certain factors. However, other models have examined this, at least in part, more closely. In examining disclosure of sexual abuse allegations, Leonard (1996) offered a model of CSA disclosure incorporating social exchange theory. Within the model, social exchange theory is based on the idea that individuals weigh costs

and rewards in every social exchange or relationship and will pursue those that offer rewards and may avoid relationships or exchanges that they perceive to be costly. Leonard surmised that children who experience sexual abuse weigh the costs to disclosure and may find the cost of disclosing too high, especially if the abuse is perpetrated by a family member. Furthermore, since social exchange between family members is often unequal, and is certainly unequal in the context of a social relationship between a child and the abuser, the child is automatically at a disadvantage with limited options (Leonard, 1996). While this model does not distinguish between the differences that exist for younger and older children's cognitive and developmental capacities to weigh these costs and rewards, research on initial disclosure does suggest that, for younger children in particular, other factors, such as fear or relationship with the perpetrator as included in this model, may hinder disclosure, including lack of opportunity or lack of understanding (Schaeffer et al., 2011). However, in the same study, Schaeffer and colleagues (2011) note that the factors of fear of what could happen, threats, and relationship with the perpetrator are things that young children noted as barriers to disclosure and are able to understand some of the consequences, or costs, of disclosure even at a very young age.

The current study

As was demonstrated in the review of the literature, little research has examined the factors related to active or tentative disclosure in the context of forensic interviews. Because children may disclose sexual abuse allegations somewhere between a full disclosure and a complete nondisclosure, defined in the current study as a tentative disclosure, understanding factors related to this type of disclosure is important as tentative disclosures can have very different outcomes for children and cases as compared with those that provide a detailed, active disclosure. The purpose of the current study is to understand whether child characteristics, abuse-specific factors, and the level of family support significantly predict how children disclose sexual abuse during forensic interviews, actively or tentatively. The specific research question addressed by this study is: How do child characteristics, factors related to the alleged abuse, and family support influence whether a child will disclose sexual abuse actively or tentatively during the forensic interview?

Method

Description of sample

Participants in the study included 196 children who disclosed sexual abuse during a forensic interview at a CAC in the upper Midwest. The average

age of participants was 10.33 ($SD = 5.06$) with a range of 2–46 years old. While most participants were children in the age range of 3 to 18, there were also 4 adult participants (ages 25, 27, 28, and 46) with significant cognitive and developmental disabilities. There were 151 females and 45 males in the sample. Most participants were identified within the existing case files as African American ($n = 60$) and Caucasian ($n = 57$). Other participants were identified as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 30$) or multi- or biracial ($n = 33$). Within the “other” category, participants were identified as African ($n = 5$), American Indian ($n = 4$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 3$), or unknown ($n = 4$). According to the existing records, the majority of participants had no identified disability or mental health diagnosis ($n = 134$), while a third of participants did have an identified mental health diagnosis or disability diagnosis ($n = 62$). Of the 62 participants with identified disabilities or mental health diagnoses, 10 had an identified diagnosis of ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), 8 had identified developmental disabilities, and 33 had a mental health diagnosis. Eleven participants were identified as having an identified disability or condition in the other category, including having a chronic medical condition ($n = 1$), a learning disability ($n = 7$), were deaf or hard of hearing ($n = 2$), or were blind/visually impaired ($n = 1$).

Interviewers and the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol

Eight trained interviewers conducted all of the forensic interviews included in the present study. Interviewers were employees at the CAC where the study took place. They have a range of 1 to over 20 years of experience completing forensic interviews. Five of the 8 have advanced degrees in social work or in education. Interview staff all undergo extensive specialized training in conducting forensic interviews and in the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol (CornerHouse, 2016). The CornerHouse Interview holds 3 guiding principles: it is person-centered, semistructured, and forensically sound. The semistructured nature of the interview provides for coverage of similar topics in each interview while allowing for flexibility in regard to how the interviewer approaches the topic of concern and maintaining the ability to remain sensitive and responsive to the developmental and emotional needs of the children. The format of questions used is guided by Invitation and Inquiry, which emphasizes open-ended prompts and questions (CornerHouse, 2016). Interviewers are guided by four main stages within the CornerHouse Forensic Interview Protocol including: build rapport, seek information, explore statements, and end respectfully (CornerHouse, 2016). When building rapport, interviewers utilize orienting messages and narrative practice. The use of narrative practice to establish rapport helps children recall details using both scripted memory (things that happen often) and episodic memory (unique events) (Anderson et al., 2010;

CornerHouse, 2016). During the seek information and exploring statements stages, interviewers utilize Invitation and Inquiry, relying on open-ended questions with indirect prompts and may incorporate other interview aids such as drawings, anatomical dolls, and diagrams if deemed appropriate (Anderson et al., 2010). Finally, ending respectfully incorporates special attendance to the individual child's needs and transitions to ending the interview (CornerHouse, 2016).

Procedure and data collection

Using a convenience sample, data collection consisted of watching 196 videotaped forensic interviews one time and reviewing case files for additional information. Criteria for inclusion were if the child disclosed sexual abuse during the forensic interview, if the child participated in a single session forensic interview, and if the primary abuse allegation was sexual abuse. Data collected from case files included children's demographics such as age, gender and race/ethnicity and identified primary disability or mental health diagnosis. Case file data gathered regarding the sexual abuse allegation included the alleged perpetrator's age and relationship to the child, the specific sexual abuse allegation, the circumstances of initial disclosure, and when the child disclosed the abuse initially. Data collected from watching the forensic interviews included how the child disclosed, whether she or he disclosed actively or tentatively, the level of family support, and whether the child experienced perpetrator threats, bribes, or manipulation. The type of disclosure, active or tentative, was coded according to the child's statements, behavior, and overall demeanor throughout the interview. The child's disclosure statement was transcribed verbatim. Field notes documented the child's overall affect, behavior, and interaction with the forensic interviewer. Inconsistencies between the case file data and information provided by the child during the interview were rectified by using information provided by the child during the interview. For example, if the case file listed no known mental health diagnosis but the child stated during the interview that they were seeing a counselor for depression, the child would receive a code for "mental health diagnosis, depression."

Protection of human subjects and confidentiality

Because this sample was a secondary data analysis of forensic interviews as part of existing case records, there were no risks to human subjects since the research did not require interaction with human subjects. However, prior to the commencement of any of the current study, institutional review board approval was obtained from a research 1 university. Steps to protect confidentiality of children in the cases were taken by signing a confidentiality agreement with the agency and by collecting deidentified data.

Content analysis and coding

Content analysis is research on existing records, or recordings, of human communications. It makes replicable and valid inferences from participant communication in specific contexts (Berelson, 1971; Krippendorff, 2012). Content analysis is most appropriate for research wishing to study subjects without affecting their communication or behavior, which could ultimately reduce the validity of the data (Babbie, 2010). In the present study, having a researcher present during the forensic interviews could have changed the way that the children responded to the interviewer's questions and could have potentially caused the children more anxiety in an already stressful situation.

Content analysis has several core components when used in reliable and valid research (Krippendorff, 2012). First, definitions of meaning units and coding instructions must be clear. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), meaning units are words, sentences, or paragraphs containing aspects related to one another through their content and context. In the present study, meaning units are both words and sentences. Second, coding instructions must clearly define the units coded, followed by examples. This not only ensures the reliability of the data but also the validity. Deductive content analysis was used in this study. Deductive content analysis answers a research question or set of questions as related to a hypothesis or set of hypotheses (Mayring, 2000). Therefore, coding is purposeful and based on previous research or theory. By assigning codes to clearly defined phenomena, content analysis allows for qualitative communication to be quantified for statistical analysis. In the present study, content analysis is appropriate because it uses existing case files and videotaped forensic interviews. For a full list of variables and definitions used for coding, see [Table 1](#).

Interrater reliability

Interrater reliability (IRR) for the outcome variable of type of disclosure during the forensic interview was established by comparing codes from the primary coder of active and tentative disclosure with a secondary coder on 10% of cases, with agreement between coders of 93%. However, percentage of agreement between coders is insufficient for determining IRR since it does not take into account the agreement that could happen by chance (Hallgren, 2012). Therefore, calculating IRR, correcting for agreement by chance, can be done by computing Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960). In the current study, the final calculation arrived at a kappa of 0.86, where $P(a)$ was 0.93 and $P(e)$ was 0.49. When using content analysis, Krippendorff (2012) offers conservative guidelines to assess kappa values for IRR, with values between 0 and 0.67 as being unreliable, values between 0.67 and 0.80 as being tentatively reliable, and values above 0.80 as being reliable and conclusive. According to these guidelines, the calculated kappa value of 0.86 of IRR of codes can be considered reliable and conclusive.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses including descriptive statistics and logistic regression were performed using R (R Core Team, 2013). To assess the research question using logistic regression analyses, initial models were built controlling for all demographic characteristics, with nonsignificant variables removed from the two final models. Because some significant child demographics were included in each of the subsequent predictive models to assess disclosure as control variables, a separate model was not built to assess how child demographic characteristics influence disclosure. However, within other predictive models, significant demographic variables were included in the final models, and nonsignificant variables were not included, such as gender and disability or mental health diagnosis.

Model fit and effect size analysis

To determine the significance of each category of predictors, diagnostic statistics were performed for each category to determine the overall contribution of the variable to the model and its significance by using the Wald test. To understand the overall model fit, the log likelihood ratio test and log likelihood are often calculated to determine whether the overall model fit is significantly better than an empty (intercept) model (Menard, 2002). As part of the log likelihood ratio test, the chi-square value, degrees of freedom, p-value, and overall log likelihood value, along with the pseudo R-squared values, were included in each of the final models. The effect size for the binary logistic regression models were assessed using the Cragg and Uhler (1970) pseudo R-squared estimate, which is one of the most commonly reported R-squared estimates for logistic regression (Allison, 2013).

Results

Child characteristics and tentative disclosure

Overall, two-thirds of children disclosed actively during the forensic interview ($n = 131$), and nearly one-third disclosed tentatively ($n = 65$). Upon analysis using binary logistic regression, there were several significant findings for child demographics and tentative disclosure. For each decrease in age by year, younger children were 0.8 times less likely to disclose tentatively as compared with those who were older by a year (OR = 0.8, CI = 0.76–0.93). Children who identified as multi- or biracial were 5.1 times more likely to disclose tentatively as compared with Caucasian children (OR = 5.1, CI = 1.66–17.00). Boys and children with identified disabilities or mental health diagnoses were not significantly more likely to tentatively disclose (see Table 2).

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Tentative Disclosure and Abuse-Specific Factors.

Variables	B	SE	Wald	Odds Ratio	95% C. I.
CSA Allegation	0.29	0.19	1.53	1.3	0.92–1.94
Circumstances of Initial Disclosure¹					
Behavioral or Results of Medical	0.66	0.68	0.97	1.9	0.48–7.25
Witnessed or Perpetrator Confession	1.13	0.49	2.33	3.1*	1.20–8.19
Relationship of Perpetrator to Child²					
Peer	−0.87	0.37	−2.34	0.4*	0.20–0.85
Perpetrator Threats³	0.14	0.37	0.39	1.2	0.56–2.39
χ^2 32.8	−2LL: −105.89	Cragg and Uhler R Square: 0.24			

*p < 0.05.

¹Reference group for Circumstances of Previous Disclosure was Verbal Disclosure.²Reference group for Relationship of Alleged Perpetrator to Child was Adult.³Reference group for Perpetrator Threats was No threats.

Abuse-related factors and tentative disclosure

Upon analysis using binary logistic regression, there were significant findings within the categories of circumstances of previous disclosure and relationship of perpetrator to the child. Within the category of circumstances of previous disclosure (see Table 1), when compared with the reference group in which children made a verbal disclosure, circumstances in which the abuse was witnessed or reported after a perpetrator confession were 3.1 times as likely to tentatively disclose (OR = 3.1, CI = 1.20–8.19). Furthermore, when the alleged perpetrator was an adult, children were 2.4 times more likely to tentatively disclose as compared with when the abuser was a peer (OR = 0.4, CI = 0.20–0.85). Sexual abuse allegation type and perpetrator threats did not significantly predict whether a child would tentatively disclose (see Table 3).

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Child Characteristics, Family Support, and Tentative Disclosure.

Variables	B	SE	Wald	Odds Ratio	95% C. I.
Age	−0.17	0.05	−3.13	0.8**	0.76–0.93
Race/Ethnicity¹					
African American	0.41	0.50	0.81	1.5	0.56–4.10
Hispanic	−0.46	0.65	−0.71	0.6	0.17–2.16
Multiracial	1.63	0.59	2.78	5.1**	1.66–17.00
Other	0.47	0.69	0.69	1.6	0.40–6.19
Level of Family Support²					
Some	−0.41	0.73	−0.57	0.7	0.14–2.58
None	1.29	0.55	2.34	3.6*	1.25–10.99
Relationship of Perpetrator to Child³					
Unrelated	1.28	0.50	2.58	3.6**	1.39–9.77
Delayed Initial Disclosure⁴					
Delayed	1.89	0.70	2.70	6.6**	1.91–31.59
χ^2 43.50	−2LL −89.04	Cragg and Uhler R Square 0.43			

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

¹Reference group for Race/Ethnicity was Caucasian.²Reference group for Level of Family Support was High.³Reference group for Relationship of Perpetrator to Child was Related.⁴Reference group for Delayed Disclosure prior to the Forensic Interview was Not Delayed.

Family support and disclosure

Two-thirds of children in the sample had families who demonstrated highly supportive behavior and actions throughout the initial disclosure and investigative process ($n = 127$). A small group of families offered some support ($n = 25$), and nearly a fourth of families were not supportive ($n = 42$). For definitions of family support used for coding, see [Table 1](#). Upon analysis using binary logistic regression, there were several significant findings within the family support model. Children with nonsupportive families were 3.6 times more likely to disclose tentatively during the forensic interviews ($OR = 3.6, CI = 1.25-10.99$). Children with somewhat supportive families were not significantly more or less likely to disclose tentatively. Furthermore, children who were unrelated to the perpetrator were 3.6 times more likely to disclose tentatively as compared with children who were related to the perpetrator ($OR = 3.6, 1.39-9.77$). Finally, children who delayed initial disclosure to anyone more than 7 days were 6.6 times more likely to tentatively disclose during the forensic interview as compared with children who initially disclosed immediately prior to the forensic interview ($OR = 6.6, CI = 1.91-31.59$). See [Table 3](#).

Discussion

While there were several significant findings in the current study, these findings can only be interpreted within the study sample but may provide a basis for future research on factors related to active and tentative disclosure. Factors with particular importance to the literature on disclosure of CSA and to professionals working with CSA survivors are included within this purview.

Children of color and tentative disclosure

Within this sample, children who identified as multi or biracial were 5.1 times as likely to tentatively disclose as compared with the reference group of Caucasian children. Since previous research on the influence of race/ethnicity and culture and disclosure of sexual abuse in the context of forensic interviews essentially is extremely sparse (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005), it is difficult to interpret this finding within the context of the literature. Future research should further explore this finding related to tentative disclosure. Future research could explore within the context of forensic interviews the relationship between tentative disclosure and reporting costs. Reporting costs suggest that when families experience a loss of privacy, extended family support, and practical losses, such as a loss of income (Massat & Lundy, 1998), they may be less likely to report or disclose information to professionals. Because families of color are more likely to

have negative outcomes, such as having a child removed from the home (Knott & Donovan, 2010; Rockymore, 2013), especially multiracial children in Minnesota (Semanchin Jones, 2013), these families may be less likely to encourage their children to openly disclose the abuse during the investigation. In this study, such actions would have led to families being categorized as unsupportive. It is clear that more research is needed on how race/ethnicity and culture influences disclosure of sexual abuse in the context of forensic interviews.

Abuse-related factors

The significant finding in this study related to children disclosing tentatively when the perpetrator was an adult is supported in other research on initial disclosure (Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, & Landolt, 2012) and suggests that children in this study were less likely to disclose immediately or fully if the alleged perpetrator was an adult. Children abused by adults may be more concerned about negative consequences for themselves, their families, or the perpetrator, or they feel a stronger sense of shame or guilt (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Furthermore, when a child is abused by someone who is older, there is an imbalance of control and power, and children may be more reluctant to provide full detailed disclosures (Schaeffer et al., 2011). This is especially relevant to Leonard's (1996) application of social exchange theory to CSA disclosure. Since social exchange between the child and the alleged perpetrator is certainly unequal, especially when the abuser is an adult, the child, no matter how old she or he is, is automatically at a disadvantage with limited options (Leonard, 1996), and the child may decide the costs of full and active disclosure are too high. For adolescents, this may include a more sophisticated understanding of unintended consequences of disclosure and the perpetrator removal from the family, the financial and emotional implications, and the impact on the family structure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). For younger children, this understanding may exist on a more basic level, such as understanding that the perpetrator may go to jail or that the children would be taken away from their home (Schaeffer et al., 2011).

Within this sample, findings begin to support the notion that children who weren't ready, for whatever reason, to discuss the abuse prior to the forensic interview readily are also not ready to discuss it within a forensic interview. Future research is needed to further understand the significant finding that children who had the abuse witnessed by someone else or when the perpetrator made a confession were 3.1 times more likely to tentatively disclose as compared with children who made an active disclosure. Within this sample, these findings may suggest that children who did not make an intentional decision to disclose or who feel safe and have the opportunity to make a

spontaneous disclosure prior to the forensic interview may be less willing or able to make a full, detailed disclosure during a formal investigation, even if there is another source providing information about the abuse (a witness statement or perpetrator statement). Related to that, findings in this study indicate that if a child delayed disclosing the abuse by one week or longer, they were 6.6 times more likely to tentatively disclose as compared with children who reported the abuse within 6 days of it occurring. Other research has found that when children delay disclosure prior to the forensic interview they are more likely to not disclose or to disclose reluctantly (Pipe et al., 2007). These findings provide an initial basis for understanding factors related to tentative disclosure, and interpretations of the findings should be evaluated in future research.

Family support

Family support was another significant finding related to disclosure within the forensic interview, with children being 3.6 times more likely to tentatively disclose if they had no family support as compared with children with high support. This finding is not surprising, given that previous research that indicates that children and adolescents are not likely to disclose readily if they anticipate negative reactions or consequences from family members (Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005). Furthermore, of the children who are concerned about not receiving a fully supportive response, many have their fears realized. Most children and adolescents in other studies experienced lack of emotional support and protective action when they disclosed sexual abuse to family members (Easton, 2013), resulting in some children having increased concern about emotional, verbal, and physical violence as a result of the disclosure (Somers & Szwarcberg, 2001). Many children in the current study voiced such concerns within the forensic interview. Some reported their families told them not to talk about what had happened, and, therefore, they were unwilling to provide many details regarding the abuse. Children with unsupportive families in this study often described reactions from family members such as disbelief; emotional, verbal and physical abuse; lack of protection; and attempts to keep the abuse a secret from authorities. Therefore, given the circumstances some children were facing at home, it is not surprising that they would be less likely to actively disclose during the forensic interview. Future research is needed to understand more about children's experiences with disclosure during a forensic interview and the role of family support.

Process of disclosure model

Finally, the findings from this study lend additional credibility to the process of disclosure of CSA model, developed by Sorensen and Snow (1991). This is

especially evident in the current study's significant finding of a delayed initial disclosure predicting tentative disclosure during the forensic interview (see Table 3). This finding really highlights one of the main components of the process of disclosure model by Sorenson and Snow: children who delayed initial disclosure may not be ready or able to discuss the sexual abuse allegations actively and that there is a definite distinction between the two types of disclosure. Furthermore, the findings do suggest that children who tentatively disclose should be viewed as credible and that tentative disclosures are common. This is especially evident in the finding of initial abuse being reported as a result of a witness or perpetrator confession and a more likely tentative disclosure. As previously discussed, these children, despite outside evidence that abuse occurred, were not able or willing to actively disclose with full details.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, which may threaten the internal and external validity of the findings. First, the findings cannot be used to establish causation, although it can identify significant relationships, both adding to the body of existing research as well as raising new questions for future research. Second, the sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling and not random sampling. Therefore, the findings can only be attributed to being representative of the population studied: children who disclose sexual abuse during forensic interviews at a CAC. However, since this study was designed to gather more information about an area of research that hasn't been fully investigated yet, it is not seeking to establish causation or to generalize the findings to the entire population.

Because this was a field study relying on existing data and records, there were several limitations in the information available. First, this research is based on the interviews of children who have made sexual abuse allegations. In some instances, there was additional evidence corroborating their statements, such as a perpetrator's confession, a witness statement, or medical evidence. However, this rarely occurred. There is really no way of knowing specifically which children are "telling the truth" and which are not. The point of the forensic interview is to provide credible evidence to the allegations made. Beyond the child's statement, no assertions of accuracy or additional conjectures of the likelihood of abuse having occurred can be made from this study. This is a limitation to all field research examining disclosure of CSA, whether initial disclosure or disclosure during forensic interviews.

Finally, a limitation that often occurs in using existing records is that the information contained in the records is restricted, and additional information cannot be retrieved and included. This is true in both the accuracy of the existing information as well as the overall scope of information. In addition,

the forensic interview contained a lot of information but was limited in terms of what the interviewer asked the child and what information the child shared during the interview. Although similar questions and topics were discussed across most interviews, not all interviews had the exact same information as compared with the others. Therefore, it is quite possible that some information was missing because it wasn't available.

Implications for practice and policy

Findings from this study and other future studies on tentative disclosure during forensic interviews could help contextualize a tentative disclosure, providing a broader understanding for circumstances of when and why a child might provide this type of disclosure and may help establish baseline percentages for how frequent tentative disclosures occur during forensic interviews. In this study, it occurred one-third of the time. However, in other samples, this percentage could be higher or lower. These findings, and other future studies on tentative disclosure, could help set precedence in court proceedings on CSA, making such research and evidence permissible as part of a prosecuting attorney's argument that the child's tentative statement is both normal and credible. Since the videotaped forensic interview may be submitted into evidence to provide additional support to a child's sworn testimony as part of criminal court proceedings, it is imperative that the child's statement is put into context of the disclosure process.

Findings from this study are also important in creating more awareness and understanding for decision makers creating and amending policies within organizations investigating CSA allegations and for practitioners engaged in direct practice. For example, many children may be initially interviewed regarding allegations by a child protection worker or by law enforcement. Child protective workers will normally conduct one interview, and if no other confirming evidence emerges after one interview, the child protective worker will usually deny the case (Child Welfare Information Gateway, *n.d.*). If a child provides a tentative disclosure, organizational policy likely will not support continued engagement with the child's family or proceeding with the case for continued monitoring or investigation since the child is providing minimal details and may appear less credible. However, findings from this study, and future studies on tentative disclosure, may help inform policy and practice for understanding that a tentative disclosure is part of a continuum of disclosure and is both common and normal for children, especially for children in specific circumstances (unsupportive families, abuser is an adult, etc.). This awareness, through future research about tentative disclosure, may create a chance in policy to allow for more opportunity for child protective workers and law enforcement to continue with an investigation when policy might not support the continuation with a

case otherwise. This is not to suggest that service providers should continue to question the child about the abuse allegations later but, as McElvaney (2013) recommends, remain open to the possibility and have the support to allow follow up for further disclosure in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, children may disclose fully and actively, tentatively, or not at all. However, factors related to this continuum of disclosure have not been fully explored in the research. Findings from this study support an expanded conceptualization of disclosure and suggest that children of color, children abused by adults, children who delayed and didn't intentionally verbally disclose initially, and children lacking family support were more likely to tentatively disclose during a forensic interview. Implications for practice and policy include a need to further consider tentative disclosure as part of a normal process along a continuum of disclosure within direct practice with children and the legal system. These findings suggest the need for future research to explore similar factors related to tentative disclosure.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank members of her doctoral dissertation committee for their input and guidance on this research: Dr. Elizabeth Lightfoot, Dr. Jane F. Gilgun, Dr. Hee Lee Yun, and Dr. Michael Miner, all of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

Funding

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship through the University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

Notes on contributor

Gwendolyn D. Anderson, PhD, MSW, is an assistant professor of social work at the University of Minnesota Duluth in Duluth, Minnesota.

References

- Alaggia, R., & Kirshenbaum, S. (2005) Speaking the unspeakable: Exploring the impact of family dynamics on child sexual abuse disclosures. *Families in Society*, 86(2), 227–234.
- Allison, P. A. (2013, February 13). What's the best r-squared for logistic regression? *Statistical Horizons*. Retrieved from <http://www.statisticalhorizons.com/r2logistic>
- Anderson, J., Ellefson, J., Lashley, J., Lukas Miller, A., Olinger, A., Russell, A., & Weigman, J. (2010). The CornerHouse forensic interviewing protocol: RATAc. *The Thomas M. Cooley Journal of Practical and Clinical Law*, 12, 193–331.

- Arata, C. M. (1998). To tell or not to tell: Current functioning of child sexual abuse survivors who disclosed their victimization. *Child Maltreatment*, 3, 63–71. doi:10.1177/1077559598003001006
- Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Berelson, B. (1971). *Content analysis in communication research*. New York: Hafner.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (n.d.). *Investigation of child sexual abuse*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/sexabuse/sexabused.cfm>
- Children's Bureau. (2010). Child abuse prevention and treatment act (CAPTA). Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws_policies/cblaws/capta/
- Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20(1), 37–46. doi:10.1177/001316446002000104
- CornerHouse Interagency Child Abuse Evaluation and Training Center. (2016). *Forensic Interviews*. Retrieved from <http://www.cornerhousemn.org/forensicinterviews.html>
- Cragg, J. G., & Uhler, R. S. (1970). The demand for automobiles. *The Canadian Journal of Economics*, 3, 386–406. doi:10.2307/133656
- Easton, S. D. (2013). Disclosure of child sexual abuse among adult male survivors. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 41, 344–355. doi:10.1007/s10615-012-0420-3
- Everson, M. D., Hunter, W. M., Runyon, D. K., Edelsohn, G. A., & Coulter, M. L. (1989). Maternal support following disclosure of incest. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59, 197–207. doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.1989.tb01651.x
- 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. doi:10.1016/S0145-2134(03)00037-1
- Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2), 105–112. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001
- Hallgren, K. A. (2012). Computer inter-rater reliability for observational data: An overview and tutorial. *Tutor Quant Methods Psychology*, 8(1), 23–34.
- 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. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.09.004
- Knott, T., & Donovan, K. (2010). Disproportionate representation of African-American children in foster care: Secondary analysis of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2005. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(5), 679–684. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2010.01.003
- Krippendorff, K. (2012). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Leonard, E. D. (1996). A social exchange explanation for the Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 11, 107–117. doi:10.1177/088626096011001008
- 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(1), 194–226. doi:10.1037/1076-8971.11.1.194
- Massat, C. R., & Lundy, M. (1998). "Reporting costs" to nonoffending parents in cases of intrafamilial child sexual abuse. *Child Welfare*, 77(4), 371–388.
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089>
- McElvaney, R. (2013). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: Delays, non-disclosure, and partial disclosure. What the research tells us and implications for practice. *Child Abuse Review*, 24(3), 159–169. doi:10.1002/car.2280

- Menard, S. (2002). *Applied logistic regression analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Children's Advocacy Center. (2015). *Forensic interview services*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalcac.org/intervention/forensic-services.html>
- Pipe, M. E., Lamb, M. E., Orbach, Y., Stewart, H., Sternberg, K. J., & Esplin, P. (2007). Factors associated with nondisclosure of sexual abuse during forensic interviews. In M. E. Pipe, M. E. Lamb, Y. Orbach, & A. C. Cederborg (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse: Disclosure, delay, and denial* (pp. 77–96). New York: Routledge.
- R Development Core Team. (2013). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing. Retrieved from <http://www.R-project.org>
- Rockymore, M. (2013). A practice guide for working with African American families in the child welfare system. *Minnesota Department of Human Services*. Retrieved from <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-4702-ENG>
- Schaeffer, P., Leventhall, J. M., & Asnes, A. G. (2011). Children's disclosures of sexual abuse: Learning from direct inquiry. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35, 343–352. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.01.014
- Schönbucher, V., Maier, T., Mohler-Kuo, M., Schnyder, U., & Landolt, M. A. (2012). Disclosure of child sexual abuse by adolescents: A qualitative in-depth study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(17), 3486–3513. doi:10.1177/0886260512445380
- Semanchin Jones, A. (2013). *From investigating to engaging families: Examining the impact and implementation of family assessment response on racial equity in child welfare* (doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest LLC (UMI Number 3599080).
- Somer, E., & Szwarcberg, S. (2001). Variables in delayed disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(3), 332–341. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.71.3.332
- Sorensen, T., & Snow, B. (1991). How children tell: The process of disclosure in child sexual abuse. *Child Welfare*, 70, 3–15.
- Springman, R. E., Wherry, J. N., & Notaro, P. C. (2006). The effects of interviewer race and child race on sexual abuse disclosures in forensic interviews. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 15(3), 99–116. doi:10.1300/J070v15n03_06
- Stoltenborgh, M., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Euser, E. M., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2011). A global perspective on child sexual abuse: Meta-analysis of prevalence around the world. *Child Maltreatment*, 16, 79–101. doi:10.1177/1077559511403920
- Townsend, C., & Rheingold, A. A. (2013). Estimating a child sexual abuse prevalence rate for practitioners: A review of child sexual abuse prevalence studies. *Darkness to Light*. Retrieved from www.D2L.org/lin10
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. (2013). *Child Maltreatment 2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2013>
- Ungar, M., Barter, K., McConnell, S., Tutty, L. M., & Fairholm, J. (2009). Patterns of abuse disclosure among youth. *Qualitative Social Work*, 8(3), 341–356. doi:10.1177/1473325009337842