

Adolescent Disclosure of Sexual Abuse

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National Children's
Advocacy Center

There is considerable evidence which links sexual abuse during childhood to later victimization and sexual exploitation. ^(2, 7) Early disclosure can mediate the long-term impact of childhood and adolescent sexual abuse. However, research demonstrates there are many barriers that impede sexually abused adolescents from disclosing maltreatment. ^(1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 18) Disclosing sexual abuse is a multifaceted process and per McElvaney, Greene, and Hogan (2013), adolescents “both wanted to tell and did not want to tell” (p. 928).¹⁴ Adolescents may use a variety of disclosure strategies ranging from risk-taking behaviors to telling someone about the abuse. ^(13, 17, 18, 21) Understanding the complex, diverse, and individual factors which motivate adolescents to divulge maltreatment can inform multidisciplinary teams, providing a fuller understanding of a teen’s behavior and aiding in the design of appropriate interventions.

OPPORTUNITY: Adolescents often find it difficult to initiate a discussion concerning abuse, and struggle with finding an opportunity to tell. External precipitants such as a school program or a television show related to sexual abuse can enhance an adolescent’s willingness to disclose because of the opportunity to talk and a connection to the topic. ^(5, 6) Being asked informally or as part of an investigative response about possible abuse, or general questions about their well-being also helped adolescents disclose or initiated the process that eventually led to disclosure. ^(3, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21)

PEER DISCLOSURE: The recipients of immediate and delayed disclosure from adolescents are often peers, ^(11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21) instead of parents or other adults. Explanations for not reporting to parents included a lack of trust in the parent’s response, as well as, fear of burdening the parents. ^(4, 13, 16, 18) Confiding in peers often occurs in the context of sharing general information about their lives and when the sharing involves both parties. ⁽¹⁴⁾ “It may be that targeting adolescents in general (rather than those at risk of abuse) may be a powerful prevention tool in encouraging early disclosure” (p. 166). ⁽¹³⁾

POST-DISCLOSURE SUPPORT: Having access to adults who will listen and respond appropriately aids adolescents in disclosing abuse. Adolescents consider and are sensitive to the expected responses of disclosure recipients and a prediction as to whether that person can and will provide support. Expectations of negative reactions can make adolescents more reluctant to talk or they may withhold pieces of information out of concern for the person to whom they disclose. Hershkowitz, Lane, and Lamb (2007) found that adolescents are accurate in predicting their parents’ likely reactions. An ambivalent or negative response is positively associated with the severity of psychological symptoms and adjustment in later life. ^(13, 16, 17, 18, 20)

DEFINITIONS, LANGUAGE, AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES: Having both the definitions of abuse and the language to describe their sexual experiences can assist adolescents in disclosing abuse. ^(2, 13, 16, 21) Prevention programs in schools may assist adolescents in learning definitions and language they can use in describing maltreatment, as well as, inform them of community resources to help themselves and others.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONTROL: Multiple studies have documented that adolescents desire both anonymity (ability to remain anonymous until they wish to be identified) and confidentiality (the right to control who knows about their abuse or another person’s abuse). Adolescents understand that once maltreatment is reported, they often have little ability to influence the method in which mandated reporters respond. ^(2, 13, 21) Offering choices to adolescents can restore a sense of control and may increase rapport. Investigators can provide choices by inviting input into the date and time of the investigative interview and/or medical exam; offering alternate methods of communicating in the interview (i.e. writing answers to questions); and educating the adolescent regarding the overall workings of the investigative or prosecutorial process.

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