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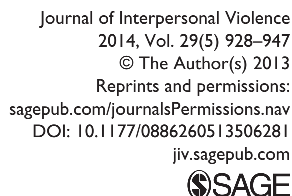
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To Tell or Not to Tell? Factors Influencing Young People's Informal Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

The aim was to understand the factors influencing informal disclosure of child sexual abuse experiences, taking account of dynamics operating prior to, during, and following disclosure. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 young people who experienced child sexual abuse and 14 parents. Grounded theory methodology informed the study. The key factors identified as influencing the disclosure process included being believed, being asked, shame/self-blame, concern for self and others, and peer influence. Many young people both wanted to tell and did not want to tell. Fear of not being believed; being asked questions about their well-being; feeling ashamed of what happened and blaming themselves for the abuse, for not telling, and for the consequences of disclosure; concern for how both disclosure and nondisclosure would impact on themselves and others; and being supported by and yet pressurized by peers to tell an adult, all illustrate the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics reflecting the conflict inherent in the disclosure process. These findings build on previous studies that emphasize the dialogic and interpersonal dynamics in the disclosure process. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal influencing factors need to

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be taken account of in designing interventions aimed at helping children tell. The importance of asking young people about their psychological well-being and the role of peer relationships are highlighted as key to how we can help young people tell.

Keywords
child abuse, sexual abuse, family issues and mediators, prevention of child abuse, adolescent victims

Introduction

Delays in disclosing childhood sexual abuse experiences both informally (to a family member or friend) and formally (to legal or child protection authorities) have been well documented in the literature and appear to be an international phenomenon (McElvaney, 2013). Large-scale studies of nationally representative samples have found alarming rates of complete nondisclosure prior to the disclosures made in the research study. Kogan's (2004) study of adolescents and Smith et al.'s (2000) study of adult women in the United States found respective rates of 26% and 28%, while in Canada, Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, and Joly (2009) found this to be the case in 20% of their sample. Even higher rates have been reported in Europe. In Sweden, Priebe and Svedin's (2008) study of adolescents found that 19% of girls and 31% of boys had told no one of their experiences prior to the survey. In Ireland, the Sexual Assault and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) telephone survey of adults (McGee, Garavan, deBarra, Byrne, & Conroy, 2002) found that 47% of those who reported some form of sexual assault prior to age 17 had told no one of this.

Delays in disclosure of more than 1 year were found for 19% of participants in Kogan's sample of adolescents, and for 47% in Smith et al.'s sample of adult women. In total, 28% of women in Smith et al.'s (2000) study delayed disclosing their experiences of sexual abuse for more than 5 years, a statistic similar to the SAVI study in Ireland (McGee et al., 2002). These figures significantly contrast with findings of Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, and Gordon (2003) who found an average delay of 48 hours in their sample of children accessed through a district attorney's office. It may be that prosecution samples are less likely to feature significant delays in disclosures as delay in reporting may be a factor in deciding whether to prosecute. Only 2% of Collings, Griffiths, and Kumalo's (2005) large-scale sample of children who had experienced penetrative abuse in South Africa had delayed disclosing for more than a month. Significant differences are therefore evident in the

extent of delay noted between clinical or legal samples and large-scale community samples, suggesting that those who delay disclosing may also be less likely to seek or receive help or engage with the legal system.

Such delays in disclosure are a major concern to society given the implications for child protection, mental health, and social justice. In addition to the psychological sequelae of the experience of sexual abuse, there is considerable evidence for the link between childhood sexual abuse and later victimization and sexual exploitation (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). Early disclosure may mediate the long-term psychological impact of childhood sexual abuse as well as serving to prevent later revictimization and exploitation. Reviews of studies investigating disclosure (Paine & Hansen, 2002; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007) have identified older age, being male, experiencing more severe abuse, and being abused by a family member as risk factors for delay in disclosing experiences of childhood sexual abuse. In the past decade, psychological variables have been identified such as fear of negative consequences and perceived responsibility for the abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Quas et al., 2005). Barriers to disclosure include threats made by the perpetrator, fear of upsetting parents or fears about other negative parental reaction, shame, fear of bringing trouble onto the family, and fear of not being believed (Crisma, Bascelli, Paci, & Romito, 2004; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011). Other variables identified include lack of opportunity to tell and lack of understanding of what happened (Schaeffer et al., 2011). Schaeffer et al.'s adolescent participants' reluctance to seek services was motivated by a wish to keep the secret, a lack of awareness of being abused, a mistrust of adults and professionals, and a fear of the consequences of disclosure.

Jones (2000) noted the importance of tracking "individual experiences of children and their perception of the influences upon them which led to the disclosure" (p. 270). It is not sufficient to identify the factors that influence disclosure. In order to help children, a deeper understanding of how such factors influence children's experiences is needed.

Since Sorenson and Snow's (1991) study in the early 90s, much of the emphasis in research studies has been on exploring barriers to disclosure rather than on what helps children tell. Sorenson and Snow found that younger children's disclosures were more typically triggered by participation in educational programs while older children more typically disclosed out of anger. In the studies examining disclosure, it has been suggested that children weigh the consequences of their disclosure before deciding to tell (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995). Schaeffer et al. (2011) classified children's reasons for telling into three domains: disclosure as a result of internal stimuli (feeling

angry), as a result of outside influences (such as being asked), and disclosure due to direct evidence of abuse (such as the abuse being witnessed). However, few studies have explored directly with young people their experiences of disclosure with a view to understanding what helps children tell.

The process of disclosure has been described by Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, and Tjersland (2005) as a fundamentally dialogical process that becomes easier if children perceive they have an opportunity to tell, involving enough privacy and prompts to help them share their experiences; where there is a purpose for speaking (when there is a good reason to disclose); and where there is a connection established or a shared understanding of the substance of the disclosure. Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) highlighted the interpersonal nature of disclosure: "Disclosure is not a one-way process. Children receive, process, evaluate, and react to information based on how adults respond to them" (p. 1423). The importance of others' responses, particularly the mother, to disclosure is central, not just in terms of encouraging disclosure (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992) but also in relation to mediating the psychological impact of the abuse and long-term mental health outcomes (Lovett, 2004).

According to Goodman-Brown et al. (2003), "sexually abused children face a serious dilemma in deciding whether or not to disclose" (p. 526). As one young person in Mudaly and Goddard's (2006) study notes, the truth is longer than a lie. McElvaney, Greene, and Hogan (2012) conceptualized this dilemma as a process of containing the secret, whereby the child's psychological response to the experience represents a need for containment to cope with the unmanageable anxiety evoked by the experience of abuse. Three key dynamics in this process were identified: the active withholding of the secret on the part of the child, the experience of a "pressure cooker effect" reflecting the conflict between a wish to tell and a wish to keep the secret, and the confiding itself that often occurs in the context of an intimacy being shared. Withholding the secret contributes to pressure building up for the child in the form of intrapersonal psychological distress and this, in addition to the interpersonal confiding nature of the disclosure and confidentiality sought, suggests the need for psychological containment for the child. This need for containment usually continues at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community level as each subsequent disclosure experience is negotiated and confidentiality is sought and for the most part maintained. The child is seen as an active agent in this process, torn between the conflicting wishes to confide and to keep the secret.

The study reported in this article elaborates on the theoretical framework described earlier, investigating the factors that influence this process of containment from both the perspectives of young people and their parents. Building on the interpersonal, and dialogical nature of the process as

Table 1. Sample of Children and Parents Interviewed.

	n
Young people interviewed (*n* = 22)	
Age (years)	
17-18	7
15-16	7
13-14	6
7-12	2
Total	22
Gender	
Girls	16
Boys	6
Total	22
Parents interviewed (*n* = 14)	
Both parents	2
Mother only	11
Father only	1
Total	14

highlighted by Jensen et al. (2005), and Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005), the study involved asking young people and their parents directly about their experiences to elucidate not only what factors influenced disclosure but also how their experiences facilitated disclosure.

Method

Participants

This study is based on individual interviews with 22 young people in Ireland, and 14 parents of these young people (see Table 1). Most of the young people interviewed (n = 20) were aged between 13 and 18 years. The type of abuse experienced ranged from sexual fondling to vaginal and anal penetration. Delay in disclosing was calculated as the time from the onset of the abuse to the time of first informal disclosure, and ranged from no delay to 9 years. A total of 16 children delayed more than a year in disclosing experiences of abuse. Within this group, four delayed by 1 year, five by 2 years, three by 4 years, two by 7 years, and two by 9 years. The sample was accessed through a child sexual abuse assessment and therapy service, based in a children's hospital in Ireland. All child participants had given an account of sexual abuse that was deemed credible by the professionals who assessed them.

Thus, all young people had undertaken a formal assessment process and a small number had also attended therapy. Ethical approval was obtained from the hospital's ethics committee and the university's School of Psychology ethics committee. Written consent (from parents) and assent (from young people) were obtained from all participants in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) informed this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted using a series of open questions to elicit a narrative regarding experiences of telling. The interview schedule included questions on when the children first told, who they told, what helped them to tell, what prevented them from telling sooner, how people responded to their story, experiences of subsequent telling, and their views on how we can help children tell. The interviews were conducted, digitally audiotaped, and transcribed by the first author. Line-by-line open coding was conducted on all transcripts followed by axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). NVivo software (QSR International, 2002) was used to facilitate data management and analysis. The coding process is illustrated by a triangular model (McElvaney et al., 2012) that describes the analytic process as moving from the raw data transcripts toward higher level conceptual categories and domains. Analytic memos provided a paper trail of the analysis process in this study, thus maintaining transparency and reflexivity. All categories and themes were developed from the raw data, not predetermined. The raw data were read and reread with a particular emphasis on seeking a theme-driven approach that reflected active processes (Charmaz, 2006). Through this process, certain themes that had been subordinate categories in the initial analysis were "promoted" to higher level domains. For example, *being believed*, which had been a subordinate category of the domain *reasons for not telling* became a higher level domain, reflecting a process in itself. In this way, it emerged that categorizing qualitative data into preconceived domains based on the interview schedule may lead to a misconception that those factors influencing disclosure can be mistakenly classified into disclosure-inhibiting or disclosure-facilitating factors. By attempting to focus on theme-driven active processes evident in the data, domains emerged that stayed close to the data and to the participants' experiences. A framework for identifying the key domains evident in the data was informed by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) who suggested that the term *general* refers to a category related to all cases, *typical* refers to where more than half of the cases are represented, and *variant* refers to when the domain applies to two to three cases. The key domains presented here represent typical categories, according to Hill et al.'s framework.

A colleague reviewed coding on a random sample of transcripts, and consensus was reached on all coding. As a credibility check, one young person and one parent read the transcript of their interview and discussed the coding with the researcher. No changes to coding were made as a result of these credibility checks.

Findings

Five key domains emerged as influencing the process of disclosure: being believed, being asked, shame/self-blame, fears and concerns for self and others, and peer influence.

Being Believed

Being believed (n = 14)[1] was the most common theme mentioned by those interviewed and fear of not being believed was consistently noted by participants as a reason for withholding the secret: "I think the main fear of most people was not being believed that's . . . the biggest one" (C01,[2] 17-year-old girl). One 14-year-old girl described how she never doubted that she would be believed and when the time came that she disclosed to her mother, this helped her to tell.

Self-doubt was expressed along with how the delay in telling contributes to a sense of the experience itself being unbelievable: "I had to deal with it for a long long time and I dunno . . . the more you leave it unsaid the more unbelievable it becomes" (C14, 16-year-old girl).

The lack of acknowledgment on the part of the abuser can feed into the doubt that something did happen: "He'd never sit down and say oh remember that time that happened . . . he never spoke about it again" (C10, 15-year-old girl).

For many, their fears were unfounded. Most young people in this study were believed when they disclosed, despite fears that they would not be believed. One mother described how she believed that her daughter had misinterpreted an inappropriate touch from her partner. A few years later, her daughter rang a helpline. At this point, the relationship had deteriorated and her mother did believe her. One father described how the parents of a 15-year-old boy who abused his then 6-year-old son reacted to the allegation:

> The mother and father went on absolutely disgraceful shouting at (child) calling him a fucking liar . . . "Who do you think you are accusing my son?" . . . "Six year olds are always lying, they're liars at that age" . . . the father said . . . "there's no way my son would do anything like that." (P15, father of the 8-year-old boy)

Parents described their initial reaction of disbelief when they were told of the abuse: “I was going ballistic but I was like right I got him to say it again because I couldn’t believe the first time” (P15, mother of the 8-year-old boy). “It wasn’t kind of hitting home at all . . . couldn’t comprehend what I was after hearing” (P09, father of a 16-year-old girl).

Being Asked

In this study, some of the young people described being asked (*n* = 11) explicitly if they had been abused, while others referred to being asked what was wrong with them by parents, friends, or professionals. Two parents (one father, one mother) witnessed sexualized behavior between young people and questioning led to further disclosures in both instances. From the young person’s perspective, people sometimes asked because “they just knew” that something was wrong. Other young people felt that someone should have known and should have asked. On occasion, being asked was the trigger that prompted the disclosure, and at other times being asked was part of the process that led to a disclosure. One teenage girl described how her friend observed the way the alleged abuser looked at her: “She kept on asking me ‘Are you ok?’ . . . ‘what is he doing to you?’ . . . she just kind of knew I dunno how but she knew” (C03, 18-year-old girl). Another 18-year-old girl described how her boyfriend “just knew”: “Because like if anybody made jokes about it . . . I was real touchy . . . I think he had an idea that it was something like that” (C17).

Two 17-year-old girls described being asked by their counselor, because they were self-harming: “I didn’t tell her what happened but I was saying things that made her think, it made her think that it happened but I didn’t tell her” (C05). The following week she disclosed to a youth group leader: “I couldn’t stop crying and one of the leaders asked me what was wrong and I told her” (C05). The second girl disclosed to a family friend after being asked by a counselor: “Everyone was asking me ’cos obviously I had signs of it you know I was cutting myself, I wasn’t eating” (C01).

Similarly, a 15-year-old girl referred to her mother asking her what was wrong: “’Cos she just knew by . . . me . . . the way I was acting that there was something wrong” (C02). In the parent interview, her mother reported how she had no suspicion about what had happened to her daughter.

Shame/Self-Blame

Feeling ashamed of what happened was noted by approximately half (*n* = 16) of the young people in this study. Two young people talked about being too embarrassed to discuss such matters with their parents: “There’s always that

thought that you let it happen" (C01, 17-year-old girl). The self-blame may arise from the child's inaction or not fighting back, "I didn't turn around and say here like stop I didn't push his hand away" (C09, 16-year-old girl). On occasion, the self-blame felt by children was prompted by the abuser: "He said that I was bad that's why this is happening" (C03, 18-year-old girl).

Some young people described how self-blame became an issue as the years progressed,

> I think that as I got older I started to think . . . I couldn't think of any reason why would he do that to me like I musta done something or I must just be a certain type of person. (C17, 18–year-old girl)

Another young person described how, over time, she realized she was not to blame:

When I was first thinking about it, "Am I gonna get in trouble?" but like . . . when I started to really think about it I just realized like it wasn't my fault I was scared I didn't do anything wrong (C12, 13-year-old boy).

One young person (C10, 15-year-old girl) talked about how she never felt that it was her fault because when her parents separated, it was always instilled in the children that it was nothing to do with them. Self-blame was on occasion compounded by later sexual abuse experiences. "I just didn't want anyone to know. I was so angry with myself, ashamed with myself that it would happen again" (C01, a 17-year-old girl).

The issue of self-blame extended beyond the experience of abuse itself and was for some associated with the consequences of telling about the abuse. One 12-year-old girl's brother had to be removed from the home and she felt responsible for this. A 14-year-old girl retracted her story in part because of the guilt feelings she experienced when her siblings missed their father and did not understand why he couldn't live with them anymore: "I don't know em there's a part of me says that I'm glad I told but there's another part of me says that I shouldn't have because I split up the family" (C02, 15-year-old girl).

Fears and Concerns for Self and Others

Fears for self and others (n = 19) expressed by children ranged from feeling afraid during the experience of abuse, "I was so afraid of him like I couldn't believe that he's actually doing this to me" (C09, 16-year-old girl); feeling afraid of telling, "It was one of the scariest things I've ever . . . thought of ever saying" (C08, 16-year-old boy); and being scared of the consequences of telling, "This is bad but it's better knowing what's happening than (not) knowing what's going to happen" (18-year-old girl).

Fears of consequences were many and varied. Five young people feared that their disclosure would break up their family: "I didn't want to be responsible for them breaking up. Even though I wanted them to split up but not because of me" (C10, 15-year-old girl). Other fears included a fear that the abuser would get into trouble, "and then I was saying God like this is much easier not to say anything" (C04, 18-year-old girl), that their father or relative would kill the abuser "he did say if he catches who it was he's gonna kill him . . . and then he'll be the one getting locked up" (C20, 15-year-old girl), fear that they themselves would get into trouble, fear for their own safety as the abuser had a history of violence, fear of what people might think, and fear that their freedom would be curtailed if they told. Fear of legal proceedings was also expressed: "I had an awful fear about standing up in court in front of him" (C09, 16-year-old girl). A fear that there would be no one to take care of her was expressed by one child, and one young person worried about how the family could survive financially.

Some young people feared negative consequences that did not materialize while others' fears were not unfounded:

> I didn't want them to grow up with no Dad . . . I felt like I was taking their Dad away from them but at the same time I didn't want anything to happen to them . . . I knew that was the right thing to do but at the same time I felt like "What am I doing? It's their Dad . . . I can't let them live without their Dad." (C13, 14-year-old girl)

She described how, after she told, her sibling would constantly ask:

> "When is Daddy coming up?" And I just couldn't take it . . . 'cos they were all like . . . "I want Daddy in the house like I love him where's Daddy?" and I felt real I felt depressed like I felt like crying all the time. (C13)

In this instance, the young person retracted the allegation, although the truth was subsequently revealed.

Young people's concerns that people would be upset if they told them were valid. Many described their parents, friends, siblings becoming very upset and crying:

> Me Dad was crying and I was crying like me Mam [*sic*] she went mad she did . . . and I was roaring crying like 'cos I could hear her screaming . . . "I'll kill him I'll kill him" like an' trying to get out the door. (C09, 16-year-old girl)

Parents described their reactions:

> You may as well have took me off the wall, I went hysterical. I said "how?" 'Cos I've always protected him I never left him with babysitters because of what happened to me you know I never put them out there at risk. . . . I just couldn't handle it at all. I have to be honest it broke me heart broke me heart [*sic*]. (P08, mother of a 16-year-old boy)

One father described it from his perspective:

> With me it was the end of the world … it was the worst thing that ever happened and it killed me really really ate me up . . . for the first 8 months I thought this was the worst thing that ever happened. Nothing worse could ever happen now. (P09, father of the 16-year-old girl)

There was a continued concern that there would be violence if the secret could not be contained on an ongoing basis. One mother explained why some of her family members didn't know about the abuse: "I'll tell you why because that person wouldn't be alive to-day [*sic*] if . . . because I'd be afraid . . . because as I said men don't think they act out" (P15, mother of the 8-year-old boy).

Concern for other children was a common theme raised by young people:

> I thought like he could do that to me and I can't tell anybody then . . . he can do it to them and they won't tell . . . and if I hadn't told and a few years later (his children) turned around and well he done [*sic*] that to me a year after what he done that to you I woulda never forgiven meself [*sic*]. (C09, 16-year-old girl)

Another girl saw the alleged abuser standing outside a local shop: "He'd have around ten children around him a day and he'd be giving them money and sweets an' all" (C20, 15-year-old girl).

Peer Influence

Many young people (n = 15) interviewed had first confided in a peer, be that friend, boyfriend, or cousin before they had told an adult of the abuse. Sometimes the context of the disclosure was that of a mutual sharing of difficulties:

> I told my friends first we were talking about our . . . about how he was feeling suicidal . . . and (girl) was telling us her problems . . . and then like out of nowhere like I just felt like saying it. 'Cos it was like built up and all of a sudden I just said it I mean they were the first two I ever told. (C08, 16-year-old boy)

Some young people were encouraged to tell an adult: "She just kept on nagging me ah eh she says . . . do tell your mam it's the right thing to do." Another young person's friend pointed out the risks to other children: "What if he goes and does it again like why don't you? You just be the one to deal with it now" (C07, 17-year-old girl). One 16-year-old girl referred to the benefit of having an older friend: "'cos she had a bit more cop on an . . . like she was able to tell me like this is a very bad situation and you know . . . really serious" (C14). Her friends were putting pressure on her not to babysit for the alleged abuser and to tell her parents:

> the more they told me and explained and you know told me how big a deal this was the more I kind of understood and just changed me whole view . . . and you know the whole situation of there's children involved . . . I think the easier it is for you to tell . . . 'cos you're giving yourself more reason. (C14)

One 14-year-old girl's friend pointed out, "Look what could happen to your sisters and when I thought of that . . . I was like no I've got to tell I don't want it to happen to them I don't want their lives ruined" (C13).

Discussion

The findings from this study offer an insight into how those factors identified influence the process of disclosure. The factors identified—being believed, being asked, shame/self blame, fears and concern for self and others and peer influence—are consistent with those found in other studies on disclosure. In exploring these themes in detail, it becomes evident that both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences serve to build up pressure on the young person to disclose the secret. Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) suggest that the consequences of disclosure need to be taken into account in considering influences on disclosure. Examining the disclosure process over time (albeit retrospectively in this study), taking account of the consequences of disclosure, enables a broader perspective to be taken on those factors influencing the process.

Fears of not being believed, shame, and self-blame have been reported by children as preventing them from telling of their abuse experiences (Crisma et al., 2004; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Schaeffer et al., 2011). Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found perceptions of responsibility for the abuse to be a significant factor in predicting older children's reluctance to disclose.

Being believed can be understood as both an intrapersonal factor, and an interpersonal factor influencing the process of disclosure. It is intrapersonal insofar as the child may have difficulty believing that it has happened. This

"unbelievable" sense of the experience may be compounded by the abuser behaving as if nothing had happened, thus in some way nullifying the experience. At an interpersonal level, many children are not believed; they are judged and blamed for the abuse or for disclosing the abuse. Incredulity is a common reaction when children disclose sexual abuse in that the behavior itself, for most people, is unbelievable. Some parents in this study described how they did react with disbelief and shock even when they believed their children, thinking it incredible that such a thing could have happened. For both the child and the person to whom the disclosure is made, it is perhaps easier not to believe. As Summit (1992) has pointed out "protective denial surrounding sexual abuse can be seen as a natural consequence (of) . . . the need of almost all adults to insulate themselves from the painful realities of childhood victimization" (p. 179). Disbelief then serves a protective function for both the child and the person listening to the disclosure. Research that focuses exclusively on the victim's perception of being believed (Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant, & Loughlin, 1999) does not take account of the perspective of the parent listening to the disclosure (Alaggia, 2004; Sirles & Frank, 1989) and the interpersonal nature of this dynamic. Despite raised awareness in relation to the prevalence of sexual abuse, many parents in this study described the incredulous reaction they experienced when their child disclosed to them. Sexual abuse was clearly seen as something that happens in other families, to other children.

It may be that self-blame is exacerbated by not being able to confide in others thus not having the opportunity to have beliefs about perceived responsibility challenged. In addition, self-blame may be related to the consequences of disclosure. Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) suggested that longitudinal studies are needed to explore whether children experience increased self-blame for actual negative consequences for the family after their disclosure. In their study, children who were older, and delayed disclosure, perceived themselves to be more responsible for the abuse than those who were younger and disclosed more promptly. What is not clear from their findings is whether the delay in disclosing in itself contributed to the feelings of self-blame. There was some evidence from the present study that young people's understanding of their reluctance to tell changes over time and that self-blame may be a dynamic that develops in the absence of being able to confide the abuse in others. Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) suggest that "children who have not yet disclosed may fear more negative consequences of disclosure or perceive more responsibility for the abuse compared to children who have disclosed" (p. 538). Findings from the present study suggest that self-blame for the consequences of disclosure (as distinct from the abuse)

was an important factor that influenced young people's perceptions about whether they made the right decision to tell.

In this study, the theme of being asked covers a wide range of scenarios where young people were asked both directly if they had been abused and indirectly if there was something wrong. Some of these scenarios led to a disclosure and some did not. In follow-up telephone interviews in the SAVI study in Ireland (McGee et al., 2002), respondents were asked why they had not disclosed their experience of abuse prior to the survey. Many noted that they had never been asked before. Hershkowitz et al. (2007) noted that 43% of their sample of 30 children only disclosed abuse after they were directly asked. It would appear that the increased attention being paid in research to disclosures in informal contexts reveals significant percentages of young people only disclosing following direct questioning. This phenomenon has not been recognized by studies examining this process solely in the context of investigative interviews. The theme of being asked is consistent with Jensen et al.'s (2005) "opportunity to tell" including the perception of young people that prompts from others to share their experiences facilitated disclosure.

Being asked, although identified here as a distinct domain, is in itself related to being believed particularly in contexts where children are asked directly if they had been abused. The ability to be open to believing an account of sexual abuse could be considered a prerequisite for the ability to ask a child if such an event has occurred. At an intrapersonal level, young people in this study noted that they should have been asked, that adults should have known what was wrong, and that on occasion they did (although this was not corroborated through parent interview). When adults or friends did ask what was wrong, young people identified this as contributing to the pathway to disclosure and to the pressure to tell. Levels of public awareness of sexual abuse have been raised considerably over the past five decades in Ireland. In the SAVI study of over 3,000 adults, the majority (88%) said that their parents had not discussed sexual abuse with them as children but over half of those who were parents had discussed it with their children (McGee et al., 2002). In addition, the majority of children in this study had participated in a child sexual abuse prevention program. Participation in school-based prevention programs, though not mentioned by young people in this study, may also have had an influence both on those who disclosed and on those peers who encouraged their friends to tell an adult.

Concern for others in the form of not wanting to upset others, particularly parents, was identified as a key motivating factor for young people in actively withholding the secret of abuse in this study while concern for other children was identified as a motivating factor for telling. Jensen et al. (2005) found

that although mothers were most often the ones who prompted disclosure, they were also the ones the children wanted to protect by not telling. Lovett (2004) also described a wish to protect mothers who were seen as vulnerable and in need of support. A quarter of Crisma et al.'s (2004) sample of 36 adolescents said that they did not disclose because they wished to protect their parents from what they perceived to be the possible negative consequences of such a revelation. Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, and Landolt's (2012) adolescents talked about not wanting to burden their parents. Schönbucher et al. noted that young people in their sample described their relationship with their parents as not sufficiently stable or trustworthy to be able to disclose. However, in the present study, young people, for the most part, described supportive relationships within their families and expressed concerns for both mothers and fathers. The concern that parents would be upset, and that families would be adversely affected were found to be valid concerns that for the most part reflected reality. Although Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found fear of consequences to be a reliable predictor of delay in disclosing in older children, few studies have examined the actual consequences of disclosure and how warranted these fears are for children. In this study, the reaction of parents to disclosure and the fact that families did break up following disclosure had a significant impact on the young person and his or her family. Nevertheless, despite a considerable increase in public awareness and professional understanding of the dynamics of disclosure, children continue to experience negative reactions to disclosure. Hershkowitz et al. (2007) found that those adolescents who were more likely to delay disclosure were afraid or shameful of their parents' reactions and that these young people's negative expectations of parental reactions were well founded.

Peer influence served two important functions for young people in this study: peers asking questions and peers encouraging the young person to confide in an adult. Recent studies of informal disclosure have revealed peers to be important confidantes for young people (Crisma et al., 2004; Kogan, 2004; Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Kogan found in his sample of adolescents that the most common initial confidante was a close friend (36%). In Priebe and Svedin's study of adolescents, of those who did disclose, 42.6% of boys and 37.9% of girls mentioned "friend of my own age" as the only person they had told. Contexts identified in this study, such as a mutual sharing of worries and disclosing in response to questions from peers about psychological well-being, point to the interpersonal nature of disclosure. The reactions of peers as described by young people in this study appeared to represent a powerful influence in encouraging the young person to tell an adult.

The five themes identified in this study can be seen to build on the dynamics of disclosure as identified by McElvaney et al. (2012). Concerns about

being believed and shame/self-blame could be seen for the most part as influencing the dynamic 'active *withholding*' and therefore acting as inhibiting disclosure. Fears and concerns, for self and others, in part inhibited disclosure and facilitated disclosure in this study. This highlights the importance of appreciating the complexity of how fear and concern influence the disclosure process. Fear is not merely an inhibitor as has been identified in previous studies. Fear and concern can act as the catalyst for disclosure. As such, this theme could therefore be seen as part of the 'pressure *cooker* effect' dynamic as it represents the conflict between wanting and not wanting to tell. Being asked and peer influence, while clearly related to the 'pressure cooker *effect*' subtheme, opportunity to tell, also refer to the context of confiding, one of the subthemes of the third dynamic, *confiding the secret*, described by McElvaney et al. (2012). Thus, the present study elaborates on McElvaney et al.'s model by identifying the forces that influence the process of containing the secret and illustrating how these influences support in particular, the dynamic of the 'pressure cooker *effect*'.

The sample in this study was small and consisted of predominantly adolescents thus limiting the potential application of the findings. Some studies have suggested gender differences not only in terms of willingness to disclose but also in terms of the factors outlined earlier. No gender differences were evident in this study but this may be due to the small number represented. The strength of the study lies in the qualitative design, enabling young people to share their experiences of disclosure in a semi-structured interview format, and in the inclusion of both children's and parents' perspectives, thus acknowledging the interpersonal context of disclosure, the attention paid to actual consequences of disclosure in an attempt to obtain a more holistic picture of the experience of disclosure, and the focus on exploring factors that facilitate informal disclosure in addition to those that inhibit disclosure.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest that many factors combine to influence a child's readiness and ability to tell. Intrapersonal factors combine with interpersonal experiences to create a buildup of pressure, helping the child to confide in another. Shame and self-blame unfortunately continue to be a feature of children's experiences when they are sexually abused. Reinforcing messages from parents, teachers, and all those who have contact with children, that the responsibility for sexual abuse rests with the abuser, is clearly still needed to combat the beliefs that children hold. Delays in disclosing deprive children of the opportunity to receive these messages in direct response to their own experiences. Education and public awareness campaigns need to

emphasize this point when targeting both children and adults. Children need to know that if they disclose, they will be believed. McElvaney et al. (2012) describe children's need for containment when making a disclosure. This need arises from the unmanageable anxiety associated with the experience of abuse and the child's need to regulate the emotional impact of the abuse. Creating opportunities for children to tell of their experiences is crucial in facilitating disclosure. Asking children about their general well-being provides such an opportunity and provides an appropriate response to those children who believe that their friends and close adults do in fact know what is going on in their lives. Teachers are well placed to both observe changes in young people's mood and to ask young people general questions about their well-being when such changes are noted. Parents and others need to be able to ask young people appropriate questions that enquire after their well-being, thus giving them the opportunity to disclose, and be able to respond to disclosures in such a way that children's need for containment is met.

Asking children both directly and indirectly has been highlighted in recent years as facilitating disclosure. Yet professionals often discourage parents and others involved with children from asking children direct questions about abuse, concerned at the contaminating effects this may have on later forensic investigations if abuse has occurred. Parents and others need advice and guidance on how to ask children questions in an appropriate nonleading manner that will provide children with the opportunity to tell, when they have been sexually abused. It is reasonable to suggest that increased public awareness of the issue will help create an environment where children will be encouraged to disclose experiences of abuse more readily and both children and adults will be better able to hear accounts of sexual abuse when disclosed by their peers or their children. It is difficult to conceptualize a world where children will not feel ashamed and self-blaming when they experience sexual abuse. However, if as is suggested here, delays in disclosing perpetuate such self-blame, facilitating early disclosures may prevent or at least mediate the extent to which children blame themselves for the abuse.

The frequency with which young people confided in friends was noted in this study and builds on a growing body of evidence that peers are an important source of support for young people who need to confide difficult experiences. This is consistent with a growing recognition in developmental psychology of the role of peers (Hartup, 1999; Ladd, 2005) and increased attention to this issue in the field of child sexual abuse. The role of peers in this study in encouraging the young person to tell an adult suggests that peers may be an important target audience for educational and awareness intervention programs. Educating young people in general about what they need to do if a friend discloses an experience of sexual abuse could significantly

influence the likelihood and expediency of disclosures to responsible adults. Data from the present study provided good examples of successful interventions by peers such as helping the young person understand that what happened was wrong, and accompanying the young person to report the matter to a teacher or parent.

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Notes

1. *n* refers to the number of young people who discussed this theme.
2. Child participants are referred to as C01 to C22 and parent participants are labeled with the corresponding number of their child preceded by P.

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