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Abstract

The current study examined investigative interviews using the National Institute of Child Health
and Human Development Investigative Interview Protocol with 204 5- to 13-year-old suspected
victims of child sexual abuse. The analyses focused on who children told, who they wanted (or
did not want) to tell and why, their expectations about being believed, and other general
motivations for disclosure. Children's spontaneous reports as well as their responses to
interviewer questions about disclosure were explored. Results demonstrated that the majority of
children discussed disclosure recipients in their interviews, with 78 children (38%) explaining
their disclosures. Only 15 children (7%) mentioned expectations about whether recipients would
believe their disclosures. There were no differences between the types of information elicited by
interviewers and those provided spontaneously, suggesting that, when interviewed in an open-
ended, facilitative manner, children themselves produce informative details about their disclosure
histories. Results have practical implications for professionals who interview children about
sexual abuse.

In recent years, the process by which children disclose sexual abuse has been hotly debated (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007). Much of the previous research concerning abuse disclosure has focused on understanding potential impediments to disclosure and report maintenance (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Considerably less research has focused on who children decide to tell about sexual abuse and why, and what influences their decisions to disclose. Children's choices may influence how recipients react to disclosure, whether the case is reported to authorities (if they tell peers/family members rather than mandated reporters), and whether they are believed and supported, which has implications for children's report maintenance and psychological adjustment (see Elliott & Carnes, 2001, for a review). For theoretical and practical reasons, therefore, we must understand what hinders *and* motivates children's disclosure of sexual abuse.

Theoretically, it is important to understand how abused children reveal transgressions to others and whether there are developmental or other differences in how and when they do so. For example, older children and adolescents who are more peer-oriented than younger children appear more likely to disclose to peers/friends than to adults (e.g., Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Kogan, 2004; Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011). This may be because, with age, children become more familiar with the potential consequences of disclosure, especially to adults, and are better able to reason about disclosure outcomes (e.g., Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995). However, laboratory research reveals that even 4- to 5-year-olds consider the identity of possible disclosure recipients when deciding whether to disclose wrongdoing by adults (Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, 2010).

Theories concerning sexual abuse disclosure have largely focused on understanding and explaining nondisclosure, delayed disclosure, and recantation (e.g., Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome; Filial Dependency Model; Malloy et al., 2007; Summit, 1983). Several factors have been identified as barriers to disclosure, albeit somewhat inconsistently (e.g., young age, abuse severity, close relationship to the perpetrator). However, what prompts children to ultimately disclose sexual abuse, often after considerable delay? Very little attention has been paid to understanding motivations for and factors that facilitate disclosure, though researchers have examined whether disclosure was purposeful (e.g., telling someone intentionally) or accidental (e.g., revealing evidence of abuse unintentionally; Campis, Hebden-Curtis, & Demaso, 1993). Some have argued that simply being prompted to discuss abuse is a common impetus for disclosure (London et al., 2005), and several studies have linked disclosures to external precipitants such as events which trigger discussion of abuse-related topics (Campis et al., 1993). In a qualitative study of 20 families, Jensen et al. (2005) argued that disclosure is more likely when children feel that they have "an opportunity to talk, a purpose for speaking, and a connection to what they were talking about" (p. 1409). In other words, it may be difficult for children to initiate discussions about sexual abuse, especially given the nature of the topic and the typical lack of conventional scripts for discussing these issues.

Practically, understanding children's sexual abuse disclosure patterns, including why and whom they tell, can help the legal and child protection systems detect and respond to sexual abuse effectively, whereas nondisclosure and delayed disclosure prevent the timely treatment of victims and the prosecution of offenders. Knowledge concerning motivations for disclosure and preferred (and non-preferred) disclosure recipients may aid in designing appropriate prevention programs and interviewing strategies that are most likely to elicit disclosures from abused

children. Also, information about children's disclosure history may assist fact finders with

assessing children's credibility and help contextualize their disclosures (Schaeffer et al., 2011).

Furthermore, asking children to discuss their disclosures in detail may provide investigators with

clues to potential witnesses or additional evidence (e.g., text messages to friends) and allow

social service professionals to assess the supportiveness of family members when making

decisions about child placement and targeted interventions.

Much of the previous literature aimed at understanding children's disclosure of sexual

abuse has been restricted by either of two limitations: (1) the research is retrospective, involving

adult survivors questioned about their disclosure experiences as children (e.g., Arata, 1998;

Roesler & Wind, 1994), or (2) children are questioned in laboratory analogue settings about the

disclosure of adult wrongdoing in hypothetical vignettes (e.g., Lyon et al., 2010; Wagland &

Bussey, 2005). Although this research has informed our understanding of children's disclosure

patterns and recipient preferences, studies in which children talk about their own abuse

disclosures are imperative. When information about the disclosure comes from children

themselves during forensic interviews, concerns about retrospective biases in recall or age-

related reinterpretations of events are lessened. For example, Schaeffer et al. (2011) asked

interviewers to question 3- to 18-year-old alleged sexual abuse victims about disclosure during

forensic interviews conducted using the RATAC (Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch

Inquiry, Abuse Scenario, and Closure) protocol (see Anderson et al., 2010). Children were asked

who they told first about abuse and why, why disclosure was delayed, and why they later

disclosed. Children were largely responsive to these specific questions, revealing, for example,

1) that children disclosed (and delayed) for several reasons and 2) developmental differences in

recipient choices (i.e., younger children disclosed to adults and older children to peers). The

authors concluded that asking children directly about disclosure is beneficial for legal and other purposes (e.g., informing fact finders, intervening with unsupportive parents).

To what extent can useful information about children's disclosures be gleaned by examining forensic interviews conducted in a more open-ended manner? The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Investigative Interview Protocol (i.e., the "NICHD Protocol") is an empirically-based protocol emphasizing open-ended inquiry (e.g., invitations to talk) and also includes a few primarily open-ended questions about disclosure near the end of the interview (the Disclosure Phase; see Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). Studying NICHD Protocol interviews, Malloy et al. (2011) recently reported that 37% of the children studied spontaneously reported expecting negative consequences following disclosure. In the current study, our goals were to assess whether children would reveal information about their choice of disclosure recipients and their motivations to disclose. In light of frequent concerns about children's suggestibility and the empirical evidence that information provided in response to open-ended questions is more likely to be accurate than information elicited using more focused questions (see Lamb et al., 2011, for a review), we also sought to determine how much of the information about disclosure was included in the narratives elicited from children using open-ended questions. We further examined whether interviewers elicited, or children spontaneously provided, this information, and whether it varied depending on child (e.g., age) or abuse (e.g., delay) characteristics.

Because of the paucity of research and theory in this area and the associated need to explore several child and abuse characteristics in relation to disclosure motivations and recipients, we limited our predictions to a few key hypotheses. First, we expected that, with older age and greater delay, children would have told more people about the alleged abuse.

Second, we hypothesized that, with older age, peers would be chosen as recipients more often than adults. Third, we expected that older children would provide more information about the disclosure spontaneously whereas younger children would tend to rely more on interviewer prompts.

Method

Sample Characteristics

The study involved transcripts of the first recorded forensic interviews of 204 children; 130 were 5- to 9-years-old (*M* age years = 7.12, *SD* = 1.40; 26% male) and 74 were 10- to 13-years of age (*M* = 11.37, SD = 1.08; 22% male). The interviews were transcribed from video recordings by professional transcribers. In 45% (*n* = 91) of the cases, children alleged a single incident of sexual abuse (47% and 41% of 5- to 9-year-olds and 10- to 13-year-olds, respectively), whereas 113 (55%) children alleged multiple incidents. Children had disclosed immediately (within 1 month; 20%), after a delay (up to several years; 57%), or delay was unknown (23%). Abuse frequency and delay were examined in all statistical tests but did not have any significant effects so are not considered further. Interviews were conducted by police detectives trained to use the NICHD Protocol. Most of the interviews (82%; *n* = 167) contained a Disclosure Phase, immediately prior to closure of the interview, in which children were asked whether anyone else knew what happened. Children were then asked to indicate the first person they told about a particular incident and to elaborate (i.e., "Tell me everything you can about how X found out"). Interviews with younger children were less likely than those with older children to have a Disclosure Phase (77%, *n* = 100, versus 91%, *n* = 67, respectively, contained a disclosure phase), χ^2 (1, *N* = 204) = 5.89, *p* = .015, and, when appropriate, this was controlled

for. Further details about the sample can be found in Malloy et al. (2011). There is no overlap between the data reported here and in the previous report.

Coding

Coders identified every occasion on which the children referenced disclosure recipients (DRs) or reasons for disclosure and then recorded: the children's verbatim utterances; whether the children had provided the information spontaneously or in response to interviewer requests for that specific information; and whether the information was first mentioned prior to, or within, the Disclosure Phase. All utterances mentioning disclosure and disclosure recipients were coded as consistent with one of three categories: (1) statements about DR preferences (e.g., "I *wanted to tell* my mum because I knew she could make it stop") or non-preferences (e.g., "I *didn't* want my dad to find out because he would be angry"); (2) statements concerning expectations of belief (e.g., "I knew she would know I'm telling the truth") or disbelief (e.g., "I didn't want to tell my mum because she's one of those who doesn't believe"); and (3) statements concerning motivations for disclosure, which may have mentioned a DR but in the absence of an explicitly stated preference for telling this individual (e.g., "I told X because I just couldn't keep it inside anymore"). Within the above three categories of DR preference, expectation of belief, and motivations, all statements were then classified according to their associations with one of the following: (1) DR; (2) child; (3) suspect; (4) desire to protect someone else; (5) desire to stop the abuse; (6) external precipitant; (7) feeling of compulsion; or (8) any negative reason not associated with one of the previous categories. See Table 1 for examples of each category.

Reliability was assessed in two phases. First, the primary authors developed the coding scheme for determining whether information about disclosure was spontaneous or elicited, who the child identified as a DR, whether a preference or non-preference was indicated, and statement

classification (i.e., [non-] preference, [dis-] belief, motivations for disclosure), by training

together on 10% of the sample ($n = 20$ cases). Then, reliability was assessed on an additional 20

cases; half at the beginning and half at the end of the coding stage (Categorical variable Kappas

.83 – 1.00; Continuous variable percent agreement .93 – 1.00, across the two assessments).

To develop the eight *reasons,* the authors read the entire sample of interviews and

discussed appropriate themes. Reliability was assessed by instructing seven coders unfamiliar

with the purposes of the study to classify all of the statements into one of eight reason categories.

Only categorizations agreed upon by at least six of the seven coders were included in the data

analysis (74% were agreed upon by all seven coders, 19% were agreed upon by six; 7% were

excluded because of failure to reach consensus).

Results

First, we report the number and identities of all DRs and children's reasons for preferring

(or not) and expectations of being believed (or not) by these individuals. Second, we describe

the children's reasons for disclosure independent of their explicit preferences or beliefs regarding

specific DRs.

Disclosure Recipients (DRs)

The number and identity of DRs mentioned by children are represented in Figure 1.

There were 164 children (80.4%) who mentioned one or more DRs (range 1-6, $M = 2.13$, $SD =$

1.23), and 348 DRs were mentioned in total (Figure 1a displays the number of children reporting

0-6 DRs, along with the mean age and age range of children contributing these responses).

There were 120 children (58.8%) who spontaneously provided information about at least one

DR. A chi square test revealed a non-significant tendency, $\chi^2 (9, N = 348) = 16.71$, $p = .053$, for

peers and mothers to be identified as recipients more often in response to interviewer questions

rather than spontaneously (57% and 59% of the time these disclosure recipients were mentioned, respectively, they were interviewer-elicited rather than spontaneous), whereas children more often mentioned teachers and other (non-familial) adults (64% and 67%, respectively) spontaneously. These differences were not evident, however, when considering information provided prior to the Disclosure Phase rather than within it, $ps \geq .24$.

Controlling for whether the interview contained a Disclosure Phase, the number of DRs discussed in the interview was positively correlated with child age, r (201) = .43, $p < .001$. Of children who reported at least one DR, many reported telling their mothers (69%) or peers (57%). Younger children (5- to 9-year-olds) were more likely than older children to mention their mothers (42% versus 27%) and grandparents (7% versus 2%), while 10- to 13-year-olds were more likely than younger children to mention peers (38% versus 19%) and teachers (13% versus 2%), χ^2 (9, N = 348) = 36.24, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1b for the percentages of older and younger children who discussed various identities of DRs in their interviews).

Children mentioned more DRs (M = 1.89, SD = 1.37) in interviews with a Disclosure Phase (n = 167) than in those without (n = 37, M = .89, SD = 1.17), t (202) = 4.12, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = .75. Nevertheless, in interviews with a Disclosure Phase, 53% of the DRs were discussed *prior* to this phase, and of those, 74% were mentioned spontaneously. Indeed, prior to the Disclosure Phase, children were significantly more likely to provide information about DRs spontaneously (i.e., 74%), while in this phase 89% of the DR identities were elicited by the interviewer, χ^2 (1, N = 315) = 127.94, $p < .001$.

Of the 164 children who mentioned DRs in their interviews, 65 (40%) indicated a preference or non-preference for telling a specific person. Non-preferences were discussed by 56 children (86%) while only 9 children (14%) explicitly indicated preferences for telling specific

DRs. A chi square test revealed that no specific types of people were consistently preferred or non-preferred, χ^2 (9, $N = 65$) = 13.44, $p = ns$, but children were much more likely to spontaneously raise the topic of non-preferred recipients (70% of the time when children mentioned non-preferred recipients, those people were mentioned in spontaneous narratives; $n = 39$) rather than in response to questions (30%, $n = 17$) (2, $N = 65$) = 14.35, $p < .001$. Of the children who identified non-preferred DRs, 17 failed to provide reasons why those DRs were non-preferred, whereas only one child with a preference failed to explain it. Children who mentioned non-preferred DRs were more likely to cite reasons associated with the suspect (14% of those with a non-preference versus 0% with a preference; e.g., non-preference for father because the suspect was the father`s former housemate), while children who mentioned preferred DRs referred more frequently to feelings of compulsion (33% of those with a preference versus 2% with a non-preference, e.g., "I said in my head I just have to tell my mum"), χ^2 (5, $N = 47$) = 17.73, $p = .003$. Reasons for DR preferences did not differ as a function of age, abuse frequency, delay, or whether information was spontaneously provided or elicited by interviewers.

Children's Expectations about Recipient Belief

Only 15 children mentioned expectations about belief, and 12 of these children expected disbelief. Six children explained their expectations and only one of these was a child who expected to be believed. This 5-year-old wanted to tell her grandmother – "I knew she would believe me because she knows I never lie" (reason associated with child). Of the five children who reported reasons for expecting disbelief, four cited reasons associated with the DR (e.g., "she's [mother] one of those who doesn't believe"), and an 11-year-old male expressed concern that the suspect would deny the abuse and so the police (non-preferred DR) would believe the suspect rather than the child.

Reasons for Disclosure

In 38% of the cases ($n = 78$), children explained why their abuse came to be known to others without mentioning any explicit (non-) preference or expectation of belief associated with a particular DR. All but four of these interviews contained a Disclosure Phase. However, over half of the reasons (56%, $n = 44$) were provided prior to the Disclosure Phase, with 77% ($n = 34$) of these spontaneous, whereas, in the Disclosure Phase, 71% ($n = 24$) were interviewer-elicited rather than spontaneous (29%; $n = 10$). This difference was significant, χ^2 (1, $N = 78$) = 17.87, $p < .001$.

The types of *reasons* for disclosure, however, were not associated with any of the child or abuse variables or with whether the reasons were interviewer-elicited or provided spontaneously. Over half (54%, $n = 42$) of the reasons were associated with an external precipitant (e.g., three children were motivated to tell after watching television programs in which sexual abuse was a theme). The second most common reason (24%, $n = 19$) was associated with a specific DR (but in the absence of any indication as to preference for, or expectation of belief by, this DR). For example, three children mentioned telling a specific DR because the intended first recipient was unavailable (e.g., one child reported that her initial disclosure was to her mother's boss because he answered the phone). Less frequently, children mentioned feelings of compulsion (9%, $n = 7$) and the desire to protect someone else (9%, $n = 7$). Interestingly, children rarely mentioned disclosing in an effort to stop the abuse (4%, $n = 3$).

Discussion

An understanding of children's disclosure history can be critical to both the investigative process and child-welfare outcomes by providing further investigative leads and insight into the support systems that may (or may not) be available to the children concerned. Accordingly, we sought to examine the identities of individuals to whom children disclosed abuse (DRs), their

preferences for and expectations of belief by those DRs, and their reasons for revealing abuse to others. We also focused on whether this information was interviewer-elicited or provided spontaneously.

In our study, many children discussed multiple DRs. Mothers and peers were the most common DRs, and most other DRs were family members. With increasing age, children mentioned more DRs in their forensic interviews, as we had expected. As in previous research (e.g., Kogan, 2004; Schaeffer et al., 2011) and consistent with our hypotheses, older children were more likely than younger children to have told peers and were also more likely to have told teachers. This may be attributable to older children's larger and more diverse social networks, especially outside the home. Prior research has revealed that most abuse is not reported to authorities (Smith et al., 2000). In our study, the fact that multiple DRs were the norm likely means that at least some of the children's early disclosures were "dead-end" disclosures (i.e., disclosures that do not lead to official reports). Disclosure to peers may be especially unlikely to lead to intervention, perhaps because peers do not understand how to intervene or because young victims request that peers keep the abuse secret from others. With age, children increasingly value secrecy as a component of friendship (Rotenberg, 1991).

Our focus was on investigating children's reasons for disclosure rather than potential impediments. Children reported a variety of reasons for disclosing abuse unrelated to DR preference or expectations of belief: Some disclosed in an attempt to stop the abuse or protect others, whereas some felt compelled to tell someone or gave a reason associated with a particular DR (e.g., choosing to tell a peer because she would not tell anyone else, but without explicitly stating a preference for telling the peer). In the absence of statements about beliefs or preferences, children most commonly attributed their disclosures to external factors (Campis et

al., 1993, Schaeffer et al., 2011). In other words, events or people motivated disclosure, underscoring that internal motivations alone often failed to motivate disclosure. This is consistent with Jensen et al.'s (2005) findings that it may be difficult for children to initiate discussions of sexual abuse for multiple reasons (e.g., family discussions rarely involve this topic). An external precipitant (e.g., television program, presentation at school) may not only help children recognize that abuse has occurred but enhance the likelihood of disclosure because children have both an opportunity to talk and an established connection to the topic that they are discussing. An alternative explanation is that children are simply more likely to be aware of external precipitants and better able to talk about them than about other motivations (e.g., internal).

During forensic interviews, children are willing and able to provide information about how their abuse came to be known to others. Schaeffer et al. (2011) found that 73% of children provided details about telling and 55% identified their first DR when asked specific questions about disclosure. Contrary to our hypotheses, there were no differences between the types of information that were interviewer-elicited as opposed to spontaneously provided by children, suggesting that children interviewed in an open-ended, facilitative manner often provide informative details about their disclosure history. It is possible that some children (and fact finders) may interpret the questions used by Schaeffer et al. (e.g., What made you wait to tell?; Why didn't you tell someone sooner?) as suggestive or accusatory (Walker, 1999). That is, reliance on more open-ended questions to obtain disclosure history may enhance perceptions of children's credibility, and this is an important issue for future research.

Because child sexual abuse is rarely reported to the authorities (e.g., Smith et al., 2000), one limitation of the current study is the nature of the forensic interview sample: By definition,

these children had come to the attention of authorities. Because we were interested in what prompted children to disclose and to whom, it was necessary to examine a sample of disclosers but our study cannot fully address questions about disclosure motivations and recipients because some children may make "dead-end disclosures" to informal recipients (e.g., family, friends) and thus not be formally interviewed by investigators. Children who held very strong opinions about preferred and non-preferred disclosure recipients and expectations of belief may have failed to disclose altogether, even informally. Furthermore, we have no way of definitively classifying children as abused and, with no objective record of events, we cannot measure the accuracy of their disclosure-related statements. Finally, these interviews were conducted for forensic purposes, and thus the main goal was to obtain detailed and accurate abuse-relevant details for investigative use. In future studies, it would be beneficial to conduct more in-depth, open-ended interviews with suspected child victims specifically designed to gather information about children's disclosure histories and preferences.

Understanding children's disclosure decisions is critical for designing appropriate interviewing and intervention strategies. Although much of the information of interest was conveyed prior to the Disclosure Phase, our data indicate that it is also useful to give children opportunities to discuss the disclosure process by asking them largely open-ended questions about how the abuse became known to others. It is possible that these discussions may trigger investigative leads and cue children's memory for evidence and additional abuse-related details; whether this occurs is an important question for future research. Information about disclosure patterns gathered from suspected child victims in the course of forensic interviews may also be helpful when prosecuting individual cases. For example, attorneys may rely on this information to explain delayed disclosure to jurors or parents (Schaeffer et al., 2011).

Our findings are consistent with laboratory work demonstrating that children, especially young children, rarely think of teachers as potential recipients of abuse disclosures (Lyon et al., 2010). However, unlike parents or other family members who typically have ties to suspects, teachers likely do not, and are mandated reporters. Disclosure-related information provided by suspected child victims directly may thus be useful for improving education and intervention programs designed to encourage disclosure, especially to individuals likely to intervene. Overall, understanding the processes and contexts in which children reveal wrongdoing committed by others is crucial for promoting their well-being and protection.

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Table 1

Examples of Statement Categorization and Reasons

Reason associated with	Preference/non-preference	Belief/disbelief	Other reasons for disclosure
Disclosure recipient	I wanted to tell mum because she's one who listens.	She [mum] didn't believe me about [separate incident] so I knew she wouldn't now.	I told [Aunt M] because she was there.
Child	I didn't want to tell [teacher] because I'm one who doesn't like to talk about things.	I knew she would believe because she knows I never lie.	X
Suspect	I didn't want to tell nanna because he [suspect] already said sorry.	I thought he [suspect] would deny it and no one would believe me.	X
Protect	I wanted mum and dad to know because I didn't want it to happen to [younger sister].	X	I [told because] I didn't want [peer] going off with [suspect].
Stop abuse	I wanted to tell the police because they could make it stop.	X	[I told] so he couldn't do it to me anymore
External precipitant	X	X	They were showing us a safety video [in school], and then I thought I should tell someone what's been happening.
Feeling of compulsion	I wanted [best friend] to know because you just need to [tell].	X	I just broke down and told because I was in shock.
Non-specific negative	I didn't want to tell [mum] because I'd get in trouble.	X	X

Notes. 'X' indicates no exemplars of the specific Category-Reason combination. Square brackets are author additions to children's statements.

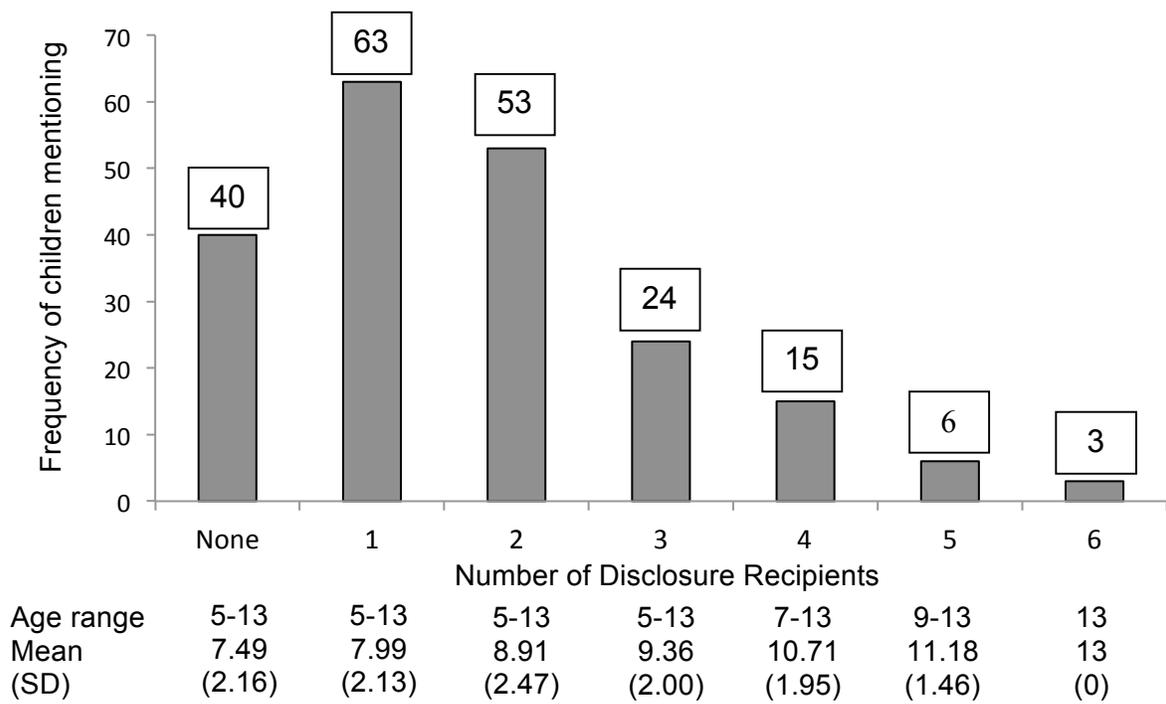| Age range	5-13	5-13	5-13	5-13	7-13	9-13	13
Mean	7.49	7.99	8.91	9.36	10.71	11.18	13
(SD)	(2.16)	(2.13)	(2.47)	(2.00)	(1.95)	(1.46)	(0)

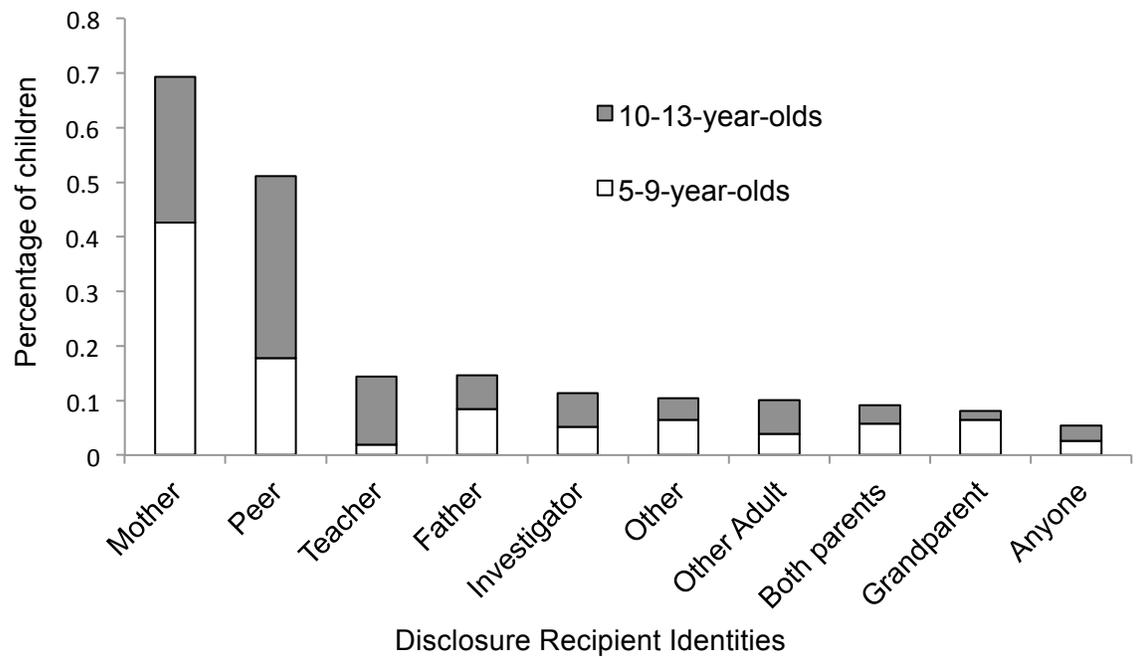*Figure 1a.* The number of disclosure recipients discussed by children and their ages.

Figure 1b. Percentages of older and younger children who discussed various identities of disclosure recipients.

Figure 1. The number and identity of disclosure recipients discussed by children.