

Vital Communication - *Disclosing Abuse*

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Through the *Protecting God's Children*® program, we learned that children don't usually lie about sexual abuse. In fact, research tells us that they are more likely to keep silent about the abuse and tell no one than they are to lie about it. Over the years, there have been research projects aimed at determining the reason for a child's reluctance to disclose. All have provided information but none have studied the parents and children at the same time in quite the same way as a recent study involving researchers from the United Kingdom and Israel.

This study is providing some additional insights into the reasons for children's disclosures and why some disclose quickly and some hold on to the information much longer and disclose only when prompted. The study involved a small group of children and parents, but was well defined and managed, thus providing some real insights into disclosure events. Experts tell us that certain factors influence a child's ability to recover from sexual abuse. These factors are:

- The nature of the abuse
- The duration of the abuse
- The frequency with which the abuse occurred
- The level of violation of trust in the relationship
- The response of the family and community to the disclosure

According to the new research, these factors also influence whether a child or young person discloses the abuse and, if so, with whom they talk about what happened. In the study, children and parents were interviewed simultaneously. The participating victims were all abused by a stranger or trusted adult other than a member of the immediate family. Strict protocols including conducting the interview during the first formal session after the disclosure and asking open ended questions assured that no child was further traumatized by the interview process and that no parent was provided with information other than their own recollection.

The size of the study and the fact that it is the first of its kind remind us that the results should be viewed with some caution; nevertheless, the findings are important. According to the study, the factors that most influenced a child's ability to disclose immediately or soon after the abuse occurred were:

- *Familiarity with the abuser.* 78 percent withheld disclosure for up to a year if the abuser was known and trusted by them and their parents but only 17 percent withheld the disclosure when the perpetrator was a stranger.
- *The severity of the abuse.* Almost 92 percent of the children who suffered more severe abuse delayed the disclosure and 60 percent of those who suffered less serious offenses such as sexual exposure or touching on the outside of clothes disclosed right away.
- *The number of times the abuse occurred.* Children who were abused repeatedly were more likely to withhold or delay disclosure while those who were victimized one time had a greater tendency to speak up.
- *Anticipated reaction by parents.* According to the study "None of the children whose parents reported that they reacted calmly to stress delayed their disclosure, whereas most children (88%) whose parents reported being anxious under stress did so."

In addition to these factors influencing whether a child disclosed at the time of the abuse or delayed disclosure, the study found that those who delayed disclosure did not tell their parents about the

abuse and that younger children were more likely to tell parents than older young people. They told their friends or siblings before they disclosed to parents or other adults.

Furthermore, the study found that there was a direct correlation between children who recanted and the frequency of the abusive incidents suffered by the children. Those who were abused multiple times were significantly less likely to disclose. Children reporting a single incident NEVER recanted their accusations.

For parents and other caring adults, the study reminds us once again of the importance of reassuring the children and young people in our lives that they can tell us anything. They need to know and experience that we can deal with stress in a way that is healthy and productive, and that if they tell us what happened, we will believe and support them.

It also points to the need for us to heighten our awareness of the behaviors that indicate that an adult is a risk of harm to children. Becoming proficient at identifying risky behaviors and intervening to stop what's happening is the best chance we have of protecting our children from being faced with the decisions about disclosure.

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