

“Why didn’t you tell?”  
Helping families and children weather  
the process of a sexual abuse  
disclosure

Nancy D. Kellogg MD  
Professor of Pediatrics  
UTHSC-San Antonio

# “Why didn’t you tell?”

- \* The Problem: common responses to disclosures
- \* Patterns of disclosure
  - \* Time to disclosure
  - \* Reasons for non-disclosure
  - \* Reasons for disclosure
  - \* What happens after they tell
- \* The Solutions: how we can help
  - \* Educating parents about “normal” disclosures
  - \* Bridging gaps between children and parents

# The Problem

- \* Parental reactions to a child's disclosure may include
  - \* Denial
    - \* “Not my child”
    - \* “Not my husband/boyfriend/brother/father”
  - \* Skepticism
    - \* “Not possible because... never alone, no red flags”
  - \* Grief
    - \* Loss of innocence
    - \* Loss of family/friend relationship integrity
  - \* Failure as protector
    - \* Didn't see the signs
    - \* Didn't teach my child well enough to protect herself

# The child's perception

- \* My parent is.....
  - \* Angry
  - \* Grieving
  - \* Disappointed
  - \* Disbelieving, and/or
  - \* Supportive
- \* At/in/of...
  - \* me
  - \* the abuser

# Why is understanding disclosure important?

- \* Provides strategies for facilitating disclosures
- \* Provides guidance in supporting child when he or she is making a disclosure
- \* Enhances ability to provide ongoing support to child and family once disclosure is made

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# Disclosure study

- \* Analyzed data from 661 children and adolescents presenting for acute (221) and nonacute(440) sexual assault/abuse examinations
  - \* Average age: 11.6 y
  - \* 89% female
  - \* 7% had >1 abuser
  - \* 30% of abusers were minors; 46% of these were family members

# Disclosure questions

- \* “What kept you from wanting to tell right away?”
- \* “Why did you decide to tell?”
- \* “How old were you the first time [the abuse] happened?”
- \* “How old were you the last time [the abuse] happened?”
- \* “How old were you when you told?”
- \* “Did anyone say anything to you about telling?”



# Time to disclosure

- \* Total sample: mean 1.5 years; median 90 days
- \* Non-acute sample: mean 2.3 years; median 18 months



# Factors impacting time to disclosure (in non-acute group)

- \* Average delay was almost **2 years** longer for children victimized by **family members** than for those victimized by non-family members
  - \* If abuser is a parent, children wait 6.5 months longer to disclose than if abuser is another family member
- \* Average delay was about **1 year** longer for children victimized by **adults** than for those victimized by juveniles
- \* Hispanic children waited **>13 months** longer on average than African-American children to disclose
- \* Non-Hispanic white children waited **8.7 months** longer than African-American children to disclose

# Factors impacting time to disclosure

- \* The younger the child was when the abuse began, the longer the disclosure time
  - \* Children aged 0-5 yrs at onset of abuse waited 1 year longer to tell than children who were 6-10 yrs of age at onset of abuse
  - \* Children aged 6-10 yrs at onset of abuse waited 2 years longer to tell than children who were 11-15 yrs of age at onset of abuse

# Factors that did not impact time to disclosure (in non-acute group)

- \* Severity of abuse (penetration vs no penetration)
- \* Abuse-specific self-blame
- \* Gender

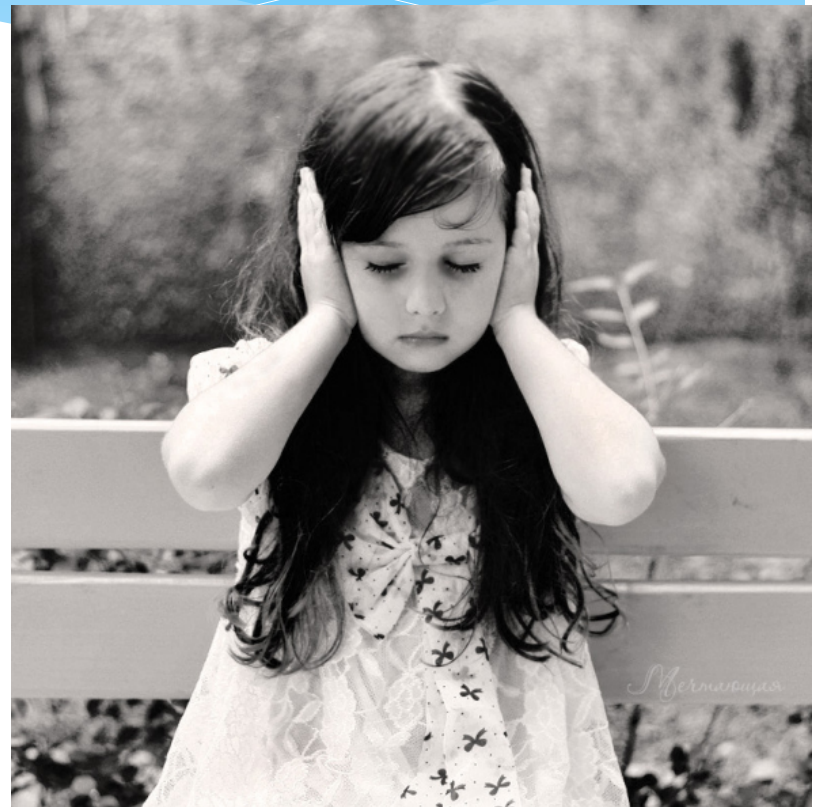
“I didn’t want to tell because when I told the first time [I was abused], it ruined everything. It took all my mother’s happiness away.”

Lauren, age 14, sexually abused from 3 to 6 by mother’s boyfriend, then sexually abused from ages 11 to 14 by her stepfather

# “Why didn’t you tell?”

## Major themes

- \* Fear of consequences
- \* Incapacitating feelings
- \* Lack of opportunity or person to tell
- \* Told not to tell
- \* Didn’t think/know it was wrong



# Fear of consequences (59%)

- \* Child or others threatened by abuser (explicit or implicit)
  - \* “I thought it would hurt my mom, and that’s the only reason I didn’t tell because if I let him do it to me he didn’t hurt my mom”
- \* Fear of consequences to self or others, including abuser
  - \* “I was scared of being punished”
  - \* “I didn’t want him to get in trouble”
- \* Fear of how others will react, especially parents
  - \* “I didn’t want to hurt mom’s feelings”
  - \* “I was afraid no one would believe me, and my aunt didn’t”
- \* Among theme groups for nondisclosure, this group waited longer than any other group to disclose

# Incapacitating feelings (24%)

- \* Abuse generated uncomfortable feelings
  - \* “I felt guilty, no disgusted is the right word”
  - \* “I was ashamed and embarrassed”
- \* Avoidance/denial
  - \* “I don’t like thinking or talking about it”
- \* Unspecified fear
  - \* “I was scared”



“I felt like screaming. It hurt. But it was like I was in a dream. You try to move but you can’t. You open your mouth but there is no sound. You can’t scream when you’re dreaming”

Sarah, age 15,  
explaining how she felt the first time her  
stepfather abused her

# Lack of opportunity or person to tell (7%)

- \* Didn't know who/how to tell
  - \* "I didn't know how to say it, how to tell mom and dad that a person we trusted hurt me"
  - \* "I didn't have anyone to tell because I had run away and was alone"
- \* Lack of prior protective response
  - \* "I didn't think mom would do anything. He would get drunk and beat her and he would leave but she always took him back, so what was the point?"

# Told not to tell (6%)

- \* “He said to keep it a secret”
- \* “I pinky promised not to tell”



# Didn't think/know it was wrong (5%)

- \* Consensual
  - \* “It was my decision”
  - \* “I didn't tell him no”
- \* Didn't know it was wrong
  - \* “He would do it so much I thought what we were doing was something normal”
  - \* “At first I didn't know it was wrong”

# Why did you tell?

- \* “I didn’t tell because he told me not to and my mother told me to trust him, so I did. I didn’t know it was the wrong thing. In health class they told us it was the wrong thing and that it was important to tell.”
- \* Emily, age 12, sexually abused at age 7 by a family friend



# External factors(56%)

- \* Found opportunity or person to tell (18%)
  - \* “The night before my grandma was talking about something similar that happened to her when she was little”
  - \* “The doctor asked me”
- \* Witnessed/rescued/someone else told (17%)
  - \* “Mom walked in”
  - \* “My sister told my mom”
- \* Needed help from others because of physical, psychological or behavioral symptoms or concerns(21%)
  - \* “I kept waking up crying and screaming”
  - \* “I was worried I had an STD”

# Internal factors(44%)

- \* Pressure cooker (most common disclosure reason; 29%)
  - \* “I wanted to get it out-it was like a soda can, just shaking and shaking”
- \* The right thing to do (13%)
  - \* “Just knowing that if I didn’t [tell], other people could get hurt and he would get away with it”
  - \* “I saw a TV show that told me to always tell the truth”
  - \* Shortest disclosure time of all external/internal factors
- \* Felt safe(2%)
  - \* “I told because my mom left him”

# What happens after they tell?

“I don’t know if my mom believes me. At night, everyone is crying. My mom doesn’t know who to believe, and my little sister and brother cry for their father.”

Amy, age 10



# What does the mother do when her child discloses abuse?

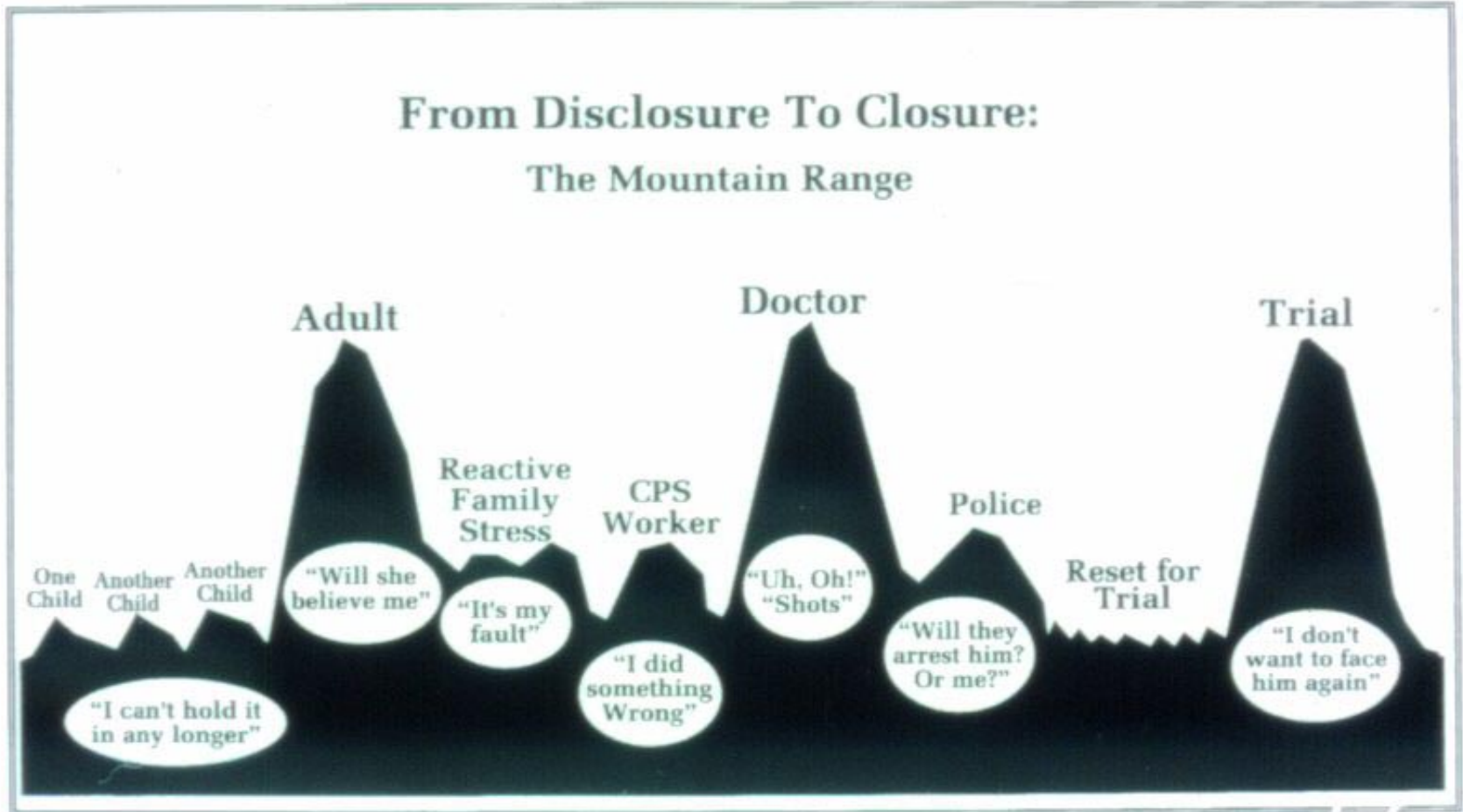
(Kellogg & Menard, Child Abuse & Negl, 2003)

- \* 60%: believe and support the child, report promptly to authorities
- \* 20%: don't believe the child, don't report
- \* 20%: don't know whether to believe the child or perpetrator, delay reporting or "talk" to the perpetrator to try to stop the abuse

# Abuse-specific self-blame

- \* 51% had self-blame; self-blame did not impact overall time to disclosure
- \* But... those that blamed themselves for not telling after the first time waited the longest to tell among those with self-blame
- \* Children are significantly more likely to have self-blame if their parent does not believe the initial disclosure completely
- \* Children with self-blame have a greater number of trauma symptoms than children without self-blame (Melville, Kellogg, Lukefahr, Perez, Child Abuse & Negl, 2014)

# What happens to the child when abuse is reported?



“The heart has its reason which reason does not understand” -Pascal

- \* “I want to go back to him. Maybe if he took lots of cold medicine at night he would just sleep instead of touching me” –Ana, age 11, sexually abused by her father for 3 years



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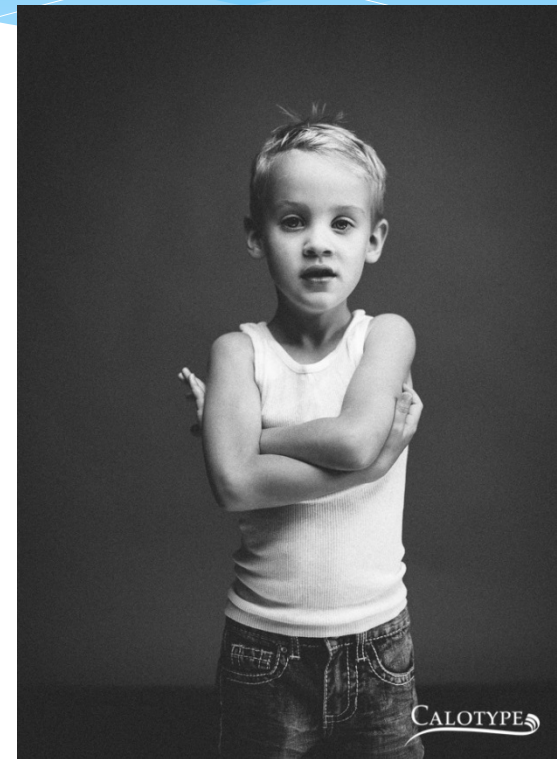
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# There is no “normal” disclosure

- \* **Young age, family member(especially parent)** perpetrator, and **ethnicity** (Hispanic and white) are associated with longer disclosure times
- \* Children have many different reasons for disclosure and non-disclosure
- \* Disclosure is a **process**, not an event
- \* Reasons for recantation and partial disclosures are likely the same as reasons for initial non-disclosure

# The initial response of the parent is key

- \* Children need to KNOW that parents will believe and support them if they disclose
  - \* Fear of parental response is the single most common reason children don't tell
- \* Delay in disclosure is common, long, and does *not* mean that children don't love or trust their parents
- \* Most children have no physical or emotional/behavioral symptoms



# Bridging gaps

- \* Child's perception of parent's belief and support
  - \* May misinterpret parent's anger, despair or silence
  - \* Actions speak louder than words
- \* Children feel responsible for their parents' emotions following disclosure
- \* Often the best sense of security is normalcy following disclosure
- \* Parents need to leave parent "hat" on
- \* Emotions and behaviors sometimes worsen or develop after disclosure



A child's secret shame  
Gently unfolded to find  
A white bloom of hope

