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Child Sexual Abuse: How Young People Tell

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of disclosing sexual abuse experiences in adolescence. As children develop increasing autonomy and independence they also develop cognitive, social and emotional skills which facilitate the process of disclosing personal experiences they have struggled for in some cases many years to maintain secrecy. Decision making skills which enable the young person to consider alternative consequences to their behaviour, multiple outcomes and an appreciation of the diverse perspectives of others enables them to weigh up the relative advantages and disadvantages of disclosure. Increased empathy enables them to appreciate the vulnerability of other children to abuse yet also sensitises them to the distress inevitably caused when loved ones discover that the abuse has occurred. Emotional self-regulation is needed to contain the 'pressure cooker' of conflicting emotions which young people describe in struggling with protecting and seeking help. As young people turn toward their peers as sources of support and confidantes, it is crucial that they are met with appropriate information and guidance. It is suggested that the positive impact of peer relationships on young people's development can perhaps be harnessed by ensuring that young people can respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual abuse.

The process of disclosing child sexual abuse experiences has received little attention in the research literature. Disclosure is needed for primary prevention to protect other children from being abused by the same perpetrator, for secondary prevention to stop the abuse and provide immediate therapeutic support if required and for tertiary prevention to provide therapy for those who are struggling with the long term psychological sequelae of their experiences. It is also needed to enable both therapeutic and legal services to intervene with the offenders. The extent of sexual abuse is difficult to establish, given the secrecy surrounding such experiences but published prevalence rates of unwanted sexual experiences in childhood in Irish populations have ranged from 5% of males and 7% of females ((MRBI, 1987) to 15% of females and 9% of males (IMS, 1993) to at least 30% in females(Lalor, 1999; McGee, 2002) and 23% in males (McGee, 2002)

The views of young people expressed in this article are drawn from a current study which is being conducted by the author, funded by the Health Research Board. It is a qualitative study on how children disclose sexual abuse, drawing on interviews with children/adolescents (n=20) parents (n=15) and adults who have themselves been sexually abused in childhood (n=11). The methodological approach draws on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1967; Strauss, 1998) where the aim is to develop a theory of how children disclose which is grounded in children's own experiences.

Adolescence

The significance of adolescence as an important life stage has been well recognised in Developmental Psychology for many years. It is the second major 'growth spurt' and a time of significant change at many levels - biological, cognitive, emotional. In particular, it is a time of development of autonomy, identity, cognition, morality, emotion, and the self-processes of self concept and self-esteem (Adams, 2006). This paper explores how the adolescent's cognitive, emotional and social development can shed light on our understanding of how young people negotiate the psychological task of disclosing sexual abuse experiences. It is not known whether adolescence is a pivotal time for disclosure if abuse occurs in the early or middle childhood years. What is known is that disclosure can be delayed up to 60 years and above (McElvaney, 2002; McGee et al., 2002). Studies do indicate that the intentional nature of disclosure varies with age: younger children are more likely to disclose accidentally while more older children disclose purposefully (Campis, 1993; Sauzier, 1989; Sorenson, 1991). Triggers for disclosure have also been given some attention. Sorenson & Snow (1991) found in a sample of children aged 3 to 19 years that younger children more often disclosed following a school based education programme while the most common trigger for adolescents to disclose was anger.

Cognitive Development

Byrnes (2006) reviewed the literature on adolescents' decision-making abilities and points to studies which have found that older adolescents are more capable of considering multiple options resulting in meeting different needs, (Byrnes & McClenny, 1994; Byrnes, Miller & Reynolds, 1999; cited in Byrnes, 2006) and anticipate a wider range of consequences of their actions (Lewis, 1981; Halpern, Felsher, & Cauffman, 2001; cited in Byrnes, 2006). Thus the child who has been told that if they disclose the abuse it will be seen by others as the child's fault begins to challenge these beliefs as the developing adolescent learns more about how society views child abuse and appreciates the imbalance of power between the adult who abused them and the child they were. The child who was told it was just a game begins to understand the abuser's rationale for portraying the sexually abusive behaviour as a game.

I didn't really understand. I was only like 7 years old and I was told it was a game. I thought it was normal(17 year old girl)

Emotional development

Byrnes (2006) points out that part of being a good decision-maker is being able to use self-regulatory (e.g. self-calming) strategies to manage the effects of emotions. Given the emotional turmoil of conflicting emotions which many adolescents experience in relation to their abuse: fear of the consequences of disclosure, upsetting loved ones, wanting to protect others, fear of being judged, concern for other children who may be at risk of being abused, it seems no wonder that young people experience such difficulty in finally breaking the silence.

Those emotion skills and abilities which are developed or enhanced in adolescence, according to Rosenblum and Lewis (2006) and serve as the building blocks for adult emotional functioning include the ability to experience and reflect on mixed and

conflicting emotions, and the capacity for a mature experience of empathy. The growing awareness of risk to other children reflects an empathic response which was noted by teenagers in this study as helping them to tell of their abuse. It is also noteworthy that at a time when teenagers are developing skills in regulating intense emotions, some of these teenagers talked about telling in an unplanned way as if they simply could not keep it in any longer.

Peer Relationships

The significance of peer relationships for development has long been recognised. Case studies of Anna Freud and Sophie Dann (1951) after first world war support the view that children can provide one another with security and self-enhancement, and when adults are absent, support ego development. In recent years, research attention has been focused on friendships as a developmental advantage for children. Hartup(1999) points out that outcomes vary depending on whether one has friends, who one's friends are(socially competent versus antisocial) and the quality of friendships (e.g. having elements such as supportiveness).

Confiding in friends

Of the 20 young people interviewed, 9 had first confided in a peer, be that friend, boyfriend or cousin before they had told an adult of the abuse. Often the context of the disclosure was that of a mutual sharing of difficulties. Disclosures to friends were met with outpouring of support. All responded by encouraging disclosure to an adult, usually the parent and in two instances the friend was present when the young person told their parent. Many young people described how their friends persisted with encouraging them to tell their parents. Some friends responded by pointing out the potential risk to other children:

and then I was just thinking of like (friend) said to me... look what could happen to your sisters and when I thought of that I just my mouth just dropped and 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(14 year old girl)

In some instances, friends knew about the abuse for some time (varying from months to years) before the young person told an adult. It may well be that this disclosure in some way alleviated the pressure felt by the young person which in itself delayed telling an adult of the abuse.

While there is some evidence that young people rely more on peer relationships when family relationships are poor ((Barber, 1997) in this study most of the young people interviewed described a close relationship with their parents which they indicated was a barrier to being able to confide in them about the abuse.

C: I don't know I really didn't know I said I do tell me Mam everything and the there wasn't anything that I never told her apart from that like that was the one thing she said I can't believe it she said like the biggest thing you couldn't tell her

R: yeah

C: and I was like well the biggest thing was the biggest thing that was gonna hurt her(16 year old girl)

Talking openly about sexual abuse

Despite the contribution of media coverage to increasing awareness of sexual abuse as a phenomenon in Irish society, many people remain unaware of people in their social circles who have experienced abuse. Most of the young people in the study were not aware of anyone who had previously been abused although others did disclose this to them following their disclosure. While most agreed that talking about abuse more openly would encourage young people to tell, a few had told no friends at all, only family knew due to concerns of being judged by others, being seen differently or concerns about confidentiality. The young people's arguments for maintaining this secret were compelling. A teenage girl talked of how her ex-boyfriend challenged her in a social setting in front of friends, that she only made up the story about her mother's partner abusing her because she wanted him out of the house.

Many of the young people in this study did not recognise the stay safe programme by name but some did so when it was described as helping with bullying. Few saw any connection between the stay safe programme and their experience of sexual abuse or that it helped them in any way to disclose. Most felt that education programmes in school needed to be more explicit, discussing both intrafamilial and extramilial sexual abuse.

Being asked

A somewhat surprising finding from the research study is the extent to which young people disclosed in the context of being asked by either friends, relatives or teachers. In the SAVI study in Ireland (McGee et al., 2002), telephone interviewers asked respondents directly if they had been abused and 47% of those who said they had been were disclosing this information for the first time, saying they had never been asked before. However, both clinical experience and research indicates that many children, adolescents and adults deny that they have been abused when asked (Lawson, 1992; Sorenson, 1991; Summit, 1983). Denial can serve an important psychological function for those who have been abused. It can act as a protective mechanism from the potentially overwhelming feelings aroused by thinking or talking of the abuse.

A clinical vignette illustrates this further: A female adult client talked of gynaecological problems and commented on the fact that the doctor never asked whether she had been abused. This appeared to be a reprimand, that the doctor should have asked. However, the therapist was aware of this client's determination that no one should ever know what happened and was surprised at this line of thought. She challenged the client: would you have told if you had been asked? The client acknowledged that no, she would not have told. However, this exploration revealed that being asked would have had some therapeutic benefit, even if it was met with denial. The acknowledgement from the doctor that such a thing was possible would have been helpful to the client. It may also be possible that the cumulative effect of being asked may help people tell eventually.

For parents or teachers, asking children if they have been abused may raise questions about putting ideas into the child's mind or even 'coaching' the child to believe that they have been abused that may have implications for any subsequent legal proceedings. Responses to direct questions misunderstood by a young child can lead to adults' interpretations that abuse has occurred when in fact it has not.

Being prepared to ask young people if they have been abused assumes a readiness and willingness to hear the answers and to respond in accordance with child protection guidelines, despite the young person's expressed wish for confidentiality. Support for professionals in this position is vital in the form of clarity of procedures and emotional support and reassurance. Fears that by insisting on parents being informed of these disclosures they could be doing further harm to young people are not unfounded:

C: That was the worst part

R: Mm

C: coz it just felt like I was being abused all over again (17 year old girl)

R: Regret I mean do you regret that you told?

M: Yeah

R: You do

M: yeah

R: If you had the time over

M: 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 splitted up the family

(Pause)

R: What do you think would have split up the family the fact that it happened or the fact that you told?

M: Well the fact that I told kindof split it up (15 year old girl)

Many of these young people experienced significant fallout in relationships following their disclosure but were able to reflect on this at the time of interview in a mature and balanced way and acknowledged that the benefits far outweighed the losses they experienced.

C: I felt when I was growing up when I hit my teenage years I thought I was alone in the world no one knew what I was about no one understands where I 'm coming from but as I opened up and I admitted it people basically knew people did know where I was coming from people did understand me (C08, 16 year old boy)

Conclusion

The data in relation to confiding in friends takes on even greater significance when we consider the research on peer relationships reviewed by Gary Ladd (2005) shows that peer relationships (combined in complex ways with many other personal and contextual factors) affect later adjustment. Positive peer relationships are associated with better mental health and educational achievement because they provide social support, opportunities for developing skills, protection from the occurrence and/or effects of negative peer relationships, and opportunities for developing a positive view of the self. According to Carr (2006) peer relationships may be either maintaining or protective factors for many common clinical problems. Perhaps this important resource for young people could be harnessed in the context of encouraging young people to disclose sexual abuse. Educating young people about how to respond if a friend disclosed sexual abuse could have far reaching consequences for children who have been sexually abused.

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