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The Telling of the Telling: Adolescent Girl's Process of Talking about Sexual Abuse

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Driving Question of the Research:

Why is it difficult to talk to young girls about their experiences of sexual abuse?



When asked, a group of 13-14 year old girls said:

**“We don’t want to talk to you about it.
You are an adult and it’s nasty!”**

We found that the girls were *consciously* choosing not to tell us about a topic they found *dirty* or *unsavory*.

Limitations of what we know about sexual abuse disclosure:

1. There is little information about the social or relational nature of the sexual abuse disclosure process.
2. There is little information gathered from children about their experiences of talking about the abuse



Child Maltreatment Literature:

- Sexual Abuse disclosure is difficult for children
- Disclosure is often delayed, altered or recounted
- Research is mostly focused on the intra-psychic process of disclosure

Self-Disclosure (S-D):

- S-D is a process that is both revealing and non-revealing
- S-D occurs between two or more people and it is mutually transformative
- S-D is integral to the developmental process
- Girls losing their “authentic” voice in adolescence



Research Design:

- Narrative
- Semi-structured interview process

Initial Question:

- First used: “Please tell me about the sexual abuse and how people found out about it?”
- Soon changed to: “What words do you use to describe what happened to you?” then... “Please tell me about the _____ and how people found out about it?”



Kimberly

The stories the girls told broke into
three distinct categories:

- The initial telling a person about the sexual abuse
- The process of disclosing
- Living with the telling



The Initial Telling:

- Most of the girls told their mother first
- In all of the stories, the girls revealed at least one act of betrayal that violated the girls confidence
- The girls were conscious of communicating cryptically about the abuse; telling and not-telling at the same time

Lisabeth



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The Process of Telling:

- Only one child deliberately told the next day after the abuse
- Girls revealed that they were worried both *of* and *for* the perpetrator
- Girls were extremely aware of the impact of the telling on their families

Quanta



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Living With the Telling:

- Most of the girls experience multiple losses as a result of the telling
- There is a conscious choosing who they will tell and not tell
- There was a relief in telling, despite all of the stressors

Natasha & Teresa



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Disclosure can be:

- a process
- contextual
- a negotiation
- dangerous
- private

More findings:

- Perception of sexual abuse events change as girls get older
- Societal norms are reflected in the conversation about the sexual abuse



Reflections:

- Language is a constraint
- Non-disclosure can be healthy and protective
- Social norms about sex are also constrictive

Clinical Recommendations:

- Watch proscribed reactions about the abuse
- Tolerate the child's confusion and ambivalence about telling
- Pay attention to the burdens the telling caused the child
- Remember that non-disclosure may be healthy



Telling of the Telling Groups

8 weeks, Youth, 10-16

- Criteria for membership
- Curriculum
- Importance of ritual
- Opening Ceremony
- The disclosure stories
- Psycho-education
- Graduation