



THE NATIONAL THINK TANK FOR CHILD PROTECTION

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DELAYED DISCLOSURE

A FACTSHEET
BASED ON
CUTTING-EDGE
RESEARCH ON
CHILD SEX ABUSE



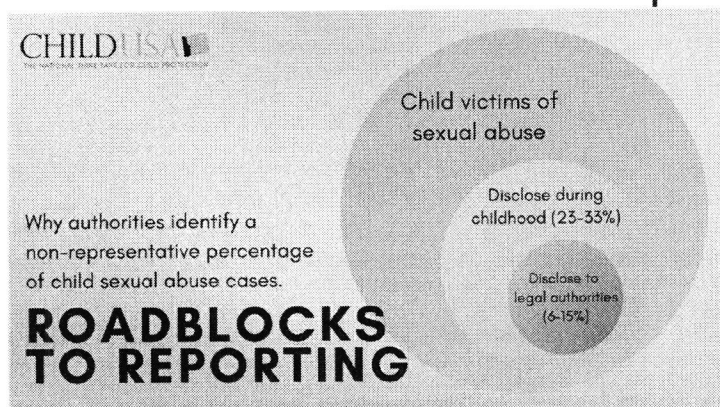
WHAT IS DELAYED DISCLOSURE?

The phenomenon common to survivors of child sex abuse where individuals wait for years, often decades, before disclosing to others that they have been victims of abuse.

For victims of child sex abuse, it is remarkable to disclose abuse at all, regardless of their age. Data from the Department of Justice suggests that 86% of child sexual abuse goes unreported altogether.[1] However, when victims of child sex abuse do report, a high percentage of them delay disclosure well into adulthood.[2]

The delay in disclosing child sex abuse happens for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons. Child victims face many barriers that prevent disclosure. Among other barriers, children often lack the knowledge needed to recognize sexual abuse, lack the ability to articulate that they've been abused, don't have an adult they can disclose their abuse to, don't have opportunities to disclose abuse, and aren't believed when they try to disclose. Trauma that results from the abuse, power differentials between the child victim and adult perpetrator, and institutional power dynamics all impact the delay.

Even in the rare instances when child victims do disclose abuse, disclosures are often ineffective. In other words, most disclosures fail to reach individuals who can report the situation and stop the predator from continued abuse. Research shows that, when child victims do disclose, a large percentage of the disclosures are to peers instead of parents or authority figures.[3] Very few disclosures, typically between only 6% and 15%, are made to legal authorities.[4] As a result, child sexual abuse is largely hidden from the adult society, especially from professionals in the legal system.[5]



These factors all impact what the disclosure of child sex abuse looks like. Some research depicts disclosure as a process that involves "telling through direct and indirect hints and signs, decisions to tell, re-decisions and delaying, or withholding until adulthood, and the dependency on trusted confidants who ask and listen for final disclosure to occur." [6] Rather than occurring in a single moment, the process of disclosure can take decades to come to fruition.

WHY DOES DELAYED DISCLOSURE MATTER?

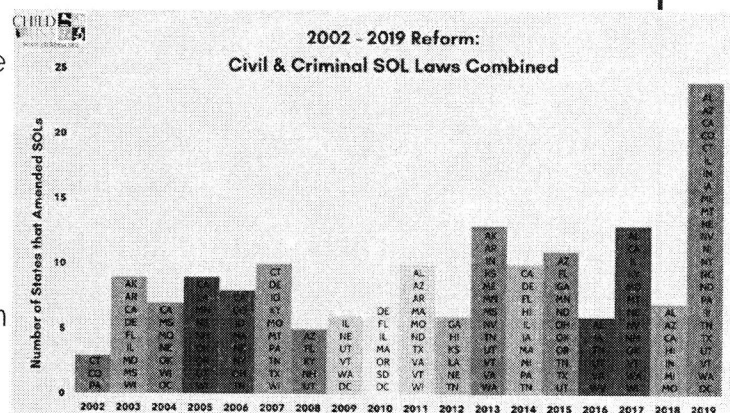
It is critical to understand the science behind delayed disclosure because it influences society's perception of child sex abuse survivors. After disclosing that they were abused, survivors often face an array of questions casting doubt on their allegation. Many of these questions hinge on the fact that the survivor did not disclose the abuse as a child. Without an understanding of the evidence-based pattern of delayed disclosure, it is difficult for individuals—whether they be loved ones, legal authorities, lawmakers etc.—to comprehend why victims would wait years before telling their story.

The average age at the time of reporting child sex abuse is about 52 years.

While it may seem intuitive that a survivor would disclose abuse when it happened, data reveals a different reality. In a study of over 1,000 survivors, the average age at the time of reporting child sex abuse was about 52 years.[7] This delay is particularly relevant in light of the fact that research indicates that history from the victim "remains the single most important diagnostic feature in coming to the conclusion that a child has been sexually abused." [8] Statistically, disclosures of abuse are more telling than even medical examinations of abused children.[8]

Credible accounts of child sexual abuse are constantly questioned because of a failure to understand that delayed disclosure is common for survivors

Additionally, delayed disclosure impacts the path to justice for victims. By the time most victims are able to come forward about their abuse, the arbitrary deadlines for filing legal claims—known as statutes of limitation ("SOLs")—have expired. Because many laws fail to account for the medical fact that child sex abuse victims delay disclosure, the courthouse doors are locked and most victims of child sexual abuse are denied their day in court. However, this is changing. In 2019, 23 states and Washington D.C. amended their SOLs to expand opportunities for victims to access justice.[9] Shining light on the evidence-based pattern of delayed disclosure is a crucial component in the fight for SOL reform nationwide.



WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

The majority of child sex abuse victims who disclose their abuse delay disclosure until adulthood

- **82.9% did not report any of the rapes they experienced during childhood.** (Hanson et al. 1999) [1]
- **60%-70% of adults do not recall ever disclosing their abuse as children.** (London et al. 2005) [1]
- **55-69% of adults indicated that they never told anyone about the sexual abuse during childhood.** (London et al. 2008) [1]
- **Disclosure rates are between 31% and 41% for disclosure during childhood and between 58 and 72% for lifetime disclosure** (Priebe and Svedin 2008) [4]

A large portion of abuse victims never disclose abuse at all

- **About 1 survivor out of 5 had never disclosed the abuse** (Hébert et al. 2009) [10]
- **28% stated that they had never told anyone about this sexual assault** (Smith et al. 2000) [3]
- **62% remained silent about their abused experience.** (Tang 2002) [3]
- **There is clear support for the proposition that a large proportion of abuse victims never disclose** (Lyon 2009) [11]

The nature of child sex abuse makes disclosure a complex, often life-long, process

- **Research indicates that lengthy delays in disclosure and even nondisclosure are common** (Paine and Hansen 2002) [11]
- **Disclosure is almost always an ongoing process** (Browne 1991) [12]

Research indicates that the following factors may impact the ability or willingness of victims to disclose abuse

- **Age** - Younger children are at a higher risk for longer delays and less disclosure overall [13]
- **Gender** - Males are more reluctant to disclose abuse and take longer to make full disclosures [14]
- **Intellectual Ability** - Children with intellectual/communication deficits face increased challenges [15]
- **Fear, Shame, Embarrassment** - Are inhibitors that often outweigh the desire to disclose abuse [16]
- **Cultural Norms and Race** - Membership in noticeable minority groups or collectivist cultures may increase disclosure delays [17]
- **Dysfunction in Family** - The presence of domestic violence, substance abuse, and a lack of familial support in the home all inhibit disclosure [18]
- **Relationship to Perpetrator** - One of the primary barriers related to a child's willingness to disclose [19]
- **Nature of Abuse** - More severe abuse [20], long durations of abuse [21], and higher numbers of perpetrators [22] are related to a lower willingness to disclose

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