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INTERVIEWING PRE-SCHOOL AGE VICTIMS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: INTERVIEWING METHODS AND DISCLOSURE OUTCOMES

by

SARAH E. DUNN

Under the Direction of Gregory Jurkovic

ABSTRACT

Disclosure rates among pre-school age victims of alleged sexual abuse were related to the type of investigative interview (forensic evaluation or forensic interview) that they received following a report of abuse. Variables expected to affect the likelihood of the child making a valid disclosure of sexual abuse including the relationship of the child to the offender and the severity of the abuse were also examined. The results indicated that children who underwent a structured, one-time 30 minute forensic interview were significantly less likely to make a valid disclosure of sexual abuse than children who underwent a semi-structured, therapeutic style evaluation over the course of several weeks. The current findings do not suggest that either offender relationship or severity of abuse significantly moderate the relationship between interview type and disclosure status. Limitations of the current study and future directions are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Sexual abuse, Interviewing methods, Forensic evaluation, Forensic interview, Pre-school age, Disclosure, Offender relationship, Child victim

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by

Sarah Dunn

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

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2005

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INTRODUCTION

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is, without a doubt, one of the most devastating and pervasive issues faced by society today and has many implications with regard to the future wellbeing of the victims and their families. Although child sexual abuse definitions vary from state to state, the federal definition of child sexual abuse is stated in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as:

> the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children (Reauthorized by Public Law, 2003).

In 1996, it was estimated that 39 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse existed in the United States, and this number did not include the thousands of incidents that have never even been disclosed (Faulkner, 1996). By their sixteenth birthday, approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will have been sexually abused (Hopper, 1998). However, it is suspected that these numbers may be a gross underestimation due to the under reporting of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse is not an experience limited to older children who are fully capable of remembering recounting their experiences. Alarmingly, one study found that

up to 42% of child sexual abuse victims treated in an emergency room setting were under the age of 7 (Cupoli & Sewell, 1988). It is estimated that of all child sexual abuse victims 10% are preschool aged children or younger (Finkelhor, 1993). Due to the young age of these victims, many professionals are concerned with how to evaluate this population in a developmentally sensitive manner, while maximizing the likelihood of obtaining a positive disclosure of abuse from the child.

A great deal of variation exists among professionals' opinions with regard to the developmental and cognitive abilities of young children, specifically their ability to provide a reliable account of their experiences of sexual abuse. The child's developmental level at the time that they are interviewed is of particular concern and poses a challenge to professionals who are faced with the task of evaluating the credibility of the child's statement. Specifically, studies have found that preschool aged children may lack the cognitive and verbal skills needed to provide a clear account of their abuse (Waterman & Lusk, 1986), and have less developed metacognitive and metamemorial (memory recall) capabilities (Walker & Warren, 1995). Furthermore, young children have been found to be less able to provide free recall of events (Saywitz & Snyder, 1992) and are more likely to make "source errors" or recount events that they have dreamed or thought about, but believe to have actually occurred (Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994; Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). Previous studies have also found young children to be significantly more vulnerable to suggestion than older children and adults (Ceci & Bruck, 1993).

In contrast to studies engendering doubt regarding the cognitive abilities of young children, other studies have found that the majority of children over the age of three can

reliably register, retrieve, and describe an abuse event and are not limited by expressive language (Steinhauer, 1983). Previous studies with preschool children have found their accounts of unpleasant experiences to be just as reliable as those of adults, they are capable of recalling accurate and forensically relevant information, albeit less descriptive in content (Fivush & Shukat, 1995; Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Jones & Krugman, 1986). In many instances, it appears that young children are capable of giving reliable information, but adults do not always know how to assist them in producing this information (Gabarino & Stott, 1989; Wakefield & Underwager, 1988, 1994). One study by Poole and Lamb (1998) found that younger children report far less information then adults when questioned using free-recall. Lamers-Winkelman & Buffing (1996) also suggest that, although capable, younger children may report fewer details because of their limited language abilities. Conversely, a study by Davies, Westcott and Horan (2000) found that when interviewing children about their experiences of sexual abuse, children ages 12 and older provided more detail and longer answers in response to open-ended questions. However, children between the ages of 4 and 11 years provided more detail and longer answers in response to closed and specific yet non-leading questions in order to obtain a positive disclosure. These findings suggest that different interviewing methods or techniques may need to be employed depending upon the age of the child.

Interviewing Methods

These conflicting findings have led to the development of diverse methods for evaluating younger child victims of sexual abuse. Two such methods include forensic interviews and forensic evaluations. Both of these methods are aimed at obtaining a valid,

truthful, and uncontaminated account of sexual abuse from a suspected child abuse victim in an objective and developmentally sensitive manner.

A forensic interview is a semi-structured, one time video-taped interview of the child by a trained professional, provided that there has been a disclosure of sexual abuse or there is reason or strong suspicion to believe the child has been sexually abused based upon behavioral observation or medical evidence. For the child, this process normally lasts between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview questions are fairly structured and closed-ended and tend to center on information gathered from a pre-interview with non-offending caregivers and/or multidisciplinary personnel. Previous research has identified a number of strengths of the forensic interview technique. For one, it minimizes both the number of interviews and interviewers, which is less traumatic for the child (Berlinger & Conte, 1993). In addition, on average, forensic interviews are conducted shortly after abuse is thought to have taken place, so the information regarding the event is more accessible to the child's memory (Flin, 1992). As a forensic interview is a one-time event, there are diminished opportunities for post-event contamination, that is, the opportunity for individuals directly involved with the child to influence his/her statements is significantly reduced (Davidson & Hoe, 1993). Finally, all forensic interviews are videotaped, and because of the controversy surrounding the accuracy and validity of accounts of sexual abuse by young children, a video-taped account of the disclosure provides an accurate visual documentation of the child's disclosure, and also increased the likelihood that interviewers will use proper techniques. (Raskin & Yuille, 1989; Underwager & Wakefield, 1990).

Although there are a number of strengths associated with forensic interviewing, research has also identified a number of weaknesses. Specifically, due to the traumatic nature of sexual abuse, some children are initially reluctant to talk about their experiences, and for many, sexual abuse disclosure is not an event but rather a process (DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Sorensen & Snow, 1991). This discomfort with disclosure may be magnified by the fact that the interview process is video recorded. A forensic interview also may not allow the child victim and the interviewer to build rapport and trust in the short time that they have together, which may inhibit the child's willingness to divulge sensitive information. Finally, a one-time interview assumes the point of view that a disclosure of sexual abuse is an event and not a process, and due to the young age of pre-school children, puts them at a major disadvantage as they often are not able to give a complete and detailed account of the event(s) during such a limited amount of time (Hewitt, 1999 p.191).

One less structured alternative method, forensic evaluation, consists of two to eight one-hour sessions with a specially trained professional, aimed specifically at building rapport with the child to make the child comfortable enough to disclose abuse if abuse has actually occurred. This model focuses not only on the clinical aspects involved with assessing the child, but also incorporates social, behavioral and developmental variables in an effort to determine how to best evaluate the child (Nelson-Gardell, Wilson & Cornelia, 2001). A young child is generally referred to a forensic evaluation if a child does not make a disclosure during the forensic interview, but there are continued strong suspicions of sexual abuse based upon sexualized behaviors or medical evidence. Research has identified a number of strengths with regard to forensic evaluations.

Specifically, questions are generally less structured and open-ended, and the phases of the interview are spread out over longer periods of time, which allows more opportunities for rapport building, and for a young child who may be frightened, to feel more comfortable disclosing incidents of sexual abuse. An extended interview technique may also allow professionals time to observe external factors (e.g., family pressures) that could influence the child's disclosure (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001). Finally, previous research has found that SES may be positively correlated with levels of receptive/expressive language skills (Raviv, Kessenich & Morrison, 2004), a multiple session interview format may provide low SES children with more time to fully express themselves.

Nonetheless, there are a number of drawbacks to conducting forensic evaluations. For example, cross-contamination of the child's statement is more likely to occur by individuals directly involved with the child (Vogeltanz & Drabman, 1995), and there is a greater possibility of the inclusion of fantasy in the child's disclosure due to the inclusion of play in forensic evaluations (Reed, 1996). When children, particularly young children, are repeatedly questioned about an event, they are more vulnerable to suggestive questioning, and their recollections can become very contaminated. (Wakefield & Underwagger 1988; White & Quinn, 1988). Also, due to the fact that forensic evaluations are not videotaped, there is no concrete documentation of the child's disclosure, which may decrease the validity of the child's account, a factor which is especially salient when dealing with the account of a young child.

A number of studies have examined specific variables related to forensic interviewing methods for children. One study by Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin (1998),

found that, in forensic contexts, three to five times more information was obtained using more unstructured free-recall prompts versus more focused prompts. A study examining aspects of forensic interviewing, including less structured repeated interviewing techniques, found that while repeated interviewing elicited more descriptive statements from the child, it also contained more suggestive questioning techniques on behalf of the interviewer (Santtila, Korkman, & Sandnabba, 2004). Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson & Orgassa (2001) examined the effectiveness of forensic interviewing in obtaining positive disclosures; results suggested that a large percentage of children require more that four evaluation sessions before they make a positive disclosure of abuse (or it is determined that no abuse occurred). No known studies have ever been undertaken comparing forensic interviews and forensic evaluations with regard to disclosure outcomes.

The Georgia Center for Children

The Georgia Center for Children (GCC) is composed of two child advocacy centers located in Fulton and Dekalb counties in Georgia that provide forensic psychological evaluations to child victims of sexual abuse. When it is suspected that a child has been a victim of sexual abuse, and corroborating evidence exists (medical findings, witness testimony, previous disclosure, etc.) s/he is brought to GCC Fulton or GCC Dekalb to investigate and attempt to validate whether or not sexual abuse has occurred. Before 2001, GCC's general procedure was to provide all children with a forensic interview. If the child did not disclose sexual abuse, but there was sufficient concern to warrant that sexual abuse had taken place, the child would also undergo a forensic evaluation. However, there are a number of issues associated with subjecting young victims to both methods of evaluation including increased risk of contamination of

the child's account of the abuse, deterioration of the child's memory over time for details surrounding the abuse, and increased risk of distress and re-traumatization to the child by being repeatedly asked to recall details surrounding their abuse. Due to both the high incidences of preschool children (aged 3, 4, & 5 years old) undergoing forensic interviews that resulted in a referral for forensic evaluation, a debate broke out between the two centers regarding which interviewing methods would be the most appropriate for this age group. Specifically, drawbacks associate with one-time interviews, and the positive aspects of forensic evaluations, GCC staff suggested bypassing the initial forensic interview and instead refer pre-school victims immediately for a forensic evaluation. Following this debate, for a short period of time in 2002 (approximately 6 months), all pre-school aged children who presented at GCC were automatically evaluated using the Forensic Evaluation (V. Boardman & D. Levy, 2003 – personal communication).

Using archival data housed at both GCCs in Fulton and Dekalb counties, the current study will examine which forensic assessment technique (forensic interview, forensic evaluation) has led to the greatest percentage of positive disclosures. Because previous research has found that pre-school aged children are significantly less likely to disclose incidents of sexual abuse in a formal setting (DiPietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Keary & Fitzpatrick 1994), and generally require more then one interview (Gries, Goh & Cavanaugh, 1996), and due to the numerous positive aspects of multiple-session interviews, it is hypothesized that forensic evaluations will yield the highest percentage of positive disclosures in three, four, and five year old, children.

Factors Affecting Disclosure

There are multiple factors that affect why, how, and when a child may disclose sexual abuse. However, of particular interest in the current study are the variables that are directly related to the abuse and the abuser, specifically, the type of the abuse and the nature of the relationship between the abuser and the victim. Both of these variables are expected to moderate the relationship between the interview type and whether or not the child disclosed sexual abuse.

Previous research has found a link between the relationship of the abuser to the victim and the level of trauma experienced by the child (Ketring & Feinauer, 1999). Specifically, child victims of sexual abuse are much more resistant to disclosing incidents of sexual abuse if the abuser is a family member rather then a non-family member (Sauzier, 1989) Abuse by a person closely related to the child, such as a father or uncle, involves the loss of trust (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Feinauer, 1989). If a child cannot trust those who are closest to them, why would they trust any other adult, especially those trying to elicit specific information about what occurred? With interfamilial sexual abuse (regardless of biological status), the child victim may be compelled to protect their abuser for a number of factors that would be less likely to apply to an abuser who is not a family member. These factors include fear of direct repercussions such as physical harm to themselves or a loved one, loss of financial support, or fear of abandonment, or indirect repercussions such as fear of negative reactions, being stigmatized, being blamed, or not believed/supported by family members (Diaz & Manigat, 1999; McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Sauzier, 1989) . As a result, it is hypothesized that children who were abused by a family member versus a non- family member are less likely to make a positive disclosure

of sexual abuse regardless of interview type. However, it is also hypothesized that the impact of this variable on disclosure status will be less for children who received a forensic evaluation than those who received a forensic interview.

Previous research has also found a link between the degree or severity of abuse suffered by the child and the level of post traumatic symptoms they experience. Specifically, the more severe the abuse, the more severe and prevalent the post-traumatic symptoms (Collings, 1995; Russell, 1986; Ketring, & Feinauer, 1999). The level of trauma or type of sexual abuse that the child experiences may, in turn, affect the willingness of the child to disclose acts of sexual abuse. As a result, it is hypothesized that the more invasive the abuse that the child has experienced, the less likely s/he is to disclose. It is also hypothesized that the type of sexual abuse will also moderate the relationship between interview type and disclosure outcome, such that the severity of the abuse will have less of an effect on disclosure for children who received a forensic evaluation than those who received a forensic interview.

The current body of literature indicates that minority victims of child sexual abuse are underrepresented in child maltreatment research. For example, Buhrmester and Prager (1995) examined 50 studies regarding disclosure of child sexual abuse. What they found was that with regard to culture and ethnicity, the vast majority of the studies were conducted with middle to upper-middle-class predominantly white samples, and only three studies looked specifically at African American or Hispanic populations. The participants in this study will be comprised primarily of African-American, low SES children.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were comprised of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic males and females (N=50) aged three, four, or five years old who were referred to the Georgia Center for Children (GCC) between 2000 and 2004 for a forensic interview (n=25) or during 2002 for a forensic evaluation (n=25) following alleged reports of being victims of sexual abuse. Approximately 50 percent of the participant data were collected from Fulton County GCC and the other 50 percent from the Dekalb County GCC. The site where each child was evaluated was determined by the county where their abuse took place (Dekalb or Fulton County). The majority of the participants at both centers were children of low socio-economic status (SES). Matched pairs were created from the pool of children aged three, four, or five years old seen between 2000 and 2004 (N = 347). Each child who received a forensic interview was matched based on age, sex and race with a child who received a forensic evaluation. To control for a possible confound, children who, relative to the general population, were classed as developmentally delayed (determined by the GCC interviewer at the time of the interview) were excluded from the study. In addition, to control for false accusations of sexual abuse and/or possible coaching, children who were involved in custody cases at the time they were interviewed were also excluded from the study.

Procedure

After a disclosure of sexual abuse had been made by the child to a non-offending caregiver, or sexual abuse had been suspected, the child was brought to GCC to undergo

forensic assessment. The child's residence or location of suspected abuse (i.e., Dekalb or Fulton County) determined at which center the assessment was conducted (GCC Dekalb or GCC Fulton). All forensic interviews were conducted in distraction free interview rooms, and the child was informed that the session would be video recorded. Of all forensic interviews 44% were conducted by three White females, 36% were conducted by one African American female, & 20% were conducted by one Hispanic female. All forensic evaluations were conducted in therapeutic child friendly rooms, and the sessions were not video recorded. Both forensic evaluators were white females. After the forensic assessments were complete, all demographic, descriptive, and qualitative data were stored in individual files and primary and statistical tracking information was entered into the networked GCC case tracking system.

Consent was obtained from the both the Executive and Clinical directors at GCC to access the above archival data at both GCC locations (Fulton County & Dekalb County). Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was also obtained prior to data collection. Data was collected by the primary investigator and an undergraduate student research assistant. Both the primary investigator and the research assistant underwent a thorough criminal background check and signed confidentiality agreements acknowledging their access to confidential information before being allowed access to the data. The assistant also underwent a brief training session to ensure thorough understanding of the procedures and goals with regard to data collection. Booster sessions regarding the collection of data were held every six weeks. Archival data was then collected from the files of eligible participants and recorded on a standard spreadsheet (see Appendix for participant data collection sheet). Due to the unambiguous

and non-subjective nature of the raw data, experimenter bias was eliminated. Each participant was assigned a case tracking number in order to ensure confidentiality.

The main variables of interest and their assigned dummy codes include the following: the interview type (forensic interview [0] or forensic evaluation [1]); type of disclosure (no [0] or yes [1]); relationship of the abuser to the child (non-familial [0] familial relationship [1] and non-biological relative [0], biological relative [1]) and severity of abuse (contact [0], penetration [1]). Consistent with previous studies (Ketring & Feinauer, 2000; Collings, 1995; Finmkelhor, 1979; Russell, 1986), the "contact" category consists of physical acts without penetrative intercourse including fondling, voyeurism, and simulated sex. The "penetration" category consists of acts involving full contact penetrative intercourse including oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse and digital/object penetration.

Data Analytic Plan

In terms of the primary analyses, binary logistic regression (LR) was used because the dependent variable, Disclosure Status, met the assumption of having two discrete levels (0 = no or inconclusive disclosure, and 1 = disclosure). A total of four LR analyses were run. The first analysis tested the association between the independent variable, namely Interview Type (forensic interview or forensic evaluation) and the dependent variable, namely Disclosure Status (yes or no). The subsequent three LR analyses tested potential moderators of this association, including Offender Familial Status (familial or non-familial relationship & biological and non-biological), and Abuse Severity (contact or penetration).

RESULTS

Descriptive Data

The demographic characteristics of the participants in each interview type group are provided in Table 1, and a summary of demographic characteristics of the offenders can be seen in Table 2.

Of the participants who received a forensic interview, the mean age was 45.68 months (SD = 7.73) with ages ranging between 36.00 and 68.00 months. With regard to offender familial status, 24% suffered abuse at the hands of a relative (16% biological relative), 56 % were abused by a known non-family member, and in 20% the cases the relationship of the offender to the child is unknown. With regard to severity of abuse, 48% suffered contact forms of abuse, and 48% suffered penetrative forms of abuse; in 4% of the cases, the abuse severity was unknown. Fifty-two percent of participants made a positive disclosure of sexual abuse.

Of the participants who received a forensic evaluation, the mean age was 44.96 months (SD = 8.39) with ages ranging between 37.00 and 68.00 months. With regard to offender familial status, 56% suffered abuse at the hands of a relative (44% biological relative), 36 % were abused by a known non-family member, and in 8% the cases the relationship of the offender to the child is unknown. With regard to severity of abuse, 44% suffered contact forms of abuse, and 56% suffered penetrative forms of abuse. Eighty-four percent of participants made a positive disclosure of sexual abuse.

Table 1

Categorical Demographics of Participants in Each Interview Type Group (N = 50).

	Forensic Interview	Forensic Evaluation
	n = 25 (50%)	n = 25 (50%)
Race		
Black	20 (80%)	18 (72%)
White	4 (16%)	5 (20%)
Hispanic	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Other	-	1 (4%)
Age		
3	18 (72%)	19 (76%)
4	5 (20%)	3 (12%)
5	2 (8%)	3 (12%)
Sex		
Male	4 (16%)	5 (20%)
Female	21 (84%)	19 (76%)

Table 2

Demographics of Offender in Each Interview Type Group (N = 50).

	Forensic Interview	Forensic Evaluation
	n = 25 (50%)	n = 25 (50%)
Race		
Black	21 (84%)	19 (76%)
White	2 (8%)	3 (12%)
Hispanic	1 (4%)	2 (8%)
Unknown	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Age	M = 25.72	M = 27.04
	SD = 15.80	SD = 13.05
Sex		
Male	24 (96%)	24 (96%)
Female	1 (4%)	1 (4%)

Preliminary Analyses

In order to confirm that the two interview type groups were comparable, four chi square tests and one ANOVA were run. The chi square analyses revealed that no differences existed between the two interview groups with regard to victim sex ($\chi^2(1) = 0.14$, $p = .71$), victim race ($\chi^2(3) = 1.22$, $p = .75$), offender race ($\chi^2(2) = 0.63$, $p = .73$), abuse type ($\chi^2(1) = 0.18$, $p = .78$), and offender relationship ($\chi^2(2) = 4.96$, $p = .08$). The ANOVA revealed that no differences existed between the two interview groups with regard to victim age ($f(1,48) = 0.10$, $p = .75$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted in order to confirm that the race of the forensic interviewer did not significantly impact disclosure status. The relationship between these two variable was not found to be significant, $f(2,23) = 1.33$, $p = .29$.

Primary Analyses

Interview Type and Disclosure Status

The primary LR, which tested if knowledge of the interview type received significantly increased the odds of making a disclosure of abuse, was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 6.09$, $p < .05$. Specifically, children who received a forensic evaluation were 38% more likely to make a positive disclosure of abuse than those children who received a forensic interview. The model predicted disclosure status with 68% accuracy. See Table 3 for a summary of relevant statistics and Figure 1 for a frequency histogram of this relationship.

Table 3

Summary of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Disclosure Status as Predicted by Interview Type.

Variable	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp B
Interview Type	1.58	0.68	5.44	1	4.85*

*p < .05. ** p < .01.

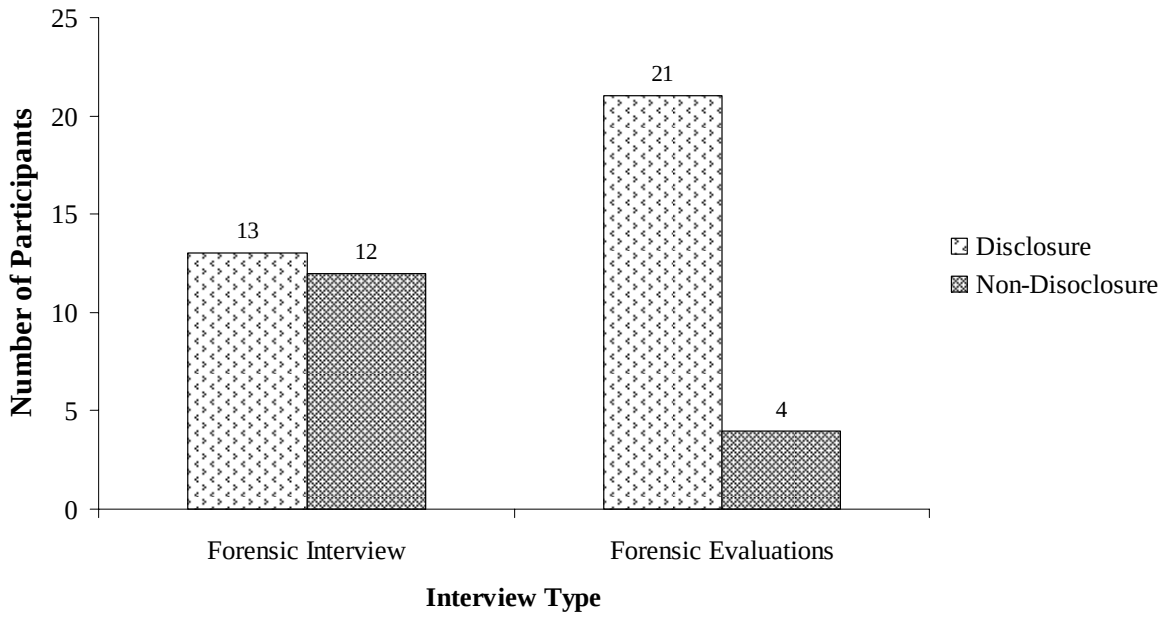

Figure 1

Disclosure Status as a Function of Interview Type

Moderating Role of Offender Familial Status

In considering the familial status of the offender as a moderator of the association between interview type and disclosure status, neither of the main effects (interview type: $b^e = 8.00$, $p = .08$; familial status: $b^e = 2.00$, $p = .50$) nor the interaction between them ($b^e = 0.23$, $p = .36$) was significant. Specifically, children who received the forensic evaluation were equally as likely to make a positive disclosure of abuse as those children who received a forensic interview, regardless of the offender's status as a family member. Please see Table 4 for a summary of relevant statistics, and Table 5 for percentage of victims who disclosed as a function of offender familial status by interview type.

Moderating Role of Biological Status

The next analysis revealed that the offender's status as a biological relative of the victim did not significantly moderate the relation between interview type and disclosure status ($b^e = 0.00$, $p = .78$). Furthermore, although the main effect for the offender's status as a biological relative of the victim was not significant ($b^e = 1.34$, $p = .78$), the main effect for interview type was statistically significant ($b^e = 6.29$, $p < .05$). This finding indicated that, holding all other variables in the model constant, children who received a forensic evaluation were 0.16 times more likely to make a positive disclosure of abuse than those children who received a forensic interview. Please see Table 6, for a summary of key statistics.

Moderating Role of Abuse Severity

For the final LR analysis, Severity of Abuse was tested as a moderator of the relationship between interview type and disclosure status. Unexpectedly, neither of the main effects (interview type: $b^e = 6.30$, $p = .06$; abuse type: $b^e = 1.96$, $p = .42$) nor the

Table 4

Summary of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Offender Familial Relationship (Family Member vs. Non-family Member) Moderating Disclosure Status as Predicted by Interview Type.

Variable	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp B
Interview Type	2.08	1.19	3.07	1	8.00
Offender Relationship	0.69	1.02	0.46	1	2.00
Interview Type X Offender Relationship	-1.47	1.61	0.84	1	0.23

*p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 5

Percentage of victims who disclosed as a function of offender familial status by interview type.

	FI	FE
Familial relationship	67%[1]	79%[2]
Non-familial relationship	50%[3]	89%[4]

[1]total n = 6
[2]total n = 14
[3]total n = 14
[4]total n = 9

Table 6

Summary of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Biological Relationship (Biological Relative vs. Non-biological Relative) Moderating Disclosure Status as Predicted by Interview Type.

Variable	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp B
Interview Type	1.84	0.93	3.94	1	6.29*
Biological Relationship	8.34	30.22	0.08	1	1.34
Interview Type X Biological Relationship	-8.54	30.24	0.08	1	0.00

*p < .05. ** p < .01.

interaction between them (b^e = 0.68, p = .78) was significant. These findings indicate that children who received the forensic evaluation were equally as likely to make a positive disclosure of abuse as those children who received a forensic interview, despite the nature of the abuse. See Table 7 for a summary of relevant statistics, and Table 8 for percentage of victims who disclosed as a function of abuse type by interview type.

Table 7

Summary of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis for Abuse Severity (Contact vs. Penetration) Moderating Disclosure Status as Predicted by Interview Type.

Variable	B	SE B	Wald	df	Exp B
Interview Type	1.84	0.98	3.55	1	6.30
Abuse Type	0.67	0.83	0.66	1	1.96
Interview Type X Abuse Type	-0.39	1.37	0.08	1	0.68

*p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 8

Percentage of victims who disclosed as a function of abuse severity by interview type.

	FI	FE
Contact	42%[1]	82%[2]
Penetration	58%[3]	86%[4]

[1]total n = 12
[2]total n = 11
[3]total n = 12
[4]total n = 14

DISCUSSION

This study examined two interviewing methods (forensic interviews and forensic evaluations) commonly used to evaluate child victims of sexual abuse with the goal of discerning whether or not sexual abuse occurred, and if it did, obtaining a positive disclosure from the child. Also examined were particular factors, specifically abuse severity and the relationship of the child to the offender, which may hamper a child's ability or willingness to make a positive disclosure of abuse.

As hypothesized, pre-school aged victims of sexual abuse were more likely to make a positive disclosure of abuse, if they underwent a forensic evaluation versus a forensic interview. That is, young children tended to disclose significantly more information needed to determine whether or not sexual abuse occurred if they were evaluated using a multi-session interview method rather than a one-time interview method. However, two factors related to sexual abuse that were expected to moderate the relationship between interview type and disclosure outcome (relationship of the child to the abuser, and severity of abuse) were not found to be significant. That is, regardless of interview type, victims who were abused by a family member or biological relative were just as likely to make a positive disclosure of sexual abuse as victims who were abused by non-family member. Children who suffered penetrative forms of abuse were also as likely to make a positive disclosure of sexual abuse as children who suffered non-penetrative forms of abuse.

Contrary to the belief that preschool-aged children may lack the cognitive and verbal skills needed to provide a clear account of their abuse, the finding that the

disclosure status of sexual abuse made by preschool aged children is dependent upon the context in which they are interviewed suggests that, given time, young children are able to provide all of the forensically relevant information needed by professionals to validate sexual abuse. However, the finding that pre-school children are more likely to make a positive disclosure of sexual abuse if they are interviewed using less structured versus more structured methods directly contradicts previous studies (e.g. Poole and Lamb, 1998; Davies, Westcott & Horan, 2000), which found that children provided more detailed and accurate information when questioned using more structured techniques and more direct, closed-ended questions, or directed recall prompts, than when using more unstructured techniques. However, it is important to remember that these studies were not comparing forensic interviewing methods and were conducted in contexts different to that of the previous study, and thus, such previous findings may not generalize to forensic situations.

The non-significant results regarding the effect that both offender relationship and abuse severity have on disclosure status contrasts with previous literature, which suggests that child victims of sexual abuse are more resistant to disclosing incidents of sexual abuse if the abuser is a relative (Sauzier, 1989), and are more likely to disclose when the abuse is classed as “less serious” (Farrell, 1998). With regard to severity of abuse that occurred, although the current study did take into account the level of physical invasiveness of the abuse, it neglected to consider other significant factors that would contribute to defining how severe the abuse was. Specifically, severity is a relative term, and in the case of child sexual abuse, a classification that cannot be assigned based only on the physical aspects associated with the abuse. Other less tangible variables, such as

the duration and pervasiveness of the abuse, and the mental/emotional factors (e.g. the presence of coercion, threatening the child regarding making a disclosure, etc.) surrounding the abuse were not be included in the formulation of severity. In order to clarify these particular findings more research needs to be conducted focusing on specific aspects of abuse that may contribute to the perceived severity of abuse.

There are several limitations associated with this study. Of primary concern is the issue of statistical power. Specifically, the limitations pertaining to the data collection resulted in a relatively small sample size, and had the sample size been larger, the resulting outcomes, particularly regarding the moderators, may have differed. Also of concern is the age range of the children studied. Specifically, while the current study classified the sample as "pre-school aged," the majority, (72%) of the participants was less than 48 months old, with only 28% of the participants between 49 and 62 months old, thus, the findings are not entirely generalizable to a pre-school age population. Another limitation that may serve as a possible confound is the fact that forensic interviews were videotaped whereas forensic evaluations were not. Because the child is made aware that s/he is being filmed, and are educated about the placement of the camera and microphone etc. s/he may become 'camera shy' or be less willing to disclose sensitive information.

Regarding the disclosure status, the current study did not account for individual differences with regard to interviewer style or technique. Thus, it is possible that this significant finding could be confounded by the personality/stylistic variables associated with the interviewer. In order to clarify this finding, more research is needed to examine

how individual interviewer variables may impact disclosure outcomes as a function of interviewing method.

One possible threat to internal validity is the impact that establishing a strong child-evaluator rapport may have on the child's willingness to disclose sexual abuse. Specifically, with regard to children who received a forensic evaluation, is possible that developing a close relationship with a trusting, caring adult may have caused the them to feel either a desire or pressure to please the evaluator by telling her what the child felt she may have wanted to hear. This may in turn have swayed the child's decision to disclose that sexual abuse had occurred regardless of whether or not this was the case.

With regard to the relationship of the abuser to the child, although the formulation of the initial hypothesis regarding the abuser-child relationship centered around the loss of trust and fear of stigmatization from those with whom the child should be able to depend on the most, the power differential that exists between a child and an adult was also included in this formulation. Specifically, almost one third of the perpetrators in the current study were minors under the age of 18, many of whom were also biologically related to their victims. As a result, while the abuser may have shared a familial tie with their victim, the power differential and associated mental factors (e.g., fear of loss of financial support, fear of physical harm, lack of authoritative status, or perceived future abandonment) that normally exists between a child and adult relative were absent, and thus, may have influenced the disclosure status of the child. More research on the abuser-child relationship, specifically with regard to sexual abuse, is needed in order to clarify these findings.

The current study suggests the need to reexamine the area of interviewing young child victims of sexual abuse. Specifically, while one significant strength of the current study is that the sample studied was taken from a population known to have a “double-disadvantage”, that is they are both a racial minority and low SES, this strength also poses a threat to external validity in that the generalizability of the findings are limited to low SES, African American children. As a result, the current study should be replicated using a larger sample size consisting of a racially representative range of pre-school aged children. It may also be important to compare findings regarding disclosure outcomes for younger child victims of sexual abuse to the disclosure outcomes of older victims of child sexual abuse, specifically as a function of interview type.

Overall, the current study makes an important contribution to the child sexual abuse literature. Not only is the current study first generation research in the area of interviewing child victims of sexual abuse, but the findings also have implications for the future regarding appropriate forensic interviewing techniques with young children, and highlight potential areas in need of further research, specifically with regard to variables that may hamper a child’s ability to make a positive disclosure. The evidence obtained here, as well as in previous studies, suggests that when interviewing pre-school aged victims of sexual abuse, in order to increase the likelihood of obtaining a positive disclosure, interviewers should spend more time building rapport with the child and use more unstructured, informal interviewing methods.

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APPENDIX

Data Entered	Date: Initials:	Data Checked	Date: Initials:

Participant Demographics		
Tracking#:	Race:	Dev. Appropriate: **Y** **N**
Gender**:** **M** **F**	Age: **3** **4** **5** Months:	Case: **Open** **Closed**

Interview Variables		
Int. Type: **FE** **FI**	County: **Fulton** **Dekalb**	# FE sessions:
TSA**:** **< 7days** **< 1 month** **< 3 months** **< 6months** **6mo – 1 year** **>1yr**		
LFI: **hours** **mins**	Custody Case: **Y** **N**	
Interviewer:	Int. Sex: **M** **F**	Int. Race:

Abuse Variables		
Offender Rel: Family Non-family Biological	Offender Sex: **M** **F**	
Offender Age:	Offender Race:	
Abuse Type: **Contact** **Penetration**	Abuse length:	
Abuse detail:		
Current Living Situation**:**	Med Eval: **Y** **N**	
Med Where:	Med Find**:** **Y** **N** Detail:	
Other Information:		