

Child Sexual Abuse: The Emerging Crime at our Doorsteps and the Role of Disclosure in Prevention

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Abstract

To report or not to report child sexual abuse remains a dilemma to many survivors with many opting to keep quiet about it. Self disclosure of sexual abuse is a critical component in initiating intervention to halt the abuse, address its immediate effects and decrease the likelihood of negative long term effects. Paine and Hansen (2002). Many incidences of child sexual abuse go unreported while the few that are reported never reach prosecution stage. Though Sexual abuse affects both children and adults, one would be tempted to think that adults are more likely to disclose sexual abuse compared to children. This however is not the case. Literature shows the rate of disclosure is equally low in both children and adult. This paper is based on documented studies on child sexual abuse and examines how disclosure can be utilized as a tool in prevention of child sexual abuse laying emphasis on the process of disclosure and the role of the various parties such as parents and professionals working with the survivors of abuse. The paper also highlights some of the reasons why survivors of child sexual abuse fail to disclose and factors that can be considered in enhancing disclosure. Findings from reviewed literature indicates that the highest number of child sexual offences is committed by people close to the survivor such as parents, siblings, uncles, other close relatives, neighbors and domestic workers. Disclosing offences inflicted by people so close yet so distance in as far as respect for relationship and or responsibility towards the minors still remains a challenge, a challenge as big as disclosing the sexual abuse itself.

Key Words: Sexual Abuse, Disclosure, Prevention

INTRODUCTION

Self disclosure is the intentional sharing of personal information about oneself which may include sharing both high-risk and low-risk information, personal experiences, ideas and attitudes, feelings and values, past facts and life stories, future hopes, dreams, ambitions, and goals. According to a Child Assessment Centre report (2001) the real prevalence of child sexual abuse is not known because so many victims do not disclose or report their abuse. The report indicates that 73% of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year, while 45% do not disclose to anyone for at least 5years. Such high rate of non-disclosure would suggest that the survivors continue to silently suffer psychological trauma with high chances of being re- abused again and again not only by the same perpetrators but also others. The perpetrators on the other hand continue to enjoy freedom to continue with this criminal act.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE INCIDENCES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Real statistics of sexual abuse are not known because most of the cases are never reported. Ruto (2009) in a research on Sexual Abuse of School aged Children found that 50% of school going children in Nairobi had been sexually harassed while 10% had been forced into sex. This was in agreement to similar findings by Ogweno (2005) where 20% of the girls studied had been sexually abused (Ruto,2009). Besides the increase in reported cases of sexual abuse, the crime not only affects children but also infants. In Radio Netherlands Worldwide (2012), a perpetrator was quoted to have acknowledged having molested children as young as 19 days old. Some of the reasons associated with this questionable behavior is traditional beliefs in some cultures. For instance, South Africa which has a high incidence of HIV infection, virgin cleansing myth which holds that sexual intercourse with a virgin will cure a man of HIV or AIDS is a common cause of child sexual abuse (Wikipedia).

According to Ruto, (2009), statistics of rape and defilement of children in Kenya range from 10% to 27%. This is quite a significant figure that is further supported by Child Helpline International report (2011) which indicates that more than one third (35%) of callers report having experienced at least one incident of sexual abuse before they turned 18 years. The report further states that 34 % of the said callers were men who reported having been sexually abused at some stages in childhood suggesting that both boys and girls are likely to suffer sexual abuse.

PROCESS OF DISCLOSURE

Disclosure is not a onetime incident but a process that not only requires time and patience but also confidence and trust on the part of the person whom the survivor chooses to disclose to. The sex abuse victim needs to feel safe that the information they are about to disclose will be held in confidence. Negative consequences of disclosure such as fear of being blamed, fear of punishment and at worst fear that the perpetrators may make good their threats of the dire consequences that would follow any act of disclosure are some of the key issues that complicate the process of disclosure.

Altman and Taylor (1987) in their Social Penetration Theory describe Self-disclosure process as the gradual sharing of information about oneself. Disclosure acts to reduce stress, anxiety and uncertainty that an individual experiences after experiencing a traumatic situation.

This theory proposes several factors that determine self-disclosure, key of which are; Rewards and Cost of Self- Disclosure, where self- disclosure is determined by the motivation behind the disclosure. Motivation determines whether the level of disclosure will be low or high, superficial or deep. Apart from motivation self- disclosure should be reciprocal. The survivor expects unconditional positive regard from whomever he or she chooses to disclose to.

The second factor is Disclosure of Breadth and Depth which basically depends on the kind of relationship that exists between the sexual abuse survivor and his or her parents,

guardians, teachers or even caregivers whom the individual is expected to disclose to. As relationship deepens, it paves way to intimate disclosure which helps the person disclosing gain support and catharsis that comes from release from burdens carried from difficult and painful emotional experiences. Information shared at this level includes very strong feelings, beliefs and concerns. Secrets, regrets or hurtful experiences may also be shared at this level. Altman and Taylor (1987) describe this stage using the metaphor of an onion which comprises different layers from superficial to the innermost. They related this layers to the various stages that an individual goes through during self- disclosure.

FACTORS THAT HINDER DISCLOSURE

Child sexual abuse is largely a silent and witness-free crime, often leaving no physical signs and evidence actively hidden by perpetrators (Allnock, 2010). The features of sexual abuse makes its detection very difficult, with increasing importance placed on the victims' disclosure of abuse for investigative and treatment purposes. It is recognized however, that children and young people may not readily and freely share their experiences of sexual abuse, they therefore should be encouraged and provided with an atmosphere where they can safely tell someone about the abuse in order to make it stop, and for them to receive help and support.

A study on children and young people disclosing on sexual abuse by Allnock (2010) revealed that:

- a) Many incidents of child sexual abuse go unreported, and delayed disclosure is common.
- b) Children may disclose sexual abuse by directly telling someone about it. They may also disclose less directly, sometimes unintentionally, over a period of time, through a variety of behaviours and actions, including discussions and indirect non-verbal cues. In this respect, disclosure should be seen as a process that occurs over time.
- c) Not enough is known about factors that influence disclosure or non-disclosure, although we know that both individual and contextual factors are important.
- d) When children do disclose, it is frequently to a friend or a sibling. Of all other family members, mothers are most likely to be told. Whether or not a mother might be told will depend on the child's expected response from the mother. Few disclosures made in childhood are to authorities or professionals. Of all professionals, teachers are the most likely recipient of a disclosure.

Professionals working with survivors, perpetrators and their families identify fear of reporting especially where the perpetrator is a parent or close relative as a key hindrance to self-disclosure. Children on the other hand fear being blamed or even punished for yielding to the abuse. Other factors such as dysfunctional families, ignorance of reporting procedures and parents fearing long court process are also attributed to non disclosure. All this is done at the expense of the abused victims.

Results from Allnock (2010) study revealed factors such as the relationship to the perpetrator; age at first incident of abuse; use of physical force; severity of abuse and demographic variables such as gender and ethnicity impact on a child's willingness to

disclose abuse. The study identified long-term abuse by a parent or other relative that starts at a very young age as the most harmful and a type that is the least likely to be disclosed.

Stigma associated with sexual abuse too contributes to non disclosure. An example is where a close family member is the perpetrator, the other family members opt to settle the matter on their own to –protect the image of the family|| yet this act exposes the survivor to further abuse and increases their vulnerability to long term physical emotional and psychological trauma.

Fear of negative consequences make children often fail to disclose abuse and or even deny that abuse ever occurred, thus prolonging their suffering. Kinuthia (2013) reported on a sexual abuse survivor who was raped at the age of 12 years by a man he alleged to have had confidence and trust in. Narrating his experience, the survivor reported that it took him 12 years to gather courage to disclose the abuse and this did not happen until he had indulged in drug abuse and crime. The survivor was lucky to have survived this ordeal while there are many more that could be languishing in jail due to criminal acts not of their own making.

In a separate incidence, Daily Nation (2013) a father was said to have defiled his 7 year old daughter and seven days later upon the survivor disclosing to her mother, the perpetrator was found guilty by a court of law sitting in Nakuru and sentenced for life. This fast legal response could be attributed to the child's prompt disclosure.

This disclosure not only led to fast tracked prosecution but also halted any further abuse to the survivor and many other vulnerable persons. Paine and Hansen (2002) postulates that a child's self-disclosure of abuse may lead to identification of an offender who poses a threat to other children, resulting in therapeutic and legal interventions to prevent and/or halt the sexual victimization of others.

Bruck *et.al* (2005) revealed that children who have experienced abuse respond with self-blame, self-doubt, fear of the perpetrators and the possible consequences of disclosure. He further postulates that children who are abused by close relatives make every effort to accept the abuse and keep it secret and if ever such children undertake to disclose they tend to do it in bits as they gain more confidence to do so.

Cultural believes about sex may hinder disclosure of sexual abuse. In some cultures discussions about sex is regarded a taboo hence sex is never discussed openly. Cultural differences between the survivors and the professionals can also contribute to non-disclosure. A study carried out by Gilligan and Shamin (2005) on cultural barriers to disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst Britain's Asian communities found that inability of professionals of British origin to respond with cultural competence to the Asian community lead to decreased access to relevant health services which include sex abuse related issues.

Lack of information on reporting mechanism by most parents, children and caregivers hinder them from seeking help from formal agencies, professional bodies or legal entities. Majority of parents on the other hand do not believe in the existence of legal

reprieve for survivors while survivors fear losing control over the information they share which further inhibit disclosure (Allnock, 2010).

FACTORS THAT CAN ENHANCE DISCLOSURE

Disclosure is difficult for children for a variety of reasons. In an interview with professionals working with sexual abuse survivors, most frequently given reasons for non disclosure apart from fear of being blamed, not being believed and fear of punishment was harsh and/or absent parents or guardians (Allnock, 2010). He further found that some children do not report because they feel they will not be believed or be taken seriously. For this reason it is fundamental that adults, whether family members, friends or professionals, actively listen and respond sensitively to survivors. This would create a safe space for children to talk as it is crucial in breaking down barriers to disclosure.

Equipping caregivers, professionals and parents with necessary information about treatment and legal processes can enhance confidence and at least instill some assurance on existence of necessary assistance required.

Counseling services, medical treatment, social support and any other services that is deemed necessary should be well-publicized in strategic forums in order to increase awareness. This includes places like schools, places of worship and youth clubs. Taking advantage of the increasing use of technology, internet websites such as social networking sites should be used as part of any awareness-raising strategy (Allnock, 2010).

Assuring the child of confidentiality can further enhance confidence to self-disclosure. This gives the individual an assurance that their information will be safe and it also helps create trust.

Conkin (2012) provides further guidelines that can enhance children's self disclosure. He postulated that training children, parents and care providers including teachers would go a long way in prevention. In this study Conkin (2012) recommended the following:

- a) Family cohesion is especially important for helping youth affected by child sexual abuse to cope with their experiences and reclaim control over their social and sexual lives. Prevention programs that include family members of at-risk youth are likely to have a greater impact in reducing risk factors for sexual abuse.
- b) Training parents to refute common myths around "stranger danger" can help to increase their awareness of far more common (and preventable) child sexual abuse risk factors in the household.
- c) Training parents to teach proper names for genitals and other reproductive organs to their youngest children can help to increase youths' empowerment to resist child sexual abuse or disclose it to trusted adults. It can also reduce shame, stigma, and self-blame for youth who have experienced sexual abuse.
- d) Educating parents in tandem with their children can increase family communication about child sexual abuse and strengthen communication between groups of parents in a community and that a program for parents and

their pre-school children increased family and community awareness of sexual abuse and the likelihood of discussions within and between families regarding detection and prevention.

- e) Parents, once trained to understand child sexual abuse, can also help to educator 'bystanders' — that is, other family members and close acquaintances whose raised awareness can lead to risk reduction and early intervention in cases of suspected sexual abuse.
- f) Training of medical providers, school staff, clergy, child protection caseworkers, forensic interviewers, and law enforcement officials can increase the willingness of youth to disclose child sexual abuse as well as the willingness of adults to report suspected sexual abuse.

These amongst other factors if considered would increase a child's likelihood to report incidences of abuse while at the same time increasing the chances of prevention.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Research findings on child sexual abuse indicate that many incidents go unreported, and delayed disclosure is common. Key factors attributed to non disclosure include relationship to the perpetrator; age at first incident of abuse; use of physical force; severity of abuse and demographic variables such as gender and ethnicity (Allnock, 2010).

Non disclosure predisposes survivors to untold suffering as they wade through life in fear combined with the psychological trauma associated with the abuse. Studies show that child sexual abuse has been attributed to broken families, poverty and overcrowding. (AMPCAN, 2012) Based on this, building strong family ties and improving their economic and leaving standards can be a key primary factor in protecting children from abuse and it can also play a role in enhancing disclosure. However these alone may not bring about the expected impact. As a crime, child sexual abuse should be fought by all regardless of one's social, cultural, spiritual and economic affiliation.

Apart from primary preventive measures such as educating children on how to identify likely perpetrators, teaching them on parts of their bodies that they should not allow to be touched by strangers, the biggest challenge in preventing the abuse still remains in assisting children to disclose. As a secondary preventive measure, disclosure of sexual abuse including attempted abuse plays a major role in stopping further abuse. When a child is taught to disclose he or she gains courage to say no when faced by a perpetrator again. Disclosure not only protects the victim from being abused by the same perpetrator but by others also.

Teaching parents, teachers, caregivers and professional dealing with issues of children the principles and processes of disclosure ensure safety of information shared during disclosure. These will protect the individual from further trauma and enhance their confidence to disclose any future abuse regardless of the perpetrator.

The legal system on the other hand should endeavor to ensure justice for the survivors by ensuring that prosecutions are done effectively avoiding prolonged court cases that deny justice to the survivors.

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BIO-DATA

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