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## Expected Consequences of Disclosure Revealed in Investigative Interviews with Suspected Victims of Child Sexual Abuse

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The current study explored the expected consequences of disclosure discussed by 204 5- to 13-year-old suspected victims of child sexual abuse during the course of investigative interviews conducted using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. Expected consequences were mentioned in nearly half of all interviews, with older children and those alleging multiple incidents more likely to do so. Most consequences were mentioned spontaneously by children and most consequences were expected to befall the children themselves. The most common consequences were *physical harm* and *feeling negative emotions* for the child and *jail/legal* consequences for the suspect. Expecting consequences for the child or another family member were associated with delaying disclosure, but expecting consequences for the suspect was not related to delay. Results provide insight into developmental and socio-motivational influences on children's disclosure of negative events and are of considerable practical interest to legal and clinical professionals who must interview, treat, and evaluate children alleging sexual abuse.

Children's disclosure of adult wrongdoing, especially child maltreatment, is the focus of considerable debate and controversy, especially because children often delay disclosure for years (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007). Although the last few decades have witnessed extensive research on

children's memory and eyewitness capabilities (see Bruck, Ceci, & Principe, 2006 for a review), there has been less research on children's willingness to report events and on the socio-motivational impediments to disclosure, including children's expectations regarding the possible consequences of disclosure. These expected consequences were the focus of the present research.

In general, human behavior is influenced by the consequences individuals expect following their behavior (Bandura, 1986). Individuals are less likely to behave in certain ways when negative consequences are expected. As discussed in the following, expectations of negative consequences (e.g., legal involvement, physical harm) may be affected by developmental and socio-contextual factors and may, in turn, affect children's disclosures of child sexual abuse (CSA). In fact, adult victims of child abuse often say, in retrospect, that

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they decided whether and when to report being abused depending on how they expected disclosure to affect themselves and others close to them (e.g., Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Fleming, 1997). Little is known about these expectations, however. The goals of the present study were to (1) describe the types of consequences children mentioned during the forensic interviews in which they disclosed abuse, (2) identify the correlates of various expected consequences, and (3) investigate their implications.

Nondisclosure, delayed disclosure, and inconsistent reporting by child victims can prevent appropriate intervention, especially because the typical absence of corroborative evidence makes children's statements critically important (Bruck et al., 2006; Gray, 1993; Myers, 1992). Identifying barriers to timely disclosure may thus help fact-finders and front-line professionals better understand children's reporting patterns as well as their needs for intervention. Further insight may also enrich existing theories concerned with the disclosure and psychological impacts of CSA (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; Summit, 1983).

In recent reviews, London et al. (2005, 2008) concluded that a majority of children delay disclosure of CSA, often until adulthood, with some never disclosing. Even in laboratory analogue studies, children as young as three years of age keep transgressions secret whether or not they are explicitly asked to do so (e.g., Bottoms, Goodman, Schwartz-Kenney, & Thomas, 2002; Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008; Pipe & Wilson, 1994; Talwar & Lee, 2008). According to Summit (1983), children remain silent about sexual abuse because they anticipate negative consequences, such as punishment, blame, and lack of support or protection from caregivers but evidence consistent with this model is still lacking (Kovera & Borgida, 1997; London et al., 2005, 2008). Although focused on the recantation of allegations, Malloy et al. (2007) found that both children's ages and the identities of the alleged assailants were correlated with the tendency to maintain allegations, rather than recant them, and these factors are likely to affect initial disclosure as well. Consistent with this, Goodman-Brown et al.'s (2003) model indicates that older children and those alleging intra-familial abuse are more likely to fear negative consequences and thus delay disclosure.

Others' reactions to CSA disclosure vary dramatically (see A. N. Elliott & Carnes, 2001, for review) and have critical implications not only for children's reporting patterns (D. M. Elliott & Briere, 1994; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Malloy et al., 2007) but also for case prosecution (Cross, DeVos, & Whitcomb, 1994), children's placement post-disclosure (Leifer,

Shapiro, & Kassem, 1993), and children's adjustment (e.g., Everson, Hunter, Runyan, & Edelsohn, 1989; Goodman et al., 1992; Tremblay, Hébert, & Piché, 1999). However, it remains unclear what kinds of reactions children expect and whether these expectations are related to certain child or abuse characteristics, although retrospective studies of adults, vignette studies, and file reviews indicate that children's expectations indeed affect disclosure.

When asked why they failed to disclose or delayed disclosure, many adult victims of sexual abuse retrospectively report that they feared retaliation by perpetrators, being blamed for the abuse, and/or other negative reactions (e.g., punishment) from disclosure recipients or other adults (e.g., Anderson et al., 1993; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Conte & Berliner, 1988; Herman & Hirschman, 1981; Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant, & Loughlin, 1999; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). However, such studies may not accurately elucidate either the kinds of reactions that children expect or their decision to disclose, not least because adult reports are subject to memory biases (Levine, 1997), perhaps leading them to reinterpret their non-disclosures as conscious reactions to feared consequences.

Similar reasons for delayed disclosure have been found in field studies of child victims who ultimately disclosed abuse, however. For example, children who mentioned fear or shame of their parents' reactions were more likely to delay disclosure of abuse by non-family members (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found that older children, girls, and children alleging intra-familial abuse feared more negative consequences than other children and that fears of negative consequences for others (but not for themselves or the suspects) were associated with delayed disclosure. The fact that the children's perceptions and fears were recorded in legal records and caregiver reports means that the data were not compromised by retrospective biases, but, unfortunately, the researchers were rarely able to talk to the children themselves. Others' reports may not provide clear insight into the children's own perceptions, and caregivers' reports may be affected by their own feelings (e.g., about the suspect). In the current study, we focused on children's own accounts of their expectations.

Other researchers have explored children's expectations by presenting children with hypothetical vignettes. For example, Malloy (2008) asked maltreated and non-maltreated children what a disclosure recipient "would do next" after the fictional child told about an adult's wrongdoing. The older children were especially likely to report that the recipient would involve formal authorities; other children reported that the disclosure recipient would tell someone else (besides an authority

figure), react negatively (e.g., with punishment, negative emotion), or have a discussion with the child or perpetrator. Wagland and Bussey (2005) found that children deemed a fictional child less likely to disclose when punishment was expected for disclosing an adult friend's wrongdoing than when no punishment was expected. Although such studies reveal much about children's expectations, it is important to investigate children's expectations in actual CSA cases directly, as in the present study, in which we focused on age and suspect identity, two factors highlighted in previous research.

Although some victims may expect negative consequences because they have been told to keep CSA a secret or even threatened not to tell (Benedek & Schetky, 1986; Pipe & Goodman, 1991; Sauzier, 1989), other children, especially older ones, may be aware of the potential consequences of disclosing adult wrongdoing without such threats or instructions. For example, older children are more likely than younger children to understand that their statements can affect others' beliefs (Bottoms et al., 2002; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002). They are also more likely to recognize socio-motivational reasons for concealment such as loyalty to friends or family (Bottoms et al., 2002; Leibig & Green, 1991; Rotenberg, 1991) and to have the cognitive capacity to conceal (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007). Not surprisingly, therefore, Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found that older victims involved in criminal CSA cases expected more negative consequences than younger children did. Similarly, 6- to 9-year-olds were more likely than 4- to 5-year-olds to expect formal intervention upon disclosing an adult's wrongdoing when questioned about hypothetical vignettes (Malloy, 2008). Older children are more likely than younger children to conceal wrongdoing when a perpetrator discourages disclosure (Bottoms et al., 2002; Ceci & Leichtman, 1992; Pipe & Goodman, 1991), and inducements to secrecy (e.g., bribes, threats) appear to be more effective with older children than younger children (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2002; Bussey & Grimbeek, 2000), perhaps because older children are more capable of considering these consequences.

Children's relationships with perpetrators and other caregivers (who may themselves have close relationships with perpetrators) may foster feelings of loyalty and dependence which lead children to delay disclosure of wrongdoing because they wish to protect known and trusted adults from expected consequences. Thus, alleged victims of CSA expect negative consequences (e.g., family disruption, negative emotions, punishment) when they have close relationships with the suspects (Farrell, 1988; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Mian, Wehrspann, Klajner-Diamond, Lebaron, &

Winder, 1986; Sauzier, 1989) and they are both less willing to disclose CSA promptly and more likely to recant allegations in such circumstances (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2007). Similar results are obtained in laboratory studies exploring children's disclosures of laboratory transgressions (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2002; Tye, Amato, Honts, Devitt, & Peters, 1999) and their evaluation of disclosure in hypothetical vignettes (Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, in press; Malloy, 2008). Because many CSA victims are abused by trusted adults (e.g., Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Hershkowitz, 2009), it is important to explore more fully how children's expectations are affected by perpetrator identity.

Factors other than age and suspect identity may also affect abused children's expectations of the consequences of disclosure. For example, girls are more likely than boys (Finkelhor, 1984), and younger children are more likely than older children (Mian et al., 1986), to be abused by family members. Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found that girls feared negative consequences to others more than boys. Some studies have also found that boys are more likely than girls to disclose reluctantly (e.g., Devoe & Faller, 1999; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Sas & Cunningham, 1995) but such sex differences are not evident in other studies (e.g., Dipietro, Runyan, & Fredrickson, 1997; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Sauzier, 1989). In addition, there is some evidence that more severe and more frequent abuse is associated with delayed disclosure (see London et al., 2005; cf. Sauzier, 1989 for frequency), perhaps because delay affords additional opportunities for further abuse.

The present study was designed to explore the expected consequences of disclosure discussed by 5- to 13-year-old suspected victims of child sexual abuse during the course of investigative interviews conducted using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol. The goals were to (1) describe the expectations they revealed, (2) identify the predictors of different expected consequences, and (3) investigate their implications. Guided by prior research, we expected that older children and children alleging abuse by parent figures would be more likely to mention expected consequences, that children who expected negative consequences would be more likely to delay disclosure, and that older children and those who alleged abuse by parent figures would be more likely to delay disclosure.

## METHOD

### Data

The study involved transcripts of the first recorded forensic interviews of 101 alleged victims in a midsized

city in the Western United States and 103 alleged victims in north central Britain who were interviewed between 1997 and 2001. The 50 boys and 154 girls, ranging from 5- to 13-years of age ( $M$  age years = 8.66,  $SD$  = 2.42) were interviewed by one of 15 police officers who had been trained to use the NICHD Protocol. In 44.6% ( $n$  = 91) of the cases, children alleged a single incident of sexual abuse, whereas 113 (55.4%) children alleged multiple incidents. The largest group of suspects (42%,  $n$  = 85) were *familiar* to the child (e.g., teachers, neighbors, family friends), followed by *immediate family* members (i.e., those living in the home and/or involved in the child's care, 36%,  $n$  = 73), *other relatives* (20%,  $n$  = 41), and *strangers* (2.5%,  $n$  = 5). Most suspects were adults (59%,  $n$  = 121). There were 81 suspects below the age of 18 (39.4%) and two suspects of unknown age (1%).

The most common type of alleged abuse involved *touch under* the clothes (48%,  $n$  = 98), followed by *penetration* (31%,  $n$  = 63), *touch over* the clothes (17%,  $n$  = 35), and *exposure* ( $n$  = 4%, 8). These abuse types were ranked according to severity, with exposure being the least severe, followed by touch over, touch under, and penetration (most severe).

Delay to disclosure was quantified as the amount of time between the first alleged instance of abuse and the first time an adult found out about the abuse (either through the child's own disclosure or because another child victim or witness brought the abuse to light). Delay to disclosure was coded as either immediate (within one month; 20%) or longer (up to several years; 57%). In some cases (23%), delay was unknown/unclear.

### Procedure

Suspected victims were interviewed using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, which covers all phases of the investigative interview (e.g., rapport building, narrative practice, substantive phase, disclosure phase, closure) and was designed to translate professional recommendations into operational guidelines and guide interviewers to use prompts and techniques that maximize the amount of information elicited from free-recall memory (e.g., open-ended invitations to talk such as "tell me what happened"). The Protocol's effectiveness in improving the quality of interviewer questions and testimony from children has been demonstrated in numerous field and laboratory studies (Cyr & Lamb, 2008; Lamb et al., 2009; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 2001; see Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008, for a review).

Statements by the child that reflected an expected consequence for disclosing abuse were first identified by coders who reviewed the transcripts. Reports of

actual consequences (e.g., "and he got taken to jail") were not included. Explicit threats related to disclosure (e.g., "he said if I told I would get taken away [sic]") were included as expectations of consequences only if the child made clear that s/he believed the threat.

Each expected consequence was coded into one of eight categories (jail/other legal, yelling/scolding, physical harm, non-specific "in trouble," loss of relationship, negative emotion towards, negative emotion felt by, or loss of privileges). The recipient of the consequence was coded as *suspect*, *child*, or *other* (e.g., family member). Repetitions were not coded, so only the first reference to the expectation that, for example, a child expected to be hit if he disclosed, was counted. If the same child also expected physical harm to a family member, however, this information was coded (*Physical Harm – Other*) as well. Table 1 provides examples of consequence type – recipient pairings.

For each expected consequence, coders noted whether the child mentioned it spontaneously or was prompted by the interviewer (e.g., "did you think something would happen if you told?"). Regardless of whether the expected consequence was spontaneous or interviewer-elicited, the preceding interviewer prompt was coded into one of the following mutually exclusive categories: (1) *invitation* (e.g., "tell me more", "you said you were sitting on the couch, tell me about that"); (2) *directive* (e.g., "where were you sitting?"); (3) *option-posing* (e.g., "were you sitting on the couch or on the floor?"); or (4) *suggestive* (i.e., including information not yet mentioned by the child, or suggesting a desired response, e.g., "so, you were sitting on the couch, right?"). Further details about these prompt types are provided by Lamb et al. (2008).

Coders also noted whether the expected consequences were mentioned in the substantive or disclosure phases of the interview. The substantive phase comprised the portion of the interview between the first mention of abuse and the first question asking how other people came to find out the abuse (disclosure phase). Of the 204 interviews, 167 contained a disclosure phase.

### Reliability

Transcripts were randomly selected for training and reliability purposes with an equal number of transcripts drawn from the British and American samples and a variety of children's ages and abuse types used. Ten transcripts were used for training purposes and for development of categories related to consequence type. An additional ten transcripts were used to assess the reliability with which two coders identified statements containing information about expected consequences, *prompt types*, whether the information was *spontaneous* or *interviewer elicited*, the *type* of consequence, and the

TABLE 1  
Sample Statements Representing Expected Consequences for Disclosing CSA

<i>Consequence Type</i>	<i>Sample Utterance</i>	<i>Recipient</i>
Jail/other legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Spontaneously, during interview:</i> There is one thing that I very very want to know. Will my dad be in prison? (<i>Becomes upset at this point</i>)</li> </ul>	Suspect
Yelling/Scolding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will it be like this in court if I do have to go to court?</li> <li>• <i>While disclosing to interviewer:</i> Are you going to shout at me after?</li> <li>• I was hoping they would get yelled at [when I told]</li> </ul>	Child Child Suspects
Physical harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In response to interviewer prompt as to why child is scared to talk:</i> Cos he said he might hurt someone in my family. I don't want him to (crying)</li> <li>• I thought she was gonna hit me 'cos she's - she's one of these that like doesn't believe me when I say stuff to her.</li> </ul>	Other Child
Non-specific in trouble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was thinking of telling them (friends) but they'd go and tell my mum and then I would have got done.</li> <li>• I: Are you afraid this person will get in trouble? C: Yeah</li> </ul>	Child Suspect
Loss of relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In response to interviewer prompt as to why child did not tell anyone sooner:</i> He said if (pause) if you tell I'm not going to look after you again.</li> <li>• If I said no [that I wouldn't keep the secret] I wouldn't have been able to see E [female family member] any more</li> </ul>	Child Other
Negative emotion toward <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was scared he'd deny it</li> </ul>	Child
Negative emotion felt by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>After talking to interviewer:</i> I were afraid to tell you but I had to tell you</li> <li>• So I just didn't tell her because it would break up her [mum] happiness</li> </ul>	Child Other
Loss of privileges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In response to prompt about what should happen to suspect:</i> He should get his allotment taken away</li> <li>• He kept on saying: "tell then, 'cos you'll be the one what gets to stop coming up [to ride the horses] not me"</li> </ul>	Suspect Child

<sup>a</sup>All expectations of "negative emotion toward" were for the child.

recipient of the consequence. Kappas ranged from .94 to 1.00, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. There were no disagreements regarding the *type* or *recipient* of consequences.

### Analysis Plan

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine correlations among abuse-related variables in the British and American samples separately before we investigated the prevalence, characteristics, and predictors of expected consequences. Predictors (age, gender, abuse severity, abuse frequency, and parent figure suspect) were first examined individually in correlational or chi square analyses, with subsequent logistic regression analyses as appropriate. The association between expected consequences and disclosure (i.e., delay) was also examined.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed some expected relations among abuse-related variables. For example, cases with multiple alleged incidents more commonly involved penetration,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 3) = 9.50,  $p = .023$  and parent figures,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 1) = 4.82,  $p = .028$ , than cases involving single alleged incidents.

There were few significant differences between the British and American samples; however,  $t$ -tests revealed that children in the British sample were significantly older ( $M = 9.43$ ,  $SD = 2.48$ ) than children in the American sample ( $M = 7.87$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ),  $t$  (202) = 4.84,  $p < .001$ . Chi square analyses revealed that British cases were more likely to involve allegations of penetration, and American cases involved more cases of touch under the clothes,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 3) = 11.82,  $p = .008$ . Also, British cases were more likely to involve multiple alleged incidents (62.1%) than American cases (48.5%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 1) = 3.83,  $p = .05$ . British interviews were also more likely to include a disclosure phase (96.1%) than American interviews (67.3%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 1) = 28.47,  $p < .001$ . Finally, British children (43.7%) were more likely than American children (29.7%) to mention expected consequences spontaneously,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 1) = 4.29,  $p = .038$ , and to mention an expected consequence for other individuals (9.7% vs. 3%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 204$ , 1) = 3.88,  $p = .049$ .

### Frequencies with Which Expected Consequences were Mentioned

Almost half (45.6%;  $n = 93$ ) of the children mentioned at least one expected consequence. Children who mentioned an expected consequence mentioned an average of 1.73 consequences ( $SD = .99$ ).

Most expected consequences were coded as Child Spontaneous (mean proportion spontaneous = 73.1%,  $SD = 40\%$ , range = 0 to 100%). Overall, 36.8% ( $n = 75$ )

of children mentioned an expected consequence spontaneously, and 15.7% ( $n=32$ ) mentioned an expected consequence elicited by the interviewer. The pattern of results was the same for spontaneous and all consequences, however, so spontaneous and interviewer-elicited expected consequences were combined for the remaining analyses.

### Who Mentioned Expected Consequences?

As expected, older children ( $\rho = .20, p = .004$ ) and those alleging multiple incidents,  $\chi^2(N=204, 1) = 7.20, p = .007$ , were more likely to mention an expected consequence. A logistic regression analysis predicting the dichotomous “whether children mentioned an expected consequence” variable was significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 17.35, p = .004$ , and correctly classified 59.8% of the 204 cases included in the model, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.11$ . Significant predictors included age and abuse frequency (Table 2). For every one year increase in age, there was a 0.16 increase in the log-odds of mentioning expected consequences, and children who alleged multiple incidents of abuse were 1.91 times more likely to mention expected consequences than children who alleged single incidents. An exploratory model testing the interaction between abuse severity and identity of the suspect was also significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 22.21, p = .001$ , correctly classifying 60.8% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.14$ . Age ( $B = 0.17$ ), abuse frequency

( $OR = 1.96$ ), and the abuse severity X parent figure interaction were all significant predictors. For children alleging abuse by non-parent figures, every one-unit increase in abuse severity was associated with a 0.43 increase in the log-odds of mentioning expected consequences. For children alleging abuse by parent figures, these log-odds increased to 1.048 for every one-unit increase in abuse severity.

### Recipients of Expected Consequences

Of the children who mentioned an expected consequence, 32.3% ( $n=30$ ) mentioned a consequence for the suspect ( $M = .42, SD = .70, \text{range} = 1 \text{ to } 3$ ), 81.7% ( $n=76$ ) mentioned a consequence for the child ( $M = 1.16, SD = .81, \text{range} = 1 \text{ to } 4$ ), and 14% ( $n=13$ ) mentioned a consequence for another person ( $M = .15, SD = .39, \text{range} = 1 \text{ to } 2$ ), usually the mother or a sibling.

A repeated measures ANOVA with the proportion of expected consequences for each recipient (out of the total number of expected consequences mentioned by the child) entered as a within-subjects factor revealed a significant effect of recipient identity,  $F(2, 184) = 9.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .39$ . Planned comparisons demonstrated that children expected significantly more consequences for the child (70%) than for the suspect (21%) or others (9%), and that children expected more consequences for the suspects than for others,  $F_s(1, 92) \geq 6.10, p_s \leq .015, \eta^2 = .06 \text{ to } .55$ .

Children who alleged abuse by juveniles were less likely to mention expected consequences for suspects (8.6%) than children who alleged abuse by adults (19%),  $\chi^2(N=202, 1) = 4.12, p = .042$ . As they grew older, the likelihood that children would mention expected consequences for themselves increased,  $\rho = .21$ . Children alleging multiple incidents were also more likely to mention expected consequences for themselves than children alleging single incidents,  $\chi^2(N=204, 1) = 4.04, p = .044$ .

A logistic regression analysis predicting the dichotomous “whether an expected consequence was mentioned for the child” variable was significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 15.72, p = .008$ , correctly classifying 61.3% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.10$ . Age was the only significant predictor: For every one year increase in age, there was a 0.17 increase in the log-odds of children mentioning expected consequences for themselves. A second model testing the abuse severity X parent figure suspect interaction was also significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 24.57, p < .001$ , correctly classifying 65.2% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.16$ . Age ( $B = .18$ ) and the abuse severity X parent figure suspect interaction were significant: When children alleged abuse by non-parent figures, there was a 0.006 decrease in the log-odds of mentioning expected consequences for every one-unit increase in abuse

TABLE 2  
Who Mentions Expected Consequences: Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Whether Children Mentioned Expected Consequences

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	Odds Ratio	Wald Statistic	95% CI
<b>Step 1</b>					
Age (in years)*	.16	.06	1.18	6.65	1.04, 1.33
Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)	.18	.35	1.20	.27	.61, 2.35
Suspect Identity (1 = parent figure, 0 = non-parent)	-.05	.35	.95	.02	.48, 1.87
Abuse Severity (4-point scale; 0 = exposure, 1 = touch over clothes, 2 = touch under clothes, 3 = penetration)	.28	.19	1.33	2.18	.91, 1.93
Abuse frequency (1 = single, 2 = multiple)*	.66	.31	1.94	4.70	1.07, 3.54
<b>Step 2</b>					
Abuse severity X Suspect Identity*	1.01	.49	2.73	4.29	1.06, 7.07

\* $p < .05$

severity, whereas there was a 1.61 increase in the log-odds of mentioning expected consequences for every one-unit increase in abuse severity when the suspects were parent figures.

Children who alleged multiple incidents (9.7%) were also more likely to mention expected consequences for others than children who alleged single incidents (2.2%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=204, 1$ ) = 4.80,  $p = .028$ . Children who alleged abuse by parent figures were more likely to mention expected consequences for others (15.7%) than children who alleged abuse by non-parent figures (3.3%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=204, 1$ ) = 9.89, Fisher's Exact test = .004.

A logistic regression analysis predicting whether or not children mentioned expected consequences for others was significant,  $\chi^2$  (5) = 26.01,  $p < .001$ , correctly classifying 94.1% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.32$ . Age ( $B = .40$ ), Gender ( $OR = .22$ ) and parent figure suspect ( $OR = 8.97$ ) were all significant predictors. For every one-year increase in age, there was a 0.40 increase in the log-odds of children mentioning expected consequences for others. Girls were also 0.22 times less likely than boys to mention expected consequences for others, and children who alleged abuse by parent figures were almost 9 times more likely to mention expected consequences for others than children who alleged abuse by non-parent figures.

### Consequence Type

As shown in Table 3, the most commonly expected consequences involved negative emotion felt by, physical harm/death, and jail/legal with 17.2%, 14.7%, and 13.2% of children mentioning these consequences, respectively. Analyses showed that children who alleged abuse by parent figures were more likely to expect physical harm/death for themselves (19.6%) than children who alleged abuse by non-parent figures (8.5%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=204, 1$ ) = 4.72, Fisher's Exact = .040. The logistic regression model predicting whether children expected physical harm/death in general was significant,  $\chi^2$

(5) = 22.99,  $p < .001$ , correctly classifying 84.8% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.19$ . Age, gender, abuse severity, and parent figure suspect were significant predictors. For every one-year increase in age and one-unit increase in abuse severity, there were 0.29 and 0.79 increases in the log-odds of expecting physical harm/death, respectively. Children alleging abuse by parent figures were 2.67 times more likely to expect physical harm/death than children alleging abuse by non-parent figures, and girls were 1.15 times less likely to mention expecting physical harm/death than boys. None of the other commonly expected consequences were significantly associated with other variables.

Children who alleged abuse by juveniles were more likely to mention being yelled at themselves (9.9%) than children who alleged abuse by adults (0.8%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=202, 1$ ) = 9.34, Fisher's Exact = .008, while children who alleged abuse by parent figures were more likely to expect a loss of relationship to occur (17.6%) than children who alleged abuse by non-parent figures (6.5%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=204, 1$ ) = 5.59, Fisher's Exact = .026.

### Threats not to Tell

Perhaps not surprisingly, children who were threatened not to tell were more likely to mention expected consequences (93.8%) than children who were not threatened (37.1%),  $\chi^2$  ( $N=199, 1$ ) = 34.64,  $p < .001$ .

### Interview Characteristics

Most expected consequences were mentioned following invitations (54.2%) with smaller proportions preceded by direct (27.8%) or option posing (20.3%) prompts. A repeated measures ANOVA with prompt type (3: proportion invitation vs. proportion direct vs. proportion option posing) as the within-subjects factor was significant,  $F(2, 184) = 11.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ . Planned comparisons revealed that a greater proportion of expected consequences were mentioned following invitations rather than direct or option posing prompts,  $F_s(1, 92) \geq 10.67$ ,  $p_s \leq .002$ , which did not significantly differ from each other.

As expected, and regardless of age, the proportion of invitations preceding mention of expectations was positively correlated with the proportion of spontaneously reported expectations,  $r(93) = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negatively correlated with the proportion of interviewer-elicited expectations,  $r(93) = -.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, the proportion of direct prompts preceding mention of expectations was negatively correlated with the proportion of spontaneously mentioned expectations,  $r(93) = -.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , and positively correlated with the proportion of interviewer-elicited expectations,  $r(93) = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 3  
Number of Children Mentioning Each Type of Consequence,  
by Recipient

Type	For Suspect	For Child	For Other	Overall
Jail/Legal	22	6	1	27 (13.2%) <sup>a</sup>
Yell/Scold	1	8	0	9 (4.4%)
Phys Harm/Death	3	23	6	30 (14.7%)
Nonspecific Trouble	9	15	0	22 (10.8%)
Loss Relationship	1	16	3	19 (9.3%)
Neg Emotion Toward	0	7	0	7 (3.4%)
Neg Emotion Felt By	2	30	4	35 (17.2%)
Loss Privileges	1	3	0	4 (2%)

<sup>a</sup>Note: Percentage of children mentioning consequence type.



Most interviewer-elicited expectations were elicited using direct prompts (67.7%) with smaller proportions elicited using invitations (14.1%), option posing (18.2%), or suggestive prompts (4.7%).

**Disclosure Phase**

Among interviews with a disclosure phase, 29.7% (*SD* = 42.2%, range = 0 to 100%) of the expected consequences, on average, were mentioned in the disclosure phase. As would be expected, the proportion of expected consequences mentioned in the disclosure phase was negatively correlated with the proportion of spontaneously mentioned expected consequences,  $r(80) = -.26, p = .021$ , and positively correlated with the proportion of interviewer-elicited expected consequences,  $r(80) = .25, p = .027$ .

**Expected Consequences and Delay to Disclosure**

Children who delayed disclosure for 1 month or more were more likely to mention expected consequences (55.2%) than children who disclosed immediately (22%),  $\chi^2(N = 157, 1) = 13.44, p < .001$ . Children who mentioned consequences for themselves were more likely to delay disclosure,  $\chi^2(N = 157, 1) = 11.86, p = .001$ , with 14.6% of those who disclosed immediately and 44.8% of those who delayed for 1 month or more mentioning expected consequences. Children who mentioned expected consequences for others also were more likely

to delay disclosure for 1 month or longer (11.2%) than children who disclosed immediately (0%),  $\chi^2(N = 157, 1) = 5.01, \text{Fisher's Exact} = .022$ . Mentioning a consequence for the suspect was not significantly associated with delay.

A logistic regression analysis was then conducted to predict which children delayed disclosure. In the first step, children's age, gender, and abuse characteristics (frequency, severity, whether suspect was a parent figure) were entered. In the second step, whether children expected consequences for disclosure was entered (see Table 4).

The first model was significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 27.43, p < .001$ ; it correctly classified 72.6% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.24$ . Abuse frequency was the only significant predictor: Children alleging multiple incidents of abuse were almost 8 times more likely to delay disclosure than children alleging single incidents. The second model was also significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 39.39, p < .001$ , correctly classifying 80.3% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.33$ . Abuse frequency and expectations of consequences for disclosing were significant predictors. Children who mentioned expected consequences were 4.6 times more likely to delay disclosure than children who did not mention such expectations (Table 4).

Three logistic regression models tested whether expected consequences overall were predictive of delayed disclosure or expected consequences for certain individuals. For each analysis, in the first step, children's age, gender, and abuse characteristics (frequency, severity, whether suspect was a parent figure) were entered. In the second step, whether children expected consequences for the child, suspect, or other predicted was entered. Only the model concerning expected consequences for the child was significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 40.14, p < .001$ , correctly classifying 79.6% of the cases, Nagelkerk  $r^2 = 0.33$ , and revealed a similar pattern of results as the overall model discussed above. Children alleging multiple incidents of abuse were 8.4 times more likely to delay disclosure than children alleging single incidents. Children who expected consequences for themselves were 5.6 times more likely to delay disclosure than children who did not mention expecting such consequences for themselves.

**DISCUSSION**

The overarching purpose of the present study was to advance understanding of the consequences children expect when they disclose child sexual abuse. Specific goals included: (1) describing the children's expectations, (2) identifying the predictors of different expected consequences, and (3) investigating their implications. As the first study to investigate the consequences expected by suspected child victims themselves, the

TABLE 4

Who Delays Disclosure: Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Immediate vs. Delayed (1 Month or Longer) Disclosure

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	Odds Ratio	Wald Statistic	95% CI
<b>Step 1</b>					
Age (in years)	.03	.08	1.03	.10	.87, 1.21
Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)	-.24	.48	.79	.25	.31, 2.01
Suspect Identity (1 = parent figure, 0 = non-parent)	.22	.52	1.24	.18	.45, 3.43
Abuse Severity (4-point scale; 0 = exposure, 1 = touch over clothes, 2 = touch under clothes, 3 = penetration)	.05	.25	1.05	.04	.65, 1.70
Abuse frequency (1 = single, 2 = multiple)*	2.02	.45	7.51	19.91	3.10, 18.19
<b>Step 2</b>					
Expected Negative Consequences*	1.53	.47	4.61	10.57	1.84, 11.58

\* $p < .05$ .

present study provides key insight into children's disclosure of negative personal experiences, including the role of developmental and socio-motivational factors.

Several findings stand out. First, many children (almost half) mentioned expected consequences for disclosing sexual abuse, even though the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol does not call for such discussion. In fact, most expected consequences were mentioned spontaneously by children in response to open-ended invitations. Second, although the precise type of consequences varied considerably, with the most common relating to negative emotions, physical harm/death, and jail/legal, most of the consequences were expected to befall the children themselves. Third, older children were more likely to mention expected consequences, as we predicted. Unexpectedly, children alleging multiple incidents were also more likely to mention expected consequences. Fourth, although children alleging abuse by parent figures were not more likely to mention expected consequences overall, contrary to our predictions, there was some evidence that children's expectations of parent figure suspects were distinctive. For example, children who alleged abuse by parent figures were more likely to mention expected consequences for others and to mention serious consequences for themselves – physical harm/death. Finally, and as hypothesized, children who expected negative consequences were more likely to delay disclosure, but only when these consequences were expected for themselves or for other individuals—not when the consequences were expected for suspects.

Although previous research (involving studies of adults, file reviews, and responses to hypothetical vignettes) suggested that the expectation of consequences might affect children's disclosure of CSA, the present study makes a unique contribution by virtue of a detailed focus on the expected consequences mentioned by alleged child victims themselves during investigative interviews. Although Malloy (2008) queried children, including maltreated children, about their perceptions of the consequences of disclosing adult wrongdoing using hypothetical vignettes, it remained critical to understand children's expectations of the consequences they faced for disclosing their own abuse. Interestingly, children more frequently mentioned expected consequences for themselves (including physical harm/death) in the present study than when discussing hypothetical vignettes involving an adult who had done "something really bad." This underscores the importance of examining phenomena in both field and laboratory analogue contexts.

Why did almost half the children expect negative consequences for disclosing sexual abuse? Perhaps many children were threatened with negative consequences for telling (e.g., physical harm/death to the child or his/her loved ones, punishment, or abandonment) as is often the

case when perpetrators discourage disclosure (Benedek & Schetky, 1986; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1978; Sauzier, 1989), but although children mentioned expecting consequences more often when they had been threatened, many children mentioned expected consequences without mentioning threats not to tell. Of course, children may simply have failed to mention threats they experienced, but this does not explain why 45% of the children mentioned expected consequences whereas only 16% mentioned being threatened.

Children, especially older children, may anticipate negative consequences because they feel ashamed of or responsible for the abuse (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1998; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). This may be especially true when there have been multiple incidents of increasingly severe abuse, because this might lead children to feel complicit or partially responsible (Arata, 1998). In our study, children alleging abuse by juveniles expected to be yelled at more and were more likely to delay disclosure than children alleging abuse by adults, perhaps because they considered themselves to be more responsible in these circumstances. This may also explain why older children were more likely to expect consequences, in both this and a previous study (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003) and why children alleging multiple incidents were more likely to mention expected consequences in the present research. Of course, expectations of negative consequences may prompt delays that allow repeated abuse to occur, an explanation that must also be considered. Perceived responsibility for the abuse is sometimes not linked to expectations of consequences but still linked to delayed disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), suggesting that nondisclosure or delayed disclosure can be self-protective, much like children's earliest lies to avoid getting into trouble (Lewis, 1993).

This self-protective function was further evident in the facts that most consequences were expected to befall the children themselves and that such consequences were associated with longer delays to disclosure. Thus, the current findings are consistent with other evidence concerning secret-keeping more generally. For example, school-aged children keep more secrets pertaining to moral transgressions as they grow older, largely because they feel ashamed and fear negative consequences for themselves or others (Last & Aharoni-Etzioni, 1995).

Nondisclosure or delayed disclosure also appeared consistent with the "social function" of secrecy (Bok, 1983), notably a desire to protect others. Even by 5 years of age, children are keenly aware of different caregiver emotions and their behavior and responses reflect this awareness (Saarni, 2006). With age, children are even more likely to consider multiple perspectives (Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983) and to better understand family loyalty and obligation (Leibig & Green, 1999),

which may help them to recognize others' attachment to and dependence on suspects. Consistent with previous research (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), children alleging abuse by parent figures were concerned about other individuals (i.e., mothers, siblings), and this concern led them to delay disclosure longer. Both the self-protective and other-protective strategies are consistent with theories concerning the disclosure of child sexual abuse and the importance of developmental and social influences (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Malloy et al., 2007; Summit, 1983).

These findings regarding children's expectations and their correlates have several substantial implications for investigative interviewers, other legal and child protection professionals, and those who intervene and treat children following allegations of abuse.

First, an understanding of children's expectations may help forensic interviewers to work more effectively with children who are especially reluctant to disclose. For example, interviewers could non-suggestively address concerns about children's safety or vulnerability to reassure children who are reluctant to disclose because they expect adverse consequences. Also, although most of the expected consequences we coded were mentioned in response to invitations, it may sometimes be useful to ask children about feared consequences of disclosure or about pressures to remain silent or recant; such steps are not typically taken even though children are particularly vulnerable to such pressures (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Malloy et al., 2007). To avoid non-suggestion, interviewers may simply try giving children opportunities to discuss expected consequences by asking questions about how the abuse came to be known to others, as in the Protocol's "disclosure" phase. In the present study, almost one-third of the expected consequences were discussed in the disclosure phase.

Second, an understanding of why some children delay disclosure may assist those who evaluate the veracity of children's claims, including fact finders, clinicians, and expert witnesses. Factors such as delay, completeness, and recantation often influence perceptions of children's credibility and the outcome of legal proceedings (Lyon & Ahern, in press), and thus an understanding of the negative consequences that children expect for disclosing may be extremely useful.

Third, information concerning the expected consequences of disclosure, including the conditions under which children expect such consequences, has implications for the effectiveness of interventions designed for maltreated children and their caregivers, making it possible to anticipate misperceptions and address them directly. Unlike other aspects of maltreatment (e.g., severity), what happens after, including others' responses, is amenable to intervention (e.g., Jinich & Litrownik, 1999).

Like many studies investigating CSA disclosure patterns (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), all of the children in our sample disclosed abuse in the investigative interviews, so we could not examine the association between expected consequences and nondisclosure. However, our findings concerning delay provide compelling evidence that expected consequences affect disclosure patterns. Although these children disclosed their abuse in the interviews, albeit sometimes after long delays, half of them mentioned that they expected negative consequences. This study provides a conservative estimate of the influence of expected consequences on disclosure because many children with negative expectations may fail to disclose until much later in life, if ever.

Second, we do not know whether children who mentioned expected consequences were more likely to *experience* them or were simply more likely to *mention* them. Of course, most expectations were spontaneously mentioned by the children, so the reports cannot be attributed to the interviewers' behavior. Future studies could test the effectiveness of systematically asking children about expected consequences; even older children (e.g., adolescents) may feel more responsible for the abuse and may be more keenly aware of the potential consequences of disclosure.

Third, the delay to disclosure variable was based on the children's own estimates, which may be inaccurate. Of course, other researchers also code delay in this manner (Arata, 1998; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Smith et al., 2000). It is worth noting, however, that we coded delay from the first incident of alleged abuse to the investigative interview, which may be more helpful when attempting to understand delayed reporting than focusing on the delay from the last incident (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

Overall, the present study elucidated the conditions under which CSA victims expect negative consequences, the role of developmental factors and characteristics of the abuse, and the associations with delayed disclosure. In light of controversy about children's (non-) disclosure of CSA, the results are of considerable theoretical and practical interest.

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