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# Children's cognitive processing of abuse as described in investigative interviews.

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CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE PROCESSING OF ABUSE AS DESCRIBED IN  
INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEWS

by

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Honours Bachelor of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2013

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## Abstract

A great deal of research has examined ways in which investigative interviewers can elicit accurate information from children. More recently, research has studied children's own thoughts or comprehension of abuse, and how these types of statements relate to disclosure, others' perceptions of child witnesses, and psychological trauma. However, little research has investigated multiple types of children's thoughts about abuse as they occur in an actual investigative interview. The current study examined seven types of statements children made about their abuse in a sample of 86 transcripts of investigative interviews conducted by Child Protective Services and a police department in a mid-sized Ontario city. Children interviewed ranged from 4- to 17-years-of-age, with approximately equal numbers of males and females. Type of abuse disclosed in the interviews ranged from verbal abuse to sexual abuse. Two coders independently coded each transcript for seven statement types: expected consequences of disclosure, actual consequences of disclosure, minimization, justification for either self, perpetrator, or other, and blame. Whether the statements were elicited by an interviewer prompt or mentioned spontaneously by the child was also coded. Results demonstrated that children blamed the perpetrator more than any other statement type, consistent with previous research. Analyses also revealed a significant relationship between abuse type and children's statements, and alleged perpetrator and children's statements. Results from the current study have implications for disclosure, treatment of psychological trauma, and how parents, social workers, police officers, attorneys, and judges view children's statements.

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### Children's cognitive processing of abuse in investigative interviews

Although rates of child abuse are said to have declined in the past ten years (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006), child abuse remains a troubling phenomenon and has implications for the lives of both children and adults. The victimization of innocent children who have no ability to protect themselves violates our belief in a just world, in which people get what they deserve in a world that is stable and orderly (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Indeed, it seems incomprehensible that adults, especially parents, could harm children in such inhumane and unjust ways. Perhaps this violation is what has encouraged the increased sensitivity and improved understanding of how these inequities substantially impact the lives of mistreated children in this generation (Summit, 1983).

One of the greatest problems with child abuse is that these crimes often have no witness except the victim, who is often too young to be viewed as credible (Gray, 1993). Developmental differences in suggestibility, theory of mind, language, and cognition may all impact the quality of information obtained from a child witness. As such, a great deal of research has studied children's memory, suggestibility, and ways in which investigative interviewers can elicit the most accurate and complete information from children (see Larsson & Lamb, 2009; Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 1995). In contrast to previous research, researchers have more recently begun to study the subjective information children provide in their allegations of abuse (see Newman & Roberts, 2013; Roberts & Lamb, 2010; Katz & Barnett, 2014). For example, research has investigated how children's affect and physical cues such as eye contact could influence the perceived credibility of their testimony (Field et al., 2010). Thus, although the quest for children's complete and accurate eyewitness testimony is one of utmost importance, its focus on the quality and accuracy of information obtained may overlook an understanding of children's subjective thoughts about the abuse. What does it mean if children try to minimize

abuse, in contrast to placing blame on the perpetrator? Do children make attempts to justify the abuse? What kind of consequences may children expect or experience as a result of disclosing their abuse? The present study seeks to address these questions relating to children's cognitive processing of abuse, using transcripts of investigative interviews conducted by social workers and police officers. At least three important areas are impacted by how children think about abuse: disclosure, others' perceptions of children's testimony, and psychological trauma, and these are now discussed.

### **Disclosure**

Many children are reluctant to disclose abuse, which may increase risk of future victimization since the child is often the only witness to the crime (Gray, 1993). As such, it is of great importance to understand children's thought processes in choosing if, when, and how to disclose their abuse, in order to develop effective guidelines and protocols that promote full and accurate disclosure.

Sorensen and Snow (1991) studied patterns of disclosure in cases of child sexual abuse. An overwhelming 97% of their sample of 636 children was abused by a family member or person in a position of trust/supervision. After an analysis of all cases, Sorensen and Snow concluded that disclosure is a process, not an event, meaning that children move through a series of stages of disclosure rather than disclosing during the first time interview. They describe children as first denying that abuse occurred, then moving into a stage of tentative disclosure. Children's statements of forgetting, distancing, and minimizing abuse characterized the "tentative disclosure" stage. Children in this stage appeared to be confused, inaccurate, and uncertain (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). After tentative disclosure, most of the children proceeded into "active disclosure", in which children provided detailed and coherent accounts of abuse.



However, it is interesting to note that almost a quarter of children recanted their allegations after the active disclosure phase, although most children who recanted eventually reaffirmed their abuse allegations with time (Sorensen & Snow, 1991).

Gonzalez, Waterman, Kelly, McCord, and Oliveri (1993) found a similar pattern of recantation of abuse allegations made by children in psychotherapy. They found that children in their study who disclosed sexual abuse as occurring in a preschool setting tended to make more vague disclosures before revealing specific acts. Furthermore, children recanted 27% of the time, and almost all children who recanted re-disclosed abuse (Gonzalez et al., 1993). Similarly, Malloy, Lyon, and Quas (2007) reported a recantation rate of 23% in child victims of sexual abuse, with half of the children re-affirming at least part of their allegations in subsequent interviews. Furthermore, children were more likely to recant their allegations of abuse if they were abused by a family member or if their non-offending caregivers were unsupportive. This is especially problematic given that 46.3% of caregivers in the sample explicitly expressed disbelief in the child's allegations (Malloy et al., 2007). Overall, the aforementioned studies suggest that recantation is a reality for approximately a quarter of children who disclose, and children who recanted appeared to be more susceptible to familial pressures to deny abuse. In other words, children may perceive (or experience) negative consequences from their family members or other adults resulting from their disclosure, which may lead them to later recant their allegations of abuse.

Delayed disclosure is another factor that prevents authorities from obtaining information from the child about the abuse they have experienced. Hershkowitz, Lanes, and Lamb (2007) studied child victims of sexual abuse and found that most of the children who were familiar with the perpetrator delayed disclosure (78%), whereas only 17% of children whose perpetrators were

strangers did. Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, and Gordon (2003) found similar results, wherein children whose abuse was intrafamilial (committed by somebody within the child's family) took longer to disclose than children whose abuse was extrafamilial. Furthermore, Hershkowitz et al. (2007) found that 92% of victims of more serious sexual offenses and 86% of victims of multiple incidents delayed disclosure, with younger children disclosing abuse more often than older children.

Finally, in addition to recantation and delayed disclosure, many children fail to disclose their abuse at all. It is difficult to obtain accurate information about children who do not disclose their abuse, as they may carry on with their life without ever telling anyone about their experienced abuse. Lawson and Chaffin (1992) utilized a unique method to study children who do not disclose abuse. Children in their study had all been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) prior to any disclosure or suspicion of sexual abuse. In their initial interview regarding the abuse, only 43% of participants made a verbal disclosure of abuse (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). Perhaps the most interesting finding was the critical role of parental support: 63% of children whose parents were supportive (as expressed in a social worker's interview with the parent) disclosed, whereas only 17% of children whose parents were not supportive disclosed. Thus, the issue regarding a child failing to disclose his or her abuse is very real, especially if their parents are unsupportive.

It is not difficult to imagine how the apparent uncertainty and confusion exhibited by children in regards to recantation and delayed disclosure may impact their credibility as witnesses. Furthermore, the failure to disclose abuse at all could result in continued abuse, causing further psychological trauma. Therefore, identifying children's thought patterns may be

one way to understand why their disclosure is not a linear process, which may help forensic interviewers to work more effectively with children who are reluctant to disclose.

**Negative Consequences.** Perhaps some of the most prominent cognitions influencing children's reluctance to disclose are the negative consequences that children expect or have experienced in the past as a result of their disclosure. Gonzalez et al. (1993) mention that children's expectancies within the legal system may have been associated with recantations. In other words, children may be more likely to recant their allegations of child abuse if they anticipate negative consequences such as being taken away from their parents, or a loved one facing jail time. Additionally, Lawson and Chaffin (1992) hypothesize that the delayed or absent disclosure by the child victims of sexual abuse in their study may be explained by the children's fear of being disbelieved, punished, or unprotected if they told. A study of adults who had been abused as children by Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant, and Loughlin (1999) lent further support to this hypothesis: 80% of adults who did not disclose abuse during childhood later reported that they failed to do so because they feared negative consequences from other family members. Moreover, Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) suggest that children often weigh the consequences of their actions prior to disclosing. In their study, children's fears of negative consequences were related to type of abuse: victims of intrafamilial abuse feared more negative consequences compared to victims of extrafamilial abuse. Furthermore, children who feared that their disclosure would result in negative consequences took longer to disclose (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

The study by Malloy, Brubacher, and Lamb (2011) specifically studied the types of consequences expected by child victims of sexual abuse. In their study, 45.6% of children mentioned at least one expected negative consequence of their disclosure, and children who did

express an expected consequence mentioned an average of 1.73 consequences (Malloy et al., 2011). Older children and those alleging multiple incidents were more likely to mention an expected consequence. Furthermore, most children mentioned a consequence for themselves versus a consequence for the suspect. Children mentioned consequences such as negative emotions, physical harm or death, and jail or other legal consequences as a result of their disclosure. Malloy et al. (2011) also coded how expected consequences were elicited. They found that 36.8% of children mentioned an expected consequence spontaneously, while 15.7% of children mentioned an expected consequence in response to a prompt from the investigative interviewer. Finally, children who were threatened not to tell were more likely to mention expected consequences than children who were not threatened, with 93.8% of children who were threatened mentioning an expected consequence of disclosure (Malloy et al., 2011).

Hershkowitz and colleagues (2007) also analyzed the content of investigative interviews, and found that half of the children interviewed felt distressed about disclosing their abuse. Reasons for this distress included feeling afraid or ashamed, and expecting negative responses from their parents. Children in their study experienced more shame about disclosure when perpetrators were familiar and when abuse was serious and repeated (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Parents were also interviewed about their child's alleged abuse. Results indicated that parents of children who reported being abused by familiar perpetrators were more likely to exhibit unsupportive parental reactions (89%) than parents of children who reported being abused by unfamiliar perpetrators (25%). Parents were also less supportive when their children were victims of serious crimes and repeated incidents (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). These results suggest that children may actually anticipate their parents' negative reactions to the child's disclosure quite well. However, Hershkowitz and colleagues (2007) acknowledge the fact that it is possible

that children who have negative expectations about their parents' behaviour may engage in their own negative behaviours, which could evoke negative reactions from parents.

It is evident that negative consequences expected by the child as a result of their disclosure could significantly impact if and when the child chooses to disclose. Furthermore, actual consequences resulting from the child's disclosure (such as lack of support in Hershkowitz et al., 2007) may cause a child to recant their allegation of abuse altogether. Thus, this complicated process of disclosure could be hindered by delays, recantation, or failing to disclose at all. These hindrances to disclosure could in turn have implications for how children's testimony is perceived by parents, police officers, social workers, attorneys, and judges. Similar to Malloy et al. (2011) and Hershkowitz et al. (2007), the present study will investigate children's perceived negative consequences in the context of investigative interviews, in order to determine the frequency and type of consequences children expect as a result of their disclosure.

### **Blame**

Beck's model of cognitive therapy (1976) ascertained that how one perceives a situation greatly influences the psychological impact of the situation for that person. Abused children may project blame, in various degrees, onto the perpetrator. Alternatively, children may attempt to minimize or justify the abuse by blaming him/herself for the mistreatment. A great deal of previous research has investigated the attributions of blame to both the perpetrators and abused children. Furthermore, it has been well-established that assignment of blame by victims and their families regarding abuse can have immediate and long-term psychological implications, and can be used to predict future outcomes.

Past research has found that placing blame on the perpetrator is generally a more common response for victims of child abuse than placing blame on themselves. In their study

with children and adolescents, Feiring and Cleland (2007) used both spontaneous and open-ended responses and rating scales regarding their attributions of sexual abuse. Results from both the open-ended responses and rating scales demonstrated that blaming the perpetrator was more common than blaming the self. Similarly, McGee, Wolfe, and Olson (2001) and Morrow (1991) found that adolescents blamed the perpetrator the most when asked why their abuse occurred. In the study by Morrow (1991), content analyses for the cause of incestuous sexual abuse revealed that participants blamed the offender 33% of the time, while they were unable to find an answer as to why abuse occurred 39% of the time. Additionally, McGee et al. (2001) found that victims blamed 100% of family violence, 88% of neglect, and 93% of sexual abuse on the perpetrator. Finally, Hunter, Goodwin, and Wilson (1992) found that relatively few children in their study expressed any self-blame, with the majority placing all of the blame on the perpetrator. The act of placing blame on the perpetrator is generally an accepted and enforced method of coping (McGee et al., 2001), and Zinzow, Seth, Jackson, Niehaus, and Fitzgerald (2010) found that greater perpetrator blame was associated with less general symptomatology in female undergraduates who had a history of sexual abuse.

There are certain antecedents to victims placing blame on the perpetrator. McGee et al. (2001) and Feiring and Cleland (2007) found that participants tended to blame the perpetrator more when the severity of maltreatment was greater. Moreover, Feiring and Cleland (2007) reported that use of excessive force and more frequent abuse were also related to participants placing more blame on the perpetrator. Past research has also cited age differences as affecting how much blame victims place on the perpetrator. Feiring and Cleland (2007) studied abuse-specific attributions across three time points with both children and adolescents. They found that

participants who were adolescents at Time 1 demonstrated greater blame of the perpetrator over time compared to participants who were children at Time 1.

Although blaming the perpetrator is a common response of victims attempting to comprehend their abuse, victims do not exclusively place blame on the perpetrator. Victims may engage in self-blame, and justify the abuse as occurring because of something they did. Previous research has cited age differences in self-blame, with younger children generally expressing less self-blame than older children. Child victims in the aforementioned study by Hunter et al. (1992) rarely acknowledged any self-blame, while one-half of adults who were abused as children blamed themselves to some extent. The female undergraduates in the study by Zinzow et al. (2010) also had lower levels of self-blame associated with younger age of sexual abuse onset. On the contrary, the sample of 31 women in the study by Hoagwood (1990) perceived themselves as having more self-blame and less perpetrator blame when they were children as opposed to their current state as adults. Additionally, Hazzard, Celano, Gould, Lawry, and Webb (1995) found greater levels of self-blame in younger children. However, it is important to note that these differences may be attributed to specific differences in samples, which are relatively homogenous in each study. In the study by Hazzard et al. (1995), participants were all female adolescents, mostly African-Americans (70%), from a low socioeconomic background, and enrolled in a psychiatric treatment program. This is in direct contrast to the study by Zinzow et al. (2010), in which all participants were female undergraduates who were predominately Caucasian and relatively high-functioning. These samples would both be quite different from the sample in Hoagwood (1990), in which participants were female adults who had chosen to be enrolled in therapy. As such, socioeconomic or cultural differences may have accounted for differences in self-blame. Furthermore, familial relationships and psychological treatment may

be responsible for these discrepant findings of self-blame. Children who had high self-blame in Hazzard et al. (1995) also had lower levels of parental support, and more blame from their parents. Therefore, lack of parental support may have been more responsible for their self-blame than their age. Additionally, women in the study by Hoagwood (1990) were all enrolled in therapy, which generally promotes projecting more blame onto the perpetrator (McGee et al., 2001). This may explain why these women blamed themselves more as children and less as adults, when they would have also gone through therapy.

Factors other than age such as abuse type and severity have also been found to be related to self-blame. Quas, Goodman, and Jones (2003) studied the perceived responsibility of both male and female victims of child sexual abuse, ages 4-17. Results implicated experiencing more severe abuse and dealing with the abuse in an avoidant coping strategy (e.g. pretending the abuse did not happen) as being related to greater levels of self-blame (Quas et al., 2003). Hazzard et al. (1995) and Zinzow et al., (2010) also found higher levels of self-blame among individuals who experienced more severe sexual abuse as children. Furthermore, Ney, Moore, McPhee, and Trought (1986) found that different types and degrees of abuse resulted in different patterns of self-blame. They found that physically abused children exhibited self-blame for mild but not for severe treatment. On the other hand, verbally and sexually abused children did not believe it was their fault if the mistreatment was moderately extensive, but they did blame themselves if abuse was either mild or severe. Moreover, children in their sample blamed themselves for their parents neglecting them (Ney et al., 1986).

Finally, Harvey, Dorahy, Vertue, and Duthie (2012) studied adults who experienced psychological maltreatment (which includes emotional abuse/neglect, verbal aggression, and psychological abuse) during childhood. They found that shame was a common occurrence for



participants in their study, resulting from internalizing parents' chronically critical standards. In other words, psychologically abusive parents had very rigid and unrealistic standards regarding participants' behaviour and also what the participant should think, feel, and desire. Failure to meet these unrealistic standards caused negative feedback from parents in the form of psychological maltreatment (e.g. degrading or belittling), which resulted in a sense of low self-worth and high levels of stable and global shame in participants. Ultimately, this shame was so powerful that participants blamed themselves for events that were beyond their control (Harvey et al., 2012).

Perhaps not surprisingly, children's attribution of blame has implications for their future psychological well-being. In his conceptual model of "Accommodation Syndrome", Summit (1983) discusses how an abused child's self-blame sets the foundations for self-hate, which is implicated in future self-destruction. Summit (1983) describes how victims of child sexual abuse reinforce self-hate through self-mutilation, suicidal behaviour, promiscuous sexual activity, and running away. In a more recent and empirical study, Hazzard et al. (1995) found that better psychological adjustment as measured by the child Global Adjustment Scale was related to lower levels of self-blame. Furthermore, higher levels of self-blame were related to increased levels of depression and decreased self-esteem (Hazzard et al., 1995), a result that was also evident in Morrow (1991). Similarly, in the study by Harvey et al. (2012), participants who experienced psychological maltreatment expected others to treat them with invalidation, betrayal, rejection, and a lack of respect as a result of their intense self-blame, which ultimately impacted their self-esteem and interpersonal development. In addition to greater rates of depression and decreased self-esteem, McGee and colleagues (2001) found that youth who blamed themselves for various types of abuse had higher levels of self-reported behaviour problems as abuse severity increased.

Toth, Cicchetti, MacFie, Maughan, & Vanmeenen (2000) also found that physically abused preschoolers tended to blame themselves for the abuse, and had fewer positive parent representations and more negative representations of both their parent and self in a one year longitudinal study than age-matched preschoolers who had no history of abuse.

Finally, it is important to note that these adjustment problems arising from self-blame may be quite long lasting. In their longitudinal study of children who had been sexually abused, Feiring and Cleland (2007) concluded that self-blame attributions at the time of abuse discovery were predictive of internalizing symptoms six years later. Valle and Silovsky's (2002) review of attributions and adjustment following child sexual and physical abuse further outlines long-term adjustment problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and relationship problems stemming from victims blaming themselves for child abuse.

### **Perceptions of Children's Allegations of Abuse**

In addition to their influence on disclosure and psychological trauma (e.g. self-blame), the way in which children express their thoughts about abuse may ultimately have implications for how others view the credibility of child witnesses and their statements. Others' perceptions regarding the believability of child witnesses may depend on age-related stereotypes, the child's behaviour during testimony, and the behaviour of other adult participants such as attorneys, defendants, judges, and interviewers.

The majority of previous research has found that others perceive younger children as less credible witnesses than adults and older children (Goodman, 1984; Goodman, Golding, Helgeson, Haith, & Michelle, 1987). Furthermore, results from Cashmore and Bussey's (1996) study of judicial perceptions of child witness competence demonstrated that judges and magistrates assumed children to be competent from 7 to 15 years of age, with a mode and

median around 12 to 13 years. This is an important finding, as judges hold a great deal of power to admit or exclude evidence, make accommodations for when children are giving their testimony, warn the jury about the reliability of the child's testimony, and also set an example for child-friendly behaviour (Cashmore & Bussey, 1996). Thus, if judges do not expect younger children to be competent witnesses, the child witness may have a very negative experience in court which could in turn influence others' perceptions of that child. Efforts to improve the perceived credibility of child witnesses have informed legislation such as Bill C-2 in Canada, which assumes children under the age of 14 have the capacity to testify without having to take an oath (the *Criminal Code of Canada, 2006*).

Furthermore, past research has demonstrated the influence of children's behaviour on the stand as impacting how others perceive their testimony. Golding, Frynman, Marsil, and Yozwiak (2003) had undergraduate students read a mock trial in which they manipulated the demeanour of the alleged child victim. The behaviour of the child in the stories was described as calm, teary, or hysterically crying. Participants also viewed a sketched image of the child which was predetermined to depict the child as exhibiting one of those three behaviours. Results demonstrated that participants administered the greater number of guilty verdicts when the child was teary as opposed to when the child was calm or hysterical. These results suggest that there is an "optimal level" of crying behaviour that is viewed as acceptable by the jury. Similarly, Schmidt and Brigham (1996) provided participants with vignettes about a child who was either 5 or 15 years old, who appeared either powerful or powerless. They found that the 5 year old who appeared powerless and the 15 year old who appeared powerful were viewed as more credible than any other condition. In other words, participants may attribute the powerful attitude of the 5

year old to coaching, while the 15 year old exhibiting powerless behaviour may be described as lying or untrustworthy.

In addition to outward crying and power behaviour, the level of emotional closeness to the perpetrator may influence others' perceptions of victim credibility. Davies, Patel, and Rogers (2013) investigated the impact of perpetrator relationship and level of emotional closeness on participants' attributions in a case of child sexual abuse. Undergraduate students in their study read a scenario of a female child sexually abused by an adult male (either biological father or step father) with her relationship to the perpetrator being described as either emotionally close or emotionally distant. Results indicated that victims were deemed more credible when abused by an emotionally close father figure. Davies et al. (2013) rationalized this finding by hypothesizing that respondents believe that victims have fewer reasons to lie and falsely accuse a perpetrator with whom they have an emotionally close relationship. It is possible that emotional closeness may lead children to minimize or justify abuse in the context of an investigative interview, in order to protect the perpetrator. Perhaps minimizing or justifying abuse may influence others' perceptions of emotional closeness between children and their perpetrator, which may also have implications for the trial outcome. Therefore, the current study will also examine the occurrence of subjective statements such as minimization or justification in the context of the investigative interview.

In sum, a great deal of research has studied children's memory and ways in which we can elicit accurate information from children, but more limited research exists on ways in which children think about their abuse in the context of investigative interviews. It is important to understand ways in which children think about their abuse due to the implications these cognitions have for disclosure, future psychological trauma, and perceptions of the child.

Furthermore, the majority of previous research that does exist on children's thoughts about abuse focuses on victims of sexual abuse (e.g. Malloy et al., 2011; Quas et al., 2003; Zinzow et al., 2010; Fiering and Cleland, 2007; Hunter et al., 1992; Hazzard et al., 1995, Malloy et al., 2007; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Palmer et al., 1999; Summit, 1983, & Hoagwood, 1990). More limited research exists on attributions from children who have experienced physical abuse (e.g. Ney et al., 1986; Valle & Silovsky, 2002; Toth et al., 2000, & Katz & Barnett, 2014) and even less research focuses on child victims of psychological or verbal abuse (e.g. Harvey et al., 2012). As such, there is a need for more research on how child victims of abuse apart from sexual abuse think about and understand their abusive experiences.

As was previously mentioned, disclosure is a nonlinear process that is subject to delay, recantation, or failing to occur at all. Children's perceived negative consequences of disclosing have been cited (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2007) as potentially impacting a child's decision of if, when, or to whom they will disclose. Furthermore, children's attributions of blame to the perpetrator or justifications of abuse will have implications for psychological trauma and future outcomes for the child. These factors may well have consequences for prosecution of perpetrators. Since others' perceptions are notably impacted by children's outward behaviour, it may be the case that children's verbal behaviour could impact their credibility. In other words, whether children place blame on the perpetrator, minimize abuse, or justify the abuse as occurring as a result of something they did may have consequences for whether a jury views the child as a credible source, or feels sympathy for the child. Therefore, it is important to understand the type of statements children make regarding their own thoughts about abuse in order to better understand processes of disclosure, psychological trauma and future outcomes, as well as how others perceive the child's testimony.

### **The Present Study**

The aforementioned research on children's thoughts about abuse have for the most part involved studying children's thoughts after, instead of during, the investigative interview through the use of questionnaires (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Palmer et al., 1999; Hoagwood, 1990; McGee et al., 2001; Quas et al., 2003; Morrow, 1991; Ney et al., 1986; Hunter et al., 1992; Feiring & Cleland, 2007). It is important to study children's thoughts during the interview, as the interview may be used as evidence-in-chief in a court case due to Bill C-2 allowing screened testimony from child witnesses (*Criminal Code of Canada, 2006*). Furthermore, the vast majority of previous research involves directly asking children about their thoughts regarding their abuse instead of these thoughts naturally occurring in the investigative interview. In the current study, children's statements will be coded for whether they are prompted or spontaneous, in order to tease apart any differences between thoughts that may have been prompted by the interviewer, or ones that are spontaneously mentioned by the children. This is important as the current best-practice interview protocols are based on the premise that information elicited by direct interviewer prompts is less reliable. Alternatively, information children spontaneously provide in response to open-ended interviewer prompts (e.g. "Tell me everything that happened on that day...") is based on recall and therefore accepted as less susceptible to contamination from the interviewer (Lamb et al., 2007). As a result, spontaneous statements from children are more admissible in trials of alleged abuse. Thus, it would be beneficial to note whether children's thoughts about abuse come about spontaneously or in response to an interviewer prompt, as this may have implications as to whether or not they could be used in a trial.

As was previously mentioned, the majority of previous research focused on how children think about having been sexually abused as opposed to physically or verbally abused, or living

with parents who have problems with substance abuse. It is important to study all types of abuse, as they may produce qualitatively unique cognitions. The sample for the present study consisted of transcripts from interviews previously conducted by child protective services and police. Interviews covered a variety of types of abuse, as well as abuse that was either acute or chronic, in either public or private settings. Including all types of abuse is more representative of the real world, where children often experience more than one type of abuse (McGee et al., 2001; Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). Additionally, many interviews in the current study were conducted by social workers employed by a child protective services agency, who prioritized child welfare in addition to obtaining information that could be used as evidence-in-chief. Thus, the sample in the present study was very broad in the sense that it included interviews dealing with both child welfare and forensic applications.

Seven main types of statements (expected and actual consequences, minimization, justification for self, perpetrator, or other, and perpetrator blame) were coded for frequency and whether they were prompted by the interviewer or mentioned spontaneously. Furthermore, type of abuse and alleged perpetrator were also analyzed. In line with previous research, perpetrator blame was expected to be the most prevalent statement children make about their abuse (Feiring & Cleland, 2007; Hunter et al., 1992; Ney et al., 1986; Morrow, 1991). Moreover, following past research on expected consequences of disclosing sexual abuse (Malloy et al., 2011; Hershkowitz et al., 2007), it was expected that victims of sexual abuse would expect more consequences than victims of other types of abuse in the current study. As this was an exploratory study, and one of the first to our knowledge to consider such a broad range of children's statements (e.g. minimization, justification, and blame), no other main hypotheses were made regarding the type of children's statements expected. It is important to study children's thoughts about their abuse

during the context of the investigative interview, as the way in which they express their thoughts may have implications for how parents, social workers, police officers, attorneys, and judges view their statements.

## Method

### Sample

The sample for the current study consisted of 157 interview transcripts of children who were involved with child protective services or a police department. Interviews for the current study were completed from years 2006-2007 as part of studies by Rischke, Roberts, and Price (2011) and Price and Roberts (2011), who trained investigative interviewers on best-practice interviewing techniques. Interviews were conducted by 13 interviewers, consisting of child protection workers ( $n = 10$ ) and police officers ( $n = 3$ ) in a mid-sized Ontario city. Three of the 13 investigative interviewers were male. Each interviewer had an average of two years of experience interviewing children (Rischke et al., 2011). Children interviewed ranged from 4-17 years of age, with a mean age of 10.06 years,  $SD = 3.35$ . The gender of the children was relatively equal, with 56% male. Unfortunately, no information on socioeconomic status or ethnicity was available for the sample.

All interviews were conducted according to the training program by Price and Roberts (2011) based on the NICHD protocol. The majority of interviews included all aspects of NICHD protocol: ground rules, rapport, practice phase, and substantive phase (Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007). In the ground rules phase, interviewers explain their expectations that the child should tell only the truth, say "I don't know", "I don't remember", and "I don't understand" as necessary, and correct the interviewer when appropriate. The rapport-building phase aims to create a supportive and relaxed environment for children along



with establishing a relationship between the investigative interviewer and child. Following this, the practice phase occurs and the child is asked to describe a recently experienced event (e.g. a birthday party, or Christmas) in detail, in order to familiarize the child with providing responses to open-ended prompts (e.g. "Tell me everything/tell me more about your birthday party"). The substantive phase of the interview is where the child and interviewer discuss the alleged abuse. This phase begins with the investigative interviewer saying "Tell me everything about (reason CAS/police are there)", and open-ended prompts are used throughout the substantive phase to encourage the child to provide as much detail as possible. The information coded in the current study was only from the substantive phase, after disclosure of abuse occurred. If a child made no statements about their own thoughts of abuse (68), or no abuse was mentioned (3), the transcript was excluded, leaving 86 transcripts in the final sample.

In the final sample of 86 transcripts, the most common type of alleged abuse was physical (29%), followed by verbal (20%), sexual (13%), substance abuse (2%), and other (e.g. attempted abduction, destruction of property; 3%). Furthermore, children in 26% of transcripts in the final sample alleged multiple abuse types, with the combination of verbal and physical abuse as the most common. The mean age of children in the final sample of transcripts was 10.23 years, with a standard deviation of 3.11. Please refer to Appendix B for demographic information of all transcripts, including both those that were coded and those not coded. Due to the relatively low number of children of each age, children in transcripts that had codeable information were divided into four age groups. Group one included children 4- to 6-years of age (9 children), group two 7- to 9-years of age (25 children), group three 10- to 12- years of age (19 children), and group four included adolescents 13- to 17- years of age (21 children). These groups represent children according to school age, with children in kindergarten, elementary school, middle

school, and high school. This categorization was done in order to reflect cognitive differences (e.g. language, memory, pragmatic understanding) during these times. Groups contained similar numbers of children, except for the youngest age group, which only contained approximately half the amount of children as the other three groups. It is important to note that the majority of transcripts documenting interviews of the youngest children were excluded, due to the low frequencies of target statements. For example, of the three four-year-olds, two were excluded; of the nine five-year-olds, five were excluded, and of the 12 six-year-olds, eight were excluded. This discrepancy is likely due to a combination of our small sample size and the fact that younger children may have more difficulties both understanding and verbally expressing thoughts regarding their abusive experiences, although more research is necessary. Consequently, the relatively low number of codeable transcripts from very young children should be considered a limitation of our study.

### **Procedure**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and rated by two separate coders. Interviews were considered “uncodeable” if both coders agreed that the interview contained none of the utterance types as outlined in the coding manual (Appendix A). A new coding system was developed to investigate how children talked about the abuse to glean the ways in which cognitively process their abuse during investigative interviews. A total of seven utterance types were coded: expected consequences, actual consequences, minimization, justification-self, justification-other, justification-perpetrator, and blame, and are described below.

### **Children's Statements**

**Expected consequence.** An utterance was coded as an “expected consequence” if the child mentioned a possible consequence that would be the result of their disclosure. An example

of an expected consequence was “If I say anything about this he’ll beat up my mom and grandpa”. This is a clear expected consequence, as the child is anticipating harm to his family (a consequence) as a direct result of the child disclosing her/his abuse. It is important to mention that the current study did not discriminate between positive or negative expected consequences, and both had the potential to be coded according to our coding scheme. However, positive consequences of disclosure were expected to be relatively rare due to the majority of research finding that children generally anticipate negative consequences as a result of their disclosure of abuse (Palmer et al., 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011).

**Actual consequence.** An utterance was coded as an “actual consequence” if the child mentioned a consequence that actually happened after s/he disclosed. An example of an actual consequence is “He hit me when he found out that I told”. In this case, the consequence is the child being hit which was a direct outcome of disclosing abuse.

**Minimization.** An utterance was coded as “minimization” if the child said something that attempted to lessen the perceived severity of the abuse. An example of minimization was “It’s not that big of a deal” when a child was discussing how her father hits her. It was considered minimization because the child had marks from the hit and child protective services were involved, yet the child still made an attempt to minimize the perceived severity of the abuse.

**Justification-Self.** The “justification for self” code was used if the child made an attempt to justify the abuse they experienced as occurring because they themselves did something wrong. An example of justification for self is “He only hits me when I either get something wrong or don’t do something properly”. The child in this case was attempting to justify the abuse by

stating that the abuse was rare and only occurred as a result of an action or quality of the child, not the perpetrator.

**Justification-Perpetrator.** The justification for perpetrator code was used for utterances in which the child described abuse as occurring due to a direct characteristic of the alleged perpetrator. The characteristic of the perpetrator is viewed as neither good nor bad, but rather a fact that somehow works to justify the alleged perpetrator's actions. An example of justification for perpetrator is "Dad hit me because he is stressed from work". In this case, the child viewed their father's stress as the main factor contributing to the abuse, as opposed to the abuse as occurring as a result of the father's own negligence (which would be characterized as blame).

**Justification-Other.** An utterance was coded as justification-other when the child described abuse as occurring because of an action or trait of another individual who is apart from either the child or the perpetrator. An example of this utterance type was "She swears at us because she really hates my dad". In this example, it was implied that the abuse occurred because of the dad, which served to justify the action and reduced the blame from the perpetrator.

**Blame.** A child's utterance was coded as "blame" if the child elaborated on why the perpetrator should be blamed for the alleged abuse, and made a significant attempt to portray the perpetrator in an unfavourable light. Children could have done this in a number of ways:

- Describing characteristics of the perpetrator and backing them up with their own opinion of why these characteristics are bad (e.g. "Dad drinks all the time and it's just not right")
- Describing their own negative reactions resulting from the alleged abuse (e.g. "When he did that I felt so mad and hated him for it")

- Denying that the act was justified (e.g. “She hit us for no reason”)
- Using a negative metaphor to describe how they felt about the action (e.g. “He hit me like I was a human punching bag”)
- Using a negative label to describe the perpetrator in an unfavourable light (e.g. “She’s really mean”)

### **Eliciting Statements**

For each consequence or qualifying response coded, coders noted whether the child mentioned it spontaneously or was prompted by the interviewer. An utterance was considered spontaneous if it was unrelated to the last question the interviewer asked. Utterances classified as spontaneous were often mentioned amongst a larger quote or description by the child. An example of a spontaneous utterance was “That night I was playing a game... But then she got mad at me and hit me because she’s really mean”. In this case, the child began talking about using a computer but then moved to a blame statement (i.e. “she’s really mean”) without any intervention from the interviewer.

Utterances that were direct responses to questions posed by the interviewer (and would not have been mentioned otherwise) were coded as prompted. An example of a statement that was interviewer prompted would be the interviewer asking “Why do you think mom [hits you]?” and the child replying “Because she’s stressed all the time”. The child’s description would be classified as justification for the alleged perpetrator since the child is providing a reason for why their mother hits them, and is classified as prompted since it is a direct response to the interviewer’s question.

### **Inter-rater Reliability**

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, all transcripts were coded twice by two separate coders to ensure reliability. One main coder coded each of the transcripts, and two additional coders each coded half of the transcripts.

Transcripts were randomly selected by the main coder for training and reliability purposes. In total, 30 transcripts were used to develop the coding scheme. Of those, 5 transcripts were excluded due to the absence of the child mentioning any consequences or deeper thoughts about their abuse. The remaining transcripts were then coded according to the aforementioned scheme.

After the coding scheme was established, ten interviews were used to train an additional coder. Each coder was trained individually over a period of two weeks. The training period consisted of reading a previously coded transcript with the original coder who pointed out why each utterance was coded the way it was. Next, coders were asked to read two additional transcripts on their own and report any questions to the main coder. The main coder and trainee then coded a transcript together. Afterwards, the trainee coded five subsequent transcripts on their own then received detailed feedback from the main coder on the accuracy of their coding.

Each transcript was double-coded (by the main coder and one of the two other coders) as a result of the challenging nature of determining what qualified as children's own thoughts about their abuse. Once transcripts were individually coded, the coders came together to determine if they coded the same statements, and if these statements actually represented children's own thoughts about abuse. Disagreements as to whether or not a statement should be coded were resolved through discussion, and whether or not an utterance was further categorized into one of

the seven statement types was a result of the direct agreement between the two coders. After agreeing on whether or not a statement should be coded, coders identified utterances fitting into one of the seven aforementioned categories (expected consequences, actual consequences, minimization, justification self, other, or perpetrator, and blame), and whether the utterances were spontaneous or prompted. Kappa was found to be .78 for prompted or spontaneous utterances, and .93 for the seven utterance types.

### Results

Analyses were conducted to explore how age, gender, abuse type, and relationship to alleged perpetrator related to the types of statements mentioned, and whether these statements were elicited through prompts by the interviewer or mentioned spontaneously. Next, the relationship between age, gender, abuse type, perpetrator, and children's blame statements were analyzed. Finally, themes in the narrative of less frequent statements were investigated. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine significance for all analyses, unless otherwise stated below.

#### All Statements

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all statements (see Table 1). Means for all statements were quite low, with blame as by far the most common statement type. Chi-square analyses were run to see whether age, gender, abuse type, or alleged perpetrator varied with statement type. Chi-square analyses were appropriate for our data because they allowed us to determine if there were any systematic patterns between expected and actual frequencies. However, we recognize that two assumptions of the chi-square were not met (i.e. expected cell count and independence), so results must be interpreted in light of this limitation. Chi-square analyses yielded no significant effects for age groups and statements,  $X^2 = 12.84$ ,  $p = .801$ . Please see Table 2 for frequencies of statements by age groups. Chi-square analyses for gender and

statements approached significance  $X^2 = 19.38, p = .080$ , with females mentioning more *expected consequences* and *blaming* less than expected. Please see Table 3 for frequencies of statements by gender.

There were significant patterns in the alleged perpetrator (e.g. parent, step-parent, sibling, or other) analysis on type of statement,  $X^2 = 33.14, p = .016$ . Frequencies revealed a pattern of children *blaming* parents less than expected, while *blaming* siblings and step-parents more than expected by chance alone. Furthermore, children tended to *minimize* and *justify* abuse more than expected for parents, but not for any of the other alleged perpetrators. Please see Table 4 for frequencies of statements by alleged perpetrator.

Chi-square analyses also revealed a significant relationship between abuse type and statements,  $X^2 = 74.81, p < .001$ . Frequencies revealed a pattern of more *minimization* and *justification* but less *blame* in statements regarding physical abuse. Furthermore, over twice as many *expected consequences* than anticipated were mentioned in statements regarding sexual abuse. Finally, statements associated with verbal abuse had more *blame* than expected. Please see Table 5 for frequencies of statements by abuse type.

Chi-square analyses were also run to test if there were differences in whether children's statements were interviewer prompted or spontaneous. There was no significant effect on whether statements were elicited by the interviewer or mentioned spontaneously  $X^2 = 10.20, p = .116$ . A subsequent analysis on differences between age and how statements were elicited also failed to reveal a significant effect,  $X^2 = 18.64, p = .14$ . Frequencies revealed a general trend of children from 9- to 14-years-of-age mentioning more statements spontaneously and fewer statements that were prompted by the interviewer than would be expected. Please see Table 6



and Table 7 for frequency of how statements were elicited and age differences in how statements were elicited.

In sum, *blaming* the perpetrator was the most common statement children made. Analyses revealed no age or gender effects for statement type. Children *blamed* their parents less, while *blaming* their siblings and step-parents more than expected by chance alone. *Minimization* and *justification* tended to occur more than expected for parents, but not for any of the other alleged perpetrators. The relationship between abuse type and statements was significant, with more *minimization* and *justification* but less *blame* in physical abuse. Sexual abuse was associated with over twice as many *expected consequences* than would be anticipated by chance alone, and verbal abuse had more *blame* than expected. Finally, there were no significant differences in whether statements as a whole were interviewer prompted or spontaneous, although there were age differences in which age groups from the middle of the sample mentioned more statements spontaneously and less that were prompted by the interviewer.

### **Blame Statements**

Since *blame* was by far the most common statement children made, further analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships between age, gender, abuse type, and child's relationship to the alleged perpetrator, and blame. A one-way ANOVA to test the relationship between age and blame statements did not reach significance,  $F(13,61) = .756, p = .701$ . A second one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and blame statements, and also failed to reach significance,  $F(1, 80) = .275, p = .542$ .

A chi-square analysis was run to test the relationship between alleged perpetrator and abuse type for blame statements, and was found to be significant  $X^2 = 144.39, p < .001$ . Parents

and step-parents were blamed more than expected for verbal abuse. Siblings were blamed twice as much than was expected for physical abuse, while step-parents and individuals in the “other” category were blamed less. Finally, individuals in the “other” category were blamed for sexual abuse over five times more than what was expected. Please see Table 8 for frequencies of relationship blamed by abuse type.

Finally, a paired-samples t-test was used to investigate if there were any differences in how blame statements were elicited. The t-test was significant  $t(85) = -2.11, p = .038$ , with more blame statements mentioned spontaneously ( $M = 1.34, SD = 1.52$ ) than prompted by the interviewer ( $M = .92, SD = 1.04$ ).

Overall, there were no age or gender differences in blame statements. However, there was a significant relationship between alleged perpetrator and abuse type. Parents and step-parents were blamed more than expected for verbal abuse, siblings were blamed more than expected for physical abuse, and individuals in the “other” category were blamed for sexual abuse over five times more than was expected by chance alone. In addition, significantly more blame statements were mentioned spontaneously than prompted by the interviewer.

### **Themes in the Narratives**

As was previously mentioned, we investigated themes in the narratives among each of the statement types that had more than 10 occurrences. Thus, themes in expected consequences, actual consequences, minimization, and justification for perpetrator were studied. Of the 86 transcripts that were originally coded, 53 transcripts contained the aforementioned statement types, which were subject to these in-depth analyses.

**Expected consequences.** Children who mentioned expected consequences ranged from 5- to 17-years of age, with a mean of 10.8 years. Expected consequences were half (50%)

prompted by the interviewer and half spontaneously mentioned. The most common expected consequence involved violence or hitting (29%). An example of this type of consequence was from an eight-year-old male who had been physically abused, who said “*If I rat then he said he will hit me*”. Please see Table 9 for a list and examples of other expected consequences.

**Actual consequences.** Children who mentioned actual consequences of past disclosure ranged from 8- to 15-years of age, with a mean of 11.6 years. Most actual consequences of disclosure (81.8%) were mentioned spontaneously as opposed to prompted by the interviewer. Actual consequences were categorized into three categories, with relatively equal frequencies in each. An example of an actual consequence was a 12-year-old female saying “*My grandpa won't even talk to me*”, when discussing the aftermath of her disclosing sexual abuse to her family. These statements of actual consequences of disclosure shared qualitative similarities with children's statements of expected consequences of disclosure. Please see Table 10 for a list and examples of actual consequences.

**Minimization.** Children who made an attempt to minimize their abuse ranged in age from 4 to 15 years, with a mean age of 10.3 years. Most minimizations (41%) sought to downplay the severity of the actual act itself. For example, when describing being hit by her mother, a 12-year-old girl said “*It just stings a bit, it wasn't that bad*”. Another example of minimization was a 10-year-old boy downplaying the severity of his father's alcohol use by saying “*My dad wasn't that drunk, he just had like a big dose – like it's just like little big*”. In each of these situations, the children use words that seem to minimize the perceived severity (e.g. “just”, “a bit”, “little”) of the events in question. Other types of minimization downplayed frequency of abuse or perceived danger the child was in. Please see Table 11 for a list and examples of minimization.

**Justification-Perpetrator.** Children who justified abuse as a result of something about the perpetrator ranged in age from 6 to 15 years, with a mean age of 10.6. Most of these statements implicated external circumstances (39.1%) as justifying the perpetrator's actions. An example of one of these justifications is "*I think he's just frustrated about his work, because he works every single day*", said by a 12-year-old female during a conversation about physical abuse from her stepfather. Another example from a 10-year-old male was "*She's only angry because she's tired*", when referring to his mother physically abusing him. Another interesting and nearly as common justification for the perpetrator was the child claiming that the perpetrator "did not mean to" do the abusive action they did. An example of this type of statement was from a 9-year-old male saying "*When they get angry sometimes they hit us but they don't mean to*" amongst a discussion of physical abuse from his parents. Please see Table 12 for a list and examples of justification-perpetrator.

### Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the different ways in which children think about their abuse in the context of investigative interviews. The current study's focus on children's statements in real-life investigative interviews is in contrast to the vast majority of previous research, which involved using structured questionnaires to assess ways in which children think about abuse (e.g. Ney et al., 1986; McGee et al., 2001; Feiring & Cleland, 2007). The current study used investigative interview transcripts from children 4- to 17-years-of-age, who alleged a wide variety of abuse types. Findings relating to children's statement types (i.e. perpetrator blame, consequences, minimization and justification) and how they relate to age, gender, abuse type, and alleged perpetrator are discussed. Limitations and potential future research, along with forensic and clinical applications, will subsequently be discussed.

### **Perpetrator Blame**

Perpetrator blame was overwhelmingly the most common statement type children made regarding abuse. Indeed, two-thirds of all statements children made were blaming the perpetrator. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has found that children generally blame the perpetrator the most when asked why abuse occurred (Feiring & Cleland, 2007; McGee et al., 2001; Morrow, 1991; Hunter et al., 1992). The study by McGee and colleagues (2001) found that adolescent victims blamed the perpetrator the most when asked why abuse occurred, and blamed all family violence, and the vast majority of neglect and sexual abuse on the perpetrator. Furthermore, Morrow (1991) and Hunter et al. (1992) found that children tended to blame the perpetrator more, and relatively few engaged in self-blame for sexual abuse.

In overall analyses of all statements, children's blame statements were directed at parents less than expected, and step-parents more than expected. However, when analyzing blame statements separately, it became evident that different abuse types had varying levels of blame for all relationships. This is a new result for literature on blame, with previous literature focusing on abuse severity and type of abuse as related to perpetrator blame (McGee et al., 2001; Ney et al., 1986). Children blamed both parents and step-parents more than expected for verbal abuse. Ney et al. (1986) found that children blamed others when verbal abuse was moderate, but blamed themselves when verbal abuse was mild or severe. Therefore, it is possible that children in the current study were experiencing moderate verbal abuse, which could explain why they blamed their parents and step-parents more than expected. Additionally, they may have blamed their parents and step-parents more for verbal abuse because they felt that the abuse was not deserved. Rausch and Knutson (1991) found that children's tolerance for punishment was related to their

own concepts of how much their misbehaviour warranted punishment. Thus, children in the current study may have blamed their step-parents and parents more than expected for verbal abuse because they did not believe that they misbehaved in a way that would justify that kind of parental behaviour.

In terms of relationships other than parents, siblings were blamed twice as much as expected by chance for physical abuse. This result may be partly due to the fact that sibling physical aggression is relatively common, with almost half of siblings found to have engaged in physical aggression in a study by Tucker-Jenkins, Finkelhor, Shattuck, and Turner (2013). In a separate study, the same researchers found that sibling aggression was implicated in child mental health distress (Tucker-Jenkins, Finkelhor, Turner, & Shattuck, 2013). Therefore, children in the current study may have blamed siblings for physical abuse more than expected due to the negative impact sibling physical aggression has on mental health.

Finally, in cases of sexual abuse, individuals categorized as “other” were blamed five times more than was expected. This result is likely due to the fact that our sample of interviews alleging sexual abuse was relatively small (13%), with individuals in the “other” category over-represented, accounting for 95% of perpetrators of sexual abuse. This over-representation of sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals other than close relatives is quite uncommon. Many studies on child sexual abuse have found that the alleged perpetrator is close to the child, such as a caregiver (Quas et al., 2003; Hunter et al., 1992). Therefore, it is surprising that others were most often the perpetrators of sexual abuse in our sample. It may also be the case that the “other” category was over-represented for perpetrators of sexual abuse due to the fact that children are more likely to disclose sexual abuse committed by a stranger as opposed to a family member (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Thus, the fact that the majority of children in the current sample

disclosed could account for the greater proportion of “others” as perpetrators of sexual abuse as opposed to the perpetrators consisting of family members, as has been found in previous studies.

The current study is one of the first to investigate children's blame attributions in the context of an investigative interview, as opposed to using a type of measurement or questionnaire that involves directly asking children about who is to blame for their abuse (e.g. Feiring & Cleland, 2007; McGee et al., 2001; Morrow, 1991; Hunter et al., 1992). Thus, we were interested in how children's blame statements were elicited in the context of an investigative interview and whether or not children would spontaneously blame the alleged perpetrator. Results from the current study demonstrate that children's blame statements were significantly more spontaneous than they were prompted by the interviewer. Information children provide spontaneously is less susceptible to contamination from the interviewer, and more credible (Lamb et al., 2007; Lamb et al., 1995). Therefore, if children make more spontaneous statements of blame towards the perpetrator, there is a greater chance that their statements will be admissible in trials of alleged abuse. In turn, these statements may be used by prosecuting attorneys to build a stronger case, and increase chances of convicting the perpetrator. It is for this reason that current best-practice interviewing techniques involve as many open-ended prompts as possible (e.g. “Tell me everything that happened...”), while avoiding forced-choice or close-ended prompts (e.g. “Did he touch you?”; Lamb et al., 2007).

In sum, perpetrator blame was the most common type of statement children made in the current study. Differences in blame were evident in regards to abuse type and relationship to alleged perpetrator. Finally, the majority of blame statements in the current study were mentioned spontaneously by children, which has implications for investigative interviewing techniques.

## Consequences

Compared to previous research, in which nearly half of children interviewed mentioned expected consequences (Malloy et al., 2011), only 12% of children's statements in the current study consisted of expected or actual consequences of telling someone about their experiences with abuse.

Past research found that children's perceptions of negative consequences of disclosure influence their decision of when and if they will disclose. Palmer et al. (1999) found that 80% of adults who did not disclose abuse during childhood reported anticipating negative consequences of disclosure as why they failed to do so. Furthermore, Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) and Hershkowitz et al. (2007) both asserted that children's perceived negative consequences of disclosure impact children's decision when and if to disclose abuse. As was previously mentioned, 98% of children in the current sample described experiencing some form of abuse. In addition, many transcripts in the current study documented follow-up interviews rather than all transcripts consisting of first-recorded interviews as they were in Malloy et al. (2011). Therefore, expected consequences may not have been mentioned as often in the current study since most children had already made the decision to disclose (many in multiple interviews), causing anticipated consequences of disclosure to be irrelevant. Similarly, given that past research has found children with higher levels of parental support were more likely to disclose (Malloy et al., 2007; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992), it is possible that children who disclose on multiple occasions have a higher degree of parental support. As such, it may be the case that these children are not experiencing actual consequences of disclosure from their family members because they have a high degree of support, which would explain why they were not mentioning many consequences in their interview.



We hypothesized that victims of sexual abuse would expect more consequences than victims of other types of abuse, in line with previous research. This greater amount of anticipated consequences following disclosure of sexual abuse is due to shame and guilt associated with sexual abuse, along with increased fear of parents' negative reactions (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). This hypothesis was supported by our data, with victims of sexual abuse anticipating over twice as many consequences than was expected by chance. The abundance of expected consequences mentioned by victims of sexual abuse in the present study may be connected to the perceived severity of sexual abuse. Past research has found that victims of more serious crimes anticipated more negative consequences of disclosure and tended to have parents that were less supportive (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible that sexual abuse was perceived as a more serious crime by the children in our sample along with their parents. This could explain why children who experienced sexual abuse were mentioning significantly more consequences of disclosing than expected, compared to other types of abuse (e.g. verbal, physical, parents' substance abuse, and parents fighting). Other than sexual abuse, there were no significant differences among other abuse types and children's mention of actual or expected consequences of disclosure. Furthermore, there were not any apparent differences in actual or expected consequences and the child's relationship to the perpetrator when all types of abuse were considered.

Malloy et al. (2011) found that older children were more likely to mention an expected consequence of disclosure than younger children, a finding also replicated in our study. Although the chi-square for age did not reach significance, the oldest age group (13-17-years-of-age) expected more consequences of disclosure than any of the other age groups. There are a number of reasons as to why this may be the case. First, older children have more sophisticated cognitive skills than younger children, which may allow them to better understand their situation and cause

them to be more likely to predict future outcomes resulting from disclosure. Moreover, older children may anticipate more negative consequences because they feel ashamed or responsible for the abuse, especially in cases of sexual abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Older children may anticipate more negative consequences of disclosure because they are typically blamed more than younger children for experiencing abuse, as they are believed to be better able to defend themselves (Back & Lips, 1998; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997). Thus, older children may feel responsibility, feelings of shame, and perceive more negative outcomes of their disclosure if they are aware of the fact that others blame them for their abuse. As a whole, these age differences are especially problematic as shame, feelings of responsibility, and expecting consequences may delay or prolong disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), preventing older children from receiving the help they need.

As was previously mentioned, the most common expected consequence involved violence or hitting (29%). This emphasis of physical harm as an expected consequence is consistent with the study by Malloy et al. (2011), in which the second most commonly expected consequence was physical harm/death. In addition, 46% of children who mentioned an expected consequence were victims of physical abuse, which may have influenced their fears of experiencing subsequent physical abuse as a result of their disclosure.

Similar to the study by Hershkowitz et al. (2007), wherein children who expected negative responses to disclosure from their parents actually experienced negative parental reactions as measured by parental interviews, the current study found that actual and expected consequences shared similar qualitative themes. Both actual and expected consequences cited punishment, social consequences, and involvement with child protective services or the police as outcomes of their disclosure. These consequences are similar to the ones children described in

the study by Malloy et al. (2011), where children described fearing physical harm or death, negative emotions, and legal consequences resulting from disclosing sexual abuse. In addition, most consequences mentioned in the study by Malloy et al. (2011) pertained to the children themselves. This was also true of consequences mentioned in the current study, where almost all of the consequences mentioned were expected to befall the children themselves.

**Secrets.** There were some instances in the current study where children spoke of the need to keep a secret, without mentioning any expected consequence attached to it. For example, one child said *"It's a secret"* when questioned about his alleged abuse. Another child mentioned his mother being upset with him if he told, stating *"She expects me not to tell anyone anything that's going on in our household"*. Secrets were mentioned in four transcripts, three of which had disclosure of abuse and one that did not contain any disclosure. Although it is difficult to extrapolate conclusions given the small number of secrets mentioned by children, it is worth acknowledging as it implies that there may be cases in which abuse is disclosed but children are still keeping some secrets, potentially covering up other incidents of abuse that may have happened.

### **Minimizing or Justifying Abuse**

Past research has mainly focused on children justifying abuse because of something they did (self-blame), and less on children justifying abuse because of a characteristic of the perpetrator, or actions of another person. Thus, the current study was the first to our knowledge to investigate the aforementioned three different types of justifications (self, perpetrator, and other), along with minimization.

A relatively small amount (22%) of children's statements made attempts to minimize abuse or justify abuse as occurring because of themselves, another person, or some circumstance

that was outside of the alleged perpetrator's control. Although no previous research exists in regards to children minimizing or justifying abuse as occurring because of another person (other than the perpetrator) or as a result of a direct characteristic of the perpetrator, this relatively low frequency is consistent with past research on self-blame. Results from Hunter et al. (1992) demonstrated that relatively few children expressed any self-blame. Furthermore, the majority of children in the study by McGee et al. (2001) did not spontaneously make self-blame statements regarding their abuse, and only did so when probed.

The type of abuse that children have experienced may serve as an antecedent of whether children justify abuse as occurring because of something they did, and engage in self-blame or not. In cases of sexual abuse, past research has found that more severe abuse predicts more self-blame (Quas et al., 2003; Hazzard et al., 1995; Zinzow et al., 2010). In a study investigating self-blame attributions in multiple types of abuse, physically abused children blamed themselves for mild but not severe abuse, whereas verbally and sexually abused children did not believe it was their fault if the mistreatment was moderately extensive, but blamed themselves if it was mild or severe (Ney et al., 1986). Children in their sample also blamed themselves for their parents neglecting them. The current study revealed some notable results in regards to type of abuse and self-blame. Although the sample was small, children in the current study who experienced physical abuse justified abuse as occurring because of something they did (in other words, engaged in self-blame) twice as much than expected. Additionally, no children who experienced sexual abuse, witnessing parents' substance abuse, witnessing parents' fighting, or other types of abuse justified abuse as occurring because of something they did. This lack of self-blame may be related to the abuse severity, in that children in the sample for the current study may have experienced less severe abuse than children in previous studies that have found higher

levels of self-blame among victims of more severe abuse (Quas et al., 2003; Hazzard et al., 1995; Zinzow et al., 2010; Ney et al., 1986). However, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the severity of abuse in the current study. Given that our data consisted solely of pre-existing transcripts, we had no way of asking the children directly about how serious the abuse they experienced was, nor access to medical records which may have documented abuse-related injuries.

Analyses in the current study also revealed interesting results in terms of how the three other types of children's statements involving minimization, justification for perpetrator, and justification for other, differed according to abuse type. First, fewer children's statements contained minimization in regards to verbal abuse than expected, while more of children's statements consisted of minimization regarding physical and sexual abuse than was expected. In addition, more statements justified physical abuse as occurring because of a characteristic of the perpetrator than was expected. This was not the case for any other abuse type. It is possible that physical abuse is associated with more statements of minimization and justification due to the nature of physical abuse. Herzberger, Potts, and Dillon (1981) studied abused and non-abused children who were residents in a group home. They found that both abused and non-abused children accepted responsibility for being spanked, and that the majority of physically abused children felt loved and cared for by their parent despite the abuse. Additionally, children in their study described the physical abuse as occurring as a punishment because of actions they did (e.g. stealing; Herzberger et al., 1981). Thus, children in the current sample may have made more attempts to minimize and justify physical abuse over all other abuse types because they too perceive physical abuse as fair punishment for their own wrongdoings. Furthermore, children may feel more responsible or that they are inherently "bad" for experiencing sexual abuse since

they were coerced to participate in the act (Hazzard et al., 1995), which may explain their increased efforts to minimize or justify sexual abuse in the current study. Children's feelings of responsibility for physical and sexual abuse is in opposition to witnessing parents' substance abuse or parents arguing with each other, in which the child may be less likely to take on responsibility, since they are presumably uninvolved in those actions. This may explain why there were no minimizing or justifying statements in these categories.

The current study did not provide evidence for age or gender differences and minimizing or justifying abuse. The lack of age differences in terms of minimizing and justifying in the current sample is reminiscent of the inconclusive age differences in self-blame that have been evident in previous studies. Hunter et al. (1992) and Zinzow et al. (2010) found lower levels of self-blame associated with younger age of sexual abuse onset, while studies by Hoagwood (1990) and Hazzard et al. (1995) cited greater levels of self-blame in younger children. However, the current study was the first of our knowledge to investigate self-blame in multiple abuse types as opposed to focusing on sexual abuse as the aforementioned studies did. Thus, future research studying multiple types of abuse and how they relate to age differences in self-blame is necessary. The lack of gender differences in the current study are similar to that of McGee et al. (2001), in which there were no gender differences with the exception that females had higher levels of self-blaming affect for family violence. Additionally, participants consisted of entirely females who experienced sexual abuse in the studies by Hoagwood (1990), Zinzow et al. (2010), and Hazzard et al. (1995), necessitating future research involving both genders' self-blame, minimizations, and justifications for multiple types of abuse.

Results from the present study revealed a significant effect of alleged perpetrator and statement, with children minimizing and justifying abuse more than expected for parents, but not

for any of the other alleged perpetrators. These results are reminiscent of those in Herzberger et al. (1981), where parents were viewed as loving and caring despite their frequent physical abuse. Perhaps abuse from parents is interpreted as justified punishment for wrongdoings, as physical abuse from parents was in Herzberger et al. (1981). However, more research is necessary to verify this hypothesis.

These minimization and justification statements bring many questions to mind. First, it is unclear whether these statements are really the children's own cognitions, or if they are justifications that they hear from their parents or other family members. It could be that children repeat these phrases during investigative interviews because their parents have told them to, or because they hear the phrases from their parents so often. Alternatively, perhaps children are making a conscious attempt to rationalize the abuse out of their own volition, without any coaching or previous exposure to these phrases. Either way, these statements of blaming external circumstances of the perpetrator as why abuse occurred may indicate a need for specific parental interventions, whether it be anger or stress management, housing resources, or financial aid. Future research is needed to investigate the origin and veracity of these justifications for alleged perpetrators, in order to inform potential interventions to prevent the occurrence of abuse.

### **Clinical and Forensic Implications**

The way in which one perceives a situation greatly influences the psychological impact of the situation for that person (Beck, 1976). Therefore, understanding more about the ways in which children think about their abuse may aid in the prediction of future psychological trauma. As was previously mentioned, the majority of children's statements in the current study were blaming the alleged perpetrator for their abusive actions. Zinzow et al. (2010) found that greater perpetrator blame was associated with less general symptomatology in female undergraduates

who had a history of sexual abuse. In contrast, self-blame has been found to be related to increased levels of depression, decreased self-esteem, and behaviour problems (Hazzard et al., 1995; Morrow, 1991; McGee et al., 2001). Thus, the high levels of perpetrator blame and low levels of self-blame (e.g. justification-self) in the current study may signify a more positive psychological prognosis for the children in our sample. As was previously mentioned, it would be interesting to include a well-being questionnaire after the investigative interview in order to verify this claim.

In terms of forensic applications, the relatively infrequent mention of expected or actual consequences of disclosure may be symbolic of children in the current sample freely disclosing abuse without experiencing or anticipating any negative events as occurring as a result of their disclosure. The most common types of abuse in the current study were physical and verbal, so it is possible that fewer consequences are associated with disclosing abuse of this nature as opposed to sexual abuse. This could be partially due to the fact that physical and verbal abuse may be related to less shame and guilt, which has generally been found to be associated with sexual abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Further research involving expected and actual consequences in cases of physical and verbal abuse is warranted, given the fact that all research on consequences of disclosure to date focuses on sexual abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Malloy et al., 2011; Hershkowitz et al., 2007). In this way, researchers could elucidate whether children who experience physical or verbal abuse do not expect negative consequences which makes them more likely to disclose, or if there is a relationship at all between the two. Understanding more about the special challenges or hindrances to disclosure for children who have experienced different types of abuse can ultimately be utilized by police officers and child protective services to inform better interviewing techniques.



### **Future Directions**

There are many future directions that research on children's cognitive processing of abuse could take. The first and perhaps most intuitive future direction would be replicating the study with a different sample. Transcripts used in the present study were the same transcripts used in the studies by Rischke, Roberts, and Price (2011) and Price and Roberts (2011) as a part of NICHD training for child protective workers and police officers. These transcripts were chosen as a result of their adherence to a widely accepted investigative interview protocol (Lamb, 2007), and for their wide range of ages and abuse type. Since researchers from the current study did not have access to video or audio files of the interviews, the current study relied on transcripts of the interviews which contained missing or unclear data. It is possible that some information that could have been coded was lost to these unclear parts. For example, if a transcript said "He (unclear) hits and it (unclear – 30 seconds)... he (unclear) bad person" it seems as though the child is placing blame on the alleged perpetrator for hitting the child. However, a statement that contained unclear information could not be coded, since there is no way to know for sure if that is what the child is actually saying. This unclear information may have been avoided by using more advanced audio-visual recording and playback equipment. Double-checking completed transcriptions with the audio-visual files of interviews would also improve transcription accuracy and minimize the amount of missing information.

Furthermore, the sample for the current study consisted primarily of children who had already disclosed abuse (98%), and as such, results must be interpreted with caution. It is entirely possible that children who do not disclose abuse would have different thought processes. For example, previous research has found that children who do not disclose or delay disclosure anticipate more negative consequences as a result of disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003;

Hershkowitz et al., 2007). It would therefore be interesting to study transcripts of interviews with children such as those in Lawson and Chaffin (1992), who have physical symptoms of abuse (e.g. STD, suspicious bruises) but have not yet disclosed. Furthermore, researchers in the current study did not have access to information as to previous involvement of children in the current sample with child protective services or police department. It is possible that children who have been involved with these services for a period of time have experienced multiple investigative interviews and are therefore more (or possibly less) likely to express their own cognitions about abuse. Future research could compare the types of cognitions of children involved in their first investigative interview versus children involved in multiple ones. Finally, having a sample with a more evenly distributed range of abuse types could be beneficial, since substance abuse and sexual abuse were under-represented in the current sample. The same could be said for ages, as the youngest (e.g. 4-year-olds) and oldest (16- to 17-year-olds) were also under-represented in our sample.

A significant limitation of the current study related to our use of chi-square analyses, despite violating the assumption of independence and the expected cell count rule of less than 20% of cells containing an expected count less than five. Due to our relatively small sample of statements other than blame, some tables in our study consisted of more than 50% of cells with expected counts less than five. Although this violation is problematic, we deemed the chi-square analyses as more appropriate than simply analyzing frequencies of each statement type or conducting an analysis of variance. Future studies could avoid this problem by having a larger sample size in which more statements about abuse were expressed. Overall, results of the current study must be interpreted with caution due to this limitation.

Another limitation concerns the novelty of the coding scheme. Although the current study had good inter-rater reliability using the coding scheme, it would be beneficial to test its effectiveness with transcripts from a different sample. This is especially important, since the coding scheme was developed based solely on transcripts in the current study. Perhaps some aspects of the coding scheme would need to be altered to be more applicable to a wider sample.

Additionally, it would be interesting to include research-based questionnaires after the investigative interviews themselves, in order to answer some questions that could not have been answered with the transcripts we had. First, future research could include a measure of psychological trauma after the initial investigative interview. Some potential measures may be the Global Adjustment Scale (Shaffer et al., 1983), as used in Hazzard et al. (1995), or the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), as used in both Hazzard et al. (1995) and McGee et al. (2001). Including the psychological trauma measure would illuminate potential connections between children's perpetrator blame, minimization or justification, and whether the child expressed expecting or experiencing actual consequences of disclosure and well-being. In this way, we could determine if the minimization and three types of justification statements in our study have any correlation with previous studies on children's self-blame and well-being. Second, a study measuring children's attributions of blame after the investigative interview and comparing these attributions to the perpetrator blame, minimization, and justification statements that occurred naturally in the investigative interview could reveal correlations between naturally occurring and questionnaire-elicited attributions. This could be accomplished using an attribution scale such as *The Attribution for Maltreatment Interview* (AFMI; McGee, 1990). This scale consists of four structured clinical interviews for four types of maltreatment, and has subscales

measuring both self-blame and perpetrator-blame. The AFMI has been demonstrated to have good inter-rater reliability in previous studies (e.g. McGee et al., 2001).

Finally, future research could study how children's statements during the investigative interview relate to others' perceived credibility of child witnesses. Researchers could manipulate interviews to contain a great deal of perpetrator blame, expected consequences, minimizations and justifications, or experiment with combinations of statement types, in order to see if certain children's statement types affect their perceived credibility. Perceived credibility could be measured using an attribution measure such as the one used in Davies et al. (2013), which measures individuals' blame towards both the perpetrator and the victim. It would be interesting to conduct an experiment of this nature with individuals who have influence in the outcome of children's testimony in real life, such as police officers, social workers, judges, and attorneys.

Overall, the current study serves as a point of departure for a broad range of future research that has the potential to better understand the meaning of children's cognitions about abuse, and how these cognitions influence others' perceptions of them.

## **Conclusion**

The current study investigated ways in which children think about abusive experiences in the context of investigative interviews. Results demonstrated that children made statements blaming the perpetrator more than any other statement type. Less than a quarter of children's statements served to minimize or justify abuse, and even fewer statements were made in regards to actual or expected consequences of disclosure. Understanding more about the ways children think about abuse may have implications for how others (e.g. judges, defense attorneys) view their statements. Furthermore, the type of statements children make may predict future

psychological trauma. Although child abuse is a multi-faceted and complex problem, future research can seek to elaborate and better understand children's subjective experiences, in order to improve others' perceptions of child witnesses, and overall well-being of the abused child.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Number of Statement Types in Each Interview*

Statement Type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Expected Consequences	.279	.746	24
Actual Consequences	.128	.400	11
Minimization	.349	.823	29
Justification – Self	.093	.364	8
Justification – Perpetrator	.256	.739	22
Justification – Other	.058	.235	5
Blame	2.256	1.848	194

*Note.* For each statement type,  $N=86$  children.  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Frequency of Statements by Age*

		Statement							
		Expected	Actual	Minimization	Justification-	Justification-	Justification-	Blame	
		Consequences	Consequences		Self	Perpetrator	Other		
Age Group in years	4-6	Actual	1	0	2	0	1	0	12
	(N=9)	Expected	1.3	.4	1.7	.5	1.2	.3	10.6
	7-9	Actual	7	3	9	5	9	2	75
	(N=)	Expected	9.2	2.9	11.7	3.3	7.9	2.1	72.8
	10-12	Actual	5	1	6	3	6	2	44
	(N=)	Expected	5.6	1.8	7.1	2.0	4.8	1.3	44.3
	13-17	Actual	9	3	11	0	3	1	43
	(N=)	Expected	5.9	1.9	7.5	2.1	5.1	1.3	46.3

Note. N = 294 coded responses, ns. Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 3

*Frequency of Statements by Gender*

		Statement						
		Expected	Actual	Minimization	Justification-	Justification-	Justification-	Blame
		Consequences	Consequences		Self	Perpetrator	Other	
Female	Actual	18	6	15	3	8	3	90
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>13.6</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>95.3</i>
Male	Actual	6	5	13	5	14	1	89
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>10.9</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>12.7</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>88.7</i>
Unknown	Actual	0	0	0	0	0	1	17
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>.7</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>.5</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>.3</i>	<i>12</i>

*Note.*  $N = 294$  coded responses, *ns.* Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 4

*Frequency of Statements by Alleged Perpetrator*

		Statement						
		Expected	Actual	Minimization	Justification-	Justification-	Justification-	Blame
		Consequences	Consequences		Self	Perpetrator	Other	
Parent	Actual	15	8	21	7	20	5	117
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>15.8</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>18.4</i>	<i>5.3</i>	<i>14.4</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>128.7</i>
	Adj. Resid	-.3	.5	1.1	1.3	2.6	1.6	-3.0
Step- Parent	Actual	0	0	0	1	1	0	26
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>2.7</i>	<i>.8</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>.5</i>	<i>18.7</i>
	Adj. Resid	-1.7	-1.1	-1.8	.3	-.8	-.7	3.1
Sibling	Actual	0	0	1	0	0	0	19
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>.7</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>.5</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>.3</i>	<i>13.3</i>
	Adj. Resid	-1.4	-.9	-.7	-.8	-1.3	-.6	2.8
Other	Actual	9	3	6	0	1	0	34
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>4.3</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>5.0</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>4.0</i>	<i>.9</i>	<i>35.3</i>
	Adj. Resid	2.6	.8	.5	-1.3	-1.7	-1.1	-.4

Note.  $N = 294$  coded responses,  $p = .080$ . Dependent variable is frequency of statements.



Table 5

*Frequency of Statements by Abuse Type*

		Statement						
		Expected Consequences	Actual Consequences	Minimization	Justification- Self	Justification- Perpetrator	Justification- Other	Blame
Verbal	Actual	4.0	2.0	1.0	1.0	7.0	3.0	70.0
	Expected	6.6	3.3	8.4	2.4	6.6	1.5	59.1
	Adj. Resid	-1.3	-.9	-3.2	-1.1	.2	1.5	3.0
Physical	Actual	9.0	3.0	17.0	7.0	13.0	2.0	81.0
	Expected	9.9	5.0	12.7	3.6	9.9	2.3	88.6
	Adj. Resid	-.4	-1.2	1.7	2.4	1.4	-.2	-1.9
Substance	Actual	2.0	4.0	2.0	0	1.0	0	11.0
	Expected	1.5	.8	1.9	.5	1.5	.3	13.4
	Adj. Resid	.4	4.0	.1	-.8	-.4	-.6	-1.2
Sexual	Actual	7.0	2.0	6.0	0	1.0	0	24.0
	Expected	3.0	1.5	3.8	1.1	3.0	.7	26.8
	Adj. Resid	2.6	.4	1.3	-1.1	-1.3	-.9	-1.0
Parents Fighting	Actual	0	0	1.0	0	0	0	9.0
	Expected	.8	.4	1.0	.3	.8	.2	6.7
	Adj. Resid	-.9	-.6	0	-.5	-.9	-.4	1.6
Other	Actual	0	0	1.0	0	0	0	1.0
	Expected	.2	.1	.2	.1	.2	0	1.3
	Adj. Resid	-.4	-.3	1.9	-.2	-.4	-.2	-.5

Note.  $N = 294$  coded responses,  $p < .001$ . Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 6

*Frequency of Statements by how they were Elicited*

		Statements						
		Expected Consequences	Actual Consequences	Minimization	Justification- Self	Justification- Perpetrator	Justification- Other	Blame
Prompted	Actual	12	2	11	2	3	1	77
	<i>Expected</i>	8.8	4.0	10.3	2.9	8.1	1.8	72.0
Spontaneous	Actual	12	9	17	6	19	4	119
	<i>Expected</i>	15.2	7.0	17.7	5.1	13.9	3.2	124.0

*Note.*  $N = 294$  coded responses, *ns.* Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 7

*Frequency of How Statements were Elicited by Age*

		Age (in years)													
		4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	17	N/A
How	Spontaneous Actual	2	1	7	7	36	29	7	17	19	10	18	10	2	21
	<i>Expected</i>	1.3	4.4	5.7	9.5	37.3	22.8	8.2	16.4	17.7	10.1	17.7	12.7	2.5	19.6
Elicited	Interviewer Actual	0	6	2	8	23	7	6	9	9	6	10	10	2	10
	Prompted <i>Expected</i>	.7	2.6	3.3	5.5	21.7	13.2	4.8	9.6	10.3	5.9	10.3	7.3	1.5	11.4

*Note.*  $N = 294$  coded responses.  $p > .05$ . N/A refers to cases where information on age was unavailable. Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 8

*Frequencies of Relationship Blamed by Abuse Type*

Abuse Type		Relationship to Alleged Perpetrator			
		Parents	Step-Parents	Siblings	Other
Verbal	Actual	50	17	1	1
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>41.0</i>	<i>9.2</i>	<i>6.7</i>	<i>12.0</i>
	Adj. Resid	2.7	3.4	-2.9	-4.4
Physical	Actual	49	6	16	10
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>48.2</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>14.1</i>
	Adj. Resid	.2	-2.1	4.0	-1.6
Substance	Actual	8	3	0	0
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>1.9</i>
	Adj. Resid	.9	1.4	-1.1	-1.6
Sexual	Actual	0	0	2	22
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>14.3</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>4.2</i>
	Adj. Resid	-6.3	-2.1	-.2	10.2
Parents Fighting	Actual	9	0	0	0
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>.9</i>	<i>1.6</i>
	Adj. Resid	2.5	-1.2	-1.0	-1.4
Other	Actual	0	0	0	1
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>.6</i>	<i>.1</i>	<i>.1</i>	<i>.2</i>
	Adj. Resid	-1.2	-.4	-.3	2.2

*Note.*  $N = 195$  for blame statements,  $p < .001$ . Dependent variable is frequency of statements.

Table 9

*Types and Examples of Expected Consequences*

Type	Example	Proportion
Violence/hitting	<i>"She tells me you're such a tattler now I'm going to hit you more often"</i>	36.84%
Unspecified trouble/mad	<i>"I didn't want to say it at first 'cause I knew I might be in a little bit of trouble"</i>	21.05%
Social consequences	<i>"I didn't want to tell my mom or my grandma or them because they'd think I was lying"</i>	21.05%
Call CPS/Police	<i>"I don't want to go away or anything"</i>	21.05%

*Note.* CPS = Child Protective Services. *N* = 24 for expected consequences.

Table 10

*Types and Examples of Actual Consequences*

Type	Example	Proportion
Punishment from perpetrator	<i>"Then I got grounded"</i>	27.27%
Social Consequences	<i>"My grandpa won't even talk to me"</i>	36.30%
CPS/Police involvement	<i>"[CPS] made me live with my aunt for the summer"</i>	36.30%

*Note.* CPS = Child Protective Services. *N*= 11 for actual consequences.

Table 11

*Types and Examples of Minimization*

Type	Example	Proportion
Downplay overall severity of abuse	<i>"It just stings a bit, it wasn't that bad"</i>	41.3%
Not a big deal	<i>"It wasn't a big deal"</i>	27.6%
Denying danger	<i>"It's not like I'm in danger"</i>	13.8%
Downplay frequency of abuse	<i>"Sometimes my mom hurts me a lot. Just sometimes"</i>	10.3%
Denying something known happened	<i>"But she never touched her kids or nothing like that"</i>	6.9%

*Note.* N= 29 for minimization.

Table 12

*Types and Examples of Justification – Perpetrator*

Type	Example	Proportion
External circumstances	<i>“She’s only angry because she’s tired”</i>	39.1%
Don’t mean to	<i>“When they get angry sometimes they hit us but they don’t mean to”</i>	30.4%
Past experiences	<i>“The reason he used to hit me and get really mad is because he grew up on a farm and that’s exactly what they did to him when he was bad”</i>	21.7%
Personality characteristics	<i>“He’s just a rough teddy bear. When he’s nice, he’s really nice, but when he’s mad, he’s really mad”</i>	8.7%

*Note.* N= 23 for justification – perpetrator.



## Appendix A

**Coding Manual****Part 1: Consequences of Disclosure**

If the child mentions consequences of disclosure but does not further elaborate on the incident itself or the child's feelings about the incident, it is coded as either:

- 1) **Actual consequences:** child mentions a consequence that happened when **s/he told** someone about the abuse. This code is used when a child mentions the consequence without mentioning how this consequence affected him/her, and the child's thoughts about the consequence are not mentioned.

*E.g. "He hit me when I told."*

*E.g. "Mom freaked out when she found out CAS was coming"*

OR

- 2) **Inferred consequences:** child mentions a possible consequence that would be the result of the **child disclosing**, but does not elaborate on the consequence in any meaningful way.

**Note.** Consequences are only coded if they are a consequence of disclosure; **consequences of the abuse itself do not belong in this category.**

**Part 2: Qualifying**

If the child gives any kind of description of their own thoughts or interpretation of the events that took place, it is considered qualifying and the child's utterances belong in one of three broad categories: minimization, blame, or justification.

- 1) **Minimization:**

Child says something that attempts to minimize the perceived severity of the abuse, in order to lessen blame on the perpetrator or feelings of shame or anxiety the child may be experiencing as a result of the abuse.

*E.g. "It doesn't happen that often" (after several incidents of abuse are discussed)*

*E.g. "It's not a big deal"*

- 2) **Blame:**

Child elaborates on why the perpetrator should be blamed for the incident, and makes a significant attempt to portray the perpetrator in an unfavourable light. Can do this in a number of ways:

- a. Describing characteristics of the perpetrator **and backing them up with their own opinion of why these characteristics are bad**

- i. *E.g. "Dad drinks all the time and it's just not right/he hits us when he drinks/he gets out of control when he drinks"*

- b. Describing **their own reactions** to abuse or an unfavourable act by the perpetrator

- i. *E.g. "When he did that I felt so mad/angry/ I hated him for it"*

- ii. *E.g. "I felt sad when I saw my parents fighting"*

- iii. *E.g. "He scares me because...."*

- c. **Denying that the act was justified**, thereby placing blame on the perpetrator
  - i. E.g. “He hit me on purpose, it wasn’t an accident” or “I: Was she trying to help you? C: No, she was just rubbing me”
  - ii. E.g. “She started yelling **out of nowhere**”
  - iii. E.g. “She hit us for **no reason**”
  - iv. E.g. “They fight/they yell **too much**”
- d. Child uses a **negative metaphor** to describe how they felt about the action (e.g. pain, negative feelings, etc.)
  - i. E.g. “He hit me like I was a human punching bag”
  - ii. E.g. “When he hit me it felt like a crocodile was biting at my feet”
- e. Child uses a **negative label** to describe the perpetrator.
  - i. E.g. “I know he’s a rapist”
  - ii. E.g. “She’s really mean”
  - iii. E.g. “He’s a bully”

*Note. These labels must still be in the context of abuse. If the child mentions the label before mentioning abuse, that’s okay – after they’ve mentioned abuse just go back and code the label.*

**Note.** The “blame” **nor** “minimization” code are used for any response to an interviewer asking how the abuse felt in regards to the physical action itself (i.e. “How did it feel when he hit you?”), **unless** the child’s response is in the form of a strong metaphor (i.e. It felt like a crocodile was biting at my feet would be coded) or **if it is anything else beyond a simple “it hurt” / “it didn’t hurt”** (i.e. “When he hit me it felt really hard and my heart hurt and I had troubles breathing” or “it really hurt a lot” would both be coded). A child’s statement such as “It hurt” or a simple description of the incident itself (e.g. Dad hit me) would not be coded.

\* If the interviewer says a prompt such as “Tell me more about...” Or “Describe that to me” (aka a prompt which does not bring up the physical incident itself), a child’s response such as “It was right on my back and it was like really hard” is coded.

### 3) **Justification:**

Child attempts to justify abuse by explaining it in terms of one of three things:

- a. **Self:** child describes abuse as occurring because they themselves did something wrong.
 

E.g. “Dad hit me because I did something bad”

*Note. Quote must be **because** I did something bad – the justification-self code is not used when a child says he hits me when... when is more of a correlation while because is more of a causation/explanation*
- b. **Other:** child describes abuse as occurring because somebody other than the child or the perpetrator instigated the abuse
 

E.g. “Dad hit me because mom always makes him mad”
- c. **Perpetrator:** child describes abuse as a result of a direct characteristic of the perpetrator. Justifying abuse because of a characteristic of the perpetrator is different in blaming since **the characteristic is viewed as an accepted**

**personality trait in justification**; in blaming the characteristic is something the child views as concerning or perceives as wrong

*E.g. "Dad hit me because he's always mad, **that's just how he is**"*

*Note: If the child had just said "Dad hit me because he's always mad", it would be categorized as blame. The "that's just how he is" at the end justifies the statement, meaning we categorize it as justification – perp.*

*E.g. "Dad hit me because his teacher hit him when he was younger"*

### **Part 3: Interviewer Prompt / Spontaneous**

-For each code, you must note whether the child's quote was spontaneous or the result of a prompt from the interviewer.

#### **Coded as spontaneous if:**

- 1) The quote is said amongst the child describing the entire situation
  - a. *E.g. I: Tell me about what happened that evening, from the very beginning to the very end C: I was on the computer and I clicked... So she got mad at me and like she **got all hormonal and locked me out of the house***
- 2) The quote is said in response to an interviewer question that is not directly related to the quote
  - a. *E.g. I: How do you guys get along? C: Sometimes me and my brother don't get along with my mom because she like swears at us **because she really hates my dad...***

#### **Coded as an interviewer prompt if:**

- 1) The interviewer explicitly asks why these things happen
  - a. *E.g. I: Why do you think mom does these things? C: She's stressed all the time.*
- 2) The interviewer asks why the child has not told anyone
  - a. *E.g. I: Why haven't you talked to your parents about it? C: It's not a big deal...*
- 3) The child's utterance is a direct response to the question asked by the interviewer, even if the response is in the midst of a larger paragraph. If the quote is a direct response to the question, it needs to be counted as a prompt regardless of where it is.
  - a. *E.g. I: Tell me more about what happens when your mom gets angry. C: It depends what it is. It's gotten better now but she lives with my dad now. It has gotten a bit better **but when my sister used to live here it was out of control.***

### **Part 4: General Points**

#### **CARDINAL RULES:**

**-Interviews are only coded if they include at least one disclosure of abuse; if child denies that anything happened or no incidents of abuse arise, it is not coded; note that the lack of consequences is recorded in the data file, however, as 0 in the column 'number of consequences mentioned'..**

-Children sometimes mention what other people think. These statements cannot be coded, as they are not a qualification from the child.

*E.g. "My dad always tells me where she gets her anger from is like her parents. The ways*

*he was treated when she was a kid"*

-Sounds like justification-perpetrator, but you can't code it since it's a sentiment from the father and not the actual child.

-Only exception to this rule is when an adult mentions consequences of disclosure.

*E.g. "My dad said the CAS would come" or "He told me he'd kill me if I told"*

-Each interview should be marked and sectioned off for ground rules, rapport, practice, and substantive sections; if one of these sections is missing please record which section is missing in database.

-The child may talk about individuals who are in their life and say statements that resemble blame (e.g. saying mom's boyfriend is lazy and mean). These statements are not coded **unless they allege abuse from that adult**; if they are just talking about how they don't like that individual, it is not coded.

-Repeated statements are not coded, although different reactions to the same event are.

*E.g. "He hit me and I felt sad" and "When he hits me I feel sad" are not both coded as they are the same reaction to the same event (e.g. both use the word "sad" to describe their reaction). Thus, you would only code the first "He hit me and I felt sad" – not the second statement. If the child also said "he hit me and it really hurt" that would be coded since it is a different feeling than the previous statement (e.g. It really hurt instead of sad).*

-Statements which include (unclear) **cannot be coded**, as we do not have enough information about the context of the quote. In order to code a quote, you must know exactly what the child is saying.

-When a minimizing or justifying statement is followed up with a blaming statement, the two cancel each other out if the blame is not strong enough to code on its own. If the blame is strong enough to code on its own, the statement should be coded as blame.

*E.g. "She was like chasing after me, but she probably didn't realize she was chasing me with a knife because she's always acting funny because she drinks and everything so"*

-Quote was said in an interview where 10 other blame codes were found

-"Always acting funny" seems like blame, but it isn't quite strong enough to code on its own.

## Appendix B

*Descriptive Information for All Transcripts*

		All Transcripts	Codeable	Not Codeable
<i>N</i>		159	86	73
Mean Age (in years)		10.06 (3.35)	10.23 (3.11)	9.86 (3.66)
Missing Age		26	12	14
Gender	Male	82	43	39
	Female	64	38	26
	Missing	13	5	8

*Note.* Standard deviations are in parentheses.