

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO CHILD ABUSE DISCLOSURE



What is the purpose?

Research shows that children and young people often disclose abuse to friends or parents, with the adult's response playing a crucial role in their recovery and safety [1-4]. Disclosure serves as a means of seeking support, and the manner in which it is received and responded to can significantly impact the victim's recovery trajectory and willingness to seek further assistance [2]. Previous studies in South Africa have primarily focused on sexual abuse disclosures of children. This study aims to expand understanding of factors that hinder or promote disclosure of all forms of childhood abuse in South Africa.



How did we do it?

We conducted a scoping review to understand the barriers and facilitators to childhood abuse disclosure. We then conducted a survey with 883 and in-depth interviews with 31 young adults aged 21-30 from rural and peri-urban communities in Mpumalanga. Young adults answered survey and open-response interview questions about their childhood experiences of different types of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional and witnessing domestic violence), who they told, reactions to their disclosure, and access to services.

Key findings:

Inflictors of Abuse: Physical and emotional abuse was most commonly inflicted by parents or close relatives. Sexual abuse patterns differed. Additional insights revealed a broader range of inflictors, including peers, neighbours, and community members, for both emotional and sexual abuse.



Physical abuse

73.8% Parents were the most common inflictors of physical abuse

Boys experienced higher physical abuse victimisation at the hand of teachers than girls **17.5%**
vs
2.3%



Emotional abuse

43.2% Participants reported parents as the most common inflictors of emotional abuse

Girls experienced higher emotional abuse victimization at the hand of close relatives than boys **35.5%**
vs
29.5%



Sexual abuse

32.5% The most common inflictor of CSA for girls was most likely to be a stranger

more than half of the boys experienced CSA at the hands of friends. **56.8%**



Policy/Program implications:

To address abuse disclosure effectively in South Africa, various initiatives must be undertaken.

1. Awareness campaigns should be launched to educate communities on the importance of empathetic responses to disclosures, to challenge victim-blaming and reduce stigma toward abuse survivors.
2. Training programs for key stakeholders, including educators, healthcare workers, and police, are essential to equip them with skills for recognizing abuse signs, providing appropriate support, and fostering non-judgmental attitudes.
3. Gender-sensitive psychosocial support programs should be developed to address the unique fears and barriers faced by boys and girls, complemented by referral systems enabling survivors to access legal aid, counselling, housing, and health services. Schools and clinics can serve as critical points for intervention by establishing abuse reporting protocols and incorporating workshops on prevention and disclosure into curricula.
4. Collaborative local initiatives, led by NGOs and community organizations, should focus on survivor-centered programs and empowerment while challenging cultural norms that perpetuate abuse. Together, these measures aim to enhance support systems and create safer environments for abuse survivors.

“I also tried to speak to ChildLine because I was hurting... when I was in grade 3, I don’t forget, people from ChildLine came and said if we were facing abuse at home. They gave us a number and I had to re-cite the number. I always had it in mind. I remember it even now 08000 55555. So, I called this number, and I was able to speak with them. We chatted. I got a lady... she tried talking, and she also called me using her phone. She tried to give me counselling until I felt OK.”

(P4_M - Community violence, sexual assault, corporal punishment, physical abuse experience)

Key findings: (cont.)

First Disclosure: Physical and emotional abuse was often disclosed shortly after it occurred, while sexual abuse disclosures were frequently delayed. Some participants disclosed abuse during childhood, while others delayed disclosure until adulthood. In many cases, sexual abuse was only revealed for the first time during the study interviews.



Physical abuse of those who disclosed:

72.1% of participants reported the abuse soon after

27.9% reported after a long time.



Emotional abuse

68.3% reported the abuse soon after

31.7% reported a long time after



Sexual abuse

62.5% reported the abuse soon after

37.5% reported the abuse a long time after

While some participants did not disclose at all in childhood, a few disclosed for the first time during the interview. Most of those that did not disclose in childhood or ever, had sexual abuse experiences, with few experiencing other types of abuse such as physical, emotional, witnessing domestic violence.

Barriers to Disclosure: Normalization of violence, economic dependence on the abuser, and fears of being disbelieved or blamed were significant barriers. Girls, in particular, feared being thrown out of their homes in cases of physical abuse and not being believed in cases of sexual abuse. Shame, social stigma, and fear of judgment further discouraged disclosure.

“No... they [teachers at the school] called me to the staff room, and I wouldn’t tell them... it wouldn’t help. If I told them what happened at the end of the day, they would hit me at home.”

(P6_F – Sexual and physical abuse experiences)

Key findings: (cont.)

“I would keep quiet... I would keep quiet because I was young. I did not know what to do or where to go.”

(P10_F – Physical and sexual abuse experiences)

Facilitators for Disclosure: The inability to endure severe violence, and encouragement from trusted individuals such as friends and family were key facilitators. Trusted individuals provided safe spaces and non-judgmental attitudes, which were critical in enabling disclosures. For girls, the fear for their lives also prompted sexual abuse disclosures.

“I would think about what happened there often and it would hurt me... I thought it would be better to tell my mother because she is also a woman, maybe she would understand.”

(P11_F – Kidnapping and sexual abuse experiences)

Confidantes for Disclosure: Parents, siblings, adult relatives, and peers were the most common confidantes. Boys were more likely to disclose to peers, while girls were more likely to confide in parents and siblings. Family members and neighbors also acted as confidantes.

Responses to Disclosure: Survivors of physical abuse were generally believed. However, in cases of emotional abuse, boys were more often believed but no action was taken (25.6% vs 9.5%), whereas girls were more likely to be disbelieved (6.4% vs 5.1). For sexual abuse, while most participants were believed (72.9%), some were blamed or disbelieved. Teachers often took action in cases of physical abuse, but family members sometimes ignored or concealed reports of abuse.

Sources of Help: Family members were the primary sources of help across all abuse types. Some participants also sought help from healthcare professionals, teachers, religious leaders, social workers, or NGOs. Boys were more likely to receive help from teachers, while girls received additional support from healthcare professionals and social workers. Experiences with police and formal support systems were mixed, ranging from brutal treatment to effective assistance.

1. Childline South Africa. (2018). Disclosure of abuse. <https://www.childlinesa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/disclosure-of-child-abuse.pdf>
2. Goldsworthy, K. (2015). Child abuse disclosure: Delays, non-disclosure, and partial disclosure. *Child Abuse Review*, 24(3), 159-169. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2280>
3. Priebe, G., & Svedin, C. G. (2008). Child sexual abuse is largely hidden from the adult society: An epidemiological study of adolescents' disclosures. *Child abuse & neglect*, 32(12), 1095-1108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2008.04.001>
4. Shackel, R. (2009). Understanding children's medium for disclosing sexual abuse: A tool for overcoming potential misconceptions in the courtroom. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 16(3), 379-393

Source:

Monaisa, K, Truter, E, Fouche, A & Meinck, F. Exploring the Facilitators and Barriers of Childhood Abuse Disclosure Among Adult Survivors: A scoping review.

Monaisa, K, Truter, E, Fouche, A & Meinck, F. Childhood Abuse Disclosure in South Africa: A Quantitative Exploration of Prevalence, Barriers and Facilitators.

Monaisa, K, Truter, E, Fouche, A & Meinck, F. “We didn't tell anyone, we were still young”: A qualitative study of experiences, barriers to and facilitators of childhood abuse disclosure.

