

Child sexual abuse—hearing the cry for help is not always a simple task

January 4 2018, by Samuel Lerner



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Child sexual abuse is on the rise in the UK with the [NSPCC announcing](#)

[a 31% increase](#) in police referrals in 2017 compared to the previous year. Worryingly, this is just the tip of the iceberg as child sexual abuse is widely under-reported. My research has revealed that a major factor in this issue is the use of language and a safeguarding system which is sometimes deaf to a child's cry for help.

There are many reasons why a child will not tell anyone that they are being abused, including fear, shame and confusion. It is therefore important that adults are aware of [behaviours](#) that may be symptomatic of sexual abuse.

Greater awareness of potential indicators of sexual abuse is undoubtedly crucial for helping adults to recognise when there may be a problem. But as a linguist, I am particularly troubled by reports of children who attempted to disclose sexual abuse, but felt that they were [never heard](#). That is, their attempts to seek help failed.

The disclosure stage (the point at which an allegation of sexual abuse is made) is crucial in determining what action is taken, if any at all. The recipient must firstly acknowledge that a child has reported sexual abuse and then be willing to act.

There are several reasons why children's voices may be unheard. Sadly, cases where recipients have not acted appropriately, either through [minimisation](#) or [cover-up](#) are numerous. Second, since children often do not make a clear disclosure, the full extent of their abuse may not always be apparent. They may only partially report the abuse, they may minimise the extent of the abuse, and they may [lack the vocabulary](#) to convey the full extent of their abuse.

Linguistic skill

But another reason why disclosures go unheard may be linked to the

linguistic skill of the adult the child confides to.

In data that I am currently analysing (online counselling sessions between victims of sexual abuse and [ChildLine](#) volunteers) some children talk explicitly about sexual abuse. Within the opening lines of one counselling session, an 11-year-old child stated bluntly that she had been raped.

By contrast, a 15-year-old revealed [sexual abuse](#) more cautiously over a conversation lasting one hour and ten minutes. First, she reported she had had sex. Later, she explained that she didn't consent. She then provided details about the level of force. Finally, one hour into the conversation, she asked for clarification over whether she had been raped.

Importantly, it was the counsellor that facilitated the disclosure and helped the child to articulate it. In this example, the process of reporting was very much a two-person interaction. The pressure shifted from the child being solely responsible for making the disclosure to the counsellor supporting and eliciting it.

From this perspective, it is understandable why some children report how they've tried to tell someone what has happened to them – but have not been heard. It is possible that the adults they spoke to were either not skilled in drawing out the information or following safeguarding advice and training were reluctant to do so for fear of contaminating the child's evidence.

Support versus evidence

The problem is that an allegation made in an anonymous counselling session is very different to a disclosure made to a teacher or social worker. In a ChildLine counselling session, the focus is on supporting

the child. By contrast, teachers and social workers are duty bound to report disclosures and the statement that the child produces constitutes evidence, which may be used in subsequent criminal proceedings.

[Guidance](#) for social workers and teachers highlights the need to collect accurate and complete information from the child, reporting only the words that the child has used and without using leading questions.

This creates an apparent paradox since my research suggests some children rely on an adult to help construct their disclosure precisely so they can produce complete information. While the evidential approach is designed to collect uncontaminated evidence, it potentially fails those children who need adults' help to actually say the words.

In my data, a 12-year-old girl explicitly asked the counsellor to ask her questions because she found it easier than providing an unprompted narrative. Teachers are explicitly told that how they speak to the child can [affect the evidence](#) and questioning should be kept to the minimum. The child is expected to articulate their [abuse](#) independently.

It seems, then, that there is a potential tension between the needs of the child in making a disclosure and the needs of trusted adults who are in a position to help the [child](#). For many children in my data, their concern was not with prosecuting their abuser. Many explicitly said they did not want this. What they often wanted was emotional support, reassurance that they did nothing wrong, and clarification about what had happened to them so that they could begin to make sense of it.

For as long as safeguarding policies place emphasis on the quality of evidence collected, rather than focusing on helping children to understand and verbalise how they've been abused, [children](#)'s voices will continue to be unheard.

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