

Blame Attributions Among Child Sexual Abuse Survivors and Disclosure of the Abuse

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure is critical for survivor's psychosocial adjustment later in life. The aim of the present study was to analyze the relationship between attributions of blame for child sexual abuse by the victim and the disclosure of the abuse to parents or caregivers while controlling for characteristics of the abuse.

Female college students between 17 and 24 years of age ($M = 19.44$, $SD = 1.64$) from a southern Spanish University were surveyed. Of 1547 respondents, 153 (9.90%) reported having suffered some form of CSA before the age of 15. Information about the characteristics of abuse (age of onset, type of abuse suffered, continuity of abuse, and relationship with and age of the perpetrator) and the existence of abuse disclosure by the survivor was obtained from a self-reported questionnaire developed for the present study. The Attributions of Responsibility and Blame Scale (McMillen & Zuravin, 1997) was used to assess attributions made about CSA (self-blame, perpetrator blame and family blame).

The results of a logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(9) = 43.856$, $p < .001$. The model explained 41% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance of abuse disclosure and correctly classified 85.6% of cases. Survivor disclosure was 5.50 times more likely to occur when the perpetrator was not a family member (Wald = 8.14, $p < .01$) and 3.95 times more likely to occur when there was not physical contact with the perpetrator (Wald = 4.30, $p < .05$). The occurrence of disclosure was also related to increased perpetrator age (Wald = 4.83, $p < .05$). With regard to the attributions of blame, the occurrence of disclosure was related to lower scores on self-blame (Wald = 6.78, $p < .01$) and higher scores on family blame (Wald = 9.67, $p < .001$). However, no relationship was found between perpetrator blame and disclosure of abuse.

The results confirm the idea that not only self-blame attributions, but also family blame attributions are critical to the decision of a CSA victim to disclose abuse. The possibility that children who do not disclose abuse have a greater need to deny the occurrence of abuse, or have more confusion about being abused is discussed.

Attributions of blame should be taken into serious consideration when evaluating children for possible sexual abuse.