

Test Balloons? Small Signs of Big Events: A Qualitative Study on Circumstances Facilitating Adults' Awareness of Children's First Signs of Sexual Abuse [Summary]

Published by Child Abuse & Neglect, 27 July 2013. Authors Anna Margrete Flåm and Eli Haugstvedt.

In cases of child sexual abuse, children often find it difficult to inform anyone of their abuse. However, research based on parents' recollections in therapeutic settings of their children's experiences of sexual abuse suggests that children often give verbal signs, however small or indirect, that they are experiencing abuse. How caregivers respond to these signs determines whether or not children reveal that they are being abused. This indicates that it is important for parents and professionals to be sensitive to the role of dialogue in children's disclosure of sexual abuse, and meet potential signs with responses that give opportunities for disclosure.

One of the reasons why children face difficulties in revealing sexual abuse is because abusers are often family members or trusted by parents. In addition, children often feel responsible or complicit in cases of sexual abuse and fear the repercussions of revealing information. In general, children are very responsive to prompts from the adults who surround them when deciding whether or when to provide information about their abuse. Children may therefore give trusted adults indirect signs or "test balloons" related to the context of their abuse, and choose to disclose (or not to disclose) that they are being abused based on the responses they receive.

In the 20 cases examined as part of this study, all children involved gave these kinds of signs or "test balloons" to a parent or caregiver, which were usually indirect and difficult to immediately recognize as signs of abuse. They often involved questioning a rule or obligation, such as a child asking whether or not they had to stay with the family member or trusted friend who was abusing them, and expressing reservation or unease about circumstances under which the child was being abused, such as being left alone with the abuser. In several of these cases, the adult in question rebuffed these signs, minimizing the child's concern or answering that they had to follow the rule or obligation. In these cases, the child stopped providing information and did not disclose the abuse at that time. By contrast, when these signs were met with open answers by adults that allowed for further dialogue (such as parents asking why the child felt uneasy or scared), the children revealed the fact that they were being abused in further conversation. In a few cases, children revealed their abuse directly, but this only occurred in situations where health issues related to sexual abuse or the concept of sexual abuse itself was being referenced (for example, while watching a TV programme about child sexual abuse).

These findings suggest that parents and professionals should be made aware of the ways in which children may "test" whether adults are responsive to their abuse-related concerns, and should pay attention to the role of dialogue in helping children to disclose sexual abuse.

Summary prepared by Katharina Obermeier, Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, 2015.