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Does implying peer knowledge during an interview promote truthful disclosures from peer disclosure recipients and witnesses?

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ABSTRACT

We tested a novel implied peer knowledge paradigm in which both child witnesses and child recipients (children who previously received a disclosure from a witness) were able to infer, with varying degrees of saliency, the likelihood that an adult interviewer would hear about a negative transgression from a peer and adjust their disclosure strategy accordingly. We tracked children's disclosures ($N = 418$; aged 6-12 years; $M_{age} = 8.91$ years, $SD = 1.37$) across two interviews and found that providing a verbal notice of implied knowledge to child disclosure recipients (not child witnesses) that a peer who had previously disclosed to them would also be talking to an adult increased their disclosure rates. This study adds to a small body of work examining patterns of disclosure transmissions from witnesses to peers to adults, which is frequently observed in situations of child sexual abuse.

Imagine that a child witnesses an adult commit a transgression and is asked to keep it a secret–will the child keep the secret? Who might they tell - another adult or a peer? If they tell a peer, what will that peer do with the disclosure? The present study sought to investigate children's secret keeping and disclosure patterns after witnessing an adult transgression and potential methods to increase disclosure rates.

As children age into late childhood and adolescence, peers become common recipients of disclosures about negative events, such as abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Kogan, 2004; Malloy et al., 2013; McElvaney, 2015; Schaeffer et al., 2011; Ungar et al., 2009). For example, Malloy et al. (2013) reported that younger children (5- to 9-years old) were less likely to report to a peer (19%) compared to older children (10- to 13-years-old; 38%). Priebe and Svedin (2008) found that over 80% of adolescents (high school seniors) who previously disclosed abuse, did so to a 'friend of their own age", compared to just 7% who reported it to authorities or police.

Reasons for why children begin to show a preference for disclosing to peers as they age can be understood through a social development lens. As children age, they spend more time with, and prefer, peers (Brown & Larson, 2009). This preference for peers beginning in early adolescence (10-years and older) appears to be driven by an increased focus on social stimuli (Albert et al., 2013). In early adolescence, disclosure and secret-keeping become particularly important for building trust, with the expectation of reciprocal disclosures and confidentiality being central to friendships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Bauminger et al., 2008; Parker & Asher, 1993). Given that adolescents worry about maintaining a secret and confidentiality following a disclosure of abuse (McElvaney et al., 2014; Ungar et al., 2009) as well as the consequences of disclosure (e.g. Malloy et al., 2011), peers may be a more controlled and less consequential disclosure recipient than adults. A peer may offer interpersonal support that allows a child to feel in control (e.g. mutual sharing of worries, noting the severity of the abuse, or querying the child's well-being; McElvaney et al., 2014). Thus, it is likely that with age children and adolescents will be more likely to disclose to a peer and trust their disclosure will remain confidential.

Given the importance of such disclosures being reported to authorities, it is imperative to understand the peer disclosure process and whether peer disclosure recipients later disclose to an adult. Yet, the transmission of peer disclosures has been understudied. One recent study explored 6- to 11-year-olds' disclosures of a negative event to a peer and found that

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peers who received a disclosure from a child witness (peer recipient), were more likely to subsequently share the disclosure with an adult compared to the child who witnessed the negative event themself (Price et al., 2021). Given that peer recipients of a disclosure may transmit that disclosure to an adult, understanding when or why peer recipients disclose is important. Price et al. (2021) found that the proportional number of peers who received a disclosure from a child witness (peer recipient) and then shared that disclosure with an adult was greater than the proportional number of children who witnessed the negative event themselves and then shared it with an adult. The fact that not all recipients disclosed may still suggest that recipients experience reluctance. Thus, it is important to examine possible methods for increasing *both* witnesses' and recipients' disclosures.

Encouraging truthful disclosures

There has been a substantial amount of work dedicated to overcoming a child's reluctance to truthfully tell an adult about a negative event (e.g. Evans & Lee, 2010; Lyon et al., 2014; Quas et al., 2018). One approach that has been found to encourage disclosures from reluctant children involves suggesting an interviewer's implied knowledge of an event (see Fu et al., 2012; Lyon et al., 2014; Lytle et al., 2019). For instance, previous studies utilizing the Putative Confession technique (Lyon et al., 2014) demonstrated that implying an adult co-transgressor had disclosed the transgression increased children's disclosure of that same transgression (e.g. Lyon et al., 2014; Stolzenberg et al., 2017). Specifically, the Putative Confession involves telling children that a suspect told them "everything that happened" and "wants the child to tell the truth" (Lyon et al., 2014). This paradigm has been found to increase disclosure rates in children under 11 years of age (e.g. Evans & Lyon, 2019; Quas et al., 2018; Rush et al., 2017) without increasing false reports. Using an alternative context of implied knowledge, Fu et al. (2012) found that preschoolers adjusted their decision of whether to disclose a transgression (i.e. peeking at a forbidden toy) based on the implied knowledge of an interviewer (i.e. the interviewer either claimed to have knowledge from an informed adult who the child knew witnessed the transgression or an uninformed adult who had no knowledge). These findings suggest that implying access to knowledge may be a useful tool for increasing honest disclosures, at least for children under 11 years of age.

While prior work suggests that implying knowledge increases honesty, one criticism of falsely implying knowledge is that using deception to overcome disclosure reluctance in children is not in line with the ethical boundaries of current interviewing practices, which limits its applied utility (Lytle et al., 2019). However, the putative confession (e.g. Lyon et al., 2014) as well as work by Fu et al. (2012) provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding how implying knowledge may encourage reluctant children to disclose. Importantly, an alternative source of knowledge that has not been examined, that may also assist in avoiding the use of deception, is peers.

Given the developmental importance of peers and the effectiveness of the implied knowledge technique, the present study examined the utility of a less deceptive 'implied knowledge paradigm' to encourage truthful disclosures from child witnesses as well as peer recipients of disclosures. Specifically, we were interested in whether implying knowledge acquired *via* a peer, by noting that both the child and peer were being interviewed about the event in question, would increase disclosure rates.

Present study

Extant research exploring implied knowledge has focused on implying that an adult has provided knowledge to the interviewer about a transgression. However, peers as a source of knowledge have not yet been studied. Peers may be a particularly important source given the established importance of peers as potential recipients of disclosures. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore two key issues.

First, we attempted to replicate and extend Price and colleagues' (2021) findings by examining child witnesses' willingness to disclose a minor transgression to a peer or adult and whether a peer disclosure recipient would subsequently disclose to an adult. Given that there have been very few experimental paradigms that have examined children's likelihood of disclosing to peers versus adults, this study provides much needed context to better understand this important dynamic of how disclosures can be transmitted. Using Price and colleagues' *Don't Tell* paradigm, we staged an event that involved an adult transgression during a children's (aged 6–11 years) science presentation. The adults expressed remorse over the transgression and asked the children not to disclose the transgression to anyone. Immediately following the presentation, children were either paired with a naïve peer or an adult research assistant to discuss the

event. The addition of the adult interview condition allowed for a direct comparison of children's initial disclosure rates to peers versus adults (unlike Price et al., 2021 design which only had children paired with a peer immediately following the presentation). The following day, all children were paired with a different adult interviewer and were assigned to one of two honesty promotion conditions. We then tracked if children disclosed the transgression across the two different interviews.

During the immediate (Day 1) interviews, it was predicted that children would be significantly more likely to report the transgression to an adult authority figure than a peer (consistent with Price et al., 2021 disclosure rate findings when comparing the first and second interview), although this preference was expected to be dampened with age and a corresponding developmental increased preference for peers (e.g. Malloy et al., 2013). During the second interview (Day 2) with adults, we anticipated that disclosure rates would be high for all children (based on Price et al., 2021). We expected this would be especially true for child witnesses who had previously disclosed (to either a peer or an adult) given that existing work suggests that an important predictor of a disclosure is a prior disclosure (Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Lyon et al., 2020). Based on past findings (Price et al., 2021), we also anticipated that peer disclosure recipients would be more likely to disclose than the child witness.

Second, we examined if the disclosure process during the second interview was influenced by an implied peer knowledge paradigm that involved two different honesty promotion techniques: (1) verbally implying knowledge from a peer (*Verbal condition*) (2) verbally and visually implying knowledge from a peer (*Verbal + Visual condition)*. In the *Verbal condition* children were told at the start of their interview that an adult was also interviewing the peer they spoke with the previous day, thus, verbally implying the interviewer would have information from the peer. In the *Verbal + Visual condition,* children were told the same information as those in Verbal condition but were also interviewed at the same time and within sight of the peer (i.e. they could see, but not hear, their peer being interviewed). Thus, this condition involved not only verbally implying knowledge but also including a visual confirmation of the plausibility of the adult interviewer having access to knowledge about the transgression. As documented by Fu et al. (2012), when a reliable source is present who may decide to tell a secret, even very young children will disclose more often. The visual confirmation was designed to make the implied knowledge more salient than in the Verbal condition. We also included a *control condition*, where children were interviewed without any verbal or visual reference to their peer interviewer from the day before.

This implied peer knowledge paradigm is premised on the idea that one of the mechanisms driving disclosure is a desire to ensure consistency across reports–especially in the presence of a peer. If a child decides to disclose to a peer at least partially because they anticipate where information might be shared (see prior discussion), learning that a peer may share knowledge might be a particularly powerful influence on children's willingness to themselves disclose information to an adult. Considering this idea, as well as past research exploring the role of implied knowledge on disclosures (e.g. Fu et al., 2012), we hypothesized that presenting children with the implied (possibility) of knowledge of a child's involvement in a transgression would increase the rates of disclosures–especially when this knowledge was made particularly salient with children able to see their peer being interviewed. We anticipated that the Verbal + Visual and Verbal conditions would produce significantly higher disclosure rates compared to both the control conditions.

We also expected that age would factor into how these different conditions would influence children's decisions to disclose. In particular, the implied knowledge manipulation may influence the youngest children in our study as they may have a desire to be consistent with the peer (e.g. Fu et al., 2012); however, the manipulation may be significantly less effective with older children due to their increased ability to monitor their reports (e.g. Koriat et al., 2001) and their ability to reason about the questioner's access to knowledge (Evans & Lyon, 2019). With more advanced cognitive skills, older children may be more aware that disclosure can occur across a gradient and thus may be more likely to conceal or avoid full disclosure of a transgression. Additionally, although peers are particularly important disclosure recipients during late childhood and early adolescence, they are also trusted to maintain confidentiality (e.g. McElvaney et al., 2014). As such, with age children may be less likely to disclose in response to the implied knowledge manipulations. It is important to note that the age range in the present study is younger than the age range in the literature that has found a strong influence of peers (i.e. adolescents). Though this pattern has not been tested across a wide range of ages, it is reasonable to expect that the influence of peers increases with age and thus, we

anticipate that even within our relatively younger sample, we may still observe a developmental difference in disclosure likelihood.

Method

Participants

Children ($N = 543$, $n = 285$ males) aged 6–12 years (M_{age} = 8.91 years, $SD = 1.37$) were recruited from a summer science camp. For various reasons, including logistical issues (e.g. child changed camp groups part way through, 2%), absences from camp across the two days (24% missed the event on Day 1), opting out (e.g. fun activities taking place during interview times that children did not want to miss, 19%), inattention/lack of understanding of the task (2%), or experimenter error (the child was too old, missed interviewing the child; 43%), 104 children did not complete all aspects of the study. Moreover, during debriefing, children were given an explicit opportunity to withdraw from the study and an additional 21 children indicated they wanted their entire interview or just their disclosure excluded.

The final sample included 418 children. Children were randomly assigned as either a witness ($n = 235$; M_{age} = 8.85 years, $SD = 1.49$, 49% female; who witnessed and could potentially disclose the adult's transgression) or an interviewer ($n = 183$; M_{age} = 8.92 years, $SD = 1.37$, 51% female; who were potential recipients of a disclosure but did not witness the transgression). As a proxy for socioeconomic status, we collected information on parent's highest level of education. The majority (52%) of parents had a bachelor's degree, 20% had a Master's degree, 12% completed high school, and nearly 5% had a doctorate degree.

Procedure

This work was done in collaboration with a children's summer camp. Like previous research (e.g. Price et al., 2021), we used a '*Don't Tell*' paradigm in which children witnessed an adult commit a transgression who then appealed to the children to not tell anyone about the transgression. We then tracked if children disclosed the transgression across two different interviews over two days. Children were randomly assigned to one of two groups: (1) witnesses or (2) non-witness peer interviewers. See Figure 1 for a depiction of the procedure and distribution of participants across the procedure.

Event

Before the event, peer interviewers ($n = 183$) were removed from the room, leaving only child witnesses ($n = 235$) to view the event. Then, two confederates (one male, one female) visited the room to perform a science art show for small groups (approximately 10-15) of children. The show began with the two confederates introducing themselves and explaining their roles. The female confederate, C1, performed the role of the artist and indicated that she would execute two art tricks and then show a video of a messy art trick. While she set up for each trick, her assistant, C2, performed physical activities with the children (e.g. stretching, lunges). Prior to the second art trick, C1 spilled water on a laptop computer, which resulted in an inability to show the planned video. The artist then asked the children not to tell anyone about the incident ("*Oh no! I'm going to be in so much trouble—My boss is going to be so mad at me. Please don't tell anyone this happened, I will get in so much trouble with my boss.*"), while also trying to turn on the laptop (and failing to do so). C1 apologized: "*I'm so sorry, we won't be able to finish today. Okay you guys, maybe you should go outside with the others while I clean this up before anyone sees the mess.*" The event lasted approximately 10 min. Witnesses to the event were unaware that they would later be interviewed about the event. Witnesses were then either paired up with a peer or an adult interviewer and asked about the event.

Initial interview (Day 1)

Peer interviews

Before the art show took place, peer interviewers ($n = 183$) were pulled from the room. They were provided with the following instructions:

> The visitors in the classroom are going to do some activities with the other kids in your group. When they are done, they will come out and you will be paired up with one of the kids that was in the room with the visitors. Your job is to talk to that kid and find out what happened in the room while you were gone. You will have to ask the other kid questions to find out what happened. You can ask as many questions as you would like. It is important that you find out everything you can about what happened because an adult will come tomorrow to talk to you about it. The adult will want to know everything that happened.

To ensure children understood their role, the researchers further clarified that they would be like detectives and their job was to find out what happened while they were outside of the room. Children were informed about the pending adult interview to ensure they stayed on task and attended to their interviewee's

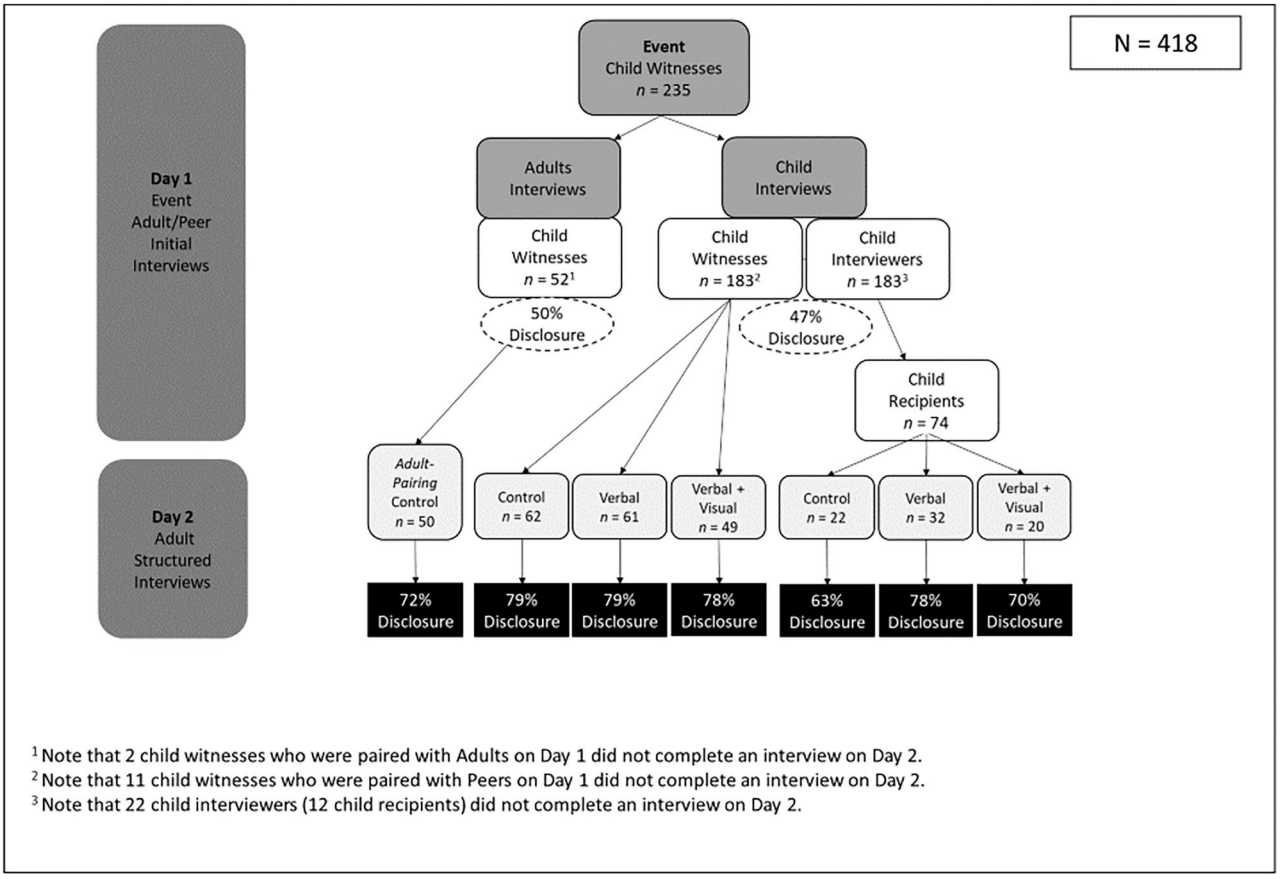

Figure 1. Visual depiction of sample sizes and final disclosure/transmission rates.

responses. Peer interviewers were provided with digital voice recorders to record their interviews, but a research assistant was responsible for starting and stopping each recording. Children were directed to a quiet location in a large hallway to conduct the interview and the distribution of children was monitored by several research assistants to avoid over-hearing of conversations. Peer interviews took place immediately following the end of the science art show.

When pairing child witnesses with child interviewers, care was taken to pair based on sex and age. Same sex peers were considered more desirable because of the anticipated parallels with disclosures in which peers choose the recipient (i.e. the commonality of same-sex peer friendships; Maccoby, 1990). Peer interviewed witnesses were simply told by their peer interviewer that the interviewer was tasked with finding out about the activities in the room. Day 1 peer interview duration ranged from approximately 2 to 6 min.

Adult interviews

A smaller number of child witnesses ($n = 52$) were paired up with one of four adult interviewers on Day 1, rather than a peer to allow for a direct comparison between children who were initially interviewed by an adult versus a peer[1]. After requesting assent, a trained research assistant told the child that they were outside with the other kids in the group and, therefore, did not see what the visitors did. The research assistant asked one open-ended question (e.g. *Tell me what happened in the room when the visitors were there.*) followed by two or three additional prompts (e.g. *Is there anything else you can tell me?*). Although these interviews primarily relied on open-ended requests for information, they were not in-depth and were intended to reflect a more casual conversation than a structured interview to parallel the peer interviews and regular adult-child conversations more closely.

Structured interview (Day 2)

Due to dropouts, illness, absences, and camp time constraints, 37 (22 child interviewers and 15 child witnesses) children did not have a Day 2 interview (but

[1]A smaller number of children were assigned to this condition as we were not interested in the honesty promotion manipulations on Day 2 for children in the initial adult interviews but rather a direct comparison between the child witness who disclosed to a peer versus an adult on Day 1 (see Figure 1).

these 37 children were included in the total sample count of $N = 418$). See Figure 1 for complete breakdown of sample sizes and disclosure rates across the two interviews. All remaining children were interviewed one day later by one of 12 adult research assistants[2] who received training on general interview principles (e.g. establish rapport, rely on open-ended questions, avoid suggestive questions) and how to administer a structured interview protocol. The interview protocol was designed to keep the interviews as consistent as possible across interviewers. The interview protocol included two phases, described below.

Free-recall phase

The first phase of the interview was the free-recall phase, consisting of an initial open-ended question and follow-up prompts. The initial invitation was manipulated depending on which Honesty Promotion Condition children were assigned to. Specifically, in the *Verbal* and *Verbal + Visual conditions,* interviewers implied peer knowledge about the event and these conditions were contrasted to a control condition:

Control condition. Children in the Control condition were asked:

> "Yesterday, Mackenzie, the art lady and her helper, Ben, came to visit your camp. I wasn't here yesterday so I don't know what happened. *[Next sentence for peer interviewers only]* I heard that you talked with another kid about what happened. I am going to ask you some questions about what happened yesterday when two visitors came to visit your group. *[additional condition-specific sentences inserted here; see below for descriptions]* Ok, tell me everything you can about what that kid told you about what happened when Mackenzie, the artist, came to camp? [*Next sentence for peer interviewers only*] I know you weren't there, but I need to know everything that kid told you."

Verbal condition

Children in the Verbal condition ($n = 93$; 61 child witnesses & 32 child recipients) were provided with the same prompt as above but with an additional sentence added in that verbalized that their partner from the day before was also being questioned: "We are going to talk to everyone about what happened yesterday when the visitors came, including the kid you talked to yesterday."

[2]These 12 interviewers were from the same pool as Day 1 adult interviewers, but no child received the same adult interviewer for both interviews.

Verbal + Visual condition

Children in the Verbal + Visual condition were asked the same as above but with an additional sentence that explicitly highlighted that their partner was being questioned at the same time as they were: "We are going to talk to everyone about what happened yesterday when the visitors came, including the kid you talked to yesterday. My friend is over there [*researcher pointed to the other researcher questioning the child's partner*] is talking to the kid you spoke with yesterday about what happened yesterday."

Adult-pairing condition

Children who witnessed the transgression and were interviewed by an adult on Day 1 were placed in the Adult-pairing condition on Day 2. These children were asked the same questions as those in the control condition. This condition was added to help clarify if any effects observed were due to the nature of conducting multiple (two) interviews or *who* the child was talking to at each interview (peer vs. adult).

After children provided their initial response, interviews followed up with additional, open-ended prompts. If the child's initial response was largely incomplete (i.e. child did not provide a narrative, such as simply stating "it was fun."), the interviewers followed up with: (a) *What's the first thing that happened when the art lady and her helper came to visit your camp? (b) What happened next? (c) Then what happened?* If/when the child provided a relatively detailed account, the interviewers followed-up on specific details (e.g."*You said [action/verb]. Tell me more about [action/verb]").*

Cued-recall phase

Next, interviewers asked four cued-recall questions about particular things that happened, in a specific order: (1) *Tell me everything the visitor(s) Mackenzie and Ben said while they were in the room*; (2) T*ell me everything you said to your friends after the visitors left*; (3) *Tell me everything you said to your parents about the visitors*; (4) *Did the visitor(s) ask you not to tell anybody about what happened in the room?*

Following the interview, children who were paired with a peer on Day 1 were asked to complete a brief questionnaire about their preexisting relationship with the interviewer/interviewee. Next, child witnesses participated in a photo identification task of the visitors, but this information is beyond the scope of the present study and not discussed further. Next, children were debriefed about the study, discussed the importance of honesty with children, and were provided with a small prize.

Coding

Audio recordings of interviews were used to code for key information. After determining whether the child disclosed the transgression, the details of that disclosure were further broken down into a series of disclosure characteristics, described below. Each audio recording was coded by two independent research assistants. Intercoder agreement was established on all coded variables using intraclass correlation (ICC) coefficients for continuous variables, while nominal variables were examined using Cohen's kappa. Strong intercoder agreement (ICC and kappa values ranged from .72 to 1.00; Cicchetti & Sparrow, 1981; individual reliability scores are reported in each section below) was established on all audio files for each of the variables coded (100% of interviews were double coded and reliability was established on 100% of the interviews). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request. Where possible, all variables were coded using the same coding schemes across both Day 1 and Day 2 interviews (e.g. disclosure type, time; see below for description of coded variables). Information that was uniquely collected on Day 2 (cued-recall phase of the interview) was uniquely coded.

Disclosure type

After first coding interviews for disclosure (present or absent; Day 1 reliability [kappa] = .81; Day 2 =.86), we then coded disclosures into one of three classifications: *full disclosure* (i.e. child explicitly described the entire transgression–adult spilled water on her boss's laptop and it broke), *partial disclosure* (i.e. child disclosed part of the transgression not all–typically in an attempt to minimize blame; e.g. "*some water spilled so we couldn't finish*"; Day 1 reliability [kappa] = .82; Day 2 =.83, or a *nonspecific disclosure* (i.e. child alluded to the fact that something 'bad' happened without providing specific details about the transgression; Day 1 reliability [kappa] = .89; Day 2 =.75).

Disclosure time

The time taken from the start of an interview until when the child first disclosed was coded in seconds (ICC reliability = .96). This period included the time taken for research assistants to state their standardized introductory statements and build rapport with the child.

Consistency across interviews

We examined witness consistency of disclosures across interviews. We first examined consistency similarly to past research (Price et al., 2021). Specifically, we excluded child witnesses who were not interviewed on both Day 1 and Day 2, as well as child witnesses who were paired with an adult interviewer on both days (i.e. Adult Pairing condition). Therefore, the total sample included in this analysis was $n = 172$. We classified witness disclosures into one of four categories: (1) *Consistent Disclosers* were those who disclosed during both interviews (i.e. to a peer on Day 1 and again on Day 2 to an adult); (2) *Consistent Concealers* were those children who did not disclosure during either interview; (3) *Peer-Only Disclosers* were those who *only* disclosed to a peer on Day 1 but not an adult on Day 2; and, (4) *Adult-Only Disclosers* were those who only disclosed to an adult on Day 2 but not to a peer on Day 1. Additionally, we examined consistency in reference to prior disclosures for child witnesses. In particular, we examined whether a witness disclosed on Day 1 (to either a peer or an adult) influenced disclosures on Day 2. Note that any disclosure type (i.e. full, partial, or nonspecific) was included as a disclosure when creating these consistency groups.

Results

Recall that children were divided into two groups–those who saw the transgression (i.e. child witnesses) and those who did not but were, instead, tasked with finding out what happened to their peers (i.e. child interviewers). For child witnesses, we were interested in understanding differences in their disclosures when talking to a peer versus talking to an adult. For the peer interviewers, we were interested in what they would do if they received a disclosure from a witness. Given these distinctive goals, we examined these two groups of children separately. For a visual depiction of sample sizes and final disclosure rates, see Figure 1.

Preliminary analyses

Although we had no specific gender-related hypotheses, we ran logistic regressions to examine the effects of age (continuous in years) and gender on the likelihood that a child disclosed. Overall, disclosure behavior was unrelated to witness age and gender. For the Day 1 interviews, the model was not significant and explained only 2% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in disclosures (to both peers and adults). Neither age ($ß = -0.15$, $p = .105$) nor gender ($ß = -0.22$, $p =$

Table 1. Proportion of witness disclosure (Day 1).

	Disclosure to Peer		Disclosure to Adults	
Age (Years)	n	Disclosure Rate	n	Disclosure Rate
6	16	0.80	4	0.67
7	31	0.42	3	0.60
8	46	0.50	9	0.64
9	36	0.42	5	0.36
10	33	0.48	6	0.50
11	17	0.46	1	0.20
12[a]	0	0.00	-	-

[a]Note that the 12-year-old child was only three months older than 11.

Table 2. Proportion of witness disclosure (Day 2) by prior disclosure behavior (Day 1).

Age (Years)	n	Peer Disclosure Rate	Adult Disclosure	Overall Disclosure Rate
6	16	0.73	0.80	0.75
7	39	0.44	0.60	0.46
8	57	0.52	0.62	0.54
9	53	0.40	0.38	0.40
10	47	0.47	0.45	0.47
11	22	0.47	0.20	0.41
12[a]	1	0.00	0.00	0.00

[a]Note that the 12-year-old child was only three months older than 11.

.428) significantly contributed to the model. Those who disclosed did not differ in age ($M = 8.67$, $SD = 1.59$) from those who did not disclose ($M = 9.01$, $SD = 1.37$; $t(220) = 1.71$, $p = .088$).

Although no significant effects were found (likely due to small sample sizes), it is worth highlighting notable age-related patterns. First, the youngest children in the sample disclosed with the highest frequency on both Day 1 and 2 (see Tables 1 and 2). Second, on Day 2, a proportionately higher number of younger children (6- to- 8-year-olds) disclosed to an adult than a peer, while older children (i.e. 9- to −12 years) disclosed proportionately more to a peer than an adult. Tables 1 and 2 provide an age breakdown of disclosure rates on Day 1 and 2, respectively.

Similarly, for Day 2 interviews, the model was not significant (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .001$) with neither age ($ß = -0.01$, $p = .925$) nor gender ($ß = -0.13$, $p = .693$) significantly explaining disclosure behavior. Additionally, there was also no impact of age or gender on disclosure rates across the different Honesty Promotion Conditions (Control: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .03$, Age $p = .414$, Gender $p = .414$; Verbal: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .02$, Age $p = .380$, Gender $p = .922$; Verbal + Visual: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .03$, Age $p = .763$, Gender $p = .355$; Adult Pairing: Nagelkerke $R^2 = .01$, Age $p = .838$, Gender $p = .571$). Thus, age and gender were excluded from all further analyses.

Child witnesses

For child witnesses, we examined disclosure characteristics (i.e. Disclosure Type, Disclosure Time) separately for interviews held on Day 1 (i.e. with either a peer or adult) and on Day 2 (i.e. with adults). Specifically for Day 2 interviews, we examined whether the Honesty Promotion Condition (i.e. Control, Verbal, Verbal + Visual, and Adult Pairing) impacted disclosure characteristics. When comparing Honesty Promotion Conditions, all relevant analyses included tests of individual proportion differences (z-tests), with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons. Only those found to be significant are reported below for conciseness.

Day 1 interviews

Overall, 235 children witnessed the transgression, and that same day (Day 1) were interviewed by either a peer ($n = 183$) or an adult ($n = 52$). In total, 47% ($n = 111/235$) of witnesses disclosed at the Day 1 interview. The disclosure rates were not significantly different between those witnesses who were interviewed by a peer (47% disclosure rate; $n = 85/183$) and those who were interviewed by an adult (50%; $n = 26/52$; $z = 0.38$, $p = .352$).

Disclosure type

Of all disclosures made by child witnesses ($n = 111$), most (61%) were partial disclosures, followed by full (31%), and nonspecific disclosures (8%). Whether children were interviewed by peers or adults did not impact the frequency of full (peer: 31%, adult 31%; $z = 0.02$, $p = .985$), partial (peer: 62%, adult 58%; $z = 0.36$, $p = .721$), or nonspecific (peer: 7%, adult 12%; $z = 0.71$, $p = .480$) disclosures.

Disclosure time

Children took an average of 87.67 s ($SD = 66.54$) to disclose and were faster when disclosing to adults ($M_{seconds} = 62.67$, $SD = 35.19$) than when disclosing to peers ($M_{seconds} = 95.36$, $SD = 71.99$; $t(106) = 2.23$, $p = .028$).

Day 2 interviews

A total of 222 child witnesses were interviewed by an adult on the second day (Day 2; See Figure 1). Of those, 77% ($n = 171$) disclosed during the Day 2 interview. Regardless of which Honesty Promotion Condition children were assigned, they disclosed at a similar rate, $\chi(3) = 0.96$, $p = .811$. See Table 1 for disclosure rates across the honesty promotion conditions. We also examined whether the Honesty Promotion Conditions impacted

Table 3. Proportion of Witness Disclosure Type by Honesty Promotion Condition (Day 2).

Type of Disclosure	Control $n = 62$	Verbal $n = 61$	Verbal + Visual $n = 49$	Adult Pairing $n = 50$	Total $n = 222$
No Disclosure	.21	.21	.22	.28	.23
Disclosure (any)	.79	.79	.78	.72	.77
Full Disclosure	.23	.20	.27	.30	.24
Partial Disclosure	.53	.51	.45	.32	.46
NonSpecific Disclosure	.03	.08	.06	.10	.07

Note that this table reflects all child witness responses.

Table 4. Proportions of disclosure consistency by honesty promotion condition.

Type of Disclosure	Control $n = 62$	Verbal $n = 61$	Verbal + Visual $n = 49$	Total $N = 172$
Consistent Discloser	0.48	0.44	0.39	0.44
Consistent Concealer	0.18	0.16	0.20	0.18
Just Peer/Just Day 1	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.04
Just Adult/Just Day 2	0.31	0.34	0.39	0.34

Note. Sample size reflects the children who were present for both interviews but excludes those in the Adult Pairing condition ($N = 172$).

Day 2 disclosures just for the child witnesses who disclosed to a peer on Day 1 and found no differences in disclosure rates, $\chi(2) = 0.58$, $p = .748$. Witnesses in the Control condition who had previously disclosed to a peer disclosed at a similar rate (94%) as those in the Verbal (90%) and Verbal + Visual (95%) conditions.

Disclosure type

Of the children who disclosed ($n = 171$), most were partial disclosures, followed by full, and nonspecific disclosures (see Table 2). A test of proportional differences (Bonferroni adjustment applied) revealed that children who were interviewed by a peer on Day 1 were significantly more likely to partially disclose (50%) compared to those who were interviewed by an adult on Day 1 (32%; $z = 2.34$, $p = 0.025$). No other proportional differences were found (all $ps > .05$). A chi-square analysis revealed no impact of Honesty Promotion conditions on the disclosure type (i.e. no, full, partial, and nonspecific disclosures), $\chi(9) = 7.42$, $p = .594$. See Table 3 for a breakdown of child witness disclosure type across Honesty Promotion Condition.

Disclosure time

Children took an average of 203 s ($SD = 68.56$) to disclose[3]. Children who were interviewed by an adult on Day 1 disclosed significantly faster ($Msec = 181.53$, $SD = 46.59$) than children who were interviewed by a peer on Day 1 ($Msec = 208.50$, $SD = 72.40$; $t(220) = 2.49$, $p = .014$). A series of t-tests (Bonferroni corrected) revealed no significant differences (all $ps > .05$) in the mean length of disclosure time between the Verbal + Visual ($Msec = 227.82$, $SD = 93.12$), Verbal ($Msec = 193.60$, $SD = 57.56$), Control ($Msec = 208.12$, $SD = 64.73$), and the Adult Pairing conditions ($Msec = 180.53$, $SD = 46.59$).

Consistency of disclosures

Children were most often categorized as consistent disclosers (disclosed on both days) or adult-only disclosers (only disclosed to an adult on Day 2) (see Table 4). The consistency of disclosure across the two interview days did not vary according to whether the child was interviewed by a peer or an adult on Day 1, $\chi(3) = 2.15$, $p = .541$. Children who made any disclosure on Day 1 (regardless of who that disclosure was to) were more likely to disclose on Day 2 (93%) compared to children who did not disclose on Day 1 (62% Day 2 disclosure rate; $z = 5.81$, $p < .001$). This finding was true for both children who disclosed to a peer (93% Day 2 disclosure rate) and children who disclosed to an adult (92% Day 2 disclosure rate). Honesty Promotion Condition was not related to the consistency of witness disclosures, $\chi(6) = 2.01$, $p = .919$. See Tables 4 and 5 for consistency of disclosure rates across Honesty Promotion Conditions. Note that significantly more children disclosed during the Day 2 interview (77%) compared to the Day 1 interview (47%), $z = 6.95$, $p < .001$.

Child interviewers/recipients

Day 2 interviews

A total of 161 child interviewers (Day 1 child interviewers) were interviewed by an adult on Day 2. To further explore the transmission of disclosure information, we examined only those child interviewers who received a disclosure (i.e. heard about the transgression) from a peer the day prior[4]. Of those 161 interviewers, 45% ($n = 74$) received a disclosure and, thus, are now classified as *child recipients* (see Figure 1 for the distribution across Honesty Promotion Conditions). For the

[3]Recall that Interview 2 included a structured approach not present in Interview 1 which, relative to Interview 1, likely increased the time to disclosure.

[4]Note that 14 peer interviewers who did not receive a disclosure from a child witness on Day 1 (while we were monitoring the conversations) went on to disclose the transgression to an adult on Day 2. These were excluded from the recipient group.

remaining analyses, we focused just on these child recipients. Seventy-two percent ($n = 53$) of child recipients transmitted that disclosure to an adult on Day 2. Note that this disclosure rate observed with child recipients (72%) was not significantly different from the disclosure rate of child witnesses in general (77%), $z = 0.84$, $p = 0.402$. Recipient disclosure rates also did not differ from child witnesses who only disclosed on Day 2 (no prior disclosure; 62% disclosure on Day 2, $z = 1.34$, $p = 0.180$). However, child witnesses with a prior disclosure (to anyone) disclosed at a higher rate (93%) compared to child recipients ($z = 3.58$, $p <= .001$).

We examined how Honesty Promotion Condition influenced peer recipient transmission rates (see Figure 1). Transmission was highest in the Verbal condition (78%), followed closely by the Verbal + Visual (70%) and more distantly by the Control (64%) condition. Due to the low sample size of children in this recipient group, we were limited in what statistical analyses could be reliably run. However, to provide some insight into transmission differences across Honesty Promotion Conditions, we explored proportional differences and found that peer recipients who were interviewed in the Verbal condition were twice as likely to transmit a disclosure compared to those in the Control condition, $OR = 2.30$, 95% CI [0.70, 7.51], $z = 1.35$, $p = .089$. Peer recipients in the Verbal + Visual condition were 1.3 times as likely to transmit a disclosure compared to those in the Control condition, $OR = 1.28$, 95% CI [0.37, 4.42], $z = 0.39$, $p = .348$.

Disclosure type

Of the child recipients who transmitted the disclosure to an adult on Day 2 ($n = 53$), most were classified as partial disclosures, followed by full, and nonspecific disclosures (see Table 6). A chi-square analysis revealed no proportional differences in disclosure type (i.e. no, full, partial, and nonspecific disclosures) across the conditions, $\chi(4) = 5.09$, $p = .278$. See Table 6 for a breakdown of child recipient disclosure type across Honesty Promotion Conditions.

Disclosure time

Child recipients took an average of 199 s ($SD = 68.56$) to disclose[5]. A series of t-tests (with Bonferroni correction applied) revealed no statistical differences (all $ps > .05$) in the time child recipients took to disclose in the Verbal ($Msec = 201.30$, $SD = 101.06$), Verbal + Visual ($Msec = 201.65$, $SD = 55.94$) and Control conditions ($Msec = 190.69$, $SD = 80.08$).

[5]Interview 2 included a structured approach not present in Interview 1 which, relative to Interview 1, likely increased the time to disclosure.

Table 5. Proportion of disclosures across honesty promotion condition.

Honesty Condition	Day 2 Disclosure	Prior Disclosure (any)	No Prior Disclosure
Control	0.79	0.94	0.63
Verbal	0.79	0.90	0.68
Verbal + Visual	0.78	0.95	0.66
Adult Pairing	0.72	0.92	0.50
Total	0.77	0.93	0.62

Follow-up age analyses

Our preliminary analyses revealed that, contrary to our hypotheses, disclosure did not vary by age. Our ability to examine additional an age-related hypothesis (i.e. that the implied knowledge paradigm would be more impactful on younger children) was limited by our small sample sizes. However, we do report high-level age-related trends in our data, while cautioning against over-interpretation of these findings given the restricted sample size. We collapsed across the Verbal and Verbal + Visual conditions on Day 2 to create one implied knowledge condition. Using this, we ran two logistic regressions and revealed that, while age did not influence children's (combined witness and peer interviews) disclosures in the control condition (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.03$; $\beta = -0.27$, $p = .103$), age was predictive of disclosures in this combined implied knowledge condition (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.04$; $\beta = -0.33$, $p = .011$). Somewhat in line with our hypothesis, as age increased, disclosures resulting from the implied knowledge conditions tended to decrease—though this effect is quite small and over-interpretation is cautioned again due to sample size constraints.

Discussion

In the present study, we introduced an implied peer knowledge paradigm. This paradigm used different honesty promotion conditions in which children were able to infer, with varying degrees of saliency, the likelihood that an adult interviewer would have knowledge about a negative transgression from a peer and adjust their disclosure strategy accordingly. We anticipated that the more salient the peer conversations with an adult were to children, the more likely they would be to disclose the transgression to an adult interviewer. Despite our expectation that the saliency of other children's potential disclosures would influence the likelihood of children's disclosures, we found few differences between our honesty promotion conditions for child witnesses.

These findings may offer one of two conclusions. First, it is possible that the implied knowledge

Table 6. Proportion of child recipient disclosure type by honesty promotion condition (Day 2).

Type of Disclosure	Control $n = 22$	Verbal $n = 32$	Verbal + Visual $n = 20$	Total $n = 74$
No Disclosure	.36	.22	.30	.28
Total Disclosure (any)	.64	.78	.70	.72
Full Disclosure	.36	.24	.14	.25
Partial Disclosure	.57	.76	.71	.70
NonSpecific Disclosure	.07	.00	.14	.06

manipulation used in this study was too subtle to influence disclosure behaviors, or if children were initially impacted by it, they simply neglected to consider this information as the interview proceeded. Alternatively, these findings may imply that child witnesses may not require salient indications of the possibility of peer disclosures to encourage their own disclosures. Rather, knowing that other children were being interviewed (control condition), or a simple verbal reminder of their peer being interviewed was no less effective at eliciting disclosures from children during adult interviews than our strongest saliency condition in which children were both visually and verbally reminded that their prior interview partner was currently being interviewed by another adult. However, clarity on this issue of degree of pressure, such as telling a child that their peer has already told them everything from a prior conversation, is an important point for future work.

When focusing on child recipients, however, more notable findings emerged. Unlike child witnesses, there was some evidence (though limited due to the low sample size) that the different honesty promotion techniques had more of an impact on peer recipient disclosures. In particular, child recipients in the Verbal condition disclosed at proportionately the highest rate compared to any other conditions. This finding was surprising because, as indicated above, we anticipated that the Verbal + Visual condition would produce the most disclosures as this condition made the implication of peer knowledge most salient.

Why would the Verbal condition result in the highest proportion of disclosures for recipients? Given that recipients only heard about the transgression from another child (i.e. were less close to the 'secret'), perhaps the inclusion of a simple verbal statement implying the possibility of a peer sharing their knowledge may have been enough for the child to decide to disclose to be consistent with what their peer may tell. Additionally, perhaps interviewing a child recipient within the visual range of a peer may have produced somewhat of a backfire effect. That is, seeing the peer who had previously entrusted knowledge about a transgression to the recipient may have made recipients slightly more reluctant to share another's 'secret.'

Although child recipients of disclosures were fewer in number, some important observations should be considered for future research. Almost three-quarters (72%) of child recipients transmitted the disclosure to an adult interviewer, which is slightly less than the rate of child witness disclosures to adult interviewers (77%). This pattern contrasts with the findings of Price et al. (2021) who found that children who received disclosures from peers were very likely to pass that information on to an adult interviewer (87% did), whereas child witnesses were less likely to do so (52%). Price et al. speculated that children who only heard about the transgression from another child (i.e. peer recipients) experienced decreased moral conflict between keeping the secret and disclosing the transgression because they were not direct witnesses to the transgression. However, in the present study, the pattern was quite different: The overall disclosure rate for child recipients was 72%, and the overall disclosure rate for child witnesses was 77%. Of course, the current paradigm elicited higher overall disclosure rates, but importantly, the difference between the child recipients and the child witnesses was no longer noteworthy. This difference in disclosure patterns warrants further research, both because the present study showed reduced disclosure by peer recipients to adults (a concerning trend) and to explore what factors in the present study contributed to a higher rate of child witness disclosure. Unlike past paradigms that have observed an increase in disclosures following the introduction of implied knowledge (e.g. Fu et al., 2012; Quas et al., 2018), we did not observe strong evidence that implying peer knowledge influenced disclosure rates of child witnesses. One important way that this paradigm is different from past studies is that previous work often has relied on a self- or co-transgressor paradigm–that is, the child being interviewed was one of the people responsible for a transgression. In the current study, neither child (the witness or the recipient) was the transgressor. Instead, it was premised on the idea that children would endorse a 'don't tell' request made by an adult they had never met before. Perhaps, then, this implied peer knowledge paradigm would have had more of an impact on disclosure rates if the two peers (or one of

two peers) were involved in a transgression. Future research should continue to explore how the implication of peer knowledge influences witness and recipient disclosures.

Continuing with this line of work is important because, although existing implied knowledge paradigms may not be designed for applied use (e.g. putative confession; Lyon et al., 2014; see Lytle et al., 2019), the theory behind them offers insight into different processes that may be at play when children decide to disclose. This paradigm (and associated Honesty Promotion conditions) was our attempt to test this idea of implying knowledge to increase disclosure in both witnesses and peer recipients. One could imagine using this implied peer knowledge strategy in a variety of contexts. For example, a teacher could call each child from a classroom into the hallway individually to speak about a transgression. Perhaps a social worker could tell all the children in a family that each will have a one-on-one confidential conversation about the happenings in the home. The implication that all children with knowledge will have an opportunity to privately disclose may encourage others to disclose.

When considering our other hypotheses, two surprising findings emerged from the results. The first surprising finding was the lack of age-related differences in disclosure behavior. The null effect of age is, however, likely due to low power. Examination of age-related (non-significant) patterns in the data does offer some insight that is supported by existing literature and is consistent with our predictions: the youngest in our sample were the most likely to disclose (particularly to adults) and the older children (aged 9- to 11-years old) showed a slight preference for disclosure to peers over adults. However, readers should be cautious when interpreting these findings due to non-significance and small sample size.

Unsurprisingly, our study replicated past work (e.g. Lyon et al., 2020) suggesting that a prior disclosure increases the likelihood of a subsequent disclosure. McElvaney and colleagues (2013) described interviews from a (older) child population and highlighted the important role that a prior conversation with a peer can have on a child's decision to subsequently disclose abuse (e.g. knowing someone has a similar experience; increased awareness about the transgression, being encouraged by a peer to disclose). Although the stakes in the present study certainly are not as high as situations in which a child is deciding to disclose abuse, this study provides experimental support that an initial disclosure to a peer can increase the likelihood of subsequent disclosure. Importantly, however, we found that implying peer knowledge did not have a strong influence on this commitment effect. Drawing from the putative confession literature (e.g. Lyon et al., 2014), perhaps this lack of influence suggests that children would benefit from more explicit language or concrete statements that the other person (i.e. peer) has already disclosed. Our implied knowledge manipulation was much more ambiguous and, to be effective, required more complex reasoning abilities from children than was required in other implied knowledge paradigms (e.g. putative confession).

Limitations and future directions

Although the current paradigm has many ecologically important aspects (e.g. witnessing a transgression, peer interactions, multiple interviews), there are limitations to consider when interpreting the findings. First, a larger sample size would have been beneficial in more clearly addressing how these different implied knowledge conditions differently influence younger and older children's disclosures. Our ability to answer our research questions was limited by how many children decided to disclose across the two interviews. Although a child's willingness to disclose cannot be controlled for, having a large sample would have allowed for more power to detect differences across study conditions and participant age. Some general insight can be gleaned from the data; however, we are cautious in overstating any age-related findings and encourage future researchers to focus on a larger sample across the different age groups.

Second, this study would have benefited from a wider age range of participants—particularly older participants. Although the Honesty Promotion Conditions used in this study did not have a large impact on disclosure patterns, we did see some notable differences in comparing disclosures made by witnesses to peers versus adults. Child witnesses were less likely to disclose to a peer immediately following the event (Day 1 interview) compared to an adult the next day (Day 2 interview). Additionally, during the initial interviews (Day 1), children disclosed faster to adults than to peers. This hesitancy to disclose to peers was also observed when examining the completeness of disclosures to adult interviews during Day 2. Those who disclosed to a peer on Day 1 were more likely to partially disclose on Day 2. Taken together, these findings suggest that children of this age group (M_{age} = 8.85 years) may have different expectations when entering conversations with a peer and an adult

to discuss an event. Peer disclosures are documented to become more common as children age (i.e. 11+ years; Schaeffer et al., 2011), so it is possible that with an older sample, we would have observed more peer disclosures and, in turn, been able to better examine the implied peer knowledge paradigm.

A third important consideration of the present study pertains to generalizability to other contexts. The transgression that was used in the present study (an adult visitor spilling water and subsequently breaking a laptop) did appear to cause children to take the transgression seriously; however the nature of the transgression witnessed by children certainly does not generalize to other contexts where disclosures are often discussed (e.g. child victimization and sexual assault). Despite providing some important insight into patterns associated with how disclosures may be transmitted between witnesses and peers, readers need to consider that the rates of disclosures reported in the results may not translate into real-world contexts. Furthermore, the relatively high disclosure rates (~70%) found in the present investigation may be explained by the child's minimal involvement in the transgression. Future studies may find more of an impact of the implied peer knowledge technique when more personal and serious transgressions are committed.

A final limitation to consider involves the methods used during the interviews. During the free-recall phase of Day 2 interviews, children potentially received different follow-up prompts, though all the children were asked the same initial question. If, after the initial question was asked, a child failed to provide a narrative, they were supported to do so by the interviewers asking follow-up prompts ("What's the first thing that happened?" "What happened next." "Then what happened"). All children were then asked two additional action/verb "Tell me more" prompts. These follow-up prompts may have produced a different experience for some children; however, we opted to use this format as it allowed for dynamic variation akin to forensic interviews in which interviewers are trained to obtain a narrative response.

Conclusions

This study adds to a small body of work examining the patterns of disclosure transmissions from witnesses to peers to adults. Importantly, this study was the first to introduce an implied peer knowledge paradigm designed to encourage truthful disclosures in both witnesses and peer recipients. The results suggest that allowing child recipients to infer that an adult interviewer would likely hear about a negative transgression impacted their disclosure strategy. Despite these contributions, more empirical work is needed to understand and offer insight into a common practice of peer disclosures observed in situations of child sexual abuse (e.g. Hershkowitz et al., 2007).

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