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To Disclose or Not to Disclose? The Influence of Consistently Disclosing and Disclosure Recipient on Perceptions of Children's Credibility

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Abstract

With age, children become increasingly likely to make initial disclosures of transgressions, such as maltreatment, to peers. The present study examined adults' credibility evaluations of children's disclosures to peers across two studies. Study 1 examined credibility evaluations when children disclosed (or concealed) to a peer compared to an adult. Study 2 examined credibility ratings when children disclosed consistently or inconsistently across peer and adult interviews. Children were interviewed by a same-age peer and an adult regarding an event where an adult confederate spilled water on a laptop and broke it. In Study 1, participants heard a child interviewed by *either* a same-age peer or adult. In Study 2, participants heard a child interviewed by *both* the same-age peer and adult. In both studies, participants evaluated the child's credibility. Children who disclosed the transgression were rated as significantly less credible than those who concealed the

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transgression; however, credibility ratings did not differ by whether the child was interviewed by a peer or adult (Study 1). Furthermore, children who concealed the transgression across both interviews were rated as significantly more credible than children who disclosed in both interviews or disclosed to the peer, but not the adult, interviewer (Study 2). The current study provides the first evidence that peer disclosures may hinder children's credibility and that adults may be hesitant to believe children's disclosures of an adult's transgression.

Keywords
credibility, child witnesses, disclosures, consistency, transgression

When children who have witnessed or been a victim of a crime disclose the event, adults' perceptions of that disclosure greatly impact what steps are taken in response. If an adult believes the child's disclosure is honest and credible, this may result in a formal report being made, initiation of a police investigation, or a jury delivering a guilty verdict. However, if a truthful disclosure is not believed, this may result in a child being left in a situation in which he or she is being harmed. Given that adults' judgements through both informal (e.g., to a parent, teacher) and formal (e.g., statements to police, attorneys, triers of fact) disclosure processes will influence the steps taken, it is imperative to understand how adults evaluate children who are reporting an adult transgression and what factors contribute to children's perceived credibility.

When children report an adult's transgression, such as maltreatment, they may report it to another adult or they may choose to disclose to a peer. With age, children become increasingly likely to disclose maltreatment to peers (Malloy et al., 2013); however, research has yet to examine how adults perceive peer disclosures. Thus, the present set of studies examined adults' perceptions of children's disclosure (or concealment) of an adult's wrongdoing to a peer. Study 1 examined adults' perceived credibility of children's disclosures made to a peer compared to an adult. Extending these findings, Study 2 examined whether the consistency of children's disclosures to a peer and adult interviewer influenced their perceived credibility.

By early childhood children are willing to conceal both their own (Evans & Lee, 2010, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2002, 2008) and others' transgressions (Ahern et al., 2016; Evans & Lyon, 2019; Gordon et al., 2014; Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon et al., 2014; Quas et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2020). When questioned about transgressions, the credibility

of children's reports is typically judged based on two factors: cognitive competence and honesty (Ross et al., 2003). With age, children are perceived as more accurate, more consistent, and less susceptible to suggestive questioning (Castelli et al., 2005; Connolly et al., 2010, 2008; Wright et al., 2010). However, beginning in late childhood, child witnesses are perceived to be more dishonest with age (Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Gabora et al., 1993; Last & Aharoni-Etzioni, 1995; Nightingale, 1993; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Wood et al., 1996). For example, Nightingale (1993) found that children's believability decreases beginning at age six. This change in adults' perceptions of children's honesty appears to make them hesitant to believe children's reports of adults' transgressions. Consistent with this idea, a study by Wyman et al. (2018) examining children's denials and recantations of an adult's crime found that children who denied the occurrence of an adults' transgression (whether the denial was true or false) were considered more credible than children who had made a disclosure. These results suggest a problematic pattern where children who disclose transgressions may be considered less honest or viewed less favorably than those who conceal them. However, how a discloser is perceived may be dependent on who a child tells.

Disclosure Recipient

While there is extensive literature examining the credibility of children's disclosures to an unfamiliar adult (Bala et al., 2005; Goodman et al., 2006; Landström & Granhag, 2008, 2010; Orcutt et al., 2001; Wyman et al., 2018), children may initially disclose maltreatment to a variety of close recipients including parents, teachers, siblings, and friends (Malloy et al., 2013). Despite this, experimental studies have not examined the influence of disclosure recipient on children's credibility. With age, children become more hesitant to disclose experiences of maltreatment due to the negative consequences they expect may follow a disclosure of that magnitude. Children often worry about unsupportive reactions from parents, being harmed by their abuser, being questioned by the police, or being removed from their home (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Kogan, 2004; Malloy et al., 2013; Schaeffer et al., 2011). With age there is a greater understanding of these negative consequences, and thus a greater reluctance to disclose to parents (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Schaeffer et al., 2011). Malloy et al. (2013) found that 10- to 13-year-olds report disclosing to peers more frequently than five- to nine-year-olds.

Despite the prevalence of peer disclosures of maltreatment, adults' perceptions of peer disclosures are unclear and have not yet been studied. This is problematic given that adults might perceive a disclosure to a peer differently

than a disclosure to an adult. For example, given that children are not able to intervene, disclosures to a peer may be more casual in nature. In contrast, adults have the authority to intervene or address the transgression. As such, the seriousness or solemnity of a disclosure to an adult may be perceived as more credible than a disclosure to a peer.

Consistency of Disclosures Across Interviews

A child's disclosure to a peer may ultimately result in a later conversation or interview with an adult, particularly when the peer recipient transmits the disclosure. If there are inconsistences across disclosure recipients, this may be harmful to the child's credibility. The consistency of a child's report is often considered an important factor when adults assess a child's cognitive competence (Ross et al., 2003). Unsurprisingly, adults perceive children as less credible when they provide inconsistent details of an event both within and across reports (Berman & Cutler, 1996; Berman et al., 1995; Brewer & Burke, 2002; Lindsay et al., 1986; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016).

There are two types of inconsistent disclosure patterns that have been examined previously: delayed disclosure (the victim discloses after a considerable time lapse or denies then discloses later) and recanted disclosure (disclosing followed by a denial or failure to disclose). When children are inconsistent in their disclosure by either recanting or delaying, they are perceived as less credible witnesses and defendants are less likely to be found guilty (Bradshaw, & Marks, 1990; Connolly et al., 2009, 2010; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016; Pozzulo et al., 2010; Wyman et al., 2018; Zellman, 1992). While previous research has examined the consistency of details or disclosures across multiple forensic interviews, it is unknown whether the consistency of disclosures across different types of recipients (peers and adults) impacts credibility.

The Current Research

To date, no study has examined adults' *perceptions* of children's disclosures of a transgression to a peer. However, Price et al. (2019) examined the *likelihood* of children disclosing an adult transgression to a peer in an experimental setting. Children witnessed an adult confederate's transgression where the adult spilled water on a laptop. The following day the children who witnessed the transgression were interviewed by a naïve peer and an adult. Nearly half (41%) of witnesses disclosed the transgression to the peer. This was the first experimental evidence of children's willingness to disclose an adult transgression to peers. Building from Price et al. (2019), the goal of the current

research was to examine whether children's credibility is impacted by the disclosure recipient.

Study 1: Disclosure recipient. Study 1 used audio recordings of the peer and adult interviews from Price et al. (2019) to examine adults' perceptions of disclosures to these different recipients. Participants listened to a child being interviewed either by the naïve peer or adult, and subsequently provided ratings of various measures of credibility. The aims for Study 1 were to examine (a) how adults perceive children when they disclose or conceal an adult's transgression and (b) whether children's credibility is impacted by the recipient of the disclosure (peer or adult). It was predicted that children who concealed the transgression would be considered more credible than those who disclosed as adults have been shown to perceive children as dishonest when disclosing a transgression (Last & Aharoni-Etzioni, 1995; Wyman et al., 2018). Additionally, it was predicted that children who disclosed to an adult would be considered more credible than children who disclosed to a peer given that adults can intervene.

Study 2: Disclosure consistency across recipients. Study 2 built upon Study 1 by examining whether the consistency of a child's disclosure across interviews would influence credibility ratings. Thus, participants listened to a child being interviewed by the naïve peer *and* adult in one of four conditions: consistent discloser (the child disclosed the transgression to both recipients), inconsistent peer discloser (the child disclosed to the peer but not the adult), inconsistent adult discloser (the child disclosed to the adult but not the peer), or consistent concealer (the child did not disclose to either recipient). The goal of Study 2 was to examine whether the consistency of the child's disclosure across the peer and adult interviews would impact their credibility.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Participants were required to be of jury age (18 years of age or older) and Canadian citizens. Participants were recruited from two Canadian universities (Brock University: n = 150; University of Regina: n = 122) through participant research pools. While most participants completed the study on a computer, 11% (n = 30) completed the study on paper; all questionnaires were completed in the laboratory. Two-hundred and seventy-two participants completed the study (M_{age} = 20.90, SD = 5.39, 76.5% female). Participants were 66.9% Caucasian, 10.3% Asian, 4.8% African Canadian,

3.3% Hispanic, 10.7% other, and 4% not reported. Eight participants were excluded from the analyses due to missing data (M_{age} = 21.75, *SD* = 2.55). Thus, the final sample included 264 participants (participants (M_{age} = 20.88, *SD* = 5.46; 76.5% females). Participants were randomly assigned to listen to interviews of children in one of four conditions: Peer Concealer (*n* = 63, M_{age} = 20.94, *SD* = 4.73), Peer Discloser (*n* = 63, M_{age} = 21.02, *SD* = 6.28), Adult Concealer (*n* = 74, M_{age} = 21.18, *SD* = 6.20), or Adult Discloser (*n* = 63, M_{age} = 20.33, *SD* = 4.28).

Materials

Child interviews

Interviews were obtained from Price et al. (2019) in which children between seven and 11 years old were visited at their summer camp by scientists (research assistants) who performed a science show. During the show, an adult female confederate spilled water on a laptop that belonged to the camp and told the children she would get in trouble if anyone found out. The children were asked to keep the transgression a secret and were not aware they would be interviewed about the event. Following the event, children were interviewed by a peer and then by an adult research assistant who were both naïve to the event details. All interviews were audio recorded.

Adult interviews

Adult interviewers (research assistants) followed a structured interview protocol that began with a free recall portion, which included three open-ended questions (Tell me everything you can about what happened when Briana, the red apron artist, came to camp. What else can you tell me? What else?) and one closed question (Is there something else you can tell me?). Only the free-recall portion of the interview was used; these lasted an average of one and a half minutes (*M* = 108.00 seconds, *SD* = 18.84).

Peer interviews

Peer interviewers were asked to find out everything they could about what happened during the science show. To allow for a more natural peer-to-peer conversation, peer interviewers were not told what questions to ask, but were informed that they would be later interviewed by an adult about what they learned to ensure they would stay on topic. Peer interviewers and interviewees were matched by sex and age. On average, the peer interviewers selected for this study asked eight prompts (*M* = 8.13, *SD* = 5.67) and interviewed their peer for approximately two minutes (*M* = 129.25 seconds, *SD* = 57.84). Children asked open- and closed-ended questions (no suggestive questions).

One hundred-thirteen children participated in the original study. Children were considered disclosers if they explicitly told the interviewer about the transgression (i.e., spilling water on the laptop); concealers if they failed to report the transgression. As such, four disclosure patterns emerged in the original study: 36% of children concealed the transgression from both recipients (consistent concealers), 30% disclosed to both recipients (consistent disclosers), 12% disclosed only to the peer (peer disclosers), and 22% disclosed only to the adult (adult disclosers). From each of these disclosure patterns, we selected the peer and the adult interviews of two children. Selection was based on identifying two children (per disclosure pattern) with a similar quality of interview (e.g., similar ages, length, on-topic, good quality recording, representative of the average report on these metrics) from a subsample of the interviews in which parental consent had been given for the interview to be used in future research. Thus, a total of 16 interviews were selected (2 children [Child 1, Child 2] × 2 [peer and adult] interviews × 4 disclosure patterns). The interviews selected for the current study were representative of the peer interviews that took place in the original study in terms of interview length, as well as the number and types of questions asked. The ages of the children in the interviews ranged from 7 to 10 years old (peer and adult disclosers: M_{age} = 8.75 years; peer and adult concealers: M_{age} = 8.5 years).

Questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate children on 11 credibility variables (Connolly et al., 2008) selected based on previous research examining the two-factor model (Ross et al., 2003), as well as some additional measures that have been found to be associated with children's credibility. Nine variables (intelligence, accuracy, believability, truthfulness, consistency, honesty, attentiveness, understanding of the event, and overall credibility) were rated such that 1 indicated a negative evaluation (e.g., not at all honest) and 6 indicated a positive evaluation (e.g., very honest). Two variables (susceptibility to suggestive questions and the likelihood that the child fabricated the event) were rated such that 1 indicated a positive evaluation (e.g., not at all susceptible) and 6 indicated a negative evaluation (e.g., very susceptible) and were reverse coded. The questionnaire also included demographic questions about participants' age, gender, and ethnicity.

Procedure

Prior to commencing the session all participants provided informed consent. Participants were told that they would be listening to a child being interviewed and would be asked to answer questions about the child. Before hearing the audio clip, participants heard a statement indicating the context of the interview and the identity of the interviewer (e.g., "You are about to listen to

a child talking to [another child or an adult] about what happened when visitors came to their science camp to perform an art/science show"). All participants were blind to what occurred during the original event and were not given information about the science show or the transgression. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 Child (Child 1, Child 2) × 2 Disclosure (conceal, disclose) × 2 Interviewer (peer, adult) between-subjects design. After listening to the interview, participants completed the credibility questionnaire. Participants were fully debriefed about the purpose of the study and compensated with course credit or entered a draw for $200. The session took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed no differences in the pattern of results between Child 1 and Child 2 within each condition, $F(11, 225) = 1.21$, $p = .280$, thus subsequent analyses were collapsed across children. Additionally, survey format (online vs. paper) did not influence credibility evaluations, $F(11, 225) = 1.63$, $p = .092$, thus all reported analyses were collapsed across survey format.

Credibility evaluations

A 2 Interviewer (peer, adult) by 2 Disclosure (conceal, disclose) MANOVA was performed with each of the credibility variables as the outcome variables (intelligence, accuracy, believability, understanding of the event, truthfulness, consistency, honesty, susceptibility to suggestive questions, likelihood of fabrication, and attentiveness). The main effect of Interviewer was not significant, $F(11, 250) = 0.61$, $p = .822$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$, indicating that credibility ratings did not significantly differ between Peer and Adult recipient conditions. There was a significant main effect of Disclosure, $F(11, 250) = 2.82$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .110$. Specifically, Concealers were perceived to be less likely to *fabricate the event,* $F(1, 260) = 7.89$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .029$, more *believable,* $F(1, 260) = 6.02$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$, and more *credible overall,* $F(1, 260) = 5.12$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .019$ compared to Disclosers (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Finally, contrary to our hypothesis, the interaction between Interviewer and Disclosure was not significant, $F(11, 250) = 0.81$, $p = .633$, $\eta_p^2 = .024$.

Study 1 Discussion

The aim of Study 1 was to compare adults' perceptions of peer and adult disclosures. Consistent with our predictions, children who concealed the

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Credibility Measures by Disclosure Condition and Interviewer Type (Study 1).

		Disclosure Condition			
		Concealer		Discloser	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Accuracy					
	Peer	4.05	1.10	3.61	3.61
	Adult	3.77	.91	3.78	1.11
	Total	3.90	1.01	3.69	1.07
Honesty					
	Peer	4.70	1.14	4.39	1.15
	Adult	4.64	.97	4.44	1.25
	Total	4.66	1.05	4.42	1.20
Overall Credibility					
	Peer	3.92	1.13	3.42	1.07
	Adult	3.64	1.01	3.51	1.28
	Total	3.77	1.07	3.46	1.17
Intelligent					
	Peer	4.05	.94	3.77	.83
	Adult	3.99	.84	3.92	.96
	Total	4.01	.88	3.84	.89
Susceptible to suggestion					
	Peer	3.52	1.27	3.78	1.21
	Adult	3.58	1.22	3.37	1.18
	Total	3.55	1.24	3.57	1.21
Likelihood of fabrication					
	Peer	2.35	.97	2.86	1.17
	Adult	2.46	1.06	2.70	1.12
	Total	2.41	1.02	2.78	1.14
Truthfulness					
	Peer	4.65	1.21	4.33	1.04
	Adult	4.66	1.02	4.46	1.15
	Total	4.66	1.11	4.39	1.09

continued

Table 1. Continued

		Disclosure Condition			
		Concealer		Discloser	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Consistency					
	Peer	4.11	1.39	4.25	1.18
	Adult	4.04	1.20	4.08	1.22
	Total	4.07	1.29	4.17	1.20
Attentiveness					
	Peer	4.02	1.37	3.69	1.28
	Adult	3.68	1.26	3.67	1.22
	Total	3.83	1.32	3.68	1.25
Believability					
	Peer	4.54	1.26	4.08	1.13
	Adult	4.39	.93	4.17	1.17
	Total	4.46	1.09	4.13	1.15
Understanding of the event					
	Peer	3.56	1.24	3.73	1.29
	Adult	3.45	1.17	3.73	1.02
	Total	3.50	1.20	3.73	1.16

Note. Lower scores indicate negative evaluations on all variables except likelihood of fabrication and susceptibility to suggestion, where lower scores indicate more positive evaluations.

transgression were considered more credible than children who disclosed, regardless of interviewer. This aligns with previous findings where children who disclose others' transgressions are typically considered less credible (Wyman et al., 2018) and that children's disclosures of adults' transgressions are generally seen as dishonest (Davies & Rogers, 2009). Participants may have thought the child was hiding the true transgressor and blaming the adult for a transgression that the child or another child committed.

Inconsistent with our predictions, children who disclosed the transgression to the peer interviewer were not considered less credible than children who disclosed to an adult. One possible explanation is that the contrast between the peer and adult interview conversations (e.g., peer interviews perhaps being more casual and adult interviews more solemn) may not have been evident in the between-subjects design as participants only heard either the peer or adult interview. To further explore whether this unexpected

finding was due to hearing peer and adult interviews in isolation, we conducted a second study where we presented participants with both the peer *and* adult interviews.

Study 2

Given that peer disclosures are unlikely to occur in isolation, it is important to assess perceptions of children's reports to both peers and adults. As such, Study 2 examined whether the consistency of children's disclosures across peer and adult interviews may influence adults' perceptions of children's credibility. Specifically, in Study 2 we presented participants with both the child's peer and adult interviews. Children's peer and adult interview pairs fell into one of four disclosure patterns: consistent discloser (the child disclosed the transgression to both recipients), inconsistent peer discloser (the child disclosed to the peer but not the adult), inconsistent adult discloser (the child disclosed to the adult but not the peer), or consistent concealer (the child did not disclose to either recipient). It was predicted that consistent disclosers would be perceived as more credible than inconsistent disclosers (to only the peer or only the adult), because inconsistent reports can be damaging to perceptions of credibility (Berman & Cutler, 1996; Berman et al., 1995; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016; Redlich et al., 2008). We also predicted that inconsistent peer disclosers would be considered less credible than inconsistent adult disclosers, as disclosing to an adult may be seen as more credible because it is associated with a greater likelihood of intervention (Malloy et al., 2013). Finally, based on Study 1, it was predicted that concealers would be perceived as more credible than disclosers because they provided a consistent (albeit untruthful) and positive report of the event (Current Study 1; Redlich et al., 2008).

Method

Participants

Participants were required to be of jury-eligible age (18 years of age or older) and Canadian citizens. Participants were recruited from two Canadian universities (Brock University: $n = 72$; University of Regina: $n = 56$) through participant research pools. Most participants ($n = 111$) completed the study on a computer, while 13.3% ($n = 17$) completed paper and pencil versions; all questionnaires were completed in the laboratory. One hundred and twenty-eight participants completed the study ($M_{age} = 21.35$ years, $SD = 6.09$, 71.9% females). Participants were 71.1% Caucasian, 9.4% Asian, 2.3% African Canadian, 2.3% Hispanic, 8.6% other, and 6.4% not reported. Seven

participants were excluded for missing data (M_{age} = 18.57, SD = 1.51); thus, 121 participants were included in the analyses (M_{age} = 21.51 years, SD = 6.22, 71.9% females). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four Disclosure Conditions: consistent discloser (n = 31, M_{age} = 22.78, SD = 7.13), consistent concealer (n = 32, M_{age} = 22.78, SD =7.13), inconsistent peer discloser (n = 28, M_{age} = 19.96, SD = 2.05), or inconsistent adult discloser (n = 30, M_{age} = 20.17, SD = 5.27).

Materials

Study 2 used the same interviews and questionnaire as Study 1. The same children's interviews were used as stimuli; however, the child interviews were not separated by peer and adult interviews and were instead shown as peer/adult interview sets (two children's pairs per condition for eight interview pairs total). Child age was matched as closely as possible across Disclosure Conditions (consistent discloser: M_{age}= 9 years old, one male, one female; inconsistent peer, M_{age}= 8.5 years old, two males; inconsistent adult, M_{age}= 8.5 years old, two females; consistent concealer: M_{age}= 8.5 years old, two females).

Procedure

Study 2 followed the same procedure as Study 1. In a between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four Disclosure Conditions (consistent discloser, consistent concealer, inconsistent peer discloser, inconsistent adult discloser). To ensure findings were not driven by an individual child, participants were randomly assigned to hear either Child 1 or Child 2's interview set. Finally, the order in which the peer and adult interviews were presented was counterbalanced to control for order effects (Interview Order). Participants were fully debriefed about the purpose of the study and compensated with course credit or entered a draw for $200. The session took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete

Results

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed no differences in the pattern of results between Child 1 and Child 2 within conditions, thus we collapsed across Child for all subsequent analyses. Additionally, survey format (online vs. paper) did not influence credibility evaluations, $F(11, 95) = 1.15$, $p = .332$, thus all reported analyses were collapsed across survey format.

Credibility evaluations

A 4 Disclosure Condition (consistent discloser, consistent concealer, inconsistent peer discloser, inconsistent adult discloser) by 2 Interview Order (peer first, adult first) MANOVA was conducted with each of the credibility variables as the outcome variables (intelligence, accuracy, believability, understanding of the event, truthfulness, consistency, honesty, susceptibility to suggestive questions, likelihood of fabrication and attentiveness). The main effect of Interview Order was not significant, $F(11, 103) = 0.58$, $p = .844$, $\eta_p^2 = .058$, indicating that hearing the peer or adult interview first did not influence credibility ratings. However, there was a significant main effect of Disclosure Condition, $F(33, 315) = 1.56$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .140$. Disclosure Condition differences are outlined below for the significant credibility variables: truthfulness, honesty, consistency, likelihood of fabrication, believability, and overall credibility. There were no other significant effects or interactions among the remaining credibility variables (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations; Table 3 for MANOVA results). All pairwise comparisons were assessed using the Bonferroni correction.

Table 2. Means (and Standard Deviations) of Credibility Measures by Disclosure Condition (Study 2).

	Disclosure Condition			
	Consistent Concealer	Consistent Discloser	Inconsistent Peer Discloser	Inconsistent Adult Discloser
Overall credibility	4.34 (1.10)	3.35 (1.28)	3.18 (1.02)	3.67 (1.21)
Truthfulness	5.06 (.91)	4.19 (1.23)	3.71 (1.38)	4.43 (1.14)
Honesty	4.94 (1.05)	4.10 (1.25)	3.57 (1.37)	4.20 (1.19)
Consistency	4.34 (1.31)	3.74 (1.41)	3.04 (1.37)	4.33 (1.40)
Likelihood of fabrication	2.09 (1.00)	2.84 (1.29)	2.93 (1.25)	2.50 (1.11)
Accuracy	4.13 (.94)	3.45 (.93)	3.54 (.92)	4.17 (1.02)
Believability	4.75 (1.19)	4.00 (1.24)	4.07 (.94)	4.30 (1.26)
Intelligence	4.13 (.75)	3.84 (.79)	3.68 (.82)	4.00 (.74)
Understanding of the event	3.94 (1.16)	3.65 (1.14)	3.46 (1.14)	3.87 (1.11)
Susceptibility to suggestion	3.59 (1.29)	4.00 (.97)	3.75 (.93)	3.53 (1.20)
Attentiveness	4.13 (1.41)	3.81 (1.33)	3.43 (.84)	3.90 (1.03)

Note. Lower scores indicate negative evaluations on all variables except likelihood of fabrication and susceptibility to suggestion, where lower scores indicate more positive evaluations.

Table 3. Four (Disclosure Condition: Consistent Discloser, Consistent Concealer, Inconsistent Peer Discloser, Inconsistent Adult Discloser) × Two (Interview Order: Peer First, Adult First) MANOVA Results on All Credibility Measures (Study 2).

	F	*p*	η_p^2
Overall credibility			
Disclosure condition	5.88	.001*	.135
Interviewer order	.031	.860	.000
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.167	.918	.004
Truthfulness			
Disclosure condition	7.01	<.001*	.157
Interviewer order	.132	.717	.001
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	1.36	.258	.035
Honesty			
Disclosure condition	6.60	<.001*	.149
Interviewer order	.034	.854	.000
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	1.57	.201	.040
Consistency			
Disclosure condition	5.83	.001*	.134
Interviewer order	.451	.503	.004
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	1.44	.236	.037
Likelihood of fabrication			
Disclosure condition	3.22	.025*	.079
Interviewer order	.007	.935	.000
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.299	.826	.008
Accuracy			
Disclosure condition	4.33	.006*	.103
Interviewer order	.000	.963	.000
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	1.49	.223	.038
Believability			
Disclosure condition	2.80	.043*	.069
Interviewer order	2.82	.096	.024
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.951	.419	.025
Intelligence			
Disclosure condition	1.79	.153	.045
Interviewer order	.249	.619	.002
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.496	.686	.013

continued

Table 3. Continued

	F	*p*	η_p^2
Understanding of the event			
Disclosure condition	1.00	.398	.026
Interviewer order	.248	.620	.002
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.399	.754	.010
Attentiveness			
Disclosure condition	1.72	.166	.044
Interviewer order	.293	.590	.003
Disclosure condition × interviewer order	.420	.739	.011

Note. *$p < .05$.

Consistent concealers versus consistent disclosers. Consistent with our predictions, consistent concealers were perceived to be more *accurate* ($p = .038$), *believable* ($p = .053$), *truthful* ($p = .018$), *honest* ($p = .034$), and *credible* ($p = .007$) than consistent disclosers.

Consistent concealers versus inconsistent peer disclosers. Consistent with our predictions, consistent concealers were rated as significantly less likely to *fabricate the event* ($p = .043$), as well as more *truthful* ($p < .001$), *honest* ($p < .001$), *consistent* ($p = .002$), and *credible* ($p = .001$) than inconsistent peer disclosers.

Inconsistent adult versus inconsistent peer disclosers. Consistent with our predictions, inconsistent adult disclosers were perceived to be significantly more *consistent* ($p = .004$) than inconsistent peer disclosers.

General Discussion

The goal of the present research was to examine adults' perceptions of children's credibility when disclosing or concealing another's transgression. In Study 1, we examined how adults' credibility judgements differed when a child disclosed or concealed a transgression to a peer or to an adult. Building from Study 1, Study 2 examined whether the consistency of disclosing across two interviews with a peer and an adult recipient would influence a child's credibility. Across the two studies, we found that children who concealed the transgression were perceived as more credible than children who truthfully disclosed. While we did not find credibility differences between peer and adult recipients in Study 1, Study 2 suggested that when contrasted with the adult interview, peer disclosures may be harmful to children's disclosure of an adult transgression. These findings are discussed in detail below.

With age, children are more likely to disclose maltreatment to peers to avoid unsupportive responses from adults (Malloy et al., 2013). Yet, no prior study has examined whether who the disclosure recipient is influences credibility ratings. In the present study, we expected that peer disclosures would be perceived as less credible than adult disclosures. Partial support was found for this prediction in Study 2; conditions that contained peer disclosures were significantly less credible than when children concealed. This finding suggests that adults may be more hesitant to believe a child who discloses an adults' transgression to a peer, regardless of whether they also disclose to an adult. This finding has important implications for disclosures of maltreatment. Children who disclose to peers may perceive that disclosure as less likely to result in negative consequences (e.g., not being believed, being removed from the home, further harm from abuser, etc.) than disclosing to an adult. The current findings suggest that this tendency to choose a peer recipient may be harmful to the child's credibility when the disclosure is eventually received by an adult. For example, adults may question why a disclosure of being harmed was made to an individual that does not have the capacity to intervene; thus, they may consider the disclosure less believable because the child's disclosure could not result in intervention. This may lead to a child's report not being taken seriously and a child left in a situation where they may continue to be harmed.

One factor that may have influenced adults' perceptions of peer disclosures is the quality and content of the peer-to-peer conversation, as children may adjust their speech based on the identity of their conversational partner (Shatz & Gelman, 1973). While participants could not make comparisons between the peer and adult interviews in Study 1 (where no significant differences were found between peer and adult disclosure recipient conditions), in Study 2 participants heard both interviews and could directly contrast children's reports in the peer and adult interviews. The direct comparison between a child talking to a peer and to an adult may have resulted in the more negative evaluations of the children who told a peer. This explanation is somewhat encouraging, given that it is unlikely that an adult would hear the peer disclosure and would be unable to compare the peer and adult conversation directly. It is possible, though, that a child could be less credible if their initial disclosure is to a peer, regardless of whether the adults evaluating the child's credibility hear that conversation or not. To tease apart the impact of peer disclosures versus conversational style on child credibility, future studies could assess whether incorporating a discussion of a prior peer disclosure into an adult interview negatively influences credibility evaluations compared to when no such discussion is included.

Interestingly, children who concealed the transgression were perceived as more credible than disclosers across Study 1 and 2. This finding, that the children who were dishonest were rated most credible, is both interesting and concerning. While adults generally seem to hold a truth bias when evaluating the veracity of children's reports (Gongola et al., 2017), in the present investigation, adults appeared to distrust children's disclosures of an adult's transgression. Previous research has shown that adults believe that children will lie to avoid being punished (Last & Aharoni-Etzioni, 1995). Additionally, adults may believe that older children, as in our study, are able to tell convincing lies due to increased cognitive competence (Connolly et al., 2008). Thus, participants may have thought the child was able and motivated to lie about the event (e.g., blaming the adult for a child breaking the laptop). This belief combined with adults' inability to detect children's lies (Gongola et al., 2017) may have resulted in higher credibility judgements for concealers compared to disclosers. Adults' tendency to distrust children's disclosures poses serious problems for disclosures of maltreatment, in both formal and informal environments. Given that perpetrators of abuse are often familiar to the child, if a disclosure is made and not taken seriously the child may remain in a harmful environment. In formal settings, such as if the disclosure results in a trial, adult jurors' skepticism of a child's report may result in the perpetrator being allowed to continue their abuse. Unfortunately, children appear to be aware of this distrust as they report a fear of not being believed as a reason for delaying disclosure (Malloy et al., 2013; Schaeffer et al., 2011).

As with the children in our research, children who experience or witness a crime may be asked by the perpetrator to keep the event a secret (Lyon et al., 2010). The current study demonstrated that adults trust the reports of children who conceal a transgression for an adult. This willingness to believe children's positive reports (no transgression) over negative ones (disclosing a transgression) is problematic given that adults will be less likely further investigate situations when true transgressions have occurred. Further research is needed to understand why adults might be so hesitant to believe children's reports of transgressions to ensure that when children are telling the truth their claims are taken seriously. Additionally, research could examine this pattern in the context of a more serious transgression to determine whether this perception of disclosures compared to omissions might carry forward into more serious contexts, such as maltreatment.

Importantly, previous studies have focused on veracity judgments of children's false narratives (child describes an event that did not happen; Bala et al., 2005) or children's deception in response to a direct question (Crossman & Lewis, 2006). The present studies explored a third option that represents a realistic scenario that has not, to our knowledge, been examined in the

deception detection literature: lying by omission. Children may experience a negative event and report some details, but not others. In forensic interviews, children may be asked questions about an event and either deny that the event occurred, as examined in previous research, or report true aspects event while leaving out important and incriminating details. Children in the present studies lied by omission (i.e., not reporting the transgression portion of the science show), which may be even more difficult for adults to detect than lies of commission (false stories/statements). If adults are unable to detect that a child has concealed some aspects of the event, their credibility evaluations would reflect an inaccurate perception of a more honest child.

One limitation to the current study is the external validity of the transgression paradigm. The event included an adult transgression the child was asked to conceal; however, the nature of the transgression was minor. Children's disclosures of maltreatment differ from this paradigm in two important ways. First, maltreatment is a more severe transgression to disclose, with more severe consequences than the "water-spilling" transgression used in these studies. Second, in cases of maltreatment the child is not just a witness to the transgression (maltreatment) but a victim. Adults may have more positive perceptions of children in more severe circumstances compared to a less severe transgression. However, there is evidence to suggest that adults remain skeptical of children's disclosures when the transgression is more severe. For example, Wyman et al. (2018) study examined children's reports of an adult's theft, and children who falsely denied an adult's theft were seen as more credible than children who truthfully disclosed. Thus, it appears that children's reports of adults' misdeeds are received with skepticism. While the severity of maltreatment cannot ethically be matched in experimental paradigms, it is important to consider how this difference may influence adults' perceptions within the legal system. Future studies may examine real court cases and trial outcomes that include a child disclosing to both peers and adults to assess whether the consistency and recipient identity influences trial outcomes.

There are additional limitations to the interviews that were used in the current study. First, they included only free-recall questions, while forensic interviews typically also include direct or cued follow-up questions to obtain more information from the child. Price et al. (2019) used a forensic interviewing protocol that included cued questions asking about specific details about the event, but this portion of the interview was not used in the current study to minimize the differences between the naïve peer and adult interviews and to reduce time demands on participants. Thus, future studies could incorporate additional question types in the adult interview beyond the free recall questions to represent forensic interviews more accurately. Second, the

current study used audio rather than video recording. Using audio recordings was beneficial in that it allowed for us to control for child appearance, emotional expression, and other aspects that would be influential if videos were used. However, given that adults would see the child when evaluating the credibility of the child's report in legal settings, examining these effects with videos of the interviews would be an important next step.

Finally, the present study also includes a lack of ethnic or racial diversity. While the racial identity of the children was not provided, the majority of the adult participants were white (approx. 70%). Future research should include a more diverse pool of participants to examine whether the credibility ratings provided in the current study are common across groups. Additionally, it would be important to examine the way peer disclosures are perceived when the race of the child *is* specified. It would be vital to understand whether these perceptions are common across groups as this would inform any interventions that are used to try to correct the bias toward disbelief found in the current study.

Conclusion

In summary, the present investigation demonstrates children may be considered less credible by adults when they disclose an adult's transgression to a peer. Importantly, children who concealed the adult's transgression were rated as more credible compared to children who disclosed a transgression. This is especially problematic given that adults are responsible for deciding how to proceed when a child discloses a transgression.

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