Original Research

The Impact of the Consistency of Child Witness and Peer Reports on Credibility

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Abstract

Adults' perceptions of children's disclosures have important implications for the response to that disclosure. Children who experience adult transgressions, such as maltreatment, often choose to disclose this experience to a peer. Thus, peer disclosure recipients may transmit this disclosure to an adult or provide support for the child's own disclosure. Despite this, the influence of peer disclosure on a child witness's credibility, as well as on the perceptions of peer disclosure recipients, is unknown. The present study examined how child witnesses' and peer disclosure recipients' credibility is impacted when the peer either confirms or contradicts the witness's disclosure (or concealment) of an adult transgression. Participants listened to a child witness and peer being interviewed by an adult in one of four disclosure patterns (consistent disclose, consistent conceal, witness disclose/peer conceal, or witness conceal/peer disclose). Participants rated both the witness and the peer on dimensions of credibility (honesty and cognitive competence). Results revealed that both the witness and peer were more credible when their reports were consistent with one another. When

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inconsistent, the witness/peer who disclosed was considered more credible than the one who concealed. The findings indicate the potential importance of peers in the disclosure process as they may support the witness's report and even be a credible discloser when the witness is reluctant to disclose.

Keywords
credibility, peer disclosure recipient, child witness, disclosure, consistency

The nature of a child's disclosure of a transgression can influence adults' perceptions of the child's credibility (Berman & Cutler,1996; Berman et al., 1995; Bracewell, 2018; Brewer et al., 1999; Connolly et al., 2010; Dykstra et al., 2021; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016; Wood et al., 1996; Zellman, 1992). Importantly, in a legal context, a child's perceived credibility can influence both the steps taken by adults to protect the child (or lack thereof) and jurors' decisions of whether to convict or acquit the accused. While parents are the most common disclosure recipient of maltreatment for young children (Malloy et al., 2013), with age, children become increasingly likely to disclose to a peer (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Lam, 2014; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Malloy et al., 2013; Priebe & Svedin, 2008). This peer recipient may then decide to transmit the disclosure or conceal it from an adult (Price et al., 2019). During an investigation, a peer may also be interviewed regarding their knowledge of the event, leading to either consistent or potentially inconsistent disclosures between the child witness and the peer. Such reports may support or discredit the child witness, as well as the peer. Despite the important role peers may play in a child's disclosure process, there is very limited research examining how they impact the child witness' credibility (Dykstra et al., 2021). Thus, the present study examines how a child's credibility is impacted when a peer either confirms or contradicts the witnessing child's disclosure (or concealment) of an adult transgression.

The credibility of a child's report is typically assessed by adults based on two main factors: honesty and cognitive competence (Ross et al., 2003). Evaluations of honesty typically include factors such as the believability and truthfulness of a child's report, as well as whether the report is perceived as having been fabricated. Adults rely on various factors to assess honesty; children are more likely to be judged as dishonest when they are less emotional (Castelli & Goodman, 2014; Rowsell & Colloff, 2021), exhibit non-verbal behaviors such as fidgeting and face touching (Serras Pereira et al., 2014; Wyman et al., 2018), and engage in less eye contact (Global Deception Research Team, 2006; Wyman et al., 2018). Evaluations of cognitive competence include factors such as a child's intelligence,

accuracy, and the consistency of their testimony (Ross et al., 2003). Various factors can influence perceptions of competence, including interview style (Castelli et al., 2005; Klemfuss& Olaguez, 2020), gender (Voogt et al., 2020), the consistency of the details of the report (Stromwall & Granhag, 2005; Wyman et al., 2018), and whether the event is seen as plausible (St. George et al., 2022; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014).

This two-factor model of credibility is commonly used to study children's credibility evaluations (Bottoms, 1993; Connolly et al., 2008; Goodman et al., 1989; Ross et al., 1990, 2003). The two-factor model is particularly useful with children because, in general, age has been found to impact perceptions of honesty and cognitive competence in different ways. With age, children are considered more cognitively competent as adults perceive older children as having more reliable memories (Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Pozzulo et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2010), less susceptibility to suggestive questioning (Castelli et al., 2005), and increased capability of providing accurate and credible reports of events (Connolly et al., 2008, 2010; Goodman et al., 1987; Wood et al., 1996) relative to younger children. In contrast, perceptions of honesty tend to decrease with age as children's deceptive abilities improve (Bottoms et al., 2007; Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Gabora et al., 1993; Goodman et al.,1989, Experiment 2; Hatton & Duff, 2016; Nightingale, 1993). Additionally, particularly with children, either honesty or cognitive competence can be more salient depending on the context of the case; for example, young children are typically considered more honest in sexual abuse cases than older children and adults because they are considered too naïve to construct plausible false narratives about sexual behaviors (McCauley & Parker, 2000; Rogers & Davies, 2007).

Beyond a child's age, various factors surrounding children's disclosures of transgressions can impact how they are perceived. Peers become increasingly common disclosure recipients with age and play an important role in the disclosure process, perhaps even encouraging the victim to disclose to an adult (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2013; McElvaney, 2013; Priebe, & Svedin, 2008). However, research has seldom gone beyond exploration of the identity of children and adolescents' self-reported disclosure recipients to examine how peer disclosure may impact the child's credibility. Dykstra et al. (2021) examined adults' perceptions of children's credibility when they disclosed or concealed an adult transgression across interviews with a naïve peer and adult. Results indicated that children who concealed the transgression in both interviews were equally as credible as children who disclosed *only to an adult*, but that these children were significantly more credible than children who disclosed to a peer at any point. Dykstra et al. (2021) argued that perhaps the quality of the conversation between peers influenced

credibility judgments. Importantly, when making credibility judgments of a child's report, adults are unlikely to hear the peer-to-peer conversation; rather, the peer would likely become a factor in the disclosing child's credibility by either transmitting the disclosure to an adult or by being questioned by an adult as a person with knowledge of the event. The peers' report to an adult may help or hinder the child's credibility based on whether they support or discredit the child's report. However, to our knowledge, no study to date has examined how a peer disclosure recipient's report to an adult interviewer may influence adults' credibility evaluations.

While a peer's transmission of a child's disclosure may provide an opportunity for intervention, it may also be problematic because of the potential for inconsistencies. For example, a child witness may disclose maltreatment to a peer and the peer may transmit that disclosure to an adult, but when interviewed by an adult the child witness may be reluctant to disclose and as a result conceal the maltreatment. In this case, the peer's report may undermine the child's credibility. Alternatively, a peer's report may serve to bolster the credibility of a child's report if the children are consistent in whether they disclose. Adults may be more willing to believe that a transgression has occurred when another child supports the witness's report. While no study to date has examined how the consistency of reporting between children impacts credibility, prior research has demonstrated that the consistency of an individual's report across interviews is important when assessing credibility. Inconsistencies and recantations across a child's statements are often used as a marker of dishonesty and may reduce a child's credibility (Bracewell, 2018; Brewer et al., 1999; Berman & Cutler,1996; Berman et al., 1995; Connolly et al., 2010; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016; Zellman, 1992; but see Brewer & Burke, 2002; Lindsay et al.,1986). Thus, inconsistencies in disclosing a transgression between child witnesses and peer disclosure recipients may negatively impact perceived credibility.

Finally, the child's gender may be an important factor to consider in credibility assessments, though previous research has inconsistently found effects of gender. Some evidence suggests that boys may be more credible than girls (Bornstein & Muller, 2001; Esnard & Dumas, 2013), while other evidence suggests that girls may be considered more credible than boys (Cross et al., 2005; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000; Nunez et al., 2011; Wyman et al., 2018). In contrast, a recent meta-analysis examining how the victim's gender impacts credibility ratings found that the majority of studies examining gender of child sexual abuse victims did not find a significant effect of gender on credibility ratings (Voogt & Klettke, 2017). Importantly, observed credibility differences based on gender appear to emerge in sexual

abuse cases specifically; thus it may not be a factor when reporting a less severe transgression.

The Current Study

The aim of the present study was to examine whether the consistency of disclosing an adult transgression between a child witness and a peer disclosure recipient influenced adults' perceptions of witness and peer credibility. Additionally, given the inconsistencies in some previous research, the current study also examined whether there would be gender differences in how witnesses and peer disclosure recipients' credibility was evaluated. Adults listened to audio recordings of two children (one child witness and one peer who had previously interviewed the child witness) being interviewed by an adult about an art show in which an adult confederate committed and asked the children to conceal a transgression. During the adult interviews, some children disclosed the transgression and others concealed the transgression. Adult participants listened to the child witness and peer interviews in one of four between-subjects disclosure conditions: Consistent Disclose (both the child witness and peer disclosed the transgression), Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal (only the child witness disclosed the transgression), Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose (only the peer disclosed the transgression), and Consistent Conceal (neither child witness nor peer disclosed the transgression). Two additional Witness Only control conditions were included in which the participant only listened to the witness's interview (Witness-Only Disclose or Conceal) to assess witness credibility without the peer's report. These Witness-Only conditions were not central to our research question and thus are included in the Supplemental Appendix A. After listening to the interviews, participants evaluated the credibility of each child (within-subjects: witness and peer interviews; one set of female children, one set of male children).

Hypotheses. The aim of the current study was to assess the credibility ratings of the witness and of the peer. We first examined overall differences across the four disclosure conditions:

> H1. The witness and peer would be significantly more credible when the other child was consistent with their report (e.g., Bracewell, 2018; Connolly et al., 2010; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016). Specifically, the witness and peer would be significantly more credible in the Consistent Disclose and Consistent Conceal conditions than in the inconsistent (Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose) conditions.

H2. Given that previous research has found that adults are hesitant to believe children's reports involving adults' transgressions (Dykstra et al., 2021; Wyman et al., 2018), we expected that the Consistent Conceal condition would be significantly more credible than all other conditions (as all other conditions involve disclosures).

Next, we expected to find differences specifically between the two inconsistent conditions (Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose conditions) for both the witness and the peer. We expected that differences in either direction may occur:

H3. *Witnesses* in the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition may be more credible; the peer did not witness the event, and thus did not know about the transgression. In contrast, the witness in the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition may be perceived as dishonest because the peer reported important details (the transgression) that the witness did not. However, the witness may be perceived as more credible when they conceal as adults appear to be hesitant to believe children's reports of a transgression (Dykstra et al., 2021; Wyman et al., 2018).
H4. *Peers* may be considered more credible in the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition because they are honestly reporting the transgression and may not be perceived as having a reason to lie. Alternatively, the peer may be more credible in the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition because the participants may not trust the disclosure of the transgression.

Finally, we examined differences between children based on gender; these analyses were exploratory given that previous research suggests inconsistent patterns in how male and female children are evaluated (H5; Bornstein & Muller, 2001; Esnard & Dumas, 2013; Nunez et al., 2011; Voogt & Klettke, 2017; Wyman et al., 2018).

Method

Participants

Participants were required to be of jury age (18 years or older) and Canadian citizens. Participants were recruited through a participant research pool at Brock University. A total of 128 adults participated in the study; one participant was excluded due to incomplete data, resulting in 127 participants in the final sample (M_{age} = 20.86, SD = 5.43, 53.5% female). A post hoc power analysis using G*Power3 (Faul et al., 2007) was conducted with α = .05 with a

moderate effect size ($d = .25$). Results suggest that a total sample of 136 would be required to achieve a power of .80 in a repeated measures ANOVA. Participants were 74.4% White, 11.2% Asian, 6.4% African Canadian, 2.4% Hispanic, 5.6% other. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: Consistent Disclose ($n = 32$), Consistent Conceal ($n = 32$), Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal ($n = 31$), or Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose ($n = 32$).

Materials

Adult–child interview stimuli background. The interviews used in the current study were obtained from a previous study (Price et al., 2019) in which children (6–11 years) at a summer camp witnessed a transgression. Specifically, children were visited by a red apron artist (a research assistant) who performed an arts and science show. During the show she spilled water on a laptop belonging to the camp and told the children she would get into trouble if anyone found out. She then asked the children to keep her transgression a secret. The children were not told that they would be interviewed about the event.

Prior to this event half of the children from the camp group were removed from the room to complete a separate task and were naïve to the details of the event and transgression. These children served as naïve peer interviewers and were assigned to interview one of the children who witnessed the event. The peer-to-peer interview occurred immediately after the event and was unstructured and not scripted; the children were instructed to ask questions to find out as much as they could about the event. Peers were motivated to get as much detail as possible as they were told that they themselves would be interviewed about the event later. The following day, both the child witness and naïve peer interviewer were interviewed by an adult. (Note: the peer-to-peer interviews were not used in the current study, but additional information on these interviews can be found in Dykstra et al., 2021; Price et al., 2019).

Child–adult interviews were conducted by trained research assistants who followed a structured interview protocol that involved asking a series of open-ended prompts. The first question asked, "What can you tell me about the event when the red apron artist visited your camp?" (child witness) or "What can you tell me about what the other kid told you about when the red apron artist visited your camp?" (naïve peer interviewer). The interviewer then continued to ask open-ended follow-up questions to obtain as much information as possible (e.g., "What else can you tell me?"); once the child appeared to have exhausted their recall, the interviewer ended the free-recall phase of the interview. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

The children who witnessed the event either disclosed or concealed the transgression during their adult interview. Children were considered disclosers if they mentioned the transgression of spilling water on the laptop. There were two groups of naïve peer interviewers: children who received a disclosure from a witness during the peer interview, and children who did not receive a disclosure during the peer interview. The peers' interviews with the adult were only used if the peer had received a disclosure from the witness during their peer-to-peer interview; thus, all peer interviewers included in the current study had knowledge of the transgression. Of these children, some peers transmitted the disclosure during their interview with the adult (disclosers) while others concealed their knowledge of the transgression (concealers).

Adult–child interviews for current study. The interviews between the child (witness or peer) and the adult interviewer were used to create four disclosure conditions: Consistent Disclose (both witness and peer disclose transgression), Consistent Conceal (both witness and peer conceal transgression), Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal, and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose. Sixteen child interviews were chosen (M_{length} = 102.13 seconds, SD = 45.95; M_{age} = 8.84, SD = 1.22); eight pairs of interviews in which the children disclosed (M_{length} = 119.63 seconds, SD = 57.00; M_{age} = 9.06, SD = 1.24) and eight pairs of interviews in which the children concealed (M_{length} = 84.63 seconds, SD = 21.48; M_{age} = 8.63, SD = 1.20). The age of children selected did not differ across disclosers and concealers (t[30] = 1.01, p = .319); however, the disclosers' interviews were longer than the concealers' (t[30] = 2.30, p = .029). These interviews were randomly paired to create the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose conditions. Interview pairs in all conditions were gender-matched.

Credibility Questionnaire. Participants rated both the witness and naïve peer across eight credibility variables (Dykstra et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2003): intelligence, accuracy, believability, understanding of the event, truthfulness, consistency, honesty, and likelihood of fabrication. Participants responded on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (e.g., not at all intelligent) to 6 (very intelligent). Following the credibility items, participants answered demographics questions about their gender, age, and ethnicity.

Procedure. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. All procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Board (Brock University). Participants were told or read an introductory statement explaining they would be listening to interviews with children about an event they had witnessed or been told about and would be answering questions

about each child. Participants were blind to the details of the event and were randomly assigned to one of the four disclosure conditions (Consistent Disclose, Consistent Conceal, Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal, Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose).

In each condition, participants listened to two audio-recorded interviews (one witness/adult interview and one peer/adult interview) that varied in whether the witness and/or the peer disclosed. Presentation order of interviews was counterbalanced. Participants heard two randomly selected sets of interviews from the 16 interviews selected: one female and one male set (one set = witness interview + peer interview). Participants listened to *both* interviews (witness/peer order counterbalanced), then rated each child on the eight credibility variables. Participants listened to both interviews prior to credibility ratings because we were interested in how the peer's inconsistent or consistent report would influence the ratings of the witness; thus, the participants need to hear both accounts before reporting on credibility. Silhouettes depicting gender accompanied each recording, so participants were aware of the child's gender. The demographic questions came after all the questions regarding the interview were completed. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed about the study. The study took 30–45 minutes to complete. In exchange for participation, the students received one course research credit or were entered into a draw for a $200 gift card.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A multivariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine whether credibility ratings differed for those who heard the witness interview first compared to those who heard the peer first. This analysis was not significant, indicating the order in which interviews were presented did not significantly impact credibility ratings (F [4, 122] = 2.23, p = .07).

Factor Analysis

Given that previous research has found evidence of a two-factor model of credibility (Ross et al., 2003), we first examined whether factors of honesty and competence emerged. Four factor analyses were conducted: female witness credibility (Table 1), male witness credibility (Table 1), female peer credibility (Table 2), and male peer credibility (Table 2). See tables for factor loadings and variance explained. The variables included in these factor analyses were intelligence, accuracy, believability, understanding of the event, truthfulness, consistency, honesty, and likelihood of fabrication.

Table 1. Witness Factor Loadings.

	Female Witness		Male Witness	
Observed Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1				
Intelligent	.78	.11	.86	.03
Accurate	.83	.25	.75	.38
Understood the Event	.86	.07	.73	.31
Consistent	.50	.53	.64	.56
Factor 2				
Believable	.67	.47	.74	.44
Truthful	.42	.75	.46	.78
Honest	.33	.79	.41	.81
Likelihood of Fabrication	.11	.81	.00	.86
Eigenvalues	52.06%	16.08%	61.18%	14.22%

Table 2. Peer Interviewer Factor Loadings.

	Female Peer		Male Peer	
Observed Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1				
Intelligent	.75	.14	.79	.02
Accurate	.88	.09	.79	.45
Understood the event	.88	.10	.88	.27
Consistent	.57	.39	.48	.68
Factor 2				
Believable	.69	.42	.61	.63
Truthful	.38	.81	.32	.86
Honest	.33	.80	.25	.84
Likelihood of fabrication	.08	.86	.00	.73
Eigenvalues	51.35%	18.19%	14.59%	60.17%

Principle components analyses using varimax rotation revealed the presence of two factors across all analyses. Factor 1 included intelligence, accuracy, understanding of the event, and consistency; factor 1 was labeled as Competence. Factor two included believability, truthfulness, honesty, and likelihood of fabrication; factor 2 was labeled as Honesty. Across the four factor analyses, consistency and believability loaded onto both the

competence and honesty factor at about the .4 threshold. Given that consistency typically is more strongly associated with competence, it was included in the competence factor. Similarly, believability is theoretically associated with honesty, thus it was included in the honesty factor. Composite scores for each factor (Competence and Honesty) were created for male and female witnesses and peers based on these results.

Main Analyses

Witness credibility ratings. To assess perceptions of the witness's honesty, a 4 (Disclosure Condition: Consistent Disclose, Witness Disclose/Peer Disclose, Consistent Conceal, and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose) by 2 (Child Gender: male, female) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with honesty ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect of Disclosure Condition, F (3, 123) = 4.15, p = .008, $\eta_p^2 = .09$ (see Figure 1A). Pairwise comparisons revealed that the Consistent Conceal condition was rated as significantly more honest than the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition (p = .010), providing partial support for H2. Additionally, the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition was significantly more honest than the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition (p = .034; H3). There was a significant main effect of gender, F (1, 123) = 8.18, p = .005, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, such that males were rated as more honest than females (H5). The Child Gender by Disclosure Condition interaction was not significant. We did not find significant differences between the honesty ratings of the Consistent Disclose condition and the other three disclosure conditions (H1).

Next, we conducted the same repeated measures ANOVA with competence ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect of Disclosure Condition, F (3, 123) = 5.45, p = .001, $\eta_p^2 = .12$ (see Figure 1C). Pairwise comparisons revealed that the Consistent Conceal condition was rated as more competent than the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition (p = .023; H2). Additionally, the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition was rated significantly more competent than the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition (p = .001; H3). There was a significant main effect of Child Gender, F (1, 123) = 15.01, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, such that males were rated as more competent than females (H5). The Child Gender by Disclosure Condition interaction was not significant. We did not find significant differences between the competence ratings of the Consistent Disclose condition and the other three disclosure conditions (H1).

Peer credibility ratings. The final set of analyses examined the peer's credibility, as we were interested in how the peer's credibility would be impacted by

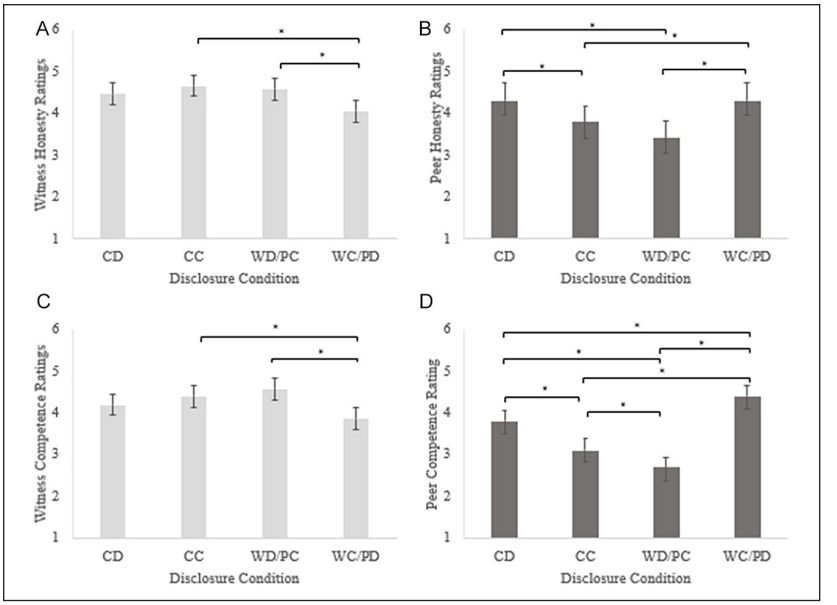

Figure 1. Mean honesty and competence ratings for witness and peer across disclosure conditions.
Note. CD = Consistent Disclose; CC = Consistent Conceal; WD/PC = Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal, WC/PD = Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose; bars indicate 95% CI. A = Witness Honesty ; B = Peer Honesty ; C = Witness Competence ; D = Peer Competence.

their consistency with the witness. First, a 4 (Disclosure Condition: Consistent Disclose, Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal, Consistent Conceal, and Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose) by 2 (Child Gender: male, female) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with the peer honesty ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect of Child Gender, $F(1, 123) = 6.14$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, and a significant main effect of Disclosure Condition, $F(3, 123) = 2.72$, $p = .048$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. These main effects were subsumed by a Disclosure Condition by Child Gender interaction, $F(3, 123) = 3.60$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Simple effects testing was used to examine the effect of disclosure condition separately for male and female children. For males, there were no significant differences between disclosure conditions. For females, several significant comparisons emerged (H5). First, the Consistent Disclose condition was significantly more honest than the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition ($p = .001$), supporting H1; the Consistent Disclose condition was also more honest than the Consistent Conceal condition ($p = .048$), contradicting H2. The Witness Conceal/Peer

Disclose condition was significantly more honest than the Consistent Conceal condition ($p = .045$), contradicting H2 in which we expected the Consistent Conceal condition to be rated more positively than the other conditions. Finally, the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition was significantly more honest than the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition ($p = .001$; see Figure 1B; H4).

We then conducted the same ANOVA with the peer's competency ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect of Child Gender, F (1, 123) = 7.21, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and of Disclosure Condition, $F(3, 123) = 10.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$. These main effects were subsumed by a Child Gender by Disclosure Condition interaction F (3, 123) = 6.62, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. Simple effects tests revealed several significant comparisons for the ratings of the female, but not male, children (H5). For females, the Consistent Disclose condition was significantly more competent than the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal ($p < .001$) conditions, supporting H1; the Consistent Disclose condition was also more competent than the Consistent Conceal ($p = .001$) condition, contradicting H2. The Consistent Conceal condition was significantly more competent than the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal condition ($p = .027$), providing partial support for H2. The Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition was rated significantly more competent than the Consistent Disclose ($p = .003$) and Consistent Conceal ($p < .001$) conditions, contradicting H1 and H2 in which we expected peers to be seen as more competent in the consistent conditions compared to the inconsistent condition. Finally, the Witness Conceal/Peer Disclose condition was rated significantly more competent than the Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal conditions ($p < .001$; see Figure 1D; H4).

Discussion

The present study sought to examine how a child's credibility is impacted when a peer either confirms or contradicts a witnessing child's report of an adult's transgression. We found that child witnesses' honesty and competency evaluations were influenced by a peer's report of the same event. Witnesses were rated most honest and competent when they and the peer consistently concealed a transgression. Inconsistencies between the witness and peer damaged honesty and competency ratings of the witness, particularly when the witness concealed and the peer disclosed. Peer credibility evaluations were also examined and revealed that female peers were perceived as more credible when they were consistent with the witness than when they contradicted the witness. They were also perceived as more credible when they disclosed but the witness concealed. We discuss each of these findings in turn.

The Influence of Disclosure Consistency on Witness and Peer Credibility Evaluations

The first aim of the current study was to examine differences in child witnesses' credibility when a peer is also interviewed and either provides a consistent or contrasting disclosure/concealment. First, given that previous findings have indicated that children are perceived as more credible when no transgression is disclosed (Dykstra et al., 2021; Wyman et al., 2018), it was predicted that both the witness and peer would be considered more credible when both children concealed the transgression (Consistent Conceal) compared to all other conditions. This hypothesis was partially supported for witness credibility but was not supported for the peer's credibility. Specifically, witnesses were rated significantly more honest and competent when both the witness and peer concealed the transgression (Consistent Conceal condition) compared to when the witness concealed but the peer disclosed. The peer's contradiction appeared to make the witness's concealment less credible.

In contrast, the peer was perceived as more honest and competent when both children disclosed and when the witness concealed and peer disclosed than when both children concealed or only the peer concealed (and witness disclosed). Thus, the peer was generally viewed more positively when they disclosed than when they concealed. While this contradicts our prediction, it is an encouraging result compared to recent findings where concealers were rated as more credible than conditions where a child disclosed a transgression (Dykstra et al., 2021). The more positive ratings of the peer's disclosure also bode well for circumstances in which a peer is interviewed about a victim's experience of maltreatment, or other adult transgressions. It may bolster the witnessing child's credibility to have a credible peer report that the transgression occurred. It does, however, suggest that more research is needed on the influence of disclosing and concealing on children's credibility. The current findings suggest that adults believe witnesses disclosure and concealment equally when the peer is consistent with the witness. If inconsistent, however, the peer's report can influence these perceptions.

Notably, when there was an inconsistency between the witness and peer's reports, children who disclosed were perceived as more credible (honest and competent) than concealers. This suggests that adults tend to believe the disclosing child, and that the concealer's credibility is harmed by inconsistency. What this means is that children who disclose a transgression may be more likely to be believed, even if a peer contradicts their report. Given the importance of consistency for credibility evaluations, this is somewhat surprising

(Denne et al., 2020; Molinaro & Malloy, 2016; Wyman et al., 2018). However, the current findings suggest that perhaps if the peer can support even some of the details of the event, it may give adults greater confidence in the accuracy of the witness's report. Additionally, recent findings from Danby et al. (2021) suggest that children are viewed more positively the sooner they report maltreatment; thus, even if the peer does not directly report the event, they may indirectly help to improve the child's credibility by ensuring that disclosures happen sooner than later. Identifying factors that could enhance credibility, such as having a peer corroborate the report, is vital given that defense attorneys often focus on challenging children's honesty and competence to try to diminish credibility (Denne et al., 2020).

Additionally, if a child who is suspected to have witnessed some type of transgression (e.g., maltreatment) chooses to conceal, but a peer who has knowledge of the transgression discloses, the peer's disclosure may be viewed positively even though it is inconsistent with the witness's report. This may provide an important avenue for disclosure and intervention in cases of maltreatment specifically, given that children who experience maltreatment often delay disclosing due to a myriad of concerns (e.g., not believed, further harm, etc.; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2011, 2013). For cases in which a witness/victim conceals an adult transgression, if a peer disclosure recipient is willing to speak up, their statements may be viewed as reliable evidence as they are perceived as more honest and competent. Peer disclosures are extremely common and occur at much higher rates than disclosures to law enforcement (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Peer disclosures, then, provide a much-needed avenue not only for ensuring that intervention occurs sooner, but also may provide a method for altering how adults view children's reports of transgressions.

Gender

Analyses revealed important differences in adult perceptions between male and female children. Overall, males were rated by adults as both more honest and competent than females. Additionally, gender interacted with disclosure condition only when examining the peer credibility evaluations; perceptions of male peers did not differ by condition, while female peers' credibility ratings varied. Specifically, female peer disclosure recipients were viewed as less credible in the conditions where the peer concealed the transgression (Consistent Conceal, Witness Disclose/Peer Conceal). It is interesting that perceptions of the peer were impacted by their lack of disclosure but that witness perceptions were not, even when the peer was inconsistent with the witness. This suggests that participants were suspicious of female peer

interviewers and may have suspected that they were holding back details. Adults may have different expectations of females' reports, but not males, that only impact their perceptions of the peer. Future research examining peer disclosure recipients should examine perceptions in greater detail, perhaps by using a more open-ended questions in the credibility assessment, to try to determine why perceptions of females and males differ specifically when it comes to peer disclosure recipients. Further, the nature of the event may play a role in this pattern (i.e., severity of maltreatment vs current transgression) as well as whether the child is a primary witness (where we found no gender differences) or a disclosure recipient (where we did find gender differences). Future studies may investigate gender differences further by using gender ambiguous interview audio and randomly assigning labels of male or female; randomly assigning gender could aid in deciphering whether gender is important or if other extraneous variables are at play.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the present study has demonstrated the influence of a peer's report on children's credibility, there are several limitations that should be considered and next steps that need to be taken. First, due to ethical constraints, the transgression that occurred in the current study was relatively minor (breaking a laptop). Credibility evaluations and differences may become more pronounced when disclosing (or concealing) a more severe transgression. Future studies may consider increasing the severity of the transgression (e.g., witnessing a theft) or an interaction with adults more akin to abuse (e.g., including touch or a co-transgression). Alternatively, it may be useful to examine mock transcripts where victims and peer disclosure recipients are interviewed about maltreatment.

The present study may have also been limited by its use of audio recorded interviews rather than video. Although this method of presentation for the child testimony prevented each individual child's physical appearance from factoring into credibility assessments, it may have also hindered adults' ability to detect situations where the child was being deceptive. Future studies may seek to use video recorded child interviews while simultaneously ensuring the child's features are blurred, to allow for adult assessment of both verbal and body language cues when determining the credibility of statements. While these cues may not be reliable indicators of credibility, they may influence how adults perceive the children.

Finally, future research should continue to examine several aspects of diversity. First, the majority of participants in the current study identified as White. Although this is representative of the area in which participants were

recruited (8.9% visible minorities; Statistics Canada, 2017), this limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to recruit diverse samples to understand whether adults' perceptions of children's disclosures vary across racial or ethnic groups. Future research should also consider participants' gender in examining adults' perceptions of peer disclosers. Previous credibility research suggests that men and women evaluate children differently (e.g., Rogers & Davies, 2007); thus this may be an important factor to explore in the future. Additionally, future research should recruit participants from older ages (e.g., middle and older adulthood), given that the participants in the current study were mainly in early adulthood. Finally, it should be noted that there was a small discrepancy between our sample and the post-hoc power analyses (nine participants).

Conclusions

The current study presents several important findings. Generally, a child witness's perceived credibility was impacted by the report of a peer disclosure recipient. Specifically, witness credibility is either unaffected or improved when a peer provides a report that is consistent. Inconsistencies were harmful to both the peer and the witness; importantly, in cases of inconsistencies, both peers and witnesses were perceived as more credible when they disclosed (and the other child concealed). This is the first study to provide an examination of how a peer disclosure recipient is perceived, as well as how their disclosure might impact adults' perceptions of the witness's credibility. The findings indicate the importance of considering peers in the disclosure process. Peers may be helpful for the witness and may even be a credible discloser when the witness is reluctant to disclose.

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Data may be made available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Supplemental Material

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