

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Vol. 22 No. 8

Test Balloons or Trial Balloons: A Prelude to Outcry or the Disclosure of Child Abuse

By [Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.](#)

Introduction

One of the best ways we can help children recover from abuse is to listen to them when they disclose sexual abuse to us, to believe them, and to take action by making a report to the authorities. However, it can take time for a child to disclose if they are being abused, and it is often done in stages that we might miss if we aren't paying attention.

Victim **outcry**, or the child's **disclosure** of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation, is a critical component of any child abuse investigation (and a helpful indicator to provide the survivor with help and resources). The terms "outcry" or "disclosure" are defined by courts and child abuse professionals as the child's ability and willingness to clearly self-report their victimization.



Across the United States, the investigative team members of a child abuse multi-disciplinary team (MDT) will make a determination of outcry or disclosure in two different ways:

- The outcry or disclosure was made prior to the initiation of a child abuse investigation, such as a child communicating an abuse experience to a family member or a friend.
- The outcry or disclosure was made as part of a child abuse investigation, such as during a forensic interview of a child at a child advocacy center (CAC).

While safe adults can observe warning signs of inappropriate behavior in other adults, and can be observant of behavioral cues children might exhibit if they are being abused, the child's outcry or the disclosure of abuse is the best way to help us protect them by getting the child the help they need and stopping the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation.

Background

In my 28 years of experience investigating these types of crimes, child abuse professionals and I have observed that a number of children who have been sexually abused often do not tell someone about the abuse at the time the abuse occurred. This occurs for a variety of reasons, and can include situations where:

- Children may be so young that they do not realize that they have been abused—or because of their very young age, some children may be unable to verbalize the words to explain what happened to them (or they may not have been taught these words in order to verbalize them).
- Children may experience crippling feelings of guilt or shame, embarrassment, self-blame, humiliation, fear of condemnation or simply a fear of not being believed.
- Due to the manipulation of the abuser and the grooming process, children are convinced not to tell or that it is better not to tell.

Because of these and many other reasons, some children may delay their outcry or their disclosure of sexual abuse until they become adults—and some still may not communicate about what has happened to them even in late adulthood.

Knowing some of the reasons that make disclosure so difficult, we should take this time to remember that we should never blame a child or youth for *not* disclosing sooner. Abuse is always the fault of the abuser, and never the fault of the victim/survivor, even if they do not tell anyone about the abuse.

Test Balloons or Trial Balloons

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a "**Trial Balloon**" is something that is done or announced as a test to find out how people would react to something similar.¹ For instance, politicians will often float trial balloons to see how the public reacts to their ideas. Often, the terms trial balloon and test balloon are used interchangeably.

In a Norwegian research project between 2011 and 2013, entitled, **Test balloons? Small signs of big events: A qualitative study on circumstances facilitating adults' awareness of children's first signs of sexual abuse**, researchers examined caregivers' awareness of children's first "signs" of sexual abuse.² After abuse had been revealed, the children's caregivers in the Norway study relayed that all of the abused children involved in the research had previously given some "signs" of having been abused that they had initially missed. The study suggested that the children's "signs" of sexual abuse can be best understood as **test balloons**, that were used by a child to explore the listener's understanding of their outcry or disclosure of abuse and whether anything would be done about it.

As a result of this study and other child abuse research, some professionals today use the term test balloons to describe a child sexual abuse or sexual exploitation victim's earliest or first attempt at outcry or the disclosure of their abuse.

Looking for Test Balloons

When children attempt to communicate about being sexually abused, they do not always go to their parents or primary caregivers. The first test balloon, used by an abused child, could be embedded in a conversation with a trusted, safe adult, such as a favorite teacher.

Often, the test balloon made by a child is only a brief comment consisting of a single sentence. For instance, the statement by a child, "I don't want to go to Uncle Billie's anymore" could be a test balloon, where the child is testing to see how you will react. As a lesson for us, consider how we might normally respond with irritation, shutting down the conversation with information about how we should love our family, or even responding with the word "Why?" (which can have a negative or abrasive/challenging connotation).

Instead, one should try using the words "How Come?" "Tell me more about that," or "Let's talk about it," which would then elicit a more narrative response from the child and could be an opportunity for the child to share something they're experiencing. In many cases the child may begin the conversation by sharing only a little information and then watch to see how the listener reacts. The words, "Then what happened?" can often help the child move along in their response. Over time, and once the child feels safe, believed and supported, the child may tell the listener more.

Other examples of test balloons are the following statements that were made by a sexually abused or sexually exploited child:

- "I don't want to go there, I'm sick"
- "My butt hurts"
- "I hate my teacher"
- "My private parts itch"
- "I don't like my coach anymore"
- "I hate it when my babysitter tickles me"
- "Mr. Smith is weird"
- "I don't want to visit my Dad this weekend"
- "Sometimes my Mom's boyfriend comes in my bedroom at night and wakes me up"
- "Mr. Meschino wears funny underwear"

Without the appropriate follow-up by an adult on these and other test balloons, an abused child will think that they tried to tell someone about their sexual abuse, but couldn't figure out how to take it further. After, they might feel that no one listened to their call for help.

Conclusion

Following a test balloon type of statement, if a child discloses being abused, it is important to let them know that what they are saying was heard and is believed, and that the situation wasn't their fault. Try to be calm and control any anger felt for the offender, since the child may mistake it for anger being directed at the child and it could have the opposite effect of keeping them quiet about what has happened to them. They need to know that you are safe and calm, and they don't need additional fear that you are going to do something that feels scary to them.

Tell them that they are very brave for sharing their information with you. Then let them know that you are there for them and want to help them by sharing what you have heard with some good friends (the authorities) who also want to help them. Never promise confidentiality to the child, not even in the initial aspects of test balloon statements, because you may need to share the information with officials to keep the child safe.

It is not necessary for you, as a safe adult, to conduct an in-depth interview of the child. In-depth or forensic interviews should *never* be conducted by the untrained and should *only* be conducted by a child abuse professional who is specially trained. If you have a suspicion where the thought has entered your mind that the child could be abused, or the child has disclosed that they may have been sexually abused, **immediately** report to child protective services or law enforcement.

References

- 1 Cambridge Dictionary, Cambridge University Press, 2023
- 2 Child Abuse Neglect 37, Elsevier Ltd., Flam & Haugstvedt, 2013 Sep;37 (9):633-42. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.06.007. Epub 2013 Jul 27.

This article is the copyrighted property of National Catholic Services, LLC. All rights reserved. To provide constructive feedback, or for permission to redistribute, please communicate with: editor@virtus.org

Our records indicate that you have already viewed this bulletin.