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#### Article

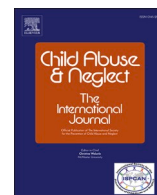
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# Non-offending caregivers reflections on the use of a film encompassing child sexual abuse perpetrator's testimonies for potential child protection initiatives in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains a challenge in South Africa, despite various legislative developments to address child abuse. Despite non-offending caregivers (NOC) playing a critical role in child safeguarding, and supporting disclosure and recovery, very little research has focused on understanding what works in assisting them in supporting child victims in South Africa.

**Objectives:** The study examines the exposure of NOC who watched a short film based on the testimonies of four CSA perpetrators in therapy, with a view to exploring whether this film could be useful for CSA prevention, disclosure and support initiatives.

**Participants and setting:** A convenience sample of eight NOC attending a community support service in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

**Methods:** After viewing the film, the NOC completed a questionnaire, and were asked to discuss usefulness of film content based on perpetrator testimonials in sensitizing NOC around disclosure of sexual abuse and support of the child. Thematic data analysis combined their perceptions of sexual abuse experienced by their children/grandchildren and the effect that content of the film had on their perceptions.

**Results:** Five themes emerged; *Awareness of CSA and available child protection programs; Views toward CSA disclosure; Emotive responses; Lessons learnt for identification of CSA and child protection; and Recommendations for future programs.*

**Conclusions:** The process of viewing and discussing the film stimulated a shift for NOC to identify risk, facilitate disclosure of CSA, and become more supportive toward child victims. The study highlights the potential of using film to guide NOC targeted child protection and safeguarding initiatives.

## 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains a global pediatric health concern (Hailes et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO)

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defines CSA as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and to which a child is unable to give informed consent, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society” (WHO, 1999). The global prevalence of CSA is 12 % (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), although estimates are likely to under-represent the true extent since many cases are unreported. Factors which contribute to the under-reporting of CSA include victim-blaming, minimization of the impact of abuse on children, shame and stigma, social customs related to sexuality and abuse, and myths about the identity of perpetrators (Hailes et al., 2019; King et al., 2019; Lanning, 2010).

Sexual abuse of children is associated with a myriad of substantial and lifelong psychiatric, psychosocial and physical health problems which include self-harm, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), mental health disorders, substance abuse and obesity (Amado et al., 2015; Arriola et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2010; Danese & Tan, 2014; Jespersen et al., 2009; Liu, 2018; Lloyd & Operario, 2012; Varese et al., 2012). Whilst the majority of non offending caregivers (NOC) are supportive and protective in the event of disclosure of sexual abuse, the nature of their response to the child is crucial (Hornor, 2022; Walker-Descartes et al., 2011; Wamser-Nanney, 2018). Post-disclosure NOC and professional support of the child victim is critical. Both NOC and child victims experience substantial distress post disclosure of CSA in their family, with this trauma impacting negatively on the caregiver-child relationship (Davies & Bennett, 2022; Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Fisher et al., 2017; Fong et al., 2020; Kilroy et al., 2014; Ramphabana et al., 2022). They also experience police and social work investigations in different ways, and may be in denial, or not fully supportive of their children (Bolen & Gergely, 2015; Bux et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2010; Kilroy et al., 2014; Lanning, 2010; Sally, 2019). NOCs play a significant role in victim functioning, healing and recovery (Bolen & Gergely, 2015; Bux et al., 2015; Daignault et al., 2018; Hébert et al., 2007; Kilroy et al., 2014; Ramphabana et al., 2022; Vaughan-Eden et al., 2020; Wallis & Woodworth, 2021). The impact of a lack of NOC support of the child after a disclosure of CSA is associated with exacerbated risk for development of trauma symptoms, vulnerability to increased risk of re-abuse, and poorer long-term mental and physical health outcomes (Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Wamser-Nanney & Sager, 2018). Hence, the support and care of a NOC is critical to the way in which a child deals with and recovers from CSA.

### 1.1. CSA in South Africa

Despite legislation such as the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005, and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 13 of 2021 in South Africa, the rate of all forms of violence against children remains one of the highest in the world (ECPAT, INTERPOL, & UNICEF, 2022; Global Peace Index, 2021). Realities of family life for many include poverty, single motherhood, HIV/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), teenage pregnancy, and high levels of violence against women (Richter et al., 2018a). In 2019/2020 the South African Police (SAP) recorded 42,289 rapes, up from 41,583 in 2018/2019 (South African Police (SAP), 2020). Almost half of complainants (46 %) were girls under the age of 18 years (South African Police (SAP), 2020). Boys are also prone to sexual abuse with more boys than girls reporting having been forced to have sex against their will in some school based surveys (Artz et al., 2016; Rasool, 2017).

Any sexual contact and interaction with a child younger than 18 years of age is classified as sexual abuse in South Africa. Whilst severely under-reported, the perpetration of sexual violence against children is a significant societal concern (Banwari, 2011; Jamieson et al., 2017; Jewkes et al., 2002; Mathews et al., 2013; Meinck et al., 2016; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Rasool, 2017; Richter & Dawes, 2008; Richter et al., 2018a, 2018b; Ward et al., 2018). The Optimus Study provided national estimates of sexual abuse and other forms of violence against children in South Africa in 2016, with 36.8 % of boys and 33.9 % of girls reporting experience of some form of sexual abuse at some point in their lives (Artz et al., 2016). This study also found that emotional and physical abuse, neglect, family violence, and exposure to other victimizations were all strongly associated with sexual victimization of boys and girls (Ward et al., 2018). A longitudinal study by Richter et al. (2018b) examining incidence of sexual violence against boys was collated across six age points between 11 and 18 years; and reported that unwanted touching, oral and penetrative sex increased with age; and sexual coercion decreased with age. Another study documented high rates of self-reported sexual abuse against children (9 % lifetime, 5.3 % incidence) in two South African provinces (Meinck et al., 2016). Of the children in this study 68.9 % reported any type of lifetime victimization (Meinck et al., 2016).

Child protection and safeguarding programs in South Africa are largely supported by clinical and forensic social workers working with mental health practitioners, psychologists and the SAP (Rapholo & Zibonele, 2022). The response to sexual violence against children is however hindered by low reporting of incidents and limited training for educators working in the South African school system (Mabetshe et al., 2022). There are calls to recognize the significant role that schools, community members and parents can play in child protection and safeguarding the need to employ a multi-sectorial approach to tackle the issue, by sensitizing and encouraging reporting, and training educators and family members on appropriate CSA responses (Mabetshe et al., 2022). Equally important are calls to improve third level education in South Africa by developing a forensic social work specialization, particularly in the conducting of forensic interviews (Rapholo & Zibonele, 2022).

### 1.2. Rationale for the study

Despite NOC playing a critical role in child protection and safeguarding, and supporting CSA disclosure and recovery, very little research has focused on material that will sensitize NOC to better support disclosure of sexual abuse and child-victim recovery in South Africa (Karagianni, 2021; Makamba, 2020; Ramphabana et al., 2022). In response to this gap, the study examined the exposure of NOC to a short film based on the testimonies of four CSA perpetrators in therapy, with a view to exploring whether this film could be useful for CSA prevention, disclosure and support initiatives.

## 2. Method

A quasi participatory action research design (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) was developed as a qualitative research methodology which involved the researchers and the participants (CSA perpetrators and NOC) collaborating to better understand CSA and take actions to bring about social change. The study took place at a non-governmental community service in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa which provides support services for victims of CSA and their families. Statistics at the organization reflected that the majority of CSA victims (more than 50 %) were below the age of six years in line with various national studies (see Kilroy et al., 2014; Mathews et al., 2013).

### 2.1. Developing and co-producing the film

A 15 min film based on the testimonies of four CSA perpetrators in therapy (two white, two black) was created by the lead author. Four CSA perpetrators (aged 30–45 years) who had participated in an earlier study (reported elsewhere, Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022) indicated a willingness to help co-create such a film, with a view to finding out if such a video would improve child safeguarding and protection as well as NOC support for CSA victims. Two of the CSA perpetrators had sexually abused their stepdaughters, and two had abused their biological children, from a very young age, generally three to four years.

The film script was based on a simple guided interview conducted by the lead author (a trained social worker) in English, the native language of all CSA perpetrators. CSA perpetrators were given the option of writing a script based on the interview guide, or responding to interview questions posed by the lead author in an interview scenario. The co-production of the film required extensive time in terms of recording (20h) and editing (40 h) prior to the final approval by the CSA perpetrators themselves. Content was primarily based on the '*modus operandi*' of grooming and other behavioral strategies in sexually abusing a child, and consisted of five theoretically grounded themes (see Leclerc et al., 2009); *understanding the selection of the child; grooming of the child; ensuring compliance of the child in the sexual act; processes of desensitization, manipulation and maintenance of the child as continued victim of CSA; and strategies used to avoid detection and preventing children from disclosing.*

### 2.2. Viewing the film and post viewing data collection

A small convenience sample of adult English speaking adult NOC (six mothers, one father and one maternal grandmother, aged between 24 and 61 years) whose children were exposed to sexual abuse were asked to view the film and partake in the study. They resided in urban, peri-urban and rural communities (Durban Central, Durban South, Durban North, the Midlands) within the larger province of KwaZulu-Natal. Five were black and three were Caucasian. Four were native Zulu speakers, who also spoke English as a second language. All were at the initial stages of receiving individual therapy, and were chosen as their children were also in therapy for sexual abuse.

All the participants were invited to view the film as a group in a private space at the organization. Thereafter they were requested to reflect on their child's experiences of sexual abuse; their personal responses to their children, and to content in the film, with a view to exploring whether this film could be useful for prevention of CSA, and NOC support of disclosure and recovery. They were asked if insights into understanding the attitude and thought processes and various grooming, manipulation and detection avoidance strategies of CSA perpetrators held any potential for inclusion in the design of child protection and safe guarding programs. Three experienced social workers were present with the lead author (also a trained social worker) during the film, and where required they assisted with interpretation and support of participants.

After watching the film, each participant completed a semi structured '*post film*' questionnaire, and were asked to discuss the usefulness of the film in sensitizing and informing NOC around CSA disclosure and support of the child. This questionnaire was developed by the lead author, based on extensive literature review and previous research with a CSA perpetrator group (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). The instrument contained open ended questions concerning film content which centered on reflections and emotive reactions to the testimonials; views on CSA disclosure; prior experience of child protection and CSA education programs; new and useful insights obtained from the film; and suggested content for inclusion in future targeted child protection initiatives.

Following completion of the questionnaire, each participant was interviewed by the lead author and asked to reflect further and provide clarity to written responses. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min and were conducted in a private room at the organization. Participants as a group were then given the opportunity to discuss the film with the lead author and the three social workers working at the service. Interviews and group discussion were audio-recorded with permission, and following transcription, the recordings were destroyed.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The study is reported where possible according to current APA standards for qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018). Questionnaire '*open text*' responses, interview and focus group transcripts were combined and coded using QSR NUD\*IST 4 software. Thematic data analysis combined the participant perceptions of sexual abuse experienced by their children/grandchildren and the effect the film had on their perceptions. Analysis was conducted by the lead and third authors in consultation, and adhered to the following six steps to ensure scientific rigor (Braun et al., 2019); 1) familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading the text, individually and in pairs to share and identify early ideas; (2) generating initial codes by development of coding schemes and the systematic coding of data; (3)

generating themes using an iterative process to organize codes into groups in developing themes and subthemes; (4) reviewing potential themes via team refinement and review of generated themes as a collective and with examination of coherence of patterns across themes; (5) defining and naming themes finalization and naming of themes, and (6) writing up by organizing the final order of themes (see Byrne, 2022).

The data analysis process was carefully conducted in alignment with the six steps by the research team of three authors, two of which were qualified social workers at doctoral level. Credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were further enhanced by multi-data source triangulation (open ended questionnaire text, interview and focus group narratives) and research team consultations around theme allocation.

#### 2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was awarded by the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. The study was conducted with cognizance of the ethics of care, the sensitivity of the topic being researched, and awareness of the rights of participants to choose to be involved in the study, with full disclosure of the process and reasons for the study. All participants (CSA perpetrators, NOC) were fully informed verbally and in writing about the aims and objectives of the study. All were advised that the study was not an integral process of their therapy, and assured of their rights to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity in both the film and in the reporting of study findings. All partook voluntarily and provided informed written consent.

The study protocol and procedures were cognizant of the potential for exposure to extremely triggering content. All participants were receiving therapy at the time of the study. Care was taken to ensure that all participants had support during co-creation (perpetrators) and viewing of the film (NOC) with referral and access to counselling throughout the process. For example, the CSA perpetrators were provided with immediate referral for counselling assistance following the scripting of and approval of the film. The viewing of the film for the NOC took place in a therapeutic setting with three social workers in attendance who provided debriefing and referral for counselling supports before, during and after the viewing of the content.

### 3. Results

In this study, five key themes emerged; *Awareness of CSA and available child protection programs*; *Views toward CSA disclosure*; *Emotive responses*; *Lessons learnt for identification of CSA and child protection*; and *Recommendations for future programs*. Themes are presented with illustrative quotes.

#### 3.1. Awareness of CSA and available child protection programs

Five of the eight NOC had not been exposed to a child protection CSA awareness program. Two participated in a child protection program prior to CSA disclosure, and the final one had heard of child protection campaigns but was ambivalent about the content.

All participants commented on the partial impact of current child protection programs in KwaZulu Natal and the impact of the film in contrast to these existing programs; two mothers said, *"The film really taught me new things"* and: *"I was told of different types of abuse but they did not tell me that someone I know will abuse my child."* The film appeared to illuminate the processes of victim selection, grooming and detection avoidance. They observed how the film illustrated to them various key signs or red flags to be vigilant for. A father commented: *"Made one aware of signs to look out for. I knew this was unlikely to be a made up story."* Remarks were made by two mothers around the manipulation and grooming tactics of the CSA perpetrator; *"I did not know that an abuser, when he was treating my child nicely, was actually wanting to abuse her"* and *"I did not know that the abuser would trick me as was shown in the film."* It is clear that the NOC had limited knowledge of the grooming methods used by perpetrators and that those known to the child are often perpetrators of CSA.

#### 3.2. Views toward child disclosure

Five participants qualified their acceptance of their child's disclosure of CSA to some degree because they felt they knew the perpetrator and were thus in disbelief because they trusted the perpetrator. Three mothers commented, *"I trusted him"*; *"he liked my child"* and *"I knew him, how could he?"* Reasons for not believing the child centered generally on the perpetrator being known and trusted by the participants. Comments were also made by a mother and a grandmother that they did not find their children's claims credible; *"I did not think people could do this"* and *"She asked strange questions that made me question whether she was really abused"*. NOC struggled to believe their children because the perpetrator was known to them and hence they trusted the perpetrator. They felt this kind of film is thus useful in making NOC aware that often CSA perpetrators are known to the family, and are not always strangers.

#### 3.3. Emotive responses

The film yielded various emotive responses, and a novel impactful opportunity to familiarize caregivers with CSA perpetrator behavioral strategies. Common emotional responses described by the participants to child disclosure of sexual abuse in the home were shock, anger, anxiety, helplessness, sadness and hurt. The NOC were distressed after viewing the film, mainly expressing sadness for their children, and expressing their feelings of betrayal by the perpetrators.

All participants indicated that the information obtained from the film was new and different. Examples of such new insights for this

group of NOC centered on the identity of the perpetrator, with sexual abuse of children/grand children being performed by trusted individuals. Hence one mother remarked; *"She is not the problem he is, don't leave a man in charge of all the functions related to your child."* The NOC also became aware of the manipulation of the child over time; vulnerability of the child exposed to sexual abuse; and the various manipulation tactics employed by the perpetrator to ensure lack of detection. One mother said, *"she is young and their bodies are not only abused but their minds."* General concerns were also made by participants around lack of detection of CSA by child protection professionals. One mother for example referred to *"the cover ups and manipulation of even professionals by the abuser."*

Opportunity to share views and discuss the film with other NOC appeared cathartic to the research team. Many participants, mostly mothers shared some bottled-up feelings that they did not feel safe to express previously. Discussions with each other, with the lead author during interviews) and with the social work team supporting the viewing of the film also enabled them to better understand the process and channel their feelings toward the CSA perpetrator rather than the child.

The NOC described how they trusted the perpetrators and consequently struggled to believe their children initially. Watching the film allowed them to be more empathic in understanding the non-disclosure, the pain and manipulation that the children endured and allowed them to be more determined in protecting, supporting and loving toward their children and to communicate more. The role of blame generally attributed to the child victim was discussed in interviews and the group setting. Following the film, all participants unanimously held that the child was not responsible or could not attract the sex offenders, and said: *"victims are sometimes not aware of being abused"*; and *"children are innocent and cannot protect themselves from these abusers"*.

The film stimulated a shift for the NOC to become more protective, supportive and caring toward these children. One mother observed; *"The film was frightening — I cannot believe that these people or abusers are like that."* The participants all described greater understanding of manipulation and deceit by the CSA perpetrator and their ambivalence toward CSA victims decreased. A mother reflected on the process of learning derived from the film; *"it helped me to not hold a grudge."* The participants also referred to wanting to take a more active role in the lives of the children and supporting them; for example three mothers said: *"I now understand that I need to be more supportive to my child she has been through enough, as these offenders are clever, and did so many games on her"*; *"I learnt that I need to be more responsible for protecting my child"* and *"I will be more of a friend and talk to her, this must have been difficult."*

The film illustrated that there is no prescribed profile that identifies a perpetrator. It appeared to be an important and credible tool in helping NOC understand grooming and that individuals who present as 'nice' or trustworthy can also perpetrate CSA. The NOC felt it is important to make known to caregivers that CSA are not necessarily strangers and that they are often people known to them, and present as 'normal' and caring.

### 3.4. Lessons learnt for identification of CSA and protection of children

The film appeared to support awareness raising of the NOC to better understand the various aspects of the CSA process pertaining to: relationship of the CSA perpetrator with the child; selection of the child; grooming strategies; manipulation and deceptive relationships with children; use of particular language and games to facilitate sexual activity; and the various sexually abusive acts.

All participants emphatically indicated that they would have been better equipped to protect their child had they watched the film prior to their children being abused. They elaborated on specific lessons that they acquired by watching the film, and discussed learning of the manipulation of the perpetrator and the relationship of the perpetrator to the child. For example one mother said, *"I would have been able to stop it and move away from the abuser, when I saw him tricking her"*. The father also observed; *"I would have spoken to my granddaughter's family about watching her, and not allowing her to sleep at the relative's house."* Four mothers indicated how increased awareness of CSA supports vigilance and child protection; several said they had achieved *"awareness of the offenders behavior"*. Two mothers said; *"family members especially fathers or men use their positions to manipulate us all"* and *"I have learnt their strategies of abusing children."* One mother illustrated how the film benefited her; *"to learn the offenders' ideas makes me aware of the child being abused and how I can protect her."*

The film appeared to be useful in alerting caregivers on the strategies used by perpetrators of CSA and created awareness of the potential of a perpetrator to be a known and trusted person, as well as to identify some signs that abuse is possibly occurring.

### 3.5. Recommendations for future programmes

The participants all indicated that *"they would have been better equipped"* to protect, support and believe the disclosures of their children if they had watched the film prior to the abuse. There was consensus that the film would assist in the awareness raising, sensitization and training of others including family support and rehabilitation initiatives, media campaigns, and gender based violence programs with men. There was also a suggestion that the messages contained in the film could be adjusted to the developmental age of children and integrated into existing child protection and safeguarding programs. Two mothers believed that communities could benefit from seeing the film; *"it should be played in communities continuously."* Various groups of beneficiaries were described; for example one participant recommended that community service providers be trained in their workplace or professional development programs be instituted using the film to create community awareness on CSA. Another indicated that churches could show the film to sensitize the congregation. Three participants believed that the film could assist in informing parents and all caregivers of children about the behaviors and strategies used by CSA. Two indicated that children and youth groups would benefit from being informed on the content of the film.

In general, the participants articulated the potential for creating widespread awareness using this kind of film, by giving communities a better idea of what the profile of CSA may be and the strategies that perpetrators employ.



#### 4. Discussion

The study is unique and presents a novel and important contribution to knowledge development for prevention and detection of CSA. It presents an innovative approach to preventing and detecting CSA through the development and use of a short educational film in which CSA perpetrators describe their thoughts, motivations and behaviors in the perpetration of CSA, thus illustrating the various aspects of the CSA process. It builds on previous in-depth qualitative research by the team with male child sex offenders attending in a therapeutic, rehabilitation program (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). These studies focused on understanding child sex offender attitudes, thoughts and grooming strategies, and their unique sex offending trajectories from victimization to perpetration, particular to the South African context. This research informed the design and co-production of the short film. The film has an important role to play in helping professionals, law enforcement and caregivers in South Africa (and beyond) increase their understanding of the conditions that enable/hinder sexual abuse of children, and how to ensure children's personal security is achieved. In so doing it contributes to the extant South African literature on this highly stigmatized topic, by exploring and illustrating the perspectives of NOC around their experiences of CSA, and helping NOC better understand the experiences of children who have been harmed, the strategies used by perpetrators and that the responsibility for the harm sits with the abuser not the child.

Enhancing knowledge of how CSA perpetrators operate or their '*modus operandi*', has practical, professional and policy implications; and are critical for enhancing the efficacy of credible child welfare and child protection interventions (DeLisi et al., 2016; Finkelhor, 1994; Leclerc et al., 2009; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). The film based on real world lived experiences of CSA perpetrators particular to the South African context presented a visual dimension to conventional methods of prevention campaigns, and one which was co-created with participation of four perpetrators in treatment. It illustrated an informed practical, detailed, in-depth, examination of the strategies used to sexually offend. The stories and content provoked instantaneous emotive responses and vibrant discussions by the various NOC that would not be obtained if traditional techniques, such as an interview or lecture, were used (Alasuutari, 2008; Mills et al., 2010). The film as an innovative and culturally appropriate medium has the potential to support the sharing of knowledge and the credibility of the information, and offers an innovative route toward greater NOC and community sensitization, awareness and understanding of CSA in South Africa.

Various studies in South Africa comment on the early onset of CSA and the reduced capacity of children to develop resilience and personality characteristics that mediate the possible negative consequences of abuse (Corcoran, 2004; Kilroy et al., 2014; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). NOC play a critical role in protecting children from CSA, supporting disclosure and supporting child victim recovery. NOC support and empathy are also significant to the healing and recovery of a victim of CSA (Corcoran, 2004). The study illustrates the need to widely distribute appropriate information, including via visual media that can assist NOCs in detecting CSA, to transform their ambivalence toward the child victim when they disclose and to enable them to become more understanding, empathic and supportive to victims of CSA (Walker-Descartes et al., 2011). The opportunity to seek insights into CSA behavior via a visual medium such as a short film in South Africa can potentially equip the NOC in supporting the victim, reduce ambivalence and victim blaming, and can enhance vigilance to prevent occurrence of CSA. The NOC summarily indicated that the information obtained on the strategies of the sex offender was new and different and that they had no prior exposure or understanding of the extreme levels of manipulation by an offender, and the subsequent entrapment of a victim. They also seemed to have limited understanding of the impact of the manipulation of the child by the perpetrator, and how this affects the child's ability to disclose abuse (McAlinden, 2013; Salter, 2003).

Children most commonly disclose to family and friends before they decide to disclose to professionals (Alaggia, 2004). Hence, they require immediate support from those closest to them. Children are most vulnerable after disclosing because of their age, relative powerlessness and dependency on their family and systems of reporting (Bux et al., 2015; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). This often results in children feeling they have to "*adjust*" their stories according to what they think others want to hear; or they try to find explanations that a service provider or NOC would accept and understand (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). NOC may also not wish to report the matter as they minimize the seriousness of the abuse and/or do not believe the child (Finkelhor, 1994; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Victims of CSA and NOC in South Africa are generally dependent on the perpetrator (Bux et al., 2015; Meinck et al., 2016; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022) which complicates the response of NOC.

Child protection systems including in the South African system, often overlook the support that NOC need (Hill, 2005; Jobe-Shields et al., 2016; Lovett, 2004; Menon et al., 2015; Ramphabana et al., 2022; Van Toledo & Seymour, 2013; Yamamoto, 2015). NOC in South Africa as elsewhere experience trauma through the process of having their children sexually abused and require support recovering from that ordeal, in order to adequately support their children to recover (Ramphabana et al., 2022). NOC in this study made recommendations on how they could be better supported through the provision of information, individual support and psycho-educational groups, emotional support, support around their own victimization if relevant, and parenting assistance (Van Toledo & Seymour, 2013). Tailored support including mental health treatment directed to NOCs should recognize and respond to the double burden of distress, that of their own distress, but also that of their child (Crocketto & Beemer, 2021; Ramphabana et al., 2022; St-Amand et al., 2022; Theimer et al., 2020; Van Toledo & Seymour, 2013).

#### 5. Limitations

The study is limited by the small-scale and convenience nature of the sample of NOC partaking in the study, each at differing points in their therapeutic journey in accepting their child's disclosure, apportioning blame and supporting their child victims. We further recognize the balance between robust ethical considerations to support all participants, trust in the therapeutic relationship and the potential for bias was possible, since the study was developed, co-created and implemented by the lead author, a trained social worker

supporting all participants attending the service.

Offering the film only in English at this stage is a limitation. We recommend that the film is piloted with a broader sample of NOC from various demographic backgrounds in South Africa, and in other languages (for example Zulu, Afrikaans). Another limitation of the study is that only one father and one grandmother participated. We recognize that the needs of fathers and extended family members warrant individualized approaches to sensitize and support them (see [Crocetto, 2018](#)). We also recommend further adaptation for use with child protection service providers, to determine if this production would improve the child protection and result in early detection of CSA.

## 6. Conclusion

The study contributes to the growing evidence base in South Africa on CSA and is one of few studies focusing on the experiences and perspectives of NOC in child protection. All of the participants were of the opinion that the film content was far more impactful than any previous child protection campaigns. The critical insight provided by the film was that it created awareness of the grooming strategies, manipulation and deception used by perpetrators of CSA to manipulate children and present disclosure. Moreover, awareness that the perpetrator could be known and close to the family was meaningful to the participants and led to greater empathy, understanding and support of CSA victims. Hence, we believe the film has encouraging implications for use in strengthening child protection service delivery, designing awareness and education programs, and more targeted CSA policy development in South Africa. The NOC in this study provided useful recommendations that can be utilized by service providers to institute more effective programs for detection and prevention of CSA and to increase support of child disclosure of sexual abuse.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to declare and has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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