

Child Sexual Abuse: Assessment, Intervention & Prevention

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Background

This project is based more than 25 years of research on persons with risks for violent behaviors. Most had committed violent acts, such as child sexual abuse, rape, physical assault, attempted murder, and murder. A portion had backgrounds similar to those who had committed felonies, but as far as is known have lived pro-social lives. I began the research thinking that gender role socialization and histories of abuse and neglect were factors in perpetration, but I was unsure about factors associated with overcoming risks for perpetration. As I conducted years of interviews, I read widely on new research related to resilience, attachment, emotional development, trauma, neurobiology, criminal thinking, critical discourse analysis, gender studies, and semiotics. I gradually was able to identify factors related to the perpetration of child sexual abuse.

Definition

Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power, where older, stronger, and more knowledgeable persons take advantage of children for their own sexual and emotional gratification and sometimes for financial gain.

Child sexual abuse is a physical act and a psychological experience. As a physical act, child sexual abuse involves both touch and non-touch behaviors. As a psychological experience, child sexual abuse represents an abuse of power and authority, where perpetrators satisfy themselves emotionally and sexually and children are hurt and confused.

Perpetrators get a thrill and a high out of sexual abuse, while children are afraid, confused, ashamed, and embarrassed. Children also feel used and discounted. Some children are so

scared it is almost as if they are not there, and the sexual acts are being done to someone else. This is a psychological state called disassociation.

Project Description

Methods were interviews with about 140 persons, about half of whom were women and men who were survivors of child sexual abuse and did not sexually abuse children themselves. About 35 of these had committed other serious violence such as rape, physical assault, attempted murder, and murder. The other 35, both women and men, had no known history of perpetrating violence.

The research encompasses three different studies. Study one used in-depth life history interviews with about 90 men and women, most of whom were in prison for serious violent felonies. I interviewed these respondents an average of six times for an average interview time of about ten hours. Study two involved 33 men who were convicted of child sexual abuse and were interviewed one time for 90 minutes in community settings. Most of them had served time in workhouses, jails, and prisons. The third study was composed of eight women whose husbands or sons had sexually abused their children or grandchildren. These interviews lasted 90 minutes.

Results

Most perpetrators of child sexual abuse were not sexually abused themselves. Survivors of child sexual abuse who did perpetrate did not work through the effects of their abusive experiences, they did not share other personal, sensitive information about themselves that resulted in their letting go of self-blame and rage, and they believed they had entitlements to make themselves feel better through abuse. Some gave the appearance of being emotionally expressive and open, but they were not in regard to digging deep enough to see that their abusive behaviors harm children.

Survivors of child sexual abuse who do not perpetrate any forms of violence have many protective factors during their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. These protective factors include

- have experienced sensitive, responsive, and contingently reciprocal relationships with other people over time, typically with their parents and also with others;
- can experience, identify, and express appropriately a range of feelings;
- understand and identify with (empathize with) the emotions of others;
- encourage the healthy emotional expression of others: have good executive skills as shown by their problem-solving abilities that includes capacities for considering alternative and for thinking through consequences of their actions.
- capacities to share personal, sensitive information about themselves to persons they trust
- rejection of beliefs of entitlement

- association with pro-social peers & adults
- desire & resources to emulate pro-social persons
- competence and pleasure in everyday activities
- sense of a positive future

There is a shortage of these factors in the lives of persons who abuse children sexually.

Definition of Emotional Expressiveness

Emotional expressiveness means that persons experience and express a range of emotions that are appropriate to the situations they are in, they can handle their own emotions in ways that do not hurt themselves and others, they have capacities for identifying and understanding the emotions of others and for empathizing with others, and they behave in ways that accommodate the emotions and wants of others. They confide in others about any problems they have. They find that talking to others helps them to feel better and to handle their problems more effectively. When they are about to dysregulate or are in a state of dysregulation, they use predominantly pro-social ways or re-regulating. They may do some self-destructive things, such as overeat, and minor anti-social things, such as shout at other drivers on the highway, but they resist such anti-social acts as sexual abuse and physical violence.

Emotional inexpressiveness means that individuals are unable to connect with and express a range of emotions and are unable to connect with and empathize with the emotions of others. The emotions they identify and express in themselves typically are few in number and include anger, rage, and sexual emotions. Some emotionally inexpressive persons recognize sadness in self and others but have no idea how to work through the issues that cause them to feel sad. So they remain stuck in their emotions or they deal with them in ways that hurt themselves and others.

Persons who are emotionally inexpressive rarely if ever talk over any problems they have in their lives. Some may have tried to do so as young people, but felt betrayed by those they confided in. Some perpetrators give the impression of being emotionally expressive and may be in some situations, but in regard to abusing others and taking what they want, they are closed to other people and do not grapple with the implications of these behaviors.

Prevention

This research has implications for prevention. The broad principles are:

- Promote emotional expressiveness
- Provide healthy sex education
- Support sensitive, responsive parenting
- Challenge myths & misunderstandings about child sexual abuse
- Challenge beliefs of entitlement

Social skills training has a part to play in prevention. The following are some components of such training:

Clear Expectations

- “If you have questions about sex, ask me.”
- “Don’t use other people’s stuff without their permission”

Catch Children Doing Something Right

- “I’m glad you asked. I’m happy to talk to you about kissing boys.”
- “Good for you. You asked your sister if you can play with her dolls. You didn’t just take them.”

Direct Instruction

- Show children what to do
- Have children practice the new skill
- Give children feedback about their use of new skill
- Give time for discussion

Practice These Behaviors in Everyday Life

- Be a good role model
- Children imitate behaviors they see rewarded

The roots of child sexual abuse are wide-spread and are connected to many other social ills. Almost any effort that promotes child and parent well-being contributes to prevention. Parent support programs, for, example, have positive effects that include and go beyond the prevention of child sexual abuse. There simply are not enough of them. Healthy and appropriate sex education, emotion education in the schools and in families, and programs that challenge pro-violence beliefs are other interventions that contribute to prevention.

Children who have secure attachments to their parents are much more likely to receive healthy sex educations and to be raised by parents who practice gender egalitarianism. It would never occur to them to take advantage of others. If, as young children, they do attempt to do so, their parents immediately correct them.

There are countless millions of children at risk because of insecure and disorganized attachments and who receive their sex education and guidance for sexual behaviors from peers and the media. Such children have complex risks for various poor outcomes. Some of them perpetrate child sexual abuse. An educated public would take immediate action to provide children and families the resources they require to thrive. There is much to be done.

Summary

Persons who sexually abuse are out of touch with their own emotions and the emotions of others, are emotionally disconnected from others, and hold beliefs of entitlement to take what they want regardless of consequences for others and themselves.

Persons who recover from the effects of being sexually abused have many positive factors in their lives that help them cope with, adapt to, and overcome the effects of being sexually abused. In general, survivors who thrive are emotionally expressive, have confident relationships, associate with pro-social peers, have the desire and resources to emulate pro-social persons, have a sense of competence and pleasure in everyday activities, and have a sense of positive future.

These findings provide the basis for comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention programs and guidelines for practice.

Discussion

Generally viewed as a non-critical work support program, funding for Child Care Assistance has been buffeted about due to economic upswings and downturns and the variable attention quality child care and early learning has received from policy-makers, the media and advocates.

This variability has been evident in Minnesota as well as other states where child care funding is sometimes seen as a critical work support (as in the case of the passage of federal Welfare Reform) and other times as non-critical when lean budgetary times arise and states must balance budgets. This review of the literature on family investment and family stress theories has offered an overview of how CCAP might be viewed as just one of the complex set of factors that can influence family functioning and child well-being when young children require care. CCAP is best viewed as part of this dynamic whole rather than examined in isolation.

Because of this complexity, research on the contribution of CCAP towards the outcomes of children should control for as many other factors as possible beyond receipt of CCAP to determine the degree to which it does in fact play an important role in family stability and functioning (and ultimately, child well-being), as the literature implies. Research should, whenever possible, include nuances of family and personal experience since program data alone cannot accurately represent all contextual aspects of a family's experience. If research supports the relevant role of CCAP, the program may hold the potential to meet multiple needs in a complex family system – as an employment support as well as a support to family economic stability and access to child development resources – a significant benefit to working families and a relative bargain for tax payers.

Discussion Questions

- Why do some children who have been sexually abused go on to perpetrate child sexual abuse and others do not?
- Define child sexual abuse.
- Define emotional expressiveness.
- How do children learn to be emotionally expressive?
- What factors are linked to coping with the effects of child sexual abuse?
- What can service providers do to help parents help their children overcome the effects of child sexual abuse?
- What are the elements of child sexual abuse prevention?

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Resource List

- Child Welfare Information Gateway, USA: <http://www.childwelfare.gov>
- International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, USA: <http://www.ispcan.org>.
- Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, USA: <http://www.education.umn.edu/ICD>
- National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australia: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch>
- MaleSurvivor, USA: <http://www.malesurvivor.org>
- Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse: <http://ssw.che.umn.edu/Connections/MINCAVA.html>
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, UK: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk> :
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, USA: <http://www.rainn.org>
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, USA: <http://www.siecus.org>
- Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP): www.snapnetwork.org
- Stop It Now!, USA: <http://www.stopitnow.org>
- Website of Toni Cavanagh Johnson: www.TCavJohn.com

Potential Guest Speakers

- Dante Cicchetti, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. 612-624-0526
- Anne Gearity, Washburn Child Guidance, Minneapolis, MN. 612-871-1454
- Abi Gewirtz, Washburn Child Guidance and University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 612-871-1454
- Toni Cavanagh Johnson www.TCavJohn.com
- Danette Jones, Minneapolis Public Schools, 612-369-0221
- Alankaar Sharma, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, 612/481-0667
- Valandra, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, 612/226-5620