

Working with Survivors of Child Incestuous Abuse

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Overview

- Definition
- Difference Between Incestuous Abuse and Child Sexual Abuse
- Prevalence of Incestuous Abuse
- Effects of Incestuous Abuse
- Working with Survivors in Minority Populations
- Social Work Practice Implications

Introduction to the Topic

- Child sexual abuse is a widespread problem that many people do not discuss.
- A subcategory of child sexual abuse is incestuous abuse which is now recognized as the most prevalent form of child sexual abuse and as one with great potential for damage to the child. (Courtois 1988).
- Consequences of incestuous abuse have a significant impact on the survivor both medically and psychologically.

What is Incestuous Abuse?

- Incestuous abuse refers to when a person coerces another person who would be considered an ineligible partner because of blood or social ties into having sexual relations. (Courtois 1988)
- Cross-generational incest is **always** considered abuse because the adult uses his or her power as an authority figure to coerce the child into sexual relations. (Courtois 1988)
- It is also becoming more commonly known that peer incestuous abuse does occur. According to Courtois, “The severity of the sexual violation was the same for brothers and cousins as for fathers and uncles.” (Courtois, 1988, p 24)

What Makes Incestuous Abuse Different From Child Sexual Abuse?

- All forms of child sexual abuse have negative long-term effects for the victim. Incestuous abuse is a form of child sexual abuse especially damaging because it disrupts the child's primary support system, the family. (RAINN 2009)
- Incestuous abuse can damage a child's ability to trust, since the people who were supposed to protect and care for them have abused them. (RAINN 2009)
- When the abuser is someone in the family, the family may not be able to provide support or a sense of safety. Since the children (especially younger children) often have limited resources outside the family, it can be very hard for them to recover from incestuous abuse (RAINN 2009)
- Incestuous abuse is understood as traumatic for victims because of the betrayal in a trusted relationship, the helplessness the victim feels while this abuse is happening, and the abuse itself.

Prevalence of Incestuous Abuse

- Nondisclosure, along with delaying and withholding disclosures of child sexual abuse, are phenomena all too common to this form of child victimization. (Alaggia 2005)
- There are very few reliable statistics about how often incestuous abuse occurs. It's difficult to know how many people are affected by incestuous abuse because many incestuous abuse situations never get reported. (RAINN 2009)
- Some numbers found include:
 - 1 in 4 girls will be sexually abused before she turns 18 (Darkness to Light 2010)
 - There are more than 39 million survivors of child sexual abuse in America (Darkness to Light 2010)
 - 20 percent of child sexual abuse victims are under the age of 8 (Darkness to Light 2010)

Effects of Incestuous Abuse

Many factors can affect the survivor's reactions and aftereffects of the abuse including:

- duration of the abuse
- age the abuse started
- how closely related the relative was to the victim.

(Havig 2008)

Consequences of incestuous abuse have a significant impact on the survivor:

- Physical Effects
- Psychological Effects

(Havig 2008)

Psychiatric Hospitalization

- Trauma exposure and PTSD, though prevalent among adolescent psychiatric inpatients, are under-identified in standard clinical practice (Havens et al. 2012)
- Adolescents with probable PTSD had greater clinical severity, an increased likelihood of being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and being prescribed antipsychotic medications (Havens et al. 2012)
- Authors' findings regarding the lack of recognition of trauma-related symptoms during the admission process suggests that the clinical complexity in this population may complicate appropriate diagnosis and treatment planning (Havens et al. 2012)
- Improved methods for identifying trauma-related problems in standard clinical practice are needed. (Havens et al. 2012)

Minority Populations

Survivors who are members of minority populations bring special concerns and issues to therapeutic treatment.

- Racial Minorities
- LGBTQ
- Disabilities
- Male Survivors

Social Work Practice Implications

- More victims today are reporting child sexual abuse, sharing their stories and seeking professional help to cope with previous incestuous abuse. Because of this, it is important for therapists to be educated about incestuous abuse issues.
- It is also important that therapists and social workers screen clients for a history of sexual abuse. Survivors of incestuous abuse may be seeking help for reasons that they do not realize is related to sexual abuse.
- Approximately half of all survivors who seek treatment do not disclose their incestuous abuse history during intake and assessment (Courtois 1988)

Conclusion

- With more and more survivors breaking silence and sharing their experience, there is more of a demand for therapists to know how to intervene with this population.
- If a history of sexual abuse is revealed, an opportunity is opened to help this client solve any negative feelings, such as self-blame surrounding the sexual abuse. “Reframing the attribution of blame from an adult perspective entails acceptance of the fact that the offender, not the survivor, is always responsible for the abusive behavior.” (Draucker 2005)

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