Impact of Sexual Abuse on Maternal Caregivers: Differential Effects of Sexual Abuse by Biological Fathers and Siblings

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Introduction

- Youth who experience childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are at risk for developing a myriad of clinical symptoms including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Touhy, 2002).
- Victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse are at an elevated risk for experiencing these negative outcomes (Pinkerton, Horling, Lewis, & Smith, 1996).
- Research shows that maternal support as well as paternal expectations regarding their child’s adjustment following the disclosure of CSA is critical to mitigating its negative effects (e.g., Conner, 2004; Koenigsmann et al., 2003).
- It has been suggested that maternal caregivers may experience some level of ambivalence upon disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse due to the nature of disclosure (i.e., tare of being one’s own child or partner) and their attachment to the perpetrator (Bolen & Lamb, 2007).
- Clues as to the perpetrator is shown to predict maternal support of the victim after disclosure of abuse, with closer relationship predicting less support (Bolen & Lamb, 2007).
- Parental self-esteem and sense of competence are also influenced by the disclosure of CSA because an individual’s sense of worth and control as a parent has been challenged (Manen et al., 1996). Therefore, it is plausible to expect that parental efficacy and satisfaction would be greater affected by the discovery of abuse occurring within the home.
- The number of difficulties faced by maternal caregivers upon the disclosure of intrafamilial CSA may potentially inhibit their ability to effectively support the victim.
- While research has shown that maternal distress and lack of maternal support following the disclosure of CSA significantly impact emotional and behavioral adjustment in sexually abused youth (Elliott & Cantor, 2001), the differential impact of various familial perpetrators on these constructs has not been well researched.

Methods

Participants
- Participants of the current study include 54 nonoffending maternal caregivers and their sexually abused children.
- The sexually abused sample ranged in age from 8 to 17 years old (M = 14.5, SD = 2.77) and 81% were male. These children were part of a larger sample of sexually abused youth in 31 European American with the remaining 21% (M = 16.0) identifying as Black.
- However, the majority of caregivers were married (91%), employed (93.3%), and completed high school or above (94.1%).
- Children ranged in age from 4.67 to 16.83 (M = 10.72, SD = 3.61) with the majority being female (79.4%) and White (96.3%).

The purpose of the current study is to explore how paternal caregiver and sibling sexual abuse may differentially impact maternal efficacy and sense of competence as well as expectations for victim adjustment.

Materials
- Parental Efficacy Questionnaire (PEQ): The PEQ is a 5-item self-report questionnaire adapted from the Maternal Efficacy Scale (MES; Tieti, Tim, & Helfand, 1993) for Project SAFE assessment. The MES was developed to assess maternal perceptions of efficacy for the management of maternal perceived efficacy. Caregivers are provided with a variety of parenting situations and are asked to rate how effective they are as a parent in each situation and overall.
- Parenting Stress Index (PSI): The PSI is a 12-item self-report questionnaire asking individuals to indicate the degree of stress they experience in their role as a parent. The Parental Competence subscale was utilized for this study. The PSI demonstrates internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .78 to .96), test-retest reliability, and validity (Albin, 1998).
- Parental Expectations Scale (PES): Meidlinger et al., (2012). The PES is a 12-item measure that assesses the caregiver expectations of their child’s general functioning compared with other children their age over the next year. Questions address school and social situations, family relationships, and personal feelings. Internal consistency for the PES is excellent (x = .91); Meidlinger et al., (2012).
- Parental Sexual Abuse Expectations Scale (PSAES): Meidlinger et al., (2012). The PSAES is a 5-item measure that assesses the negative impact the caregiver expects the abuse will have on their child over the next year. Questions on this measure address school and social situations, family relationships, and personal feelings. Internal consistency for the PSAES is excellent (x = .98); Meidlinger et al., (2012).

Results

- A Linear Discriminant Function (LDF) analysis was conducted to identify factors that are characteristic of the victim/perpetrator relationship (i.e., biological father vs. sibling), specifically maternal efficacy, sense of competence, and expectations for child.
- Discriminant analysis revealed a significant difference in mean scores of maternal distress ratings between biological father and sibling perpetrators (Table 2).
- Specifically, maternal caregivers reported less efficacy and sense of competence as a parent as well as more negative expectations related to the sexual abuse for their child. There was no significant difference for maternal reports in their general expectations for their child.

Discussion

- With CSA being inflicted by a sibling, there is a potentially different impact on the intrafamilial caregiver compared to a disclosure made by a biological father. A caregiver must manage the abuse of the child while simultaneously being a parent to that child. In this study, this may have contributed to the results. Additionally, there is a potential for a caregiver to act as an advocate for the abused child and seek support or services for the perpetrator who may be a sibling.
- The use of a linear discriminant function analysis allowed for examination of maternal efficacy, sense of competence, and expectations for intrafamilial abuse. However, this study’s use of a binary scale between biological father and sibling may have contributed to its limitations. Further research is recommended to explore the differential effects of sibling abuse on maternal caregivers in a more nuanced way.