When Healing Begins: Treatment for Sexually Abused Youth and their Families

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Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence

• In 2003, there were 9,296 abuse and neglect investigations completed. Of these cases, 2,423 were substantiated.
  - This is a 29.1% increase in investigation and a 4.6% increase in substantiated cases from 2002.
  - 363 or 6.6% of substantiated cases involved sexual abuse (238 females and 61 males)
  - Southeastern Nebraska
    • 103 cases of sexual abuse (59 females, 18 males)
  - Estimates of 27% of females and 16% males experience one instance of sexual abuse

• Underreporting and failure to substantiate actual cases of abuse are likely to influence these figures, leading to widespread speculation that they are *underestimates* of actual occurrence.
Effects of Sexual Abuse

- Sexually abused youth display a considerable breadth of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, sexualized behavior, low self esteem, post-traumatic stress symptoms, interpersonal relationship difficulties, and behavioral problems (e.g., Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001).

- However, victimization does not necessarily have an inevitable pattern or unified symptom presentation for the majority of youth. Rather, there are a multitude of patterns at varying levels of severity.
Factors Influencing Outcome

• Variable impact of CSA may be explained, at least in part, by characteristics of the abuse.
  - Impact is more severe when:
    • longer duration
    • greater frequency
    • greater force
    • more serious sexual acts committed
    • perpetrator is closer to the victim
      - Friedrich, Urquiza, & Beilke, 1986; Ruggiero, McLeer, & Dixon, 2000

• Other risk factors:
  • negative attributional style
  • distorted cognitions
  • coping style and strategies
  • degree of parental support following disclosure
  • family functioning
    - Hunter, Coulter, Runyan, & Everson, 1990; Mannarino & Cohen, 1996; Spaccarelli, 1994; Vale & Silovsky, 2002
Child Sexual Abuse and Treatment

- Cannot change or influence the static factors of the sexual abuse (e.g., duration, severity, relationship to perpetrator).

- However, the “other risk factors” associated with negative outcomes are dynamic in nature and amenable to change, particularly with appropriate treatment.
Child Sexual Abuse and Treatment

• Sexual abuse does not just affect the victim, but the entire family and others who care for them.

• Treatment has consistently been shown to be effective in reducing the impacts of sexual abuse.

• The effectiveness of treatment is typically enhanced when other family members and/or caregivers are involved.

• Children who have been abused can go on to live healthy, productive lives.
Components of Project SAFE (Sexual Abuse Family Education)

- **Project SAFE Group Treatment**
  - Cognitive-behavioral standardized treatment program for sexually abused youths (ages 7 to 17) and their nonoffending parents or caregivers. Groups are 90 minutes long for 12 weeks.

- **Project SAFE Parent Support and Education Session (PSES)**
  - A one-time crisis session to help parents and caregivers cope with the family situation immediately following disclosure of abuse.
Components of Project SAFE (Sexual Abuse Family Education)

- **Project SAFE Brief Family Intervention (BFI)**
  - Short-term (3-6 sessions), individual counseling for children reporting child sexual abuse and their parents or caregivers.

- **Project SAFE Non-abused Sibling Group Treatment**
  - A group treatment designed for non-abused siblings (ages 6-17) consisting of six sessions.
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

• **Understanding and Recognizing Feelings**

• **The goals are:**
  - Educate about emotions and the relationship between emotions and behaviors
    - For children/adolescents: discuss the multidimensionality of feelings and the range of feelings
  - Examine the causes and consequences of feelings
  - Develop ownership of feelings
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

- **Learning About Bodies/Sexual Boundaries**

- **Goals include:**
  - For children/adolescents:
    - Learning appropriate sexual behavior and boundaries
    - Learning accurate facts about sex
    - Correct self-perceptions following sexual abuse
    - Learning about “good” vs. “bad” touches/safe dating practices and decisions about sex
  - For parents
    - Provide information on teaching children accurate facts about sex
    - Correct perceptions of negative labeling following CSA
    - Learning about “good” vs. “bad” touches
    - Learning how to facilitate discussion of body issues with their children
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

• **Standing Up for Your Rights & Assertiveness**

• The goals include:
  - Educate the members on assertiveness and the differences between assertiveness and aggressiveness
  - Empower children and teach them to appropriately assert themselves
    - I feel ______ when you ______. I would like you to _____.
  - Identify sources of social support
    - Safety Hand
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

• **Responses to Disclosure**

• **Goals include:**
  - Discuss family reactions to disclosure
  - Identify how the family has changed since disclosure
  - For parents:
    • Discuss the effects of disclosure on parent’s behaviors toward the identified child and siblings
    • Improve family cohesion & family skills
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

• **Sharing What Happened**

• **Goals include:**
  - Reducing feelings of isolation and stigmatization
  - Discussing good vs. bad secrets
  - For parents:
    • Education on sensitive listening and responding
  - For children/adolescents:
    • Discussing feelings about sharing their stories
    • Discussing feelings regarding the abuse
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

- **Learning about Offenders**

- **Goals include:**
  - Placing the responsibility and blame on the offender
  - Providing education on why offenders offend
  - Discussing feelings when the offender is a member of the family
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

**Understanding Feelings About What Happened**

**Goals include:**
- Reduce feelings of anger, stigmatization, shame, and guilt surrounding the abuse
- Enhance the child’s self-image
- Learn to channel negative feelings into appropriate outlets
- For parents:
  - Discuss with parents the possible guilt, shame, and stigmatization feelings they and their children may be feeling
  - Enhance self-image and feelings of positive parenting skills
Project SAFE Treatment Topics

• **Learning to Cope With Feelings**

• **Goals include:**
  - For children/adolescents:
    • Identifying and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression
    • Discuss relationship between feelings and behaviors
    • Discuss physical sensations related to emotions
    • Learn progressive muscle relaxation techniques
    • Educate children and adolescents on problem solving skills
  - For parents:
    • Discuss the grief process
    • Understand the coping strategies used by members of the family
    • Increase positive coping strategies for the children and parents
Conclusion

• The entire family is impacted by sexual abuse and, therefore, recovery and treatment are improved when family members are involved.

• Treatment is beneficial and is typically time limited.

• Children can heal and recover from sexual abuse. Family and others can help this recovery process through their support and actions.
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