

Child Sexual Abuse Goes Vastly Under Reported

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse of a child is defined as inappropriately exposing or subjecting a child to sexual contact, activity, or behavior, and occurs when a child is used for gratification of adult sexual desires. Within the past decade research has shown that there is a marked under estimation in the prevalence of child sexual abuse, which currently is reported by 20 percent of women and 5 to 10 percent of men worldwide. According to University of Oregon psychologist, Jennifer Freyd, an authority on trauma, although official reports of child sex abuse have declined somewhat in the U.S. during the last 10 years, close to 90 percent of sexual abuse cases are never reported to authorities. Despite such findings, the public's awareness of childhood sexual abuse within the U. S. has still greatly improved within the past three decades. Today, interest in the problem of child sexual abuse is greater than ever before. Psychiatrist, Jon R. Conte, Ph.D., points out that landmark documents such as S. Butler's "*Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest*" (1978), and F. Rush's "*The Best Kept Secret: Sexual abuse of children*" (1980) were followed by countless stories about sexual abuse in the print and electronic media, by an explosion in research and other scholarship in the social and behavioral sciences, and by increased attention from health, mental health, social service, and legal professionals. If such efforts to educate, study, and speak out about childhood sexual abuse continue by abuse prevention organizations, researchers, and child advocates then this upward spiral of awareness should hopefully likewise continue.

Although there are many possible causes for the under reporting of child sexual abuse within the U. S., this report will focus on the following three: (1) the under educating of America's youth about reporting experienced abuse; (2) continual public ignorance and reluctance in identifying and reporting suspected abuse; and (3) greater public understanding of the societal consequences child sexual abuse equally imposes on all of the U. S. as a whole.

DATA SECTION

Most often children are not adequately educated in age-appropriate language about the importance of reporting experienced sexual abuse. Often children will keep abuse a secret because they don't have the language to describe it, or because they don't think anyone will believe them. Compounding this problem is the closeness that most perpetrators have with their victims. Surveys suggest that 13 percent of women were forced into sexual contact

with an adult male during their childhood, many of them by their fathers or step fathers (Hill, 2003). To keep the abuse a secret, perpetrators often blame and threaten their victims, at times telling them that if they do tell they will not be believed. In response to this problem, educators and physicians have launched *early detection programs* that aim to 1) educate all children about child sexual abuse; 2) teach them skills for avoiding or escaping abusive situations; 3) encourage children to tell another adult if they are abused; and 4) assure them that abuse is never their fault (Godenzi, 2001). Educating minors about the emotional and mental dangers of not reporting experienced abuse may also help in combating this problem.

Known Lifelong Struggles of Adult Victims

Below is a short list of 6 examples of known lifelong struggles, experienced by adult victims of childhood sexual abuse, whom never reported their victimization to anyone.

1. Alcohol
2. Drugs
3. Self-harm
4. Shame
5. Anger
6. Low Self-Esteem

Figure 1-A (Conte)

Similarly, the general public often remains uneducated in regards of identifying and reporting the sexual abuse of children. Unfortunately, in comparison to physical abuse, sexual abuse is very hard to detect.. Though rare, there are however known physical symptoms that include constant vaginal and anal bleeding, difficulty walking or sitting, and contracted venereal disease. More commonly children will exhibit behavioral signs such as sexual acting out with other children, exhibiting fear of a certain person, or wearing many layers of clothing despite warm or humid weather (see Figure 1-B).

Signs & Symptoms of Child Sexual Abuse

- Disclosure by child (very rare).
- Physical evidence (very rare).
- Venereal disease
- Difficulty walking or sitting.
- Bleeding in vagina or anus.
- Depression, crying over insignificant matters.
- Fear of bathroom.
- Fear of a certain person.
- Excessive crying.
- Wearing many layers of clothing.
- Sexual acting out with other children.
- Bedwetting & soiling (after potty training).
- Nightmares.
- Abrupt change in behavior, uncharacteristic anger
- isolation or withdrawal
- Age inappropriate knowledge of sex.
- Constantly talks about sex.
- Constant vaginal discharge.
- Excessive masturbation.
- Exhibiting violent behavior.

Figure 1-B (Newton)

While a few symptoms are generally not cause for alarm, if a child begins to show several of these signs and symptoms there may be reason for further investigation. However, even with reasonable suspicion, some adults fear that a suspected abuser may find out that they made the report, or they may fear other unforeseen consequences.

It is for this reason that the option to report suspected abuse anonymously has been made available in the United States. Today, anyone who has reason to believe that a child may be a victim of sexual abuse can call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD in order to receive help in reporting suspected abuse (*See Figure 1-C*).

The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline has received more than 2 million calls since it began in 1982. These calls come from concerned individuals who suspect that child abuse may be occurring, as well as from children at risk for abuse and distressed parents seeking crisis intervention. Serving the United States, its territories, and Canada, the Hotline is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with professional crisis counselors who, through interpreters, can provide assistance in 140 languages. All calls are anonymous and confidential (Childhelp USA).

CHILDHELP NATIONAL CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE

The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-4-A-CHILD is dedicated to the prevention of child abuse.

Help in Reporting Abuse

- The professional Hotline counselor utilizes a database of thousands of emergency, social service and support resources. Using your zip code, he or she can look up the local telephone number to report abuse in your area.
- The Hotline counselor can also suggest what to do next if you have already made an abuse report and the child is still in danger.
- When you call, the hotline counselor may ask you if you want to report the abuse to the people who can check into what is happening. They can give you the phone number for the reporting agency—usually child protective services—in your community.
- Counselors can also stay on the phone line and make a 3-way call if you are nervous about doing it alone.

Figure 1-C, Childhelp USA

Lastly, the the average American citizen too often views child sexual abuse as being very rare, and it is easy to stereotype perpetrators as being "creepy men" who spend their time visibly staring at small children in playgrounds.

These misconceptions contribute to the amount of cases of child sexual abuse that continually go unreported through out the U.S. each year. The public, understandably, doesn't want to believe that perpetrators could ever be someone they know, love, or trust. However, a child is still most likely to be sexually abused by a family member, or someone they know, increasing the likelihood of delayed disclosure and possible memory failure (Conte). Child sexual abuse is not rare or discriminantive. In the face of this denial, the fact remains that child sexual abuse appears to be equally common across all socioeconomic classes, races, and ethnic groups (McCaghy, 2006). A 1996 report from the Department of Justice estimated rape and sexual abuse of children to cost \$1.5 billion in medical expenses and \$23 billion total each year to U.S. victims (Miller). It is hard to fathom that a problem which is reportedly so economically draining to it's victims could still be labeled as rare.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the impact of child sexual abuse upon America clearly doesn't stop once the act of the abuse does. There is now an established body of knowledge linking a history of child sexual abuse with higher rates in adult life of depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, substance abuse disorders, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (Mullen). If the misconstrued belief among abused children, in that they are alone, changes then their suffering might not be so easily clouded in secrecy. The *early prevention programs* mentioned earlier do seem to increase the liklihood that children will report abuse, reduce their tendency to blame themselves for it, and increase their feelings of efficacy (Finkelhore, D. et al.). Childhelp USA has announced one such prevention program, *Good-Touch/Bad Touch (GTBT)*, a nation-wide, research-based curriculum for children in Pre-K through 6th grades. On-going revisions keep this prevention program up to date and relevant and, so far, *GTBD* has published research in Behavior Therapy, which has validated it as effective prevention by researchers. To date, this research has been replicated twice with the same positive results (*Childhelp USA*). The greater a child's understanding is in that that they must always tell a trusted adult, no matter who their abuser may be, then the lesser the chances are that so many perpetrators will go unpunished. Furthermore, the greater the public understanding of the societal consequences that child sexual abuse equally imposes, the greater motivation will be to identify and report it to the proper authorities. In the end, with enough knowledge, understanding, and awareness this war against silence can be won.

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