

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE¹

Until recently child sexual abuse has been a well kept secret within families and among professionals working with families. Over the past five to ten years csa has become the focus of human services practitioners and researchers as well as the media. As the data and information about child sexual abuse emerges, it becomes increasingly apparent that a comprehensive education and awareness campaign in conjunction with a coordinated service delivery system is essential to positively impacting the problem of child sexual abuse.

As counselors on a sexual assault crisis hotline, it is important that you understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse. Except in very unusual circumstances, you will be counseling adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse; obviously, the manner in which the abuse evolved is an important factor in way in which the adult survivor has dealt and continues to deal with the experience.

Definition:

Csa is defined as any form of sexual activity imposed upon a child by a person in a position of power, authority and/or influence over a child.

Sexual activity includes but is not limited to contact with the intimate parts of the child's body by the person for the sexual gratification of that person, the child, or both. This also includes any violation or perceived violation of the child's body, even those without any physical contact such as exposing a person's genitals to the child, voyeurism of the child, or taking

¹ Adapted by SFWAR from the manual of the Sexual Assault Service Center of Middlesex County, CT

pictures of the child for sexual or pornographic purposes.

Dynamics:

The sexually abusive relationship between a child and an adult or other child can most easily be explained in phases.

1. **The Engagement Phase** -- Initially, the offender establishes a trusting relationship with the child. It is at this time that the offender gains access to the child and begins to arrange opportunities to spend time with the child away from responsible adults. Since the relationship with the child is one of rapport, the child often enjoys the time spent with the offender and is willing and happy to increase the time spent with the offender. During this time the offender lays the groundwork for the next phase.

2. **The Sexual Interaction Phase** -- The offender begins to behave with the child in a sexual way. Often offenders begin with behaviors less threatening to children, for example touching or fondling non-genital areas of the body, exposing or asking the child to expose genital areas, or sexual stimulation of either the child or the adult's genitals without removing clothing. The offender often frames these activities in a gamelike manner, and attempts to make the child that the activities are special between the two of them, and to feel very comfortable with the activities. The sexual activity in most case of child sexual abuse is progressive: the offender gradually introduces new behaviors to the child.

3. **The Secrecy Phase** -- The role of secrecy in the continuation of the abuse is crucial. As long as the relationship remains a secret between the child and the perpetrator remains a secret, the abuse continues and the perpetrator is not held accountable for his actions (unfortunately, the abuse can also continue after

it is discovered or revealed, depending on the reaction to the discovery). For these and other obvious reasons, the perpetrator is highly motivated to keep the abuse secret. Perpetrators rarely use physical force with their victims; more typically they engage the child in the relationship and insure continued cooperation through one or more of the following approaches:

a) The Bribe -- The perpetrator will make a gift or privilege a child values contingent on the child's participation.

b) The Special Friend -- The offender will assume the role of the child's friend, providing companionship, listening to the child, and making the child feel special; once the child values the friendship the perpetrator makes the sexual activity a 'necessary' part of the friendship.

c) The Reward -- The perpetrator threatens to harm the child or someone the child cares about if the child does not continue the relationship. The perpetrator may also threaten to blame the child for what has happened, or tell the child that no-one will believe her/him, that no-one will help.

These approaches are very powerful and are even more effective when coupled with the sense of worth a child may feel, initially, because of this special relationship with an adult or older child. In many situations, the sexual activity can be physically pleasurable for the child, and this adds to the confusion felt by the child. It is important to remember that this relationship, at least initially, has met some of the child's needs also, and when s/he begins to feel uncomfortable with the relationship there are many issues of trust, guilt and blame that the child must try to sort out.

4. The Disclosure Phase -- Child sexual abuse will generally continue until there is a disclosure, although sometime the abuse will stop as the child gets older. Disclosure can occur either purposefully or by accident. Purposeful disclosures are intentional on the part of the child; young children sometime disclose because they find the activity too stimulating to keep

the secret, while older children often disclose to alleviate pressure from the perpetrator to remain isolated from peers. Sometime, of course, a child will tell because s/he simply wants the abuse to stop. Accidental disclosures are unintentional; disclosure may happen through a pregnancy or STD, observation by a third party, physical injury to the child, or through a purposeful disclosure by another victim of the same offender. Disclosure is often followed by a feeling of relief on the part of the child; however, the relief is followed quickly by a combination of feelings that are much harder for the child to deal with.. There are also difficulties within the family, as there is a significant change to its daily functioning. Although many of the emotions and feelings are similar whatever the reason for disclosure, the impetus for and manner of the disclosure is always important, and often affects the level of crisis.

No matter how supportive and calm a family may appear, the disclosure interrupts the routine of that family, and eventually the chaos will lead to anger and blame; these feelings are often misplaced onto the victim. It is important to reassure the victim/survivor that disclosure was and is the right thing for them to do (this is particularly important if you are talking to a child).

5. **The Suppression Phase** -- At this point, the victim recants the story, rationalizes the perpetrator's behavior, or attempts to convince others that s/he has lied. Often this behavior is a response to pressure from the perpetrator, siblings or other family members to deny facts in order to "restore" the families "normalcy." Since the disclosure of csa is disruptive, and may require either the victim or the perpetrator to leave a home, the child may recant in order to avoid the consequences of protection or the blame and responsibility for the situation placed on her/him by other family members or by the perpetrator. During this time family members (including the protecting parent in cases of incest) will often attempt to discredit the victim or threaten to make the situation worse for the child if s/he

doesn't stop the process.

In working with other family members, it is important to remember that each family member may either be involved in the abuse, somewhat aware of the abuse, or feeling guilty because they did not know of or stop the behavior. Other children may well be denying their own victimization, having observed the position of the child who disclosed.

Although this is the general pattern of child sexual abuse, it is important to remember that no two situations are alike, and that many do not fit this pattern in one way or another. In many situations the disclosure does not occur when the victim is a child; many survivors of childhood sexual assault suppress the memories of the abuse, and do not remember it until years later. At this point the disclosure may be to friends, to the family the adult survivor has created, or to her family of origin. In any of these situations, a disruption of the status quo will occur, and many of the same pressures to recant will be applied to the adult survivor.

