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SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

DEVELOPMENTAL AND ETIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS: TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Baseline data are reported on the demographics, psychological adjustment, victimization, and perpetration histories of 127 6- to 12-year-old children who have engaged in developmentally unexpected sexual behaviors. Information regarding the children's caregivers, and their extended families, is also presented. Data were collected during intake of the families into a longitudinal treatment outcome study.

Method: A comprehensive battery of psychometric devices and a structured interview were completed with 127 children with sexual behavior problems and their primary caregivers at intake to a treatment outcome study.

Results: More than half of the children engaging in developmentally unexpected sexual behaviors had been abused both sexually and physically by more than two different perpetrators. One-third of the people who had maltreated these children were less than 18 years old. These children had acted out against an average of two other children. High levels of distress in the children and their caregivers were evident across a number of psychometric and historical variables.

Conclusion: Children with sexual behavior problems exhibited a number of functional impairments commonly associated with maltreatment, including learning and psychiatric disorders. Their caregivers and families manifested several characteristics that deter children's recovery from maltreatment, including an impaired attachment between parent and child. The scope of the children's problems requires that treatment extend beyond the therapist's office to include schools and other agencies or individuals with whom the child and families have regular contact. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Victimization, Children, Maltreatment, Perpetration, Child development, Treatment.

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AN INCREASED FREQUENCY of sexual behaviors is one of the most common aftereffects of childhood sexual maltreatment. In a review of 45 studies comparing maltreated and nonabused children, 13 reports were found to have collected data regarding the children's sexual behaviors. Across these 13 studies, 28% of 1,353 sexually abused children had exhibited highly sexualized behaviors, with the prevalence of sexualized behaviors fluctuating across children's ages. Highly sexualized behaviors were most common among the youngest children, decreased during early adolescence, but reemerged in later adolescence. Averaged across age, sexualized behavior was one of only two symptoms found more frequently in sexually abused children than nonabused children receiving clinical services. The second symptom observed more frequently in sexually abused children was the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993).

Data from child protective services (CPS) agencies suggest that approximately 40% of all child sexual abuse is performed by youth less than 20 years old. More surprising is the discovery that children younger than 13 perform 13% to 18% of all childhood sexual abuse (Gray & Pithers, 1993; Utah Governor's Council on Juvenile Sex Offenders, 1990). In one American state, sexual abuse performed by children younger than 14 has increased 300% over the last 10 years (Vermont Social and Rehabilitation Services, 1996). In one study, 70.6% of the preadolescents who had engaged in such developmentally unexpected sexual behavior had been abused sexually prior to the onset of their misbehavior (Gray & Pithers, 1993). Thus, maltreatment was a significant, but nonessential, etiological factor in the onset of problematic sexual behaviors in children.

Information from CPS agencies is powerfully confirmed by juvenile court data (Butts & Snyder, 1997). Between 1980 and 1995, the juvenile arrest rate of children less than 12 for general crimes increased by 24%, but their arrest rate for sex offenses (excluding rape) escalated 125% and 190% for forcible rape. Of all juvenile arrests for children under age 12, 18% are for sex offenses (excluding rape) and 11% are for forcible rape.

What factors foster the development of problematic sexual behaviors in preadolescents? In research performed over the past 10 years, several findings emerge consistently. The children often have been catastrophically maltreated, both sexually and physically. The children's families manifest many markers of chronic distress, including high rates of poverty, sexual abuse and perpetration within the extended family, and arrest for criminal behavior. Many of these children have also been exposed to a high degree of violence, much of it inside the closed doors of their family's home and between their parents. Evidence of an impaired attachment between parent and child has been found. Finally, the children live in a family environment that deters their recovery from maltreatment. Given their importance, each of these factors must be explored in greater detail.

Maltreatment of Children with Sexual Behavior Problems

Ryan (1995), summarizing many studies of adolescent sex offenders, observed that 40%–90% of the youths had been maltreated, with “very few having no abuse in the history if physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are considered collectively” (p. 6). Gray, Busconi, Houchens, and Pithers (1997), examining 66 children with sexual behavior problems, found that 95% had been sexually maltreated, 48% had been physically assaulted, 33% had been emotionally abused, and 11% had been neglected. More than half of these children (53%) had been catastrophically maltreated, involving at a minimum both sexual and physical abuse. The children had been maltreated by an average of 2.5 different perpetrators. Convergent with the CPS data noted previously, their abuser was another youth younger than 18 years of age in 40% of the instances.

Developmentally unexpected sexual behavior is considered symptomatic of childhood sexual abuse by several researchers (Berliner, 1991; Friedrich, 1995a, 1995b; Gale, Thompson, Moran, & Sack, 1988). Friedrich (1995a) has concluded, “Empirical findings with sexually abused children indicate that sexual behavior is one of the more reliable and valid markers of sexual abuse” (p. 1).

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