

The Impact of Abuse in a Context of Child Development

INCEST/SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

“Accommodation Syndrome”

Terminology

The legal definition of incest forbids sexual intercourse between certain close relatives. It is important to point out that many children are abused by trusted adults who are not relatives e.g. neighbours, mother's cohabite. Although such abuse would not legally be defined as incest, the effects are the same for the child. This paper therefore uses the Incest Survivors Campaign definition of incest i.e. “the sexual abuse of a child by a trusted adult in a position of power and authority over that child”.

The Accommodation Syndrome

Even when faced with the evidence, it is often difficult for people to believe that incest happens – that children are abused without anyone finding out, or without them attempting to tell. Roland Summit has produced a paper on the “Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome” which identifies five “stages” in incestuous abuse which highlight the difficulties children face.

The five stages are:

Secrecy

Virtually no child is prepared for the possibility of molestation by a trusted adult. That possibility is a well kept secret even amongst adults. The child is entirely dependent on the abuser for whatever reality is assigned to the experience. The secrecy is both the source of fear and the promise of safety – “everything will be alright if you don't tell”.

If the child has never been warned of the possibility of the abuse, then they have little option but to believe if they are told “don't tell because no one will believe you”, “I'll kill you”, “you'll get sent away”. As well as the pressure of carrying the secret, the child may come to believe that they are responsible for keeping the whole family together.

The average child never directly asks about sexual abuse and never directly tells. Fear of being blamed, or not being believed or fear induced by specific threats by the abuser keep children silent. Once the child has kept silent once it becomes obvious that there is no second chance. “Why didn't you tell me”, “how could you keep such a thing from me”.

Anyone working with a child whom they suspect has been abused should always assume that the child has been threatened. What children need is the permission and power to share their secret and the possibility of a non-punitive, supportive response.

Helplessness

Children may be given permission to avoid the attentions of strangers but they are required to be obedient and affectionate to any adults entrusted with their care. A child may say “I don't like daddy bathing me” or “I hate Uncle John”. Adults are not likely to pick up on this and the child

may well be told off for being a nuisance, or for being rude. The child may feel that their mother, by dismissing their complaints, is condoning the abuse.

It is sometimes assumed that if a child doesn't complain, they are in some way consenting to the abuse, or at least are not damaged by it. It should be clear that no child has equal power to say no to a parental figure or to anticipate the consequences of sexual involvement with an adult. It should be clear that the adult bears sole responsibility of any sexual activity with a child.

Adults may expect children to forcibly resist abuse, to cry for help; to try to escape but the natural reaction is to feign sleep, to shut off, to cope silently. Small creatures simply do not call on force to deal with overwhelming threat and confusion. Trusted adults define a child's reality and when there is no place to run they have no choice but to try to hide.

Adults easily forget the absolute powerlessness of the child and find it hard to believe that children would submit to sexual abuse quietly but the threat of loss of love or loss of family security is more frightening to a child than the threat of violence.

Children are easily ashamed and intimidated both by helplessness and by their inability to communicate their feelings to uncomprehending adults.

They need an adult advocate to translate the child's world into an adult-acceptable language. This advocate has to recognise that no matter the circumstances the child had no choice but to submit quietly and keep it secret.

Men who use children for their own sexual gratification soon learn that dependent children are helpless to resist or complain.

Entrapment and Accommodation

For the reasons outlined above early intervention is unusual and therefore children who suffer continued sexual abuse must learn to accommodate that reality into their lives. To make some sense of the abuse children may grow to believe that they must have provoked or deserved the assaults. However, the anger and rage at being abused will find expression for girls most usually in self destructive behaviour which reinforces her self hate.

The Incest Survivors Campaign have compiled a list of possible signs of sexual abuse. This includes urinary infections, VD, self mutilation, obsessive dependency, shutting off, incontinence, bedwetting, knowledge of sexual details, pregnancy, anorexia or obsessive eating, self neglect, depression, drug and/or alcohol problems, truancy, disrupting school, running away, fear of going to bed, insomnia, nightmares, falling asleep during the day, waking with cramps, throat infections, secretiveness, obsessive fears etc.

The list cites behaviour patterns common to all distressed children. Although all these behaviour patterns, especially when occurring in isolation may not be a reaction to sexual abuse, we must accept child abuse as a primary possibility.

Much of what is eventually labelled as adolescent or adult psychopathology can be traced back to the natural reactions of a healthy child to unnatural and unhealthy environment.

Learning to live with sexual abuse damages children's ability to trust, love and develop. Anyone working with the child, or the grown up still shattered by the abuse, may be tested and provoked

to prove that trust is impossible, and that the only secure reality is negative expectations and self hate. It is all too easy to join the parents and all of adult society in rejecting such a child.

Delayed, Conflicting and Unconvincing Disclosure

Most ongoing sexual abuse is never disclosed, at least not outside the immediate family. If family conflict triggers disclosure it is usually only after some years of continuing abuse. If after an especially punishing family fight and a belittling showdown of authority by the father, the girl is finally driven by anger to let go of the secret, she finds she is seeking understanding and intervention at the very time she is least likely to find them. Authorities, and possibly her own family, alienated by the pattern of delinquency and rebelling anger. People assume that she has invented the story in retaliation against her parents attempt to achieve reasonable control.

The average adult, including mothers, teachers, doctors, social workers, judges and jurors, cannot believe that a normal, truthful child would tolerate incest without immediately reporting it. A child of any age faces an unbelieving audience when she complains of ongoing sexual abuse, but an adolescent who has already been branded as a troublemaker and an ungrateful child risks not only disbelief but humiliation and punishment as well.

Retraction

Whatever a child says about sexual abuse, she is likely to reverse it. The family may be shattered, the child will be questioned, but the father may remain in the home in the meantime.

Once again the child bears the responsibility of either preserving or destroying the family. The “bad” choice is to tell the truth, the “good” choice is to capitulate, restore the lie and save the family.

Unless there is special support of the child, and immediate intervention to put responsibility on the abuser, the child will follow the “normal” course and retract their complaint.

The mother will also need support and a chance to express shock, grief and anger, so that she is in a better position to support the child and maintain a family base.

If this help is not available and the child does retract her statement then this confirms adult expectations that children can't be trusted. It confirms the child's belief that no one can help and it makes it that bit less likely that the next child who dares to tell will be believed.

What can be done?

If we accept the arguments in the “Accommodation Syndrome” then we must find some way of educating children about the possibility of sexual abuse, and give them the means to tell.

This must involve inter agency work particularly between social services, police and health services. Teachers and other workers who spend time with children have an important role to play.

It is important to remember that work with children in this area needs to be well planned, sensitively handled, and well supported. Agencies and organisations attempting to provide services and support for children should draw on the experience and strength of adult survivors of sexual abuse to help develop appropriate services.

Extract from Paper summarised by Women's Support Project, 871 Springfield Road, Glasgow.