Sexual Abuse Involves

Victims

The developmental immaturity of children contributes to their vulnerability and manipulation by perpetrators of sexual abuse.

- Children are taught to obey their elders.
- Children do not know what to do about inappropriate touching, even though they may intuitively know that it is wrong.
- Offenders use more advanced cognitive abilities to psychologically coerce children into sexual activity and maintain secrecy.
- Sexual abuse is often experienced by children as pleasurable, painful and frightening.
- Few children have the cognitive or psychological capacity to cope with sexual abuse on their own.
- Children are often unwilling to disclose for two reasons:
  a) Disclosure puts children at risk of psychological harm because perpetrators may have manipulated them to think they are at fault, they feel extreme shame and assume they are alone with the problem.
  b) The child knows disclosure can tear apart the family.

Non-Offending Parents

- Most research on non-offending parents concerns findings for non-offending mothers. There is very little data concerning non-offending fathers.
- Non-offending parents are a diverse group. Most non-offending parents believe their children and take some form of immediate action to stop the abuse (whether this action is successful or not). Others try to protect the child from further abuse while promoting reunification of the family.
- Some non-offending parents experience considerable shock and disbelief when the child discloses. This initial response is a natural and expected psychological response. Workers should provide support to non-offending parents to help them come to terms with the abuse.
- Other non-offending parents will remain loyal to the abuser and blame the child for the abuse, becoming angry with child and accuse the boy/girl of betrayal.
- Some non-offending parents knew about the abuse and failed to act to stop it. A parent may be psychologically dependent on the abuser or may be afraid of retaliation by the abuser. In some cases, the abuser has “groomed” the non-offending parent to disbelieve the child victim.
• A small percentage set up the abuse or participate in it, often because the offender has coerced the mother or, in very dysfunctional families, because the mother offers the child as her replacement in the sexual activity with the offender.
• The non-offending parent plays a critical role in protecting the child. His/her strengths and weaknesses must be carefully assessed.

Male Perpetrators

• There is no single profile; there are many differences among offenders.
• After years of treating sexual offenders, Salter (1995) found there are predominantly three types of motivation that precede sexual abuse:
  o Some perpetrators engage in sexual abuse of children to reduce feelings of anxiety, depression or anger.
  o Others abuse because they have deviant arousal patterns and are sexually aroused by children and/or violence. These offenders are not motivated by anger, anxiety or depression prior to the sexual abuse.
  o A third group “do not necessarily have a deviant arousal pattern but are willing to use anyone or anything without regard to age or sex in pursuit of sexual gratification. The victim is merely an object to be used for sexual gratification.” (Salter 1995).
• Sexual offenders have the capacity to disregard the child’s need for safety and security in order to fulfill his own interests.
• Sexual offenders rarely offend only once; most have multiple victims over lengthy periods of time.
• Research confirms sexual offenders commit several types of sexual offenses, including intra and extra-familial offenses, rape, exhibitionism and voyeurism.
• Some fathers/perpetrators want “a recovery of trust” with their daughters. Discuss the difficulty in trusting fathers with other children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc., and that, even if they complete treatment, they should still never have unsupervised time with children or teens.
• Most adult offenders begin offending against children when in their teens; but most teens who engage in sexual abuse of a child do not continue that abuse into adulthood. In fact, adolescent offenders are not simply younger versions of adult offenders. The literature suggests they are far more likely to stop child sexual abuse with or without treatment. The literature also suggests those most likely to stop offending received immediate negative consequences for their activities.
• It is impossible to quote an actual percentage of adult offenders who were sexually abused as children because various research studies use a range of percentages. It is safe to say most current studies show fewer than 50 percent of adult sex offenders were sexually abused as children. Neglect and physical abuse have also been tied to adult sex offenders.
Adapted from Salter, Transforming Trauma (1995) and The Field Guide to Child Welfare (Rycus & Hughes, 1998)

Female Perpetrators

- There has been little research in the field of female perpetrators. Some theories about the dynamics and motivation of female offenders have been suggested but have not been tested through research.
- Societal response to female perpetrators appears to be different than the response to males. There is a tremendous amount of denial, particularly when the offender is the child’s mother. Sexual abuse by a female isn’t seen as harmful; sometimes it is even seen as positive.
- As a result of our societal denial about female offenders, research in this field has been minimal. Early research indicates there may be significant differences between adult female offenders and adult male offenders. However, this research is only preliminary data and has not been empirically tested.
- Present estimates indicate, of those offenders who come to the attention of authorities, women comprise not more than 20 percent (Hislop, 1999). However, female offending is under-reported and not taken as seriously.
- Lack of awareness of female offending leads people to report only the most traumatizing abuse. Additionally, caseworkers are often not trained to consider that women may sexually abuse children; this leads to bias in reporting (Dunbar, 1999).

Adapted from the OCWTP workshop, Supervisory Issues in Child Sexual Abuse Cases, (1997)

Juvenile Offenders

- Like adult offenders, adolescent sex offenders are a diverse group. Some are otherwise well-functioning; some have multiple non-sexual behavior problems; some have major psychiatric disorders; some come from dysfunctional families; and others come from well-functioning families.
- Contrary to popular belief, many adolescent sex offenders were not victims of sexual abuse as children.
- Adolescent offenders differ from adult offenders in the following ways:
  - They are more responsive to treatment and are less likely to continue re-offending, especially when they receive treatment.
  - They have fewer numbers of victims and engage in less severe behaviors.
  - Most do not have the deviant sexual arousal patterns adult offenders often have.
  - Most are not sexual predators.
  - Adolescent offenders may engage in a full range of sexual behaviors (from the Field Guide).
  - Becker (as reported in the Field Guide to Child Welfare) theorizes those who continue offending found the behavior to be pleasurable, did not receive negative
consequences for the behavior, have deviant fantasies and have a poor ability to relate to peers.

- Caseworkers should refrain from labeling children and even young teens as perpetrators. This label can misrepresent the child and be stigmatizing. The language has changed as the field of child welfare has come to understand children who engage in sexually acting-out behaviors with other children. A common way of describing these children today is children with sexual behavior problems. This terminology is used to describe a broad range of behaviors and does not label the child as a perpetrator or juvenile sex offender.

Adapted from the National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth fact sheets: “What Research Shows Us About Adolescent Sex Offenders,” “Adolescent Sex Offenders: Common Misconceptions vs. Current Evidence,” and “What Research Shows Us About Female Adolescent Sex Offenders,” unless otherwise specified.

**Female Adolescent Sex Offenders**

- Little is known about female adolescent sex offenders.
- The number of female sex offenders may be under-reported.
- They are a diverse group.
- They commit a wide range of sexual behaviors; however, the most common offenses were non-aggressive acts (e.g., mutual fondling) that occurred during care-giving activities (like babysitting).
- Some have histories of multiple non-sexual behavior problems; some do not.
- Some have significant psychopathology or come from families who were dysfunctional; others have few psychological problems and minimal family dysfunction.
- On the average, they suffered from more severe physical and sexual abuse than did male adolescent offenders, were more likely to be victimized at a younger age and were more likely to have multiple perpetrators

Adapted from the fact sheet, “What Research Shows Us about Female Adolescent Sex Offenders.”