

## The role of adult expectations on the recovery of sexually abused children

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### Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a disturbingly prevalent problem that has continued to receive increased attention in the United States. Because there is substantial variability in how sexual abuse impacts children, it is important to examine potential mediating variables, including the ways in which child and family factors contribute to children's recovery. One of the most extensively researched family variables has been parental support, and this research has demonstrated a positive relationship between parental support and children's functioning following sexual abuse. Another family variable that likely influences parent-child interactions and children's recovery is parental expectations. Although adults' expectations about children who are disadvantaged, gifted, or from varying family structures have been shown to influence children's functioning, research has only begun to examine the impact of adults' expectations on children's adjustment from sexual abuse. In light of the consistent finding that adults, including parents, teachers, and professionals, appear to hold negative expectations about the outcomes of sexually abused children, it is important to systematically investigate the relationship between parental expectancies and children's recovery from sexual abuse. Recommendations for future research and intervention are provided in an effort to better understand the role of adult expectations on the recovery of sexually abused children.

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**1. Introduction**

Although estimates of child sexual abuse are influenced by methodological (e.g., measurement techniques, reporting issues) and conceptual (i.e., numerous operational definitions of child sexual abuse) variations, research in the past several decades has established that child sexual abuse is a prevalent societal phenomenon (e.g., [Gorey & Leslie, 1997](#); [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004](#)). Within the child sexual abuse literature, a variety of short-term and long-term consequences have been documented, including internalizing and externalizing symptoms (e.g., [Bauserman & Rind, 1997](#); [Jumper, 1995](#); [Rind & Tromovitch, 1997](#)). To better understand the development of these deleterious outcomes, research has examined many factors that may be involved in determining the impact of sexual abuse on children. One such area that has received significant research attention is how family variables (e.g., parental support) may influence children's recovery. Although a tremendous amount of information has been gleaned from these studies, a related and potentially influential family variable that has been largely overlooked is the role of parental expectations on children's recovery. Because there is already well-documented support in the social psychology research literature demonstrating the impact of adult expectations on selective groups of children (e.g., disadvantaged, gifted), it is reasonable to expect that adult expectations have an influence on sexually abused children as well. Because this area of research is limited, the purpose of this paper is to provide substantial support for the careful research consideration of the influence of adult expectations on the recovery of sexually abused children. Only with such research will we be able to better understand how poor expectations may increase the likelihood of deleterious outcomes in sexually abused children.

This paper reviews research that identifies adults' expectations for various groups of children (e.g., children from varying family structures, gifted children), including those who

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