



Characterizing the sexual abuse experiences of young adolescents[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 May 2013

Received in revised form 27 August 2013

Accepted 30 August 2013

Available online 4 October 2013

Keywords:

Sexual abuse

Maltreatment

Perpetrator

Case record abstraction

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study was to: (a) compare the demographics of maltreated youth initially labeled as sexually abused by the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) to maltreated youth classified as sexually abused using current and past case records, (b) identify differences in sexual abuse experiences and types of perpetrators between boys and girls, and (c) provide a detailed description of the sexual abuse experiences for boys and girls. Participants were youth ages 9–12 years old with a recent maltreatment allegation. The Maltreatment Case Record Abstraction Instrument (MCRAI) was used to code child welfare records of 303 maltreated youth of whom 60 experienced sexual abuse. Perpetrators were classified by gender into four categories (biological parent, parental figure, relative, and unrelated) and type of abuse was classified into three categories (penetrative, contact without penetration, and non-contact). Using Chi-Square tests, perpetrator categories and sexual abuse types were compared by child gender for significant differences. Only 23 (38.3%) of the 60 sexually abused youth were labeled as sexually abused in the most recent DCFS report when they entered the study. About three-quarters of the sexually abused youth experienced non-penetrative physical contact, 40% experienced penetration, and 15% experienced sexual abuse without physical contact. Most youth (91.7%) were victimized by a male, and 21.7% were abused by a female. Youth experienced a large range of sexual abuse experiences, the details of which may be important for exploration of consequences of childhood sexual abuse.

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Introduction

Just three decades ago, child sexual abuse was considered rare and thus largely understudied. However, in the intervening time, actual prevalence rates have been well documented and research has clearly established the deleterious effects of sexual abuse across the lifespan. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) shows that of the 3.7 million children referred to Child Protective Services in 2011, 9.1% were confirmed as experiencing sexual abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The highest prevalence was found in children age 12–14 years old. Additionally, there is a substantial gender difference in the prevalence of sexual abuse recorded by Child Protective Services (CPS). According to the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4; Sedlak et al., 2010), child welfare records identify the

[☆] This research was supported by funding from National Institutes of Health Grants R01HD39129 (to P.K.T., Principal Investigator), K01HD069457 (to S.N., Principal Investigator) and K01HD057987 (to J.U.S., Principal Investigator).

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sexual abuse of girls at a rate more than 3.8 times that of boys. This prevalence rate is based on the Endangerment Standard (i.e., evidence that the child had been harmed or was in danger of being harmed by the maltreatment), which includes children who were thought to be endangered as well as those with substantiated or indicated reports in a CPS investigation. Using the Harm Standard (i.e., evidence that the child has been harmed by the maltreatment), which is more stringent, the prevalence for girls is more than 5 times that of boys. Whether this gender disparity is because of fewer actual experiences of sexual abuse by males or to caseworkers substantiating fewer reports of sexual abuse for males is not clear. There is some evidence of the latter, that caseworkers substantiate sexual abuse of girls more often than that of boys (Maikovitch, Koenen, & Jaffee, 2009). Additionally, research shows that mental health professionals inquire about sexual abuse infrequently with males (Lab, Feigenbaum, & De Silva, 2000), which may also contribute to this gender disparity.

Generally, sexual abuse, as defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), refers to the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator, including molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitative activities (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). The bulk of sexual abuse research falls into two categories: (a) studies that follow up with children identified as sexually abused by protective services and (b) retrospective studies that ask individuals to recall sexual abuse experiences earlier in childhood and correlate them with current functioning. There are important definitional differences in these two approaches. Legal definitions of sexual abuse have been used in follow-up studies of childhood abuse when CPS agencies provide the identification of the sexual abuse. On the other hand, retrospective studies rely entirely on the individual's "memories, perceptions, and willingness to disclose" (Trickett, 2006, p. 132) and may not use legal definitions of sexual abuse in all instances.

Although the exact definitions may vary by state, they all include *sexual assault* and *sexual exploitation*. Sexual assault includes, but is not limited to, oral copulation, sexual penetration, masturbation in the presence of a child, and fondling of genitals or intimate parts. Sexual exploitation includes, but is not limited to, preparing, selling, or distributing obscene matter depicting a minor or employment of minor to perform obscene acts. Despite statutory definitions of sexual abuse being derived from the CAPTA, the sexual abuse experiences included can vary substantially. Therefore, the classification of an individual as *sexually abused* may include experiences ranging from sexual penetration to witnessing sexual acts to posing for pornographic photographs. For many research studies these heterogeneous experiences are simply grouped into categories of *non-contact*, *non-penetrative contact*, and *penetrative* sexual abuse. In addition, the perpetrators can vary from biological parents to relatives to strangers (Trickett, 2006). In the NIS-4 (Sedlak et al., 2010), 37% of sexually abused children were abused by a biological parent and 23% by a non-biological parent or parent's partner. The remaining 40% were abused by a person other than a parent or parental figure. The majority of perpetrators were males (87%) and were more likely to be male when they were the child's non-biological parent. Female perpetrators were most commonly biological parents.

Retrospective studies often try to use CPS definitions, but they can vary widely in their definition of sexual abuse. For example, questions ranged from whether the individuals had unwanted sexual advances or been sexually abused (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997; Krahé, Scheinberger-Olwig, Waizenhofer, & Kolpin, 1999), forced or somewhat forced sexual experience (Nereo, Farber, & Hinton, 2002), or penetration and/or genital contact more than 10 times (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, & Romans, 1994; a thorough review of studies can be found in Trickett, 2006). The wide variation in sexual abuse experiences described both between and within studies demonstrates the range of characteristics that sexual abuse encompasses.

Childhood sexual abuse has been found to impact a number of domains including mental and physical health, sexual risk taking, and cognitive abilities (Irish, Kobayashi, & Delahanty, 2010; Putnam, 2003; Trickett, Noll, & Putnam, 2011). The bulk of the literature on the effects of childhood sexual abuse comes from studies with all female samples, and knowledge of the effects on males lags far behind. A recent study of the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) found that girls were more likely than boys to have sexual abuse substantiated and to experience penetration (Maikovitch-Fong & Jaffee, 2010). Girls and boys were equally likely to have a perpetrator that was related to them and did not differ in internalizing or externalizing problems associated with abuse characteristics. Similarly, a meta-analysis of seven studies found no gender differences in psychopathology related to sexual abuse (Tolin & Foa, 2006).

There seems to be substantial inconsistency in the extant evidence linking specific abuse characteristics to negative outcomes. Some studies have found that abuse perpetrated by a father or father figure is most detrimental (e.g., Adams-Tucker, 1982; Briere & Runtz, 1987; DiLillo, 2001; Edwards, Freyd, Dube, Anda, & Felitti, 2012; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Sirls, Smith, & Kusama, 1989), whereas others have not found this link (e.g., Einbender & Friedrich, 1989; Glover et al., 2010; Mennen, 1993; Sciolla et al., 2011). Two more comprehensive, multidimensional studies comparing the effects of various abuse characteristics (while controlling for the others) found that severity of abuse (Mennen & Meadow, 1995; Trickett, Reiffman, Horowitz, & Putnam, 1997) and perpetration by a biological father (Trickett et al., 1997) predicted worse outcomes. Additionally, Trickett, Noll, Reiffman, and Putnam (2001) found that a profile group comprised of girls sexually abused by their biological fathers for a long duration were the most disturbed in the long term. Results of a meta-analysis suggest that penetrative sexual abuse puts an individual at higher risk for mental health problems than contact or non-contact abuse (Andrews, Corry, Slade, Issakidis, & Swanston, 2004).

The extant evidence demonstrates that there are certain characteristics of sexual abuse that may increase maladjustment, which highlights the need to obtain detailed information about sexual abuse experiences to better define and understand those at highest risk. This descriptive study utilized a methodical system to both identify and categorize the sexual abuse experiences recorded in official child welfare records of young adolescents referred to CPS. The purpose of this study was to (a) compare the demographics of maltreated youth initially labeled as sexually abused by the Department of Children and Family

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