



Child sexual abuse and subsequent relational and personal functioning: The role of parental support[☆]



Natacha Godbout^{a,*}, John Briere^b, Stéphane Sabourin^c, Yvan Lussier^d

^a Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

^b University of Southern California, USA

^c Université Laval, Québec, Canada

^d Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of nonoffending parental support in the relationship between child sexual abuse (CSA) and later romantic attachment, psychiatric symptoms, and couple adjustment. Of 348 adults engaged in stable romantic relationship, 59 (17%) reported sexual abuse. In this subgroup, 14% ($n=8$) reported parental intervention after the abuse was disclosed (i.e., support), 15% ($n=9$) reported a lack of parental intervention after abuse disclosure (i.e., nonsupport), and 71% ($n=42$) reported that their nonabusive parent(s) was(were) unaware of their abuse. Results indicated that, compared to other groups, CSA survivors with nonsupportive parents reported higher levels of anxious attachment, psychological symptoms, and dyadic maladjustment. In contrast, CSA survivors with supportive parent(s) expressed psychological and couple adjustment equivalent to non-abused participants, and lower attachment avoidance, relative to all other groups. Path analysis revealed that insecure attachment completely mediated the relationship between perceived parental support after CSA and later psychosocial outcomes. An actor–partner interdependence model showed different patterns for men and women and highlighted the importance of considering relational dynamics in dyads of CSA survivors. Overall, the results suggest that perceived parental support serves as a protective factor among those exposed to CSA.

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Introduction

It is well documented that the trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA) is associated with psychological maladjustment that may begin shortly after the abuse and continues into adulthood (Briere, 1996; Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2006; Putnam, 2003). CSA survivors are particularly at risk of developing insecure attachment representations, which are associated with relational problems, including couple dissatisfaction (Berthelot, Godbout, Hébert, Goulet, & Bergeron, 2013; Cyr, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2010; Friesen, Woodward, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2010; Godbout et al., 2006; Watson & Halford, 2010).

Yet, some survivors of CSA appear relatively unscathed, demonstrating asymptomatic or healthy functioning (Finkelhor, 1990). Although this apparent resiliency may reflect the fact that the lasting effects of CSA are complex and that its assessment

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Sexology, University of Quebec in Montreal – UQAM, 455, E René-Levesque, Room W-R165, Montreal, QC, Canada H2L 4Y2.

potentially requires more subtle measures (Godbout et al., 2006), the reaction of non-abusing parents may explain the extent to which CSA survivors experience negative outcomes (Beaudoin, Hébert, & Bernier, 2013). In fact, several studies indicated that CSA survivors with positive family environments and high levels of support experience less severe long-term sequelae than their peers who reported less parental support (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008; Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Gries et al., 2000; Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, & Joly, 2009; Thériault, Cyr, & Wright, 1997). Other researchers, however, report that parental support is a relatively weak predictor of later outcomes (Bolen & Lamb, 2007). This discrepancy suggests that the protective role of specific parenting factors on the well-being of CSA survivors remains an underresearched area.

Although research and clinical data revealed that CSA victims who never disclosed the abuse or who delayed disclosure report more psychological distress in adulthood, more information is needed on the impacts of parents who were unaware of the ongoing abuse of their child (e.g., Hébert et al., 2009). Also, no study has evaluated an integrative model to explore the pathways linking parental support after CSA to each partner's adult psychological and couple distress. The current study aims to address these gaps by exploring the relationships between CSA, perceived parental support, psychological distress, and couple adjustment using attachment as a conceptual framework.

An attachment perspective may offer a helpful framework for understanding the role of parental support at the time of CSA disclosure and subsequent intrapersonal and dyadic outcomes. The theoretical and empirical literatures indicate that parental support in the context of CSA influences the development of positive models of self and other or secure attachment behaviors toward the principal attachment figure (for literature reviews on parental support and CSA, see Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; for an application of attachment theory to the study of sexual abuse, see Alexander, 1992).

The supportive intervention of a nonabusive parent is likely to assist the formation of positive models of self and others (Bowlby, 1969). Those positive internalized models (secure attachment) may eventually lead to better personal and couple outcomes (Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009; Godbout, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2009; Roche, Runtz, & Hunter, 1999). Conversely, lack of intervention or deficiency of protective behaviors by nonabusive parents after learning that their children were sexually abused may contribute to the survivors' perceptions of themselves as nonvaluable and of others as not available for help in time of need. We therefore hypothesized that report of parental support should be related to higher attachment security. In contrast, nonsupport should be related to higher attachment insecurity.

Despite its relative commonness in clinical contexts, the effects of a nonabusive parent who is perceived as unaware of the CSA have been less frequently studied (Hébert et al., 2009; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). Based on attachment theory, we hypothesized that perceived parental nonawareness of CSA might produce two types of outcomes. It might be associated with more positive models of self and other than what would be observed in CSA victims with nonsupportive parents because it did not involve direct rejection or refusal to help. However, unaware parents may also be perceived as neglectful to the extent that the victim thinks that the parents should have known about the abuse. In this case, victims with parents perceived as unaware of the abuse might develop less secure attachment representations than victims reporting parental support in the aftermath of CSA. Internal models based on early experiences have been found to relate to adult romantic attachment which, in turn, are related to one's psychological and relational adjustment (Godbout et al., 2006). Some authors report that attachment is relatively stable, developing from childhood in relation with parents and persisting into adulthood in relation with significant others, especially the intimate partner (Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Other authors, however, contend that attachment is variable in time (*evolving representations*), as it depends upon significant life experiences with significant others (Kagan, 1996; Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000; Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004). Although this debate continues, we hypothesized in the current study that attachment representations might have been either developed or altered by an exposure to an interpersonal trauma (CSA) depending of the parental behaviors (i.e., support) associated with this trauma. As such, attachment representations are hypothesized to act as mediators in the relation between CSA-related parental support and adult dyadic adjustment.

Disordered attachment is also a robust predictor of psychological distress (Putnam, 2003; Shapiro & Levendosky, 1999), which in turn might diminish couple adjustment (Godbout et al., 2006). In this context, psychological distress is conceived as an intrapersonal proximal variable that reflects the effects of daily hassles and pervasive vulnerabilities associated with past negative experiences and that may impact the couple relationship (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003).

In the present study, we compared four groups of individuals (CSA survivors with perceived parental support, survivors without perceived parental support, survivors who reported that their parent(s) were unaware of the abuse, and nonsurvivors) on their relational and psychological adjustment as adults. We then tested an integrative model of the associations between parental support, psychological distress, and couple satisfaction, with attachment acting as a mediator between parental support and psychosocial adjustment. Lastly, we conducted an Actor–Partner Interdependence Model analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to examine the dynamic aspect of relationships between parental support after CSA and long term adjustment in intimate relationships.

Method

Participants

The sample ($N=348$) consisted of 153 men and 195 women who were in couple relationships, either married ($n=103$) or cohabiting ($n=245$) with their partner. Both members of the couple were invited to participate to the study;

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