Aggression and Violent Behavior 24 (2015) 175–187

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

Transition to adulthood of child sexual abuse victims

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 July 2014
Received in revised form 27 February 2015
Accepted 23 April 2015
Available online 2 May 2015

Keywords:
Child sexual abuse
Adult roles
Education
Employment
Romantic relationships
Parenting

ABSTRACT

There is extensive evidence that childhood sexual abuse (CSA) can have deleterious consequences for adult psychological and physical functioning. The extent to which CSA hampers victims in the fulfillment of adult roles such as marriage, employment, and parenting is less clear. In this review, we investigate the effects of CSA on adult roles in the domains education, employment, offending, relationships, and parenting. We reviewed the literature published since 1990. We find that CSA appears to be associated with the quality of adult roles more than the transition to these roles per se. The article ends with a discussion on the results and recommendations for future research.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.04.012
1359-1789/

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has abundantly been shown to negatively impact victims' lives. Meta-analyses and reviews have shown this for physical health (e.g., Irish, Kobayashi, & Delahanty, 2010), for sexual functioning (e.g., Neumann, Houskamp, Pollock, & Briere, 1996; Senn, Carey, & Vanable, 2008), for depression (Chen et al., 2010; Jumper, 1995; Neumann et al., 1996; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001), for post-traumatic stress disorder (Chen et al., 2010; Paolucci et al., 2001), for suicide (Chen et al., 2010; Neumann et al., 1996; Paolucci et al., 2001), and for self-esteem (Jumper, 1995). However, Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman (1998) give some opposition to the belief that CSA is associated with pervasive harm. They found CSA victims to be psychologically slightly less well adjusted than controls, but this effect was largely explained by family factors. Although they conducted a meta-analysis of studies on college samples, similar results were found using national samples (Rind & Tromovitch, 1997).

CSA may also impair victims' broader social functioning and prevent them from fulfilling social roles that are an essential part of leading a well-adjusted adult life. However, due to methodological and conceptual quandaries, evidence on CSA victims' transition into and adaptation to such adult roles is scattered across disciplines and research areas. In the current review, we synthesize literature from these different disciplines on the influence of CSA on the fulfillment of adult roles.

1.1. Adult roles

Adaptation to adulthood encompasses self-responsibility and a life outside the family of origin (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). This self-responsibility does not mean that adults will immediately be self-sufficient, but it indicates that they actively prepare themselves for their adult functioning, either by pursuing work or an education. Self-responsibility also means that adults develop adult relationships and social support networks (Sroufe et al., 2005). In line with self-responsibility, desisting from delinquency is argued to be another important part of role behaviors that define adulthood (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010), with norm compliance being an important criterion for considering someone as an adult (Arnett, 2001; Facio & Micocci, 2003; Nelson, Duan, Padilla-Walker, & Luster, 2013; Nelson et al., 2007): while delinquency occurs relatively often in adolescence (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001), offending becomes rarer by the late 20s (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). Finally, becoming a parent is often defined as the final step in the transition to adulthood (Billari, 2001). While parenthood is not necessarily a requirement to transit into adulthood (Arnett, 2001), the decade between 25 and 35 years of age is normative for childbearing in most Western societies (Heffner, 2004) and becoming a parent at especially an early age is considered a risk factor for a number of negative outcomes (Chevalier & Viitanen, 2003; Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012; Sanders, 2011).

The development of adult roles encompasses developing bonds with partners, children, work, and society. The need for these lasting social bonds has been argued to be a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is consistently associated with well-being across several domains. Research even finds that the effect of having adequate social relationships on mortality is comparable to quitting smoking (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Thus, being able to function in a social context, control inappropriate impulses (refraining from drugs, crime, and violence), having finished an education, being employed, and having enduring (romantic) relationships are important ingredients of leading a healthy and happy adult life. Failures in the transition to adulthood may have long-lasting consequences. For instance, high-school dropout can impede a successful professional career (Jarjoura, 1993), not finding a job in early adulthood may impact earnings later on in life (Mroz & Savage, 2006), and a late transition to romantic bonds with a partner may mean childlessness.

Successful transitions to these adult roles are not only important per se, but also because the accomplishment of these adult roles may interact with other outcomes. For example, meta-analyses show a strong link between education and health (Furnée, Groot, & Van den Brink, 2008). Employment is related to psychological well-being (Paul & Moser, 2009; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1990). Offending is negatively related to general health (Junger, Stroebem, & Van der Laan, 2001). Marriage has a positive effect on mental (e.g., Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007) and physical health (e.g., Schoenborn, 2004). Parenthood, finally, is found to be positively associated with mental health (Helbig, Lampert, Klose, & Jacobi, 2006).

Increasing our understanding of whether and how CSA impairs victims' adjustment to these adult roles is crucial for understanding the full impact of CSA. It is also important if we want to understand the mechanisms that generate negative outcomes for victims. For instance, depression in victims may be a direct consequence of victimization and may explain difficulties in adaptation to adult roles. However, depression may also be an indirect consequence of the effect of CSA on the fulfillment of adult roles. A better understanding of the association between CSA and adult role outcomes is therefore a building block for unraveling the mechanisms that generate negative life-outcomes among CSA victims.

The adaptation to adult roles generally takes place in a period that Arnett (2000) coined *emerging adulthood*, to describe a relatively unstable phase after adolescence in the life of young people in industrialized societies. In this phase, roughly between ages 18 and 25, many directions in life are still possible and most young people do not yet consider themselves adults. The emerging adulthood is a transitional period that is characterized by change and exploration. It is also a period that typically ends with more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, in the current review we will focus on effect of CSA on individuals who have transited through this unstable period and who are 25 years of age or older.

1.2. Definition of child sexual abuse

The literature uses varying definitions of CSA. Most researchers agree that physical contact with a child in a sexually coercive situation constitutes CSA. Such contact may range from touching body parts inappropriately to genital penetration. Some authors also include non-contact behavior, such as public indecency, unwanted exposure to pornography, or verbal harassment, in their definition of CSA (see Finkelhor, 1994 for a discussion of CSA definitions). We only included studies that require the abuse to have involved physical contact. In doing so, we focused on a clearly delineated, relatively homogeneous set of serious behavior.

Another criterion that varies in CSA definitions is the cutoff age up to which the abuse is considered child abuse. Some authors use an age limit of 12 years (e.g., Widom & Ames, 1994), others use 16 years (e.g., Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1994), while yet others use 18 years as a cutoff (e.g., Lee & Tolman, 2006). Some also consider a certain age difference between perpetrator and the victim as characteristic of CSA (e.g., Anda et al., 2001: "…at least 5 years older"), to exclude sexual contacts with peers. We chose 18 years as a cutoff age because from this age on a person is legally considered an adult in most countries.

1.3. This study

In this review we will provide a systematic and exhaustive review of the long-term effects of CSA on the transition of victims to adult roles. Specifically, we focus on five main transitions towards adult roles, namely education, employment, desistance from offending, romantic relationships, and parenting. Not only will we investigate whether victims make the transition to certain roles, we will also examine the quality of this transition. We will focus only on CSA that involves