The Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

Ellery Fink
What is Child Sexual Abuse?

- General definition from the American Humane Association
- Includes nontouching, touching and exploitation aspects of CSA
- Different studies use different parameters to define CSA
Notes About Research Methods

- No studies examine children both before and after sexual abuse
- Adult research relies primarily on retrospective reports
- Child research relies on parents and clinicians reports
- Minimal information available about adolescents
- Use of both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies
Possible Effects of CSA

- low self-esteem
- guilt
- anxiety
- depression
- somatization
- PTSD
- suicidality

- dissociation
- interpersonal dysfunction
- eating disorders
- sexual problems
- substance abuse
Distinct Manifest Symptoms

- Important to recognize that all of these symptoms are correlated but not necessarily caused by CSA
- Sexualized Behavior
- Depression
- PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Externalizing Symptoms

- Behaviors that create external problems and interpersonal difficulty
- Sexualized behavior is the most commonly studied characteristic behavior of CSA
What is Sexualized Behavior?

- Includes: sexualized play with dolls, putting objects into anuses or vaginas, excessive or public masturbation, seductive behavior, requesting sexual stimulation from other children or adults and age inappropriate sexual knowledge.

- The possibility that a victim of CSA would become a perpetrator.
Important to recognize that sexualized behavior is common among all children - 40% of parents report that their children touch themselves in public and undress in front of others - the concern lies when it becomes excessive and inappropriate.
Suicidality

- Study identified 31% of patients in an outpatient clinic as CSA
- Of those 34% had made a serious suicide attempt
- Only 8.3% of the other 69% of the population had made a suicide attempt
- More common in adolescents and adults than children
Internalizing Symptoms

- Symptoms that are manifested within oneself, distress is experienced privately
- Depression
- PTSD
Depression

- One of the most common side-effects associated with CSA
- Includes low-self esteem and suicidality
- Victims of CSA have as much as 4x greater risk for major depression than those with no abuse history
PTSD

- APA definition: a psychiatric diagnosis that describes anxiety responses to a significant stressor
- Manifested by means of re-experiencing through nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and other symptoms
- Standard diagnostic criterion found a 48% prevalence rate for children with severe, ritualistic abuse
PTSD - continued

- Survivors of CSA are twice as likely to develop PTSD than their nonabused counterparts who are in treatment for some reason unrelated to abuse.
- By means of self-report measures CSA is appears to be highly associated with PTSD among adolescents.
- Elevated rates of PTSD occur among adult survivors of CSA - include anxiety symptoms, sleep disturbances, somatic
Traumatization Process

- **Dissociation** - defense mechanism used by victims to allow them to “escape” from their body during trauma and to have amnesia.

- Is considered to be voluntary thought suppression, minimization and sometimes outright denial.

- Peritraumatic dissociation occurs concurrently with traumatic event - is the process by which the event is fragmented into distinct separate entities.
Unfortunately these defenses only alleviate the initial trauma effect.

Until the time comes that the victim is ready to put the fragmented events together and deal with the experience, the manifest symptoms will be present.
Conclusions

- There is an obvious need for mental health care for victims of CSA - the sooner the better.
- “...the influence of CSA on adverse long-term effects is mediated and influenced by both the severity of the abuse and by a range of family and social background factors” (Fleming, Mullen, Sibthorpe & Bammer, 1999)
References

- American Humane Association (1995) - Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet #4
- Class Discussions - Critical Thinking in Child Abuse - Fall 1999 - Louise Silvern
References - continued
