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Sexual abuse of deaf youth
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p. 256

“Sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child under legal age who is developmentally incapable of understanding or resisting the sexual contact and who may be psychologically, physically or socially dependent upon the offender.”

“Available incidence data from the general population indicate that one in four girls and one in ten boys is sexually abused at some time prior to adulthood (Finkelhor, 1986).”

“A questionnaire survey was undertaken at a residential school for the deaf. All members of the ninth-grade class were surveyed to determine their knowledge of sexual abuse, self-protection techniques and their own experiences, if any, of sexual abuse. Some 50 percent of the students reported that they had been sexually victimized (Swan, February, 1987).”

“In a more extensive study, police investigators, with the assistance of sign language interpreters, interviewed all 150 of the children at another residential school for the deaf to determine the occurrence of sexual abuse. Seventy-five of the children stated that they had been sexually abused. Nineteen reported being victims of incest in their homes. Three additional children reported both physical and sexual abuse. All students were interviewed individually.”

“A third investigation...conducted between 1984 and 1986...all incoming freshman at a postsecondary educational facility for the hearing impaired...[students] had previously attended both mainstreamed and residential programs...322 students surveyed with a written questionnaires...(11.1%)...had been victims of sexual abuse...of these, 24 also reported physical abuse. More physical than sexual abuse were reported, i.e., 53 students said they had been physically abused only, 13 reported sexual abuse only and 24 reported a history of both physical and sexual abuse (Sullivan, Scanlon & La Barre, 1986).”

“...final research...Center for Abused Handicapped Children at the Boys Town National Institute for Communication Disorders in Children...Center has seen more than 200 handicapped children who have been the victims of physical and/or sexual abuse...Included were 100 deaf children from 18 states...deaf students attended both mainstreamed and residential educational placements...interviewed individually by counselors...64% of the deaf youth attended residential schools. Of these 40 were abused in the school, 10 in the home and 15 both the school and the home. Of the 35 cases from mainstreamed placements, 21 reported sexual abuse in the home, 9 within the school and 5 at home and at school.”

p. 257

“These four pioneering studies yield certain trends. First, there appears to be more sexual abuse of deaf children than hearing children. Whereas 10 percent of hearing boys and 25 percent of hearing girls reported sexual abuse, the rates are 54 and 50

percent respectively for deaf boys and girls. Not only are the rates for deaf children higher, but the sex ratio is reversed, i.e., among the deaf, more boys than girls experience abuse.”

“The deaf youth stated that the sexual abuse tended to occur in vans or buses when going to and from school, in bathrooms and in beds. Most of the mainstreamed students were abused at home, however the residential children were more likely to be abused at school.”

“The authors have found that long regular bus rides where children are confined in a small area with little or no supervision represents a high risk situation for sexual (and other) abuse.”

Table 1 Sexual Abuse – Physical Indicators

- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing
- Traumatized, painful and/or pruritic cervix, vulva, penis, perineum or anus
- Bruises or lesions overlaying hard or soft palate and/or tonsillar pillars, including chancres
- Semen about mouth, genitals or clothing
- Presence of sexually transmitted disease (herpes, genital warts, venereal disease, syphilis, AIDS)
- Pregnancy
- Itching or scratching of genitals
- Apparent pain in sitting or walking

(Adapted from Brookhouser, Sullivan, Scanlan & Garbarino, 1986)

Table 1a Sexual Abuse – Behavioral/Emotional Indicators

- Direct reports from children
- Change in sleep or eating habits
- Regression in developmental milestones
- Seductive behavior
- Explicit and/or precocious knowledge of sexual acts
- Compulsive masturbation
- Excessive curiosity about sex
- Sexual themes in play and conversations
- Encopresis (fecal soiling) and enuresis (wetting)
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Impaired ability to trust
- Pseudomature and/or overly compliant behavior
- Overly compulsive behavior
- Sudden development of phobias (the dark, going to bed, riding in cars)
- Sleep disturbances
- Clinging behaviors
- Withdrawal
- Acting-out behavior (delinquency, running away)

“More often than not, children will not discuss sexual abuse unless specifically asked about it. This is especially true with deaf children. There are a variety of reasons for this (Sgroi, 1982). They may fear rejection, punishment, loss of parental love, or lame for the sexual incidents. Fears of retaliation, disease, pregnancy, going to a foster home or institution also exist. Many perpetrators foster fear in their child victims, warning them of horrible consequences for telling of the abuse.”

“The deaf child seeking to report sexual abuse faces another problem. Often the parent, teacher or other caretaker does not know enough sexual signs (or sign language in general) to understand when the child does report sexual molestation.”

“In the general population we know that in 80 percent of cases, the child molester is someone the youngster knows and trusts (DeFrancis, 1969; Peters, 1976). Additionally, 95 percent of girls and 80 percent of boys are sexually abused by men (Finkelhor, 1986). As indicated earlier, pedophiles often seek employment in school settings. Deaf children who are conditioned to comply with authority, are in subordinate positions, are fearful of threats and are susceptible to bribes and the promise of reward. They tend to be intensely curious and are usually highly naïve about sexual norms and values. Finally, children are also sensual beings who may respond willingly to intimate contact which they often associate with feelings of being loved and cared about. These dynamics can play a major role in children’s vulnerability to sex abuse and reluctance to report it.”

p. 258

“All states and the District of Columbia have statutory reporting requirements regarding both the suspicion and actual witnessing of child sexual abuse.”

“...incidence of sexual abuse often go unreported because of ignorance of the law, refusal to believe the children reporting the abuse and attempts to deny or cover up the problem.”

“Historically, schools (mainstream and residential) have tried to handle sex abuse “in house” to avoid publicity and conflict.”

p. 259

“...children rarely lie about being the victim of sexual abuse, although it may be easier to assume deception among children than to face the reality of what they are telling.”

“Children may lie about not being sexually abused.”

“Successful prevention hinges on an awareness of risk factors, and policies and procedures within educational facilities which minimize these risks.”

“Programs need to provide caretakers with appropriate ongoing supervision and in-service education which prepares them to identify sexual abuse and report the problem.”