

Chapter 11

Being a Child Is a “Serious Game”: Innovations in Psychological Preventive Programs Against Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the main and most recent research trends for the prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), by summarizing and discussing related theoretical and methodological issues, debated among scholars. Starting from European and International recommendations, the authors will focus on the most innovative approaches and prevention programs, by particularly exploring the necessity to reinforce children’s ability to self-protect, the need for involving trusted adults in prevention programs, and the possibility to adopt serious games as innovative and child-appropriated tools to this end.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the ample theme of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) from a psychological preventive perspective. Although largely explored, this issue still contains obscure points to be addressed and controversial topics currently discussed by scholars.

The definition of CSA itself is quite controversial due to the fact that there is no universal description of what child sexual abuse actually means (Macdonald, 2001; Trickett, 2006). The term “CSA” is usually adopted to cover a wide range of experiences involving a child in unwanted, inappropriate, coercive, and unlawful sexual exploitation by an adult or older child (Walsh, Zwi, Woolfenden & Shlonsky, 2015). As reference concept, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines CSA as “...the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent

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to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society...” (WHO, 1999, p. 15). This comprises several types of inappropriate abusive “interactions” including physical body contact (e.g. unwanted touching, fondling, masturbation, frottage, oral/genital contact, vaginal or anal penetration by whatever object) or not including physical body contact (such as sexual comments, voyeurism, exhibitionism, exposing a child to pornography, or involving him/her in making pornography) (Putnam, 2003).

The variety of unwanted behaviors under which a CSA occurs, represents a proper difficulty primarily for potential victims in order to identify and reject them and only secondly for authorities in order to adopt appropriate prosecutions for perpetrators. Indeed, in the authors’ perspective, children protection from sexual abuse should be a worldwide effort, by means of effective prevention programs that mainly involve children as primary addressees, in order to reinforce their self-protection skills, together with the trusted adults nearest to them.

This contribution will adopt a prevention approach to CSA, which is best conceptualized as a process of reducing risk factors and building protective factors in the potential victim and his/her family, and in the environment in which they all exist (Wurtele, 2009). As a secondary goal, CSA prevention aims to promote the disclosure of sexual abuse, considering that a strong association between prevention programs, disclosure and shorter duration of sexual abuse has been registered (Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992; Gibson & Leitenberg, 2000).

Consistent with this, the chapter will analyze the main controversial theoretical and methodological points about the theme of CSA prevention, particularly discussing the opportunity of employing serious games as innovative tools to this end.

BACKGROUND

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a form of violence with an alarming prevalence all over the world (Muller, Röder and Fingerle, 2014); unfortunately, more than a half-million children are abused sexually each year (Renk, Liljequist, Steinberg, Bosco & Phares, 2002; Finkelhor, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995). Reliable estimates of CSA prevalence are difficult to obtain because not all abuses are usually denounced (Fallon et al., 2010; Mathews, 2011): 38% of child victims are estimated to disclose they have been sexually abused, but 40% of them report the abuse to a friend instead of adult figures or services (Ullman, 2007; Broman-Fulks et al., 2007). As a result, whereas two-thirds of children never report the abuse (London, Bruck, Ceci & Shuman, 2005), most disclosed cases are not reported to authorities (Wyatt, Loeb, Solis & Carmona, 1999), which investigate only the 55% of the CSA told by children and the 20% by school personnel (Sedlak et al., 2010).

However, “retrospective studies suggest that an important number of adults have been victimized during childhood” (Hebert et al., 2001, p. 506). According to Pereda et al. 2009, which analyzed CSA prevalence over 65 countries, one in five women and one in 12 men report to have suffered some form of sexual abuse (from unwanted touching to penetrative assault) before the age of 18. In the same vein, the report “Child Sexual Abuse: An Overview of Statistics, Adverse Effects, and Prevention Strategies” accounts that 12-40% of females and 4-16.5% of males in the United States have experienced at least one instance of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence (Advocates for youth, 2000). Similar data are also confirmed worldwide, accounting that 10% to 20% of female children, and 5% to 10% of male children have been sexually abused (Barth 2013; Ji 2013; Stoltenborgh, 2011), with most abuse episodes occur-

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