

# Chapter 17

## Child Sexual Abuse: Intra- and Extra-Familial Risk Factors, Reactions, and Interventions

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter outlines briefly the dynamics of the interplay between Child Sexual Abuse and Family. Child abuse is a state of emotional, physical, economic and sexual maltreatment meted out to a person below the age of eighteen and is a globally prevalent phenomenon. Child abuse is a violation of the basic human rights of a child and is an outcome of a set of inter-related familial factors among other ones. The primary focus is on the issues of intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sexual abuse, familial risk factors for abuse and broadly some theories that contribute to the understanding of intrafamilial child sexual abuse. The chapter also explores reactions of the family to the sexually abused child, evaluation of the interventions suitable for the same and the status of psychotherapy with respect to the sexually abused child and their family.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Child sexual abuse is a serious and heinous crime. In today's time it not only needs to be zeroed down, but also discussed as a huge responsibility on the part of the society, political system, and human welfare institutions. The impact of trauma from sexual abuse in childhood is manifold and widely studied and heavily documented. However, what the world needs today is not just information or statistics but also workable, feasible solutions to curb this crime. There is not even a single geographical landscape where one cannot find the existence of cases of child sexual abuse, which is why the discussion of preventive factors is even more relevant.

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In the following chapter, the reader will find certain important aspects related to child sexual abuse, in the context of family and its impact on the family system. The chapter also provides certain researched preventive and treatment intervention based solutions to this problem to caregivers. Broadly, the aim of the authors is to help the reader(s) understand how to holistically approach this issue –from the professional (taking appropriate professional help) and personal (managing one’s own emotions and taking care of the child who is subjected to this trauma) front.

## **Familial Risk Factors**

Familial risk factors include the various aspects of the child’s immediate social circle- the child’s family. It is important and impressionable in a sense that it is the family that helps a child formulate their attitudes towards various phenomena in life, and child abuse is crucial hence needs an understanding from the familial point of view, as in the various factors involved in the complex interplay of sexually abused child and the victim.

In order to explain child sexual abuse and identify risk factors, investigators have focused on the families of sexually abused children. The areas examined to date have been socioeconomic status, life stress and quality of home life. Findings about socioeconomic status are conflicting, as Russell (1986) found that high income was a risk factor, whereas Finkelhor (1984) found that low socioeconomic status was associated with abuse. Disruptive life circumstances are common in the history of families of sexually abused children. Einbender-& Friedrich (1989) noted that sexually abused girls had experienced a greater number of stressful life events. Finkelhor (1984) also found that the likelihood of sexual victimization increased in the presence of increasing numbers of vulnerability factors in childhood. Loss of a parent and the presence of a stepfather have been identified specifically in this regard (Russel, 1986 & Finkelhor, 1984). Several investigators have found that dysfunctional family relations are associated with sexual abuse. Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, et al (1982) identified growing up in an unhappy home as a risk factor. However, understanding of familial risk factors is still rudimentary as much of the research is limited because the studies were based on retrospective reports by survivors or did not include control groups.

Intrafamilial abuse is commonly believed to have more severe or more pervasive consequences for child victims than extrafamilial abuse (Sgroi, 1982; Groth, 1978 & Finkelhor, 1979). Some data are available on risk factors associated specifically with the former. Girls who experience incestuous abuse are more likely to have mothers who are physically or emotionally unavailable to their families (Finkelhor, 1984; Browning, 1977; Herman, 1981 & Summit, 1978). A history of childhood sexual abuse was frequently noted in mothers whose children had experienced sexual victimization (Summit, 1978; Faller, 1989; Goodwin, 1982 & Rosenfield, 1979). Hence it is difficult to ascertain the cause of intra and extra familial abuse till date.

## **Child Sexual Abuse: Victim Age, Victim Gender, and Observer Gender as Factors Contributing to Attributions of Responsibility**

The tendency to attribute responsibility for unfortunate life events to the victims of misfortune has been well established (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1993; Ryan, 1971). The phenomenon of “blaming the victim” allows the observer to justify the victimization by unintentionally distorting reality to find defects, behavioral or characterological, in the victim which would warrant maltreatment (Ryan, 1971).

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