

The Importance of Caregiver Support

The impact of child sexual abuse can be devastating. However, research indicates that support from primary caregivers can offset the negative impact of child sexual abuse. This handout cites references of research studies that have looked closely at how important caregiver support can be.

- Parental support is critical, in one study outstripping abuse characteristics in predicting at least short-term behavioral reaction to the abuse (Conte & Shuerman, 1987). A supportive stance from the non-offending parent may act as a protective factor by promoting the use of efficient coping (Spaccarelli, 1994).
- Coping and family characteristics, especially parental support, are among the key mediators proposed to explain the link between sexual abuse and emotional distress (Barker-Collo & Read, 2003; Whiffen & MacIntosh, 2005).
- A supportive family environment also may serve as a buffer against detrimental outcomes following disclosure of sexual abuse (Elliot & Carnes, 2001; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Taska, 2003). In one study, Spaccarelli and Kim (1995) reported that perceived support was the best predictor of the victim's outcome among all considered variables. Children who felt supported by the non-offending parent maintained a higher level of functioning in social, interpersonal, and academic domains.
- Even after differences in abuse-related characteristics had been controlled for, family contextual factors significantly added to the prediction of the level of behavioral difficulties of sexually abused school-age children (Hebert, Tremblay, Parent, Daignault, & Piche, in press). More specifically, of the different aspects of family functioning evaluated, the intensity of family conflict was found to contribute to the prediction of externalizing behavior problems.
- In a 2006 study (Hebert, Parent, Daignault, & Tourigny), those children appearing to be more resilient following child sexual abuse were those that benefitted from a series of protective factors that helped them overcome the trauma associated with abuse. The family environment is one variable that offers assets to overcome and help reduce the impact of sexual abuse, being more cohesive and less conflict-ridden than families of children presenting as more severely distressed.

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