The Invisible Victim – The Non-Offending Parent

Resources

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The Invisible Victim: The Non-Offending Parent

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- Wife
- Mother/Father
- Stepmother/Stepfather
- Family Member
- Sexual Abuse is most often perpetrated by:
  - Spouse/partner
  - Ex-spouse/partner
  - Sibling of victim
  - Other relative

Professional Reactions

- MOTHER and the expectations of MOTHERHOOD
- Gender expectations of nurturance, sacrifice
- Much more derided and punished in the system when not a perp
- Perpetrator by omission
- Considered pathological
Myths

- “She had to know - how could you not know?”
- “Her child would have told her if she was a good mom”
- Colluded with the abuse
- Benefitted from the abuse
- Raised the children wrong
- Something wrong with her to be with a perp
- Caused the sexual abuse - didn’t give enough sex

Parents believe myths too!

- I would be able to tell if someone was hurting my child.
- My child would tell me, we are close.
- I taught them always to tell about sexual abuse.
- She loves her brother! If he was hurting her, she would hate/fear him.
- They get along so well! He loves being with him.
- We have plenty of sex. He doesn’t like children.
- I could tell if he was perverted. He is not like that.
- I (or the victim) is responsible - ideal, behavior, sex, attention
- Something else is responsible - drinking, stress, childhood abuse, curiosity
- It was an accident/mistake/misunderstanding

Inaccurate information about offenders and victims

- Misinformation about sexual assault, sexual offenders, and victims persist
  - You can tell who a sex offender is
    - Sexually preoccupied
    - Weird, acts strangely, acts strange
    - “He/She/Them good with the kids - get along great!”
    - Sexual interest in school sex
  - Amount of sex
  - Inconsistencies
  - You can tell when a child is being abused
    - Symptoms
    - Victim behavior - can’t act normal, will talk, water the plant
Most non-offending parents believe... eventually

- Immediate shock and trauma
- Crisis in the family
- Disbelief and denial
- Anger and blame
- Grief and loss
- Depression, helplessness
- Real consequences

Disbelief and Denial

- Not only about the perp, but about the self
  - How could he do that?
  - How could I have married someone like that?
  - How did I not see it?
  - How could this be true?
  - How could I be such a bad judge of character?
  - Why didn't she tell me?

Confusion

- The experience of confusion drives “undesirable” behavior
  - Contact with the perpetrator
    - Explanation
    - Reassurance
  - Perpetrator contact and information
  - Questioning or doubting the victim
    - Interrogating/investigating
    - Disbelief/defame
  - Search for alternative explanations
  - Reliance on inappropriate information
    - Sex
    - Abuse
Grief and Loss

- Tremendous loss of
  - Love
  - Faith
  - Hope
  - Healing of self/judgment
  - Family
  - Idea of sexuality
  - Truth in self/perp/victim
  - Future

- May have to choose between children if one is a perp
- Income
- Security
- Home, caretaker
- Family integrity

Guilt/Shame/Embarrassment

- Failure to protect
- Failure to mother
- Admission of sexual abuse in family
- Questioned, investigated by professionals
- Blaming from family, society, professionals
- Mother responsible for family happiness, integrity
- May have to address own past or family history of abuse
- Domestic violence might be exposed

Offender Behavior

- Deny, deny, deny
- Isolate
- Offer alternative and acceptable explanations
- Rely on common experience – lying, retaliation, confusion
- Relate myths
  - When would have time?
  - We have plenty of sex
  - Why doesn’t she hate me then?
  - Haven’t touched other kids.
  - She wants her dad back.
  - I am not like that! You know me, I’m a nice guy.
  - I can’t believe you would accuse me of something like that! That’s sick!
Impact on Victim

- Not being believed can be more traumatic than the sexual abuse itself.
- Recantation is related to lack of support of non-offending parent.
- Victim can be scapegoated/blamed for consequences.
- Non-offending parent can act as an agent for the perpetrator.
- Perp may have offered more love/attention than non-offending parent.

Tips

- Patience
- Check your biases
- Assess attitude about the perp –
  - Imagine your spouse doing something – would you go ask?
  - What happens when he admits?
  - Is the perp overvalued/more valuable than the victim?
  - Is the perp being perceived as a victim?
  - Is the victim being blamed?
  - Is the victim being disbelieved?
- Negative impact on the victim should result in no contact until therapy.