



Research & Advocacy Digest

Linking Advocates & Researchers

Working with Nonoffending Caregivers of Children That Have Been Sexually Abused

Letter From The Editors

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Note: The term “parent” is used throughout this Digest to encompass any nonoffending caregiver, including foster parents, guardians, or parents of a child that has been sexually abused.

Jeanne:

I started out in the child sexual abuse field in the early 1990s as a Child Protective Services Social Worker. I recall working with many nonoffending parents and the varied stressors they faced – from guilt they did not know the abuse occurred, to disbelief that their partner could do such an act against a child, to stress about how they were going to survive financially with the offender out of the home. At the time, the child welfare field often saw parents’ ambivalent reactions to the abuse as unsupportive. It became evident there was so much more these parents were experiencing when a parent very candidly said, “I love my daughter, and I will do what I need to support and protect her. But what does this mean about me as a person? That I did not know this was happening. As a parent? That I can not protect my child in my own home. As a wife? That my husband had sex with my daughter and not me.”

Jennifer:

As a clinical psychologist, I worked with children who had been sexually abused and their nonoffending parents for many years. It is not overstating the case to say that many of these parents were truly heroic in their efforts to protect their children, even while the parents themselves were often vilified by family members, service providers, and the court system. The pain of child sexual abuse transforms the life of the parents forever, just as it changes the world for the child victim. We owe it to these families to learn about their struggles and how to best support them.

Shock, disbelief, protectiveness, ambivalence, anger, and sorrow are just a sampling of the emotions experienced by parents whose children disclose abuse. Since in the vast majority of cases the abuser is someone close to the family – often a parent, stepparent, or extended family member – the nonoffending parent experiences one of the most profound betrayals possible.

It is crucial to explore the impact of a child's sexual abuse on his or her parents so that we can better understand the issues affecting parental responses and experiences. There is no single "right way" for a nonoffending parent to react to the news that his or her child has been sexually abused. While there may be commonalities across parent responses, we must listen, ask questions, and learn from each parent with whom we work. Research consistently finds that to best help the child, we need to support the parent. In most instances, it is the parent that is going to be with that child for the long term and can help him or her in the recovery process.

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That is why we wanted to highlight this very important group of people in this *Research & Advocacy Digest*. As advocates, we need to attempt to understand what parents of a child who has been sexually abused might experience so that we can better help the child, and so that we can provide appropriate support to the rest of the family, who are secondary victims of the abuse.

While reviewing recent research on this topic we found informative articles exploring expectations of parents, parents' reactions to disclosures, parental support and parental involvement, and how these factors affect a victim's recovery. There is not extensive research on working with nonoffending parents; research is almost nonexistent on the topics of working with male parents and within specific cultural contexts.

To get an overview of the current issues in working with nonoffending parents, we interviewed Dr. Rebecca Bolen. Dr. Bolen's research questions the very definition of parental support. "If researchers cannot agree on how to measure parental support, then how can we expect child welfare workers to do so?" She also looked at what ambivalence really means in the context of parental support. "These experts showed that individuals can simultaneously hold both strongly positive and strongly negative thoughts and feelings about something." This idea challenges previous assumptions in the field and identifies the need to further explore this issue when working with parents. Dr. Bolen provides a wealth of research-based information about nonoffending parents, but just as important, she also provides an array of practical guidance imbued with her wisdom and compassion.

Some of the articles reviewed explore the parent's reaction after the disclosure of abuse. Not surprisingly, the parent's response often affects the child's own response and recovery process. The research describes how parents frequently feel overwhelmed, helpless, guilty for not having recognized the abuse, blamed for "allowing it to happen," and betrayed by the abuser if it is someone they know.

When children do not receive support and resources, the trauma can impair their recovery and development. The research explores the dual roles caregivers face – supporting the child and overcoming their own emotional distress. The stress they may experience is affected by the relationship of the offender to the caregiver, the nature of the abuse and whether the parent was present at the home when the abuse occurred. Researchers highlight the need to understand that a parent’s reaction is a process that occurs over a period of time, not a snapshot of a moment.

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In a number of studies, nonoffending parents describe being profoundly frustrated by the way they were treated by service providers. They felt disrespected and disregarded. The research reminds us of the many ways that we can help other professionals to understand what these parents are going through. As advocates, we can listen, understand and help build tools and resources for nonoffending parents to help their children. We can facilitate cooperation of service systems and clarify the roles of helping professionals. Most importantly, we can support parents so they can support their children. ■

Interview with

Dr. Rebecca Bolen **Associate Professor** **at the College of** **Social Work** **University of Tennessee,** **Knoxville, Tennessee**

JEANNE MCCURLEY, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, WCSAP

Dr. Rebecca Bolen is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in the College of Social Work. Her research interests include child welfare, child sexual abuse and victimization. She has authored or co-authored various research articles on child sexual abuse, child abuse prevention, and working with nonoffending parents.

WCSAP: Can you please share with readers a little bit about yourself and your research on nonoffending caregivers?

RB: I am an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in the College of Social Work. I first started reading intensively about child sexual abuse while in my master's social work program in the late 1980s. Although there were several areas that I found interesting, I was quite dumbfounded by how hostile some of the literature regarding nonoffending parents, or more specifically, nonoffending mothers, was. One of the reasons I chose to do research in this area was to try to provide a more balanced perspective while also developing valid and reliable assessments of nonoffending parents that draw on our cutting edge understanding of human behavior.

WCSAP: What are the most surprising findings from your research?

RB: I think others will consider a study I now

have under review to have one of the most surprising findings. It was a meta-analysis (or a study that statistically assesses a number of other studies) that analyzed studies assessing the relationship between the nonoffending parent's support of the sexually abused child after disclosure and how well those children did on a variety of different outcome measures (e.g., depression, PTSD, etc.). Numerous different studies and reviews of those studies have concluded that how well the parents support their children after disclosure is closely related to how well their children do over time. Instead, my meta-analysis of these studies found that this relationship was nonexistent for most outcomes, and when a relationship was supported, it was typically weak. What I also found, however, is that multiple problems existed with current measures of parental support. It was therefore impossible to know whether the relationship between parental support and child outcomes really is muted at best or whether the relationship exists but the problems with the measurement of parental support are so extensive that we just don't know yet.

This is a rather long-winded explanation, but one with extremely important concerns. Whether parents are deemed appropriately supportive and protective is one of the most critical factors determining whether sexually abused children are removed from their nonoffending parents. If researchers cannot agree on how to measure parental support, then how can we expect child welfare workers to do so? If workers hold biases against nonoffending parents of which they are not aware, the lack of objective measures seems even more problematic. I often wonder whether the problematic measurement of parental support is a reason that just less than half of all sexually abused children are removed from their homes at some point after disclosure.

WCSAP: What are the common dynamics seen between nonoffending caregivers and the child that discloses?

RB: For the remaining questions, I will focus my answers on sexual abuse that occurs within the family, since it is a much more complex situation. This is not to minimize the much more frequent sexual abuse that occurs outside the family. Much of what I say can also be applied to these situations.

I fear that one of the problems in the literature is that we attempt to reduce nonoffending parents to groups who respond in different ways. Regretfully, this has been very harmful in the past. During the early 1980s when some researchers and clinicians still considered that children with sexualized behaviors were actively participating in the abuse, typologies were developed to place them into various pejorative categories. One of the most recent attempts to interview nonoffending parents and categorize their responses after disclosure made the assumption that all nonoffending parents fit into some category that could only be described with negative characteristics. Thankfully, the journal asked for commentaries from a couple of well-respected researchers who were able to rebut the categorization scheme. If research, which typically employs many methods for protecting against researcher bias, can produce such results, what protection does the nonoffending parent have when faced with a more hostile child welfare worker, judge, or other person who may play a key role in her or his future? For this reason, I think that at this time it is better to stay away from “common” dynamics because they can be misused to label clients. I think it is better at this time to allow parents to respond in their multiple different ways while developing different theories for understanding how to understand these different responses.

To return to your question, the multiple different ways that parents respond are dependent on the factors involved in the case. One of the most important factors is the relationship of the offender. When a parent abuses a child, the case becomes so much more complex. What

is the quality of the relationship between the two parents? Is the family dependent on the offender’s wages? How recent was the relationship? Obviously, nonoffending parents who have a closer relationship with the offender, especially when that relationship began more recently, tend to have a more difficult time reconciling the abuse. And if the nonoffending

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parent is dependent on the offender’s wages and the nonoffending parent is less educated and less skilled, the ramifications of the abuse are even more significant. In one paper, I wrote about this as the “cost” of the abuse to the nonoffending parent. This is not to trivialize the abuse. It is instead to state that there are also very real consequences to the nonoffending parent and family when the abuse is disclosed. Other factors that may affect the nonoffending parents’ response to the disclosure are whether the child disclosed to the parent or someone else and whether the abuse occurred when the nonoffending parent was home, as well as others.

One thing the literature is unequivocal about is that the majority of parents are appropriately supportive. They demonstrate this in many different ways, some of which may be culturally specific. Parents don’t come equipped with manuals entitled, “How to Appropriately Respond When Your Child is Sexually Abused”, so they may be quite confused about just what they need to do. And like all parents, they won’t always do the right thing at the right time. They may be very angry with the offender, and sometimes the child—sometimes for not disclosing to the parent. They might not be

completely convinced that the child isn't lying. Almost all will likely be extremely emotionally distressed. In a previous study of 30 nonoffending mothers whose husbands sexually abused the child, their levels of emotional distress were higher than that of even clinical populations. They may be furious with the offender and kick him out of the home immediately, if he will go. There are numerous different types of responses to the abuse and to the child.

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WCSAP: What other dynamics may be present if there are other children in the home?

RB: Again let me reframe the issue, because the dynamics are dependent on whether the offender is allowed to remain in the home. This is where I feel our society fails these families. In probably the large majority of cases in which a family member has abused a child, the offender is not removed from the home immediately. Instead, the nonoffending parent is asked to protect the child from the offender. Typically this means that the nonoffending parent is either expected to kick the offender out of the house or to move out with the children, which of course assumes that the family has somewhere to go locally (since they cannot move from the region) and has the financial resources to pay for two households. It is not unusual that they do not have a place to go or the financial resources to pay for two households. Parents I talked with were sometimes very angry that law enforcement did not forcibly remove the offender from the house or immediately arrest the offender. If we were better at getting offenders out of the home and keeping them, then the Child Protective Services (CPS) issues with nonoffending parents would likely decrease dramatically.

So back to the question. It is again very difficult to talk about typical dynamics. So many factors are in play, including the ages of the siblings and victim, the number of siblings, status of the offender, financial resources, the information that is shared with the siblings, and many others. "Typical" dynamics tend to reduce rich differences into gross similarities. It is important, however, to nurture the relationships among the siblings and to help nonoffending parents figure out how to do so if one becomes jealous. Parents also struggle with how much to tell siblings and at what age. The child's abuse will place the whole family system in crisis. Being aware of this will help advocates also consider the needs of siblings.

WCSAP: Could you describe some of the attachment issues in families where children have been sexually abused?

RB: Yes, and I'll actually answer the question directly! First, children who have been sexually abused by someone in the family have by definition been betrayed. This betrayal can do a profound amount of damage to the child's ability to attach to others, especially when the abuse is ongoing. Children will often internalize a sense of themselves as bad and a sense of others as untrustworthy and abusive. This means that as they move into their other relationships—even those relationships that were previously more positive—the victim will now begin to experience others as less trustworthy. This might even occur with the nonoffending parent. Whereas the child and nonoffending parent might have a very secure and strong attachment prior to the abuse, the quality of the relationship may deteriorate as the abuse goes on. Depending on the age of the child, the child might also assume that "mom" knows about the ongoing abuse because "moms know everything." This would be most likely if the abuse were occurring in the house when "mom" was there.

That the quality of the attachment relationship between the child and nonoffending parent likely deteriorates as the abuse continues is a serious issue in the assessment of the relationship between the victim and nonoffending parent. The relationship quality may be judged as poorer, but is this because the abuse has changed the quality of the relationship, or was it always poor? I feel that if we do assess the quality of the relationship between the child and nonoffending parent, we also need to capture retrospectively the quality of the relationship prior to when the abuse started, even with the known problems of retrospective assessment.

Finally, it is not unusual for the attachments among family members in families in which sexual abuse occurs to be poorer, sometimes even before the abuse began. This may be less true for families in which the child was abused by someone outside the home. For each situation, however, these are just general statements and many exceptions exist.

WCSAP: In your research on ambivalence among nonoffending caregivers, you found that caregivers can be both ambivalent and supportive. Can you please explain this?

RB: Some measures of parental support consider ambivalence as a middle state between full support and no support, with ambivalence being measured as alternately showing support or belief for the perpetrator and then for the victim. Early in my career I began to question how this was done. Later, I looked much more closely into the literature on ambivalence and found that experts thought it captured two different, although closely related, concepts—the positive feelings, thoughts, or behaviors towards something and the negative feelings, thoughts, or behaviors toward it. These experts showed that individuals can simultaneously hold both strongly positive and strongly negative thoughts or feelings about something. Of course, that doesn't really come as a surprise to most of us.

During this period of time I was also very moved by Carol-Ann Hooper's work on nonoffending mothers. One quote I use quite frequently in my presentations is, "Women spoke of a multi-layered state in which quite contradictory positions could be held simultaneously, and where the certainty of belief held one day could not be predictably held on to the next...Most mothers spoke of their initial responses in terms of belief and disbelief, with the latter occurring as a spontaneous emotional reaction, a natural defense against traumatic news" (Hooper & Humphries, 1998, pp. 568-570).

Most parents experience ambivalent thoughts or feelings towards their children at times. Children do things that do not make them very likeable at times, but what I know as a parent is that regardless, I smile at my children, hug them, and act as a responsible parent. I don't act out my ambivalence on them when I experience it, just as most adults don't allow their ambivalent feelings about loved ones, co-workers, friends, and others to direct their behaviors. So clearly in these day-to-day examples, adults in different roles can separate their thoughts and feelings from their behaviors.

My suspicion was that parents of sexually abused children could do so too—even when that ambivalence meant that they might still hold some positive feelings towards the perpetrator. Love typically doesn't evaporate in a day. And indeed, in a very small study, I found that nonoffending mothers whose husbands had abused their children did experience some, although limited, ambivalence. But what was very interesting was that regardless of how ambivalent they were, it had no relationship to their supportive behaviors toward their child. Ambivalence, however, was very closely related to distress and stress. The more ambivalent they were, the more distressed they were, and the more stressors they were experiencing, the more ambivalent they were. There is a very important caveat to this study. The number of parents in

the study was so small for the type of analysis that I used, that I cannot make any conclusions regarding this finding. I have to await further research.

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What this means to me is that ambivalence, which I believe can be a normative state for nonoffending parents in certain situations following the child's disclosure of sexual abuse, can be separated from their supportive behaviors. We do not have to assume that, for example, because they seem to vacillate between belief and disbelief (a cognitive state over which they have no control), they must therefore be less supportive in their actions (which they can control). I think that what may work is to teach parents what the supportive behaviors are that children need—hearing that parents believe them, saying the parents are there for them, that the parents will protect them, seeing the parents make proactive protective actions—while providing parents experiencing ambivalence with appropriate therapeutic support to help them resolve the ambivalent feelings and thoughts.

WCSAP: In your 2004 article, you describe nonoffending parents as having “some allegiance to the perpetrator.” This can be very challenging for advocates to understand. Can you provide some insight into this?

RB: Yes, this can be very challenging, but I think this is because these individuals are looking at the situation from the child's perspective and

not the parent's. From the child's perspective it is absolutely clear. The child disclosed. Children almost never lie. We professionals know that. Child Protective Services is investigating the abuse. They must have a pretty high suspicion of abuse. The system is ratcheting up to provide what this child needs. With this being so clear to us, it is often incomprehensible that it is not to the nonoffending parent. It might help to know that a study by Conte and Colleagues (1991) found that 25% of professionals to whom children disclosed did not believe that disclosure. Another national random study, the NIS [National Incident Study (Sedlack, 1996)], assesses all professionals in contact with maltreated children. This study also finds that a significant minority of professionals who believe that a child has been abused or neglected do not report it to the proper authorities. It strikes me as odd that we have a much higher standard for nonoffending parents as we do for professionals.

It is important to understand that from the parent's perspective the disclosure looks completely different, especially if the nonoffending parent has a close and loving relationship with the alleged perpetrator. I do an exercise with my students to help them understand this. They are asked to close their eyes and to visualize themselves as a 30-year-old mother of 4 children, living in the working class, with a husband of 13 years. He was a high school sweetheart, and she remains very much in love with him. He works hard in construction and makes a decent living. She worked as a waitress until her last child was born, after which time she went to the part time evening shift because this child was born with chronic health problems. I continue the vignette by talking more about how they are a typical couple with the typical ups and downs, but how she feels lucky to be married to such a strong and handsome man. She also worries about the finances because she knows that if he gets injured, she won't be able to pay the bills.

I then talk about how the oldest girl, a 12-year-old who is going through puberty, started having problems about a year ago, becoming more depressed and having problems in school. Mom took her to a doctor, who found nothing wrong. Then one day CPS shows up on her doorstep and her world falls apart. She is told that one of the siblings saw the abuse occurring while Mom was at work and reported it at school. When CPS came in to talk with them, the victim acknowledged it. Dad has agreed to stay at a hotel temporarily. Over the next 24 hours, Mom confronts Dad who denies the abuse. Mom becomes confused, the CPS worker gets concerned and states that the children may have to be removed, Mom freaks out, the girl recants because she doesn't want the family broken up, and Mom gets even more confused and distressed. The next night Mom has terrible nightmares, wakes up and can't focus, can't remember that she has to call CPS, and is sharp with all her children.

It is very important for these advocates to understand that these situations are not black and white. Nonoffending parents don't know that children almost never lie about sexual abuse and that offenders almost always do. They have been taught to trust and sometimes obey their partner, and have likely caught their child in a fair share of "truth-stretching." If the child has been acting out, Mom might wonder if this is just another way the child is acting out. If the offender is violent, mom may be fearful of what he may do. It is also important to remember how traumatic the disclosure can be for the mother. Traumatized people can respond in very different ways—sometimes very illogically. And, what they consider to be appropriately supporting their child and family may be very different than what we think. If CPS were to tell me that they might remove my children, my first instinct would be to run with them. What would you do?

I suspect that we need to allow these mothers to be as human as we are and not as perfect

as we think that we would be in the same circumstances. I fear that these perceptions of how we would respond are grounded in our own idealized fantasies of being the perfect mother. In my interviews with these parents, these perfectly human mothers mostly responded in "good enough" ways, but they certainly weren't the idealized views of what "we" would do that I so often hear from professionals. We simply have to allow these mothers their humanity. A very helpful book to read is *Mothers Surviving Child Sexual Abuse*, by Carol-Ann Hooper, published in 1992. It makes the struggles of these mothers very real.

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WCSAP: Most of the research focuses on maternal responses to abuse. Are there any specific challenges in working with male nonoffending caregivers?

RB: The most important challenge in working with male nonoffending parents is getting the various systems to recognize that they exist. When both a male and female caregiver are in the household, CPS almost invariably focuses solely on the female caregiver. Yet, in one of my studies I found that when both the father and mother (or male and female caregiver) accompanied the child to the hospital where the forensic examination was being done, the child was scored as having less psychopathology. What I think this finding is hinting at is that having more than one stable caregiver is a powerful buffer to the stress and abuse.

Bruce Perry, an internationally renowned physician and neuroscientist who works with maltreated children, stated in his recent book,

The Boy Who Was Raised As a Dog, that “the more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive” (p. 230). Therefore, an essential factor is how to make more than one caregiver responsible for the postdisclosure support of the child. I think of the culturally rich family experiences of kinship networks in some African American families, where children have play aunts and uncles, godparents, their own biological kin and others. I think we do a poor job of tapping into these rich support networks.

What I found to be the experience of nonoffending fathers who were trying to be involved is that they tended to be ignored by the service providers. If we have questionnaires to fill out, we give them to the mother. Perhaps we let Dad sign the consent form, but we want Mom to tell us how the child is doing. If we can only fill out one measure of parental support for each child, we complete it for the mother. I believe that many men are willing and want to be included, but we have to be willing to include them and to have the procedures for doing so. Perhaps special concerns will arise when working with them, but first of all we have to get them in the ball park. Right now we are leaving them out in the parking lot with the car running to wait for Mom and the child.

WCSAP: How does a strengths-based approach to nonoffending parents help advocates and therapists to support these individuals?

RB: I had the privilege of doing lengthy interviews with 17 nonoffending mothers whose children had been sexually abused. These mothers were rather equally divided among Caucasian, African American, and Latina ethnicities. For a few of these mothers, their children had been removed temporarily or were still removed. All had suffered terribly.

What I learned from them was how incredibly difficult their task of working with the various

systems was, how traumatized they were, how strong they were, how much they loved their children, and how many things they were doing for their children that we are never aware of. A strengths-based approach allows us to hear what nonoffending parents are doing right rather than focus so much on what they are doing wrong. We can always find something wrong with anyone’s parenting, ours included. Such a meticulous investigation of parenting deficits is likely to make any parent look a lot worse than they are if it is not balanced by their strengths in parenting. Sometimes we don’t want to hear their strengths.

My preference is that we find out what these parents are doing well. When we know that, we can become cheerleaders for what they do well, while obtaining resources to shore up their weaknesses.

Our focus cannot simply be strength-based, however. It must also be resource driven. Many of these nonoffending parents are resource poor, and the various systems with which they interface place multiple demands on them that further deplete their external and internal resources. It is imperative that we facilitate access to resources. This might include transportation services, emergency Section 8 housing so they have a place to move, a support group for the nonoffending parents where their energy and hope can be restored, and perhaps most of all, legal advocacy.

Nonoffending parents in my albeit small sample of 17 women never made a positive statement about the court system, including the appointed lawyers. They were not informed, misinformed, misunderstood, misrepresented, and mistreated. Judges ruled arbitrarily on cases even when all evidence pointed to a different conclusion. The very lives of these families were often at stake - whether they would get to remain together as a family. For nonoffending parents, this was the most important event that had ever occurred in

their lives, and they had absolutely no control over it. I was appalled at how little representation these parents had and how terribly they were treated throughout this process. How do we provide better advocacy in court for these parents? We must solve this problem for “good enough” nonoffending parents to have an opportunity to keep their children with them.

WCSAP: What do you feel are the two or three most significant challenges advocates face when working with nonoffending parents?

RB: I have just mentioned what I think are a few. First, we have to solve the problem of how to provide competent representation for these parents in court.

Second, nonoffending parents are often extremely traumatized by the disclosure. This and the incredible stressors that are placed on them by the various systems can lead them to respond emotionally and chaotically when we want them to be clear-headed and action-focused. For females, evolutionarily normative responses to high levels of stress are more support seeking and less action-focused, the latter being more typical of males. Service providers may misinterpret more normative coping methods of females under stress as indicators that these mothers are not capable of acting in protective and supportive ways. Advocates need to educate providers on gender-specific methods of coping. Mothers especially need to be made aware that they are being judged on the actions they take. For these parents to be active problem solvers, however, some of the stress has to be relieved. Again, it would be helpful to educate service providers that the more demanding they are, the more stressed the parents become, and the less likely parents are able to respond in the way service providers want. Paradoxically, the less stress they place on nonoffending parents to comply, the more likely nonoffending parents may be to comply. Advocates also have to provide greater resources. Resources

can stop the depletion of internal and external resources nonoffending parents experience after disclosure. Because the depletion of resources is related to a decreased capacity to cope effectively, these resources are critical.

Third, we need to find a better way of tapping into what these nonoffending parents really do for their children versus what we think they should be doing. We have to examine our own explicit and implicit assumptions about parents, and especially mothers, and expect that other service providers will do so as well. We also have to consider what “good enough” parenting is in this situation, and then create the opportunity to let the parents tell us that they are “good enough.” We may be surprised at how many will be just that. Then we need to continue to empower these nonoffending parents. The many systems they work with are almost consistently disempowering. Child Protective Services want parents to be compliant rather than empowered, yet empowered parents are more protective than compliant parents. How can advocates protect them from these disempowering messages while also finding ways to empower them in what most of them know how to do well enough—to take care of their own children? Perhaps the most important roles of the advocate, then, are to empower nonoffending parents in being “good

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enough” parents, teach them how to do so if they are lacking in some ways, provide resources that will allow them to do so, and buffer from the hostility that can emerge from institutions working with these parents.

WCSAP: Do you have any tips or advice for advocates working with nonoffending parents?

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couple. First, please help service providers, lawyers, and judges understand that one of the most crucial ways that a parent is supportive of a child is simply being available to talk with them. In my interviews with these 17 mothers, it was clear that having a relationship in which the child knew in multiple different ways that the parent was available to them was a critical aspect of the child's recovery. One of the most important of these was letting the child know that the parent was there if the child needed to talk, and that the child could talk with the parent about anything, including the abuse. This let the child know that s/he was in control of talking but that the abuse did not have to be a secret, that the parent could handle and was open to hearing the details of the abuse, and that the parent was there to support the child on all levels. When judges or CPS imposed a gag rule—that the child and parent could not discuss the abuse, sometimes until the parent and child went to court two years later—it created a terrible chasm between the two that was difficult to breach. If professionals want nonoffending parents to appropriately support their children, they cannot impose this gag rule.

Second, in every case push the system to remove the offender rather than the nonoffending parent and/or child, perhaps by taking out a protective order against the offender. If we really want what is best for these children, then we want to do whatever we can to keep them in their homes with their nonoffending parents, if these parents are “good enough.” When children are removed from their homes, they most often lose their schools, their friends, their families, indeed their whole support network. Along with

the devastating trauma of the removal, these multiple risk factors can multiplicatively increase the child's chances of a deleterious outcome.

Finally, revel in the capacities of the nonoffending parents. Talk with them and learn about them so that you can establish a true empathetic connection with them. Nourish them, believe in them, and give them hope. Provide them the resources to sustain their energy. Empower them. Be the buffer between them and a sometimes very hostile system. “Good enough” nonoffending parents may be fighting the hardest battle of their lives. Be the warrior they need when it is needed. And always remember that not all parents will be good enough. Their children will need to be removed for their safety. But also remember that the large majority of nonoffending parents will be “good enough.”

WCSAP: Thank you for your responses. ■

Article Reviews

Can Nonoffending Mothers of Sexually Abused Children Be Both Ambivalent and Supportive?

BOLEN, R. & LAMB, L. (2007). CAN NONOFFENDING MOTHERS OF SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN BE BOTH AMBIVALENT AND SUPPORTIVE? *CHILD MALTREATMENT*, 12, 191.

This research builds on the theoretical and conceptual findings of Bolen and Lamb in their 2004 article, "Ambivalence of Nonoffending Guardians after Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure." In that article, a sample of 30 nonoffending mothers whose resident partners had sexually abused their children were studied. An instrument called the "Measure of Maternal Ambivalence" was developed by the researchers.

The findings of this earlier study were that more securely attached mothers had less ambivalence toward their children; ambivalence was related to maternal stressors in a complex fashion, depending on the stressor; and more ambivalent mothers experienced a higher level of distress. The researchers separated cognitive, affective, and behavioral ambivalence and demonstrated separate relationships among those forms of ambivalence and other variables. This early article is worth reading for the extensive literature review and discussion of concepts.

The 2007 article reviewed here raises a very interesting question about whether, as has been assumed, the presence of ambivalent feelings means that nonoffending parents will not be supportive of their children who have been victimized. Bolen and Lamb state that child protective services have traditionally viewed nonoffending parents' ambivalence as equivalent

to a lack of support for their children. The purpose of the study was to determine whether, in fact, ambivalence is an indicator of the inability or unwillingness of parents to act in an appropriately supportive manner toward their children.

The sample for this study consisted of nonoffending mothers of children who received medical or forensic examinations in an outpatient medical clinic. All of the children had been sexually abused by the resident partners of the mothers. There were 29 full participants in the study, which was conducted by providing confidential questionnaires to the mothers along with interviews by trained physicians or social workers at the clinic. Ambivalence was measured with scales reflecting cognitive, behavioral, and affecting ambivalence, with parallel items addressing attitudes toward the perpetrator and the victim. The example given in the article is a pair of items, "I believe that my partner is at fault for the abuse," and "I believe that my child is at fault for the abuse." Items were scored on a five-point scale.

Parental support was assessed with another scale developed by the researchers and scored by the trained interviewers. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, support activities were grouped into those meeting basic needs, safety, love and belonging, and esteem. Other variables included attachment security and type, maternal distress, and stressors both before and after the disclosure of abuse.

A critical and perhaps surprising finding of this study is that "maternal support and ambivalence were unrelated, suggesting the possibility that nonoffending parents can be both ambivalent and supportive after disclosure of their child's sexual abuse." This finding, while preliminary, is of major importance, because it is the authors' contention that children are often removed from the custody of nonoffending parents because the parents are perceived as incapable of being

supportive of their children, when in fact that may not be the case. The researchers argue that the vital construct of parental support is poorly defined and operationalized. Thus, one of the most important and influential decisions that the child welfare system can make may be based on inadequate empirical evidence and faulty assumptions.

The authors are very clear that this study is quite limited because of the small sample size and fact that the research is preliminary in nature. However, the researchers feel very strongly that this is an area of inquiry that must be pursued. If, in fact, ambivalence is not the harbinger of poor parental support, but is rather a normal component of the complex reaction a parent may have to the disclosure that an intimate partner has sexually abused her child, then there are major implications for policy and service delivery. ■

The Effect of Child Sexual Abuse Allegations/ Investigations on the Mother/Child Relationship

EASTIN, JULIE, PLUMMER, CAROL A. (2007). THE EFFECT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ALLEGATIONS/ INVESTIGATIONS ON THE MOTHER/CHILD RELATIONSHIP. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*, 13, 1053.

Most research on the role of nonabusive mothers has concentrated on how a mother's reaction affects her child's outcomes. Based on focus groups involving ten women with preschool-age children selected from private therapy clinics in the Midwest, this study examines the impact that a sexual abuse allegation and investigation has on the relationship between a mother and her child.

Plummer and Eastin provide an overview of the issues for mothers of sexually abused children in their literature review, focusing on how these mothers are perceived by others and by their own children, and under what conditions mothers are likely to believe their child's allegation of abuse.

In this study, most of the children were allegedly abused by their biological fathers. Using qualitative research methods designed to construct a preliminary understanding of under-researched topics, the researchers conducted two focus groups and analyzed the transcripts for common themes and experiences. All the mothers reported that their relationships with their child(ren) had changed substantially since disclosure. There was a progression from uncertainty to belief about the abuse by mothers, and they were often unclear about how to parent their children given the circumstances. Several mothers found it frustrating that Child Protective Services (CPS) and other professionals told them what not to do rather than what to do. The new challenges and demands presented by the abuse led to feeling overwhelmed, fatigued, and helpless. The allegations and their aftermath disrupted the time and quality of normal family life. Often mothers felt blamed by those assigned to help their children. System interventions were seen as unsupportive or blaming. Mothers were frequently told not to discuss the abuse with their children even though their children wanted and needed to talk to them about it. When their preschool aged children wouldn't disclose to authorities, mothers' reports were not seen as credible.

Women whose partners had perpetrated against their children felt the most guilt and blame over their partner's betrayal. Mothers also felt guilty about not detecting the abuse sooner and not being able to protect their children from the trauma of post-disclosure experiences. Many mothers became vigilant advocates for their children during the investigative phase. They also reported becoming overprotective of their

child or too lenient in their discipline for fear the child would be further harmed. In addition, the children's behaviors, including aggression, belligerence, difficultness, and acting out sexually, created major parenting challenges. Mothers were unprepared to handle these behaviors and felt distressed, embarrassed, and fearful.

Many of the mothers in the focus groups tried to make some positive meaning out of what happened. A number of them said that closeness between themselves and their child(ren) resulted from having gone through a crisis together and many of them wanted to help other mothers who had gone through something similar.

This study was limited primarily by the small sample size and the characteristics of the population, who were middle class mothers with preschool-age children, as well as the fact that the information was self-reported. The study highlights the need for professionals to increase their own understanding of the new demands placed on a nonabusive mother's time and to assist mothers in rebuilding their parental skills and self-esteem. Addressing the guilt and blame mothers feel is important, as is forming an alliance with the mother in order to facilitate her critical role in family dynamics and healing. Many mothers believed that a system advocate was needed for their children and that professionals needed to better understand child development issues and work on realistic timelines. Mothers also need support around their child's behavior problems and to reduce their anxieties and worries about their children's future. The damage that mother-blaming causes to the parent/child relationship cannot be overstated.

The researchers present an important unasked and unanswered question: What is the appropriate response of mothers to a disclosure of abuse and what reaction would be viewed as healthy? To reduce the potential damage to the mother/

child bond and relationship dynamics we need to ask: What services or supports might alleviate mothers' insecurity, exhaustion, and guilt so as to strengthen the mother/child relationship during child sexual abuse allegations/investigations? ■

Nonoffending Parent Expectations of Sexually Abused Children: Predictive Factors and Influence on Children's Recovery

KOUYOUMDJIAN, H., PERRY, A., AND HANSEN, D. (2009)
NONOFFENDING PARENT EXPECTATIONS OF SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN: PREDICTIVE FACTORS AND INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S RECOVERY. *JOURNAL OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE*, 18:40-60.

This study examines the effect of parents' expectations about their children's reactions to childhood sexual abuse on the behavior and functioning of their children. Previous research has emphasized the importance of a parent's response to his or her child's situation in determining the course of the child's recovery from abuse. The researchers discuss the impact of adult expectations on children's behavior in general, and specifically the importance of the labeling process as adults react to children who have been abused. This study measured parents' expectations about their children's behavior and symptoms prior to a treatment program, and then studied the relationship of those expectations to the children's initial functioning and also to the children's posttreatment wellbeing.

The study is notable for a substantial sample size (67 children and 63 nonoffending parents), in contrast to many of the small-sample investigations of parent-child interactions following abuse disclosure. Families were participants in concurrent child and parent

curriculum-led treatment groups. Data collection included family demographics and child histories, a standardized child behavior checklist, and measures of the children's depression and anxiety. Researchers developed instruments to measure general parental expectations and the negative impact parents expected sexual abuse to have on their children.

The more that a parent believed that his or her child would suffer from the sexual abuse, the lower the parent rated the child's functioning both before and after treatment. This effect was independent of the child's own report of internal distress. The researchers were surprised by the finding that parents' general expectations of their children's future functioning (as opposed to their expectations of the impact of abuse) did not predict behavior problems either pretreatment or posttreatment. It is notable that the participating children's anxiety and depression did diminish significantly after this structured treatment program, which also involved the nonoffending parents.

Limitations of this study include minimal ethnic diversity in the sample, restriction to families who had acknowledged the abuse and were willing to participate in treatment, and the use of two measures of parental expectations that were newly developed for this study and lack extensive validation. In addition, there may be alternative explanations for the correlation of parental expectations with child functioning; additional research is needed to examine the causal link.

This study is valuable in that it explored the power of parental expectations and labeling on children who have been sexually abused. The research supports the use of parallel parent and child group interventions and emphasizes the importance of psychoeducation to help survivors and families resolve their concerns about the long-term effects of sexual abuse. The authors describe the need for professionals to adopt a

strengths-based approach and to become well-acquainted with the factors associated with recovery from abuse. In addition, adults who interact with child survivors should increase their awareness of any possible negative expectations in order to avoid the possibility of adding to the stigma of victimization. ■

Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure: Maternal Response and Other Variables Impacting the Victim

LOVETT, B. (2004). CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DISCLOSURE: MATERNAL RESPONSE AND OTHER VARIABLES IMPACTING THE VICTIM. *CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL*, 21: 355-371.

When sexual abuse is disclosed by a child, the response by caregivers and professionals has the power to either help the child heal or to create further trauma. This article reviews the literature regarding sexual abuse disclosure, focusing on both the process for child victims and the response of nonoffending mothers.

Lovett ties together a series of studies that identify issues in the disclosure process. Children hesitate to disclose because of self-blame, difficulty in identifying the behavior as abuse, and a variety of fears – not being believed, being blamed, causing emotional and financial hardship to the family, overwhelming the mother, and others. Often the abuser has manipulated the child to create distance from the mother, and has created a powerful secret that the child feels powerless to break. A number of studies look at the difference between accidental disclosure, which may increase anxiety and fear for the child; and purposeful disclosure, which allows for more preparation and a more active role for the child. A critical finding is that

disclosure is a multi-stage process that requires time and support.

The response to disclosure has significant impact on children and is associated with the severity of symptoms in childhood as well as adulthood. When children do not receive support and resources to reduce stress, the trauma continues to impair the child's development. Children who are interviewed multiple times and who testify in court experience increased distress, although a supportive family response was a mitigating factor. Children are more likely to disclose when assaulted by strangers than by family members, and most adult survivors reported they were glad they told, especially when the outcome involved controlling the perpetrator in some way.

In reviewing studies on the response of nonoffending mothers to the disclosure of abuse, Lovett points out the common theme of "mother-blaming" in the literature. While some authors believe that mothers are covertly aware of the abuse despite their denial, other studies highlight the shock of disclosure for the mother. Mothers face the dual challenges of supporting their traumatized children and overcoming their own emotional distress. One study found that three factors most influenced whether a mother believed her child: the relationship of the offender to the mother (less likely to believe if the offender was the mother's partner), the nature of the abuse (more likely to believe cases not involving intercourse), and whether the mother was present at the home when the abuse occurred.

A mother's ability to protect her child may lag behind her belief in the disclosure because of the stress involved. Because mothers themselves may be in fear of the perpetrator, additional support is important in the presence of family violence or other stresses at home. Child welfare professionals often disregard the protective actions taken by mothers, sometimes because

they misinterpret the stress reactions of parents as an indication of lack of caring. A variety of studies focus on the complex nature of the mother-child relationship and how it affects the disclosure process for each of them.

Though culture and ethnicity play a significant role in responses to sexual abuse and its disclosure, this is an under-researched area. A few studies have focused on these issues. An examination of Seventh-day Adventists focused on the role of forgiveness and denial, while an article on the Puerto Rican community emphasized the importance of family cohesion. A review of abuse issues among African American families discusses strengths and protective factors in this group, and noted that African American mothers were found to be more accepting of their children following disclosure than white mothers.

Among the many implications for practice that are explicitly described, this review highlights the importance of understanding that disclosure is a process that happens over time and with a great deal of struggle for both children and their mothers. The tension between the desire to tell and the fear of disclosure creates stress for the child. Nonoffending parents may be able to support their children only after emerging from their own initial struggles with comprehending the abuse. Systems can provide more mother/child interventions designed to strengthen familial responses to sexual abuse as a means to reduce trauma and assist in the healing process. Lastly, and most important, child protection officials must work with the mother as both a client (in need of support) and a team member (included in decision-making). The single most important factor determining outcome for the child is the mother's ability to provide assistance and protection. Professionals must teach parents how to respond to disclosure constructively and give them the skills to do so. ■

Nonoffending Mothers: An Exploratory Study of Mothers Whose Partners Sexually Assaulted Their Children

McCALLUM, S. (2001) NONOFFENDING MOTHERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MOTHERS WHOSE PARTNERS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED THEIR CHILDREN. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*, 7, 315.

Dr. McCallum, an Australian researcher with a doctorate in social work, chose to conduct a small-scale qualitative study of parents who were involuntarily involved with child protective services. The broader research study examined ten parents who had been involved with a child protection agency; the study described in this article focused on only three mothers whose children had been sexually abused by their partners. The purpose of the study was to “understand the meaning of events and to establish directions in which further theoretical formulation and research can be conducted.” Thus, the study results were not intended to be generalized to a larger population, nor were hypotheses tested.

Of the three mothers in this study, two (“Sarah” and “Helen”) had daughters who were sexually abused by their husbands, with the abuse continuing until the girls were about eleven years old, in both cases. The two sons of “Carol,” the remaining mother in the study, had been sexually abused by their father, most likely over a period of several years.

The research involved at least two in-depth individual interviews with each of the participants. The researchers taped, transcribed, and analyzed these interviews using structured coding and analysis techniques.

The strength of this research technique is its ability to provide a true sense of the experiences

of the women who were studied. The researcher explores the dilemmas encountered by parents within the purview of child protective services, particularly nonoffending mothers, who are often blamed for the sexual victimization of their children. McCallum discusses both the history of “mother blaming” that has characterized service providers in the child protection field, and the painful reactions of these parents to feeling blamed. The research also explores the “denial, confusion, and shock” that each of the women felt in the aftermath of their children’s disclosures.

The research identifies the rapidly shifting emotions of the participants as they tried to cope with their sense of betrayal, the reactions of their children, and the complexities of relating to child protection workers. In particular, the two mothers who believed (prior to disclosure) that they had functional marriages were devastated and confused about conflicting loyalties. McCallum focuses on the participants’ sense of loss with regard to their roles as partners and as competent mothers. She also highlights the fear of being alone and the sense of being overwhelmed by practical household matters expressed by the women in the study.

The article makes the point that service providers may underestimate the extent to which these mothers’ lives are changed by the loss of access to their partners’ practical and emotional support, despite the fact that the men in these scenarios are accused of heinous acts. In addition, the mothers expressed a sense of being unable to protect their children, not only from the abuse in the past, but from the present intervention by authorities, which they often found intrusive and re-victimizing. Another often overlooked consequence of the disclosure of abuse is the mother’s responsibility for dealing with the entire extended family (hers and her partner’s), with the frequent result that extended family support is withdrawn from the mother and children.

In conclusion, this study reveals in great detail how “for some nonoffending mothers, the disclosure of child sexual assault may catapult them into an ever-deepening pit of fear, alienation, and isolation.” The researcher emphasizes that these mothers are facing enormous practical and emotional challenges at the very time that the normal supports of their everyday life are ripped away.

The most important lessons to emerge from this research are: 1) women need to be given time to deal with the enormous blow of learning their partners have abused their children, and should not be expected to rapidly assimilate and act upon this information; 2) service providers should be aware of the nonoffending parent’s possible lack of skills in everyday household and financial management, and should assist these clients in skill acquisition, if needed; 3) parents need assistance in understanding how their children are affected by the abuse; 4) child protection workers need to remain nonjudgmental if the women they serve choose to reunite with their partners; and 5) workers need to be respectful, rather than coercive, in order to forge alliances with nonoffending parents to enhance the safety of their children. ■

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