



Protecting God's Children for Adults

Incest: The Ultimate Betrayal, Part 1

In the 1984 Golden Globe and Emmy award-winning made-for-TV movie, *Something About Amelia*, the cast brilliantly portrays the emotional turmoil of the revelation of incest between a father and his daughter. The movie shows what incest can do to an entire family, not just the victim.

This groundbreaking television movie opens a Pandora's box of emotions and reactions. It demonstrates the disgust, disbelief, anger, resentment, and sadness that fill those affected. It also reminds everyone that rehabilitation and forgiveness are possible.

Among the most poignant scenes in the movie are those that demonstrate the conspiracy of secrecy that surrounds this crime. The wall of secrecy and denial that surrounds intrafamilial sexual abuse is virtually impenetrable.

A broader understanding of the nature and scope of incest is an important element in our continuing efforts to eliminate child sexual abuse from society. In this article we will discuss the nature and scope of incest in the United States, the consequences for victims, and how we can be instrumental in preventing this from happening in our families.

How prevalent is incest?

In the past 20 years, society has started to shine a light on the darkness of incest. As a result of the public attention to the problem, some have questioned whether this is an indication that the problem is getting worse. Unfortunately, incest has been a mainstay of most societies throughout time.^[i] Even today there are some countries where pedophiles are welcome and sexual activities with children are legal.

One of the most common early myths about child sexual abuse was that strangers committed most sexual abuse. Most perpetrators are not "dirty old men" who snatch kids out of playgrounds or lure them away from parks with candy. Strangers commit only 11 percent of child sexual abuse.

However, the realization that strangers are not the primary risk group has given rise to a new myth. Today it is commonly believed that incest is the most common form of sexual abuse. In fact, the largest number of abuse incidents is committed by people known and trusted by the children and the families.

People biologically related to the child perpetrate 29 percent of sexual abuse on our children.^[ii] An estimated 16 percent of adult women were sexually abused by a relative before they were 18 years old. ^[iii] Fathers sexually abused their own daughters in 4.5 percent of the cases. The perpetrators in the remaining 12 percent were uncles, brothers, grandfathers, and cousins.

When extrapolated to the general female population, the research shows that approximately 1 out of every 6 women was sexually abused during their childhood by a relative—and slightly more than one-fourth of those victims were molested by their own fathers.

Another group of victims in families are the women raised by stepfathers. According to the legal definition, abuse by a stepfather is not incest. However, some experts have pointed out that "from a psychological point of view, it does not matter if the father and child are blood relatives. What matters is the relationship that exists by virtue of the adult's parental power and the child's dependency."^[iv]

Seventeen percent of the women raised by stepfathers were abused by them before they were 14 years old.^[v] This means that one out of every six girls who had a stepfather as a key person in her life was molested by him before her 14th birthday.

The numbers are startling and point to a dangerous situation in families across this country. The damage caused by this

type of abuse can be devastating and it can last for years and years. Failure to understand the scope of this problem perpetuates the conspiracy of silence and aggravates the consequences for victims.

What is the effect of incest on victims?

Effects of incest on the victims are many and varied. However, most researchers assess the effects of child sexual abuse by looking to see what kind of disruption the abuse has on the child's adult life. According to Dr. David Finkelhor, it seems as if "the impact of an event on childhood itself is treated as less important. It is only 'childhood,' a stage which, after all, everyone outgrows."^[vi]

Today we know that the damage to children can be serious and the scars can last a lifetime. The ability of a child to recover is impacted by a number of factors:

- The duration of the abuse.
- The nature of the offense.
- Whether force or violence was used.
- The frequency with which the abuse occurred.
- The level of betrayal in the relationship. ^[vii]
- The response of the family, particularly the child's mother, to the disclosure. ^[viii]

Incest is the supreme betrayal of trust. Sexual abuse by biological fathers and stepfathers seems to leave the most severe scars. ^[ix] Female victims experience greater feelings of betrayal when the abuse is at the hands of their biological fathers. However, abuse by brothers, uncles, and grandfathers also causes considerable trauma. ^[x]

Regardless of who commits the abuse, the victim suffers serious consequences. However, one of the difficulties in dealing with child incest victims is that the child may not appear to be hurt or upset at the time of the abuse. It may be weeks, months, or even years before the real effects are evident. ^[xi]

Among the predominant behavioral impacts on young children are:

- Dramatic changes in behavior.
- Drop in grades.
- Difficulty in sleeping or a change in sleeping habits (either insomnia or increased sleeping).
- Fear of or withdrawal from adults or increased dependency on (non-abusing) adults.
- Regressive behavior (acting much younger than they are).
- Using sexually explicit language or acting out sexually with other children or toys.
- Changes in schoolwork.
- Increased aggressiveness or hostility.
- Withdrawal and isolation from others.

In adolescents the behavioral effects include:

- Avoiding specific persons, or wanting to be alone with specific persons.
- Poor peer relationships.
- Poor self esteem, poor self-image.
- Dramatic change in school performance (a drop in performance from good to average or below average, or improvement from average or below average to good).
- Increased hostility, anger, aggressiveness with peers and siblings.
- Excessive bathing.
- Running away from home.
- Suicidal ideas or attempts.
- Sexual interest in or abuse of younger children.

Among the more widespread effects on adult women (who were sexually abused as children) are:

- Increased marital instability.
- Sexual problems.
- Drug and alcohol abuse.
- Negative feelings about men in general and the perpetrator in particular.
- Negative feelings of self-worth, self-respect.
- Increased shame, fear, anxiety, depression, and mistrust.
- Increased fear for or worry about the safety of others.
- Withdrawal.[\[xii\]](#)

The fact that some incest victims are victimized by more than one perpetrator is also disturbing.[\[xiii\]](#) Girls who were abused by more than one perpetrator were also frequently abused more than once by each. This suggests that these girls were, for some reason, unable to stop the abuse.[\[xiv\]](#)

Evidence exists of a strong relationship between sexual abuse as a child and later victimization experiences. It is possible that “millions of American girls are being socialized into victim roles.”[\[xv\]](#)

There also seems to be a “connection between incest victimization and drug abuse, prostitution, suicide, mental illness, self-mutilation, alcoholism, running away from home, and later becoming a mother who is less able to protect her daughters from incest victimization.”[\[xvi\]](#)

When a family member sexually victimizes a child, the child’s ability to trust is crushed. The child does not have any experience of trusting, intimate, sexual relationships, so the violation is pivotal in shaping the child’s sense of who he or she is and what sex is about. One consequence of these distortions is that victims of father-daughter incest are “about four times more likely than non-incest victims to report being asked to pose for pornography as well as being asked to enact it.”[\[xvii\]](#) Victims of sexual abuse by other relatives reported similar experiences.[\[xviii\]](#)

Although there are long-term consequences of child sexual abuse, victims of child sexual abuse are apparently more likely than victims of non-sexual physical abuse to blame the perpetrator.^[xix] Children, particularly female children, seem to know that adults should not engage in sexual activity with children—even people who are an important part of their family.

Victims find themselves not trusting—not trusting themselves, not trusting others, and not trusting God. The closer the relationship between the child victim and the perpetrator, the longer the abuse goes on, and the more intense the sexual activity, the greater the damage to the victim. Incest must be stopped if we are to create a safe future for all of God's children.

Conclusion

Children have the right to grow up and learn about themselves and their own sexuality in a healthy, loving atmosphere. Adult family members are responsible for teaching children, guiding them, and protecting them from anyone inside the family or outside the family who wants to use the child for sexual gratification.

In our next training bulletin, on October 9, we'll discuss specific steps that adults can take to improve communication with children and to stop incest in its tracks.

[i] DeMause, L., (1991) *The Universality of Incest*, The Journal of Psychohistory, Vol. 19, No. 2.

[ii] Russel, D.E.H. (1986), *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women*, Revised Edition (1999), Basic Books, Persius Books Group, p. 219.

[iii] Ibid. at 10.

[iv] Herman, J., (1981) *Father-daughter incest*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. p. 70.

[v] Ibid. at 233.

[vi] Finkelhor, D. (1984) *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research*, The Free Press. p. 198.

[vii] Russell at 140.

[viii] Leifer, M., Kilbane, T., Grossman, G., (November 2001) *A Three-Generational Study Comparing the Families of Supportive and Unsupportive Mothers of Sexually Abused Children*, Child Maltreatment: Journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 353.

[ix] Ibid. at 148.

[x] Ibid. at 149.

[xi] Ibid. at 157.

[xii] Ibid. at 139-40.

[xiii] Ibid. at 154.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid. at 12.

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] Ibid. at 161.

[xviii] Ibid.

[xix] Kolko, D.J., Brown, E.J., Berliner, L., (February 2002) *Children's Perceptions of Their Abusive Experience: Measurement and Preliminary Findings*, Child Maltreatment: Journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 52.

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