

Child Sexual Abuse
Non Offending Parents
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Foreword

A review of the literature on non-offending parents over the last decade reflects a significant shift in the way professionals have viewed the role of non-offending parents in the context of child sexual abuse.

This paper has been written to summarise recent research and theoretical concepts, and presents implications for child protection work. The crucial link between the rehabilitation of child sexual abuse victims and the support of the non-offending parent is highlighted. This paper is intended to stimulate discussion and encourage the development of strategies by protective workers, aimed at enhancing the relationship between non-offending parent and child.

Note:

- i) The term non offending parent will be used in the text of this paper. It is acknowledged that the non offending parent will generally be the mother and therefore pronouns indicating female gender have been adopted (e.g. she, her).
- ii) Where discussion drawn directly from literature uses the term mother, it will be repeated in this paper to reflect the authors statements as accurately as possible.

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Introduction

The focus of protective intervention is the protection and rehabilitation of children who have been abused and are not adequately protected. Why then a paper on non-offending parents?

Many of the theories about the causes and effects of sexual abuse have focussed on the culpability or collusiveness of the victim's mother in permitting the abuse to occur. The literature has been full of examples of the ways in which mothers consciously or unconsciously encourage incestuous relationships between father and child or, at the very least, fail to intercede once they become aware of the sexual activity.

More recent writers and research studies challenge the role previously ascribed to non-offending parents as colluding in the abuse, and question the applicability of the stereotyped view of the non-offending parent which had developed in the literature.

As we learn more about child sexual abuse and its impact it becomes evident that the supportive non-offending parent plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation of a child victim. Kieran O'Hagan, a British social worker believes that "the major task (for protective workers) is how to get the non-offending mother on the side of the abused child. That has to be the way forward" (Goddard 1990).

Conte¹⁶ reminds us to examine the needs of family members at this time of crisis, and states that "unfortunately for many child victims, professional attitudes and beliefs about the family and other aspects of the social environment and sexual abuse are based on early notions about the "incest family" where it was believed that mothers colluded with fathers and incest daughters had a role in their own abuse."

He states that it is our perception that often professionals fail to recognise that having a child sexually abused is a major life trauma for families. When families act with shock, ambivalence, and even a tendency to focus on their own pain, many professionals view the families as neglectful or narcissistic. Such views and periodic anger toward parents who do not respond in

what some professionals regard as sufficiently child-directed ways following disclosure of abuse often result in insufficient efforts to **reach out** to families".

The purpose of this paper is to provide protective workers with an overview of research findings and clinical practice with non-offending parents. This will assist protective workers to:

- recognise the importance of developing opportunities to positively influence the non-offending parent's support of her sexually abused child.
- develop an awareness of how protective workers' attitudes, assumptions and intervention strategies can influence a non-offending parent's response to a disclosure of child sexual abuse, and hence influence the nature of the relationship between the non-offending parent and her child.
- maximise opportunities which will enhance the recovery of child victims.
- maximise opportunities to access information from the non-offending parent regarding the child and family for the purpose of assessment.
- develop an awareness of the need to maintain an open mind in assessing the capacity of the non-offending parent to protect while ensuring safety of the child as the priority of intervention.

The Relationship Between The Non-Offending Parent's Support And The Child's Rehabilitation.

The strength and supportiveness of the relationship between the non offending parent and her sexually abused child(ren) has been observed by many researchers as an important element in the recovery of the child from the impact of the abuse.

Erooga and Masson¹ state that studies, (Everson⁵, Hunter⁶, Pellegrin¹²) show that victims who are believed and whose families are supportive tend to experience fewer psychological repercussions from the abuse.

Everson⁴ notes that theoretical and clinical literature consistently suggests that maternal support is crucial for ameliorating the harmful effects of father perpetrated incest.

Everson's study⁴ found that the level of maternal support was more important in predicting the child's initial psychological well being than was the nature and length of duration of the abuse or the offenders relationship to the child.

Hewitt and Barnard³, in clinical practice, reported on the central role that the non offending parent has in determining the child's adjustment and in ensuring the ongoing protection of the child. Improving this relationship, which is often initially characterised by hostility and emotional distance, became a focus of their work.

Sirles and Frankes⁷ in their study note that a non offending parent's belief in her child can be seen as a strength from which to help build protection for the child in the future. That belief, however tenuous should be supported.

In a study which sought to identify factors associated with variation in the effects of sexual abuse in children, Conte, Berliner and Schuerman¹⁶ found that the most significant variables in understanding the impact of the sexual abuse on a child's functioning both initially and at the follow up were:

- the child's relationship with supportive adults and siblings.
- the functioning of the family and its social context i.e. income security, housing, general health and well being etc.

The healthier and stronger these variables the less the impact of the sexual abuse. Conte et al⁶ state that "this is not all that surprising given the importance of the family in the child's development and the role that the family and other aspects of the environment can have in helping a child recover from painful experiences".

The Family Crisis Program data from the Tufts New England Medical Centre, reported by Salt et al¹⁴ placed a slightly different emphasis on maternal response to sexual abuse in relation to the impact on the child's rehabilitation. Their findings indicated that positive responses on the part of the mother were not systematically related to the amount of distress the child experienced, i.e. a mother's expression of concern about the child and her ability to take action to protect her child did not necessarily shield the child from the harmful psychological consequences of the sexual abuse. However, when a mother expressed anger toward the victimised child and punished that child for revealing the abuse the child was likely to manifest greater behavioural disturbance. Furthermore, an angry reaction on the mother's part was associated with lower self esteem in the child. As the authors point out, it is possible to argue that some of this anger may predate the sexual abuse disclosure.

The authors did conclude that it is clear that a child who is blamed or punished by the non-offending parent for revealing sexual abuse is likely to manifest more severe emotional problems than one who is not.

Implication

- **Given that the nature of the relationship between the non offending parent and the child has been demonstrated to be important for the child's future protection and psychological adjustment, protective workers should ensure that:**
 - **immediate intervention is aimed at supporting non offending parents and helping them to believe, empathise with and offer consistent emotional support and protection to their children. This may be one of the most effective ways of reducing the stress and instability many children experience following disclosure of incest and will enhance recovery.**

- **intervention is planned in such a way as to enhance even the most tenuous relationship between the child victim and non offending parent. Various strategies and techniques can be adopted which will assist in this. (Refer to section titled Engaging the Non Offending Parent).**

The Myth Of "The Collusive Mother"

Development of a Stereotype.

Much of the literature on incestuous families has been focused on shortcomings in the mother. In the past many writers have portrayed the mother as collusive and largely responsible for the abuse.

Salt et al¹⁴ present an overview of previous research in this field and conclude by stating that "the image of mothers of incest victims presented in the clinical literature, from the 1950's to the present, is remarkably consistent and **uniformly negative**".

There is little in the literature to suggest that mothers respond assertively and empathically to their sexually abused children. Typical of the views contained in research reports cited by Salt et al¹⁴ is a statement by Kempe who, in 1978 contended that "Stories by mothers that they could not be more surprised can generally be discounted; we have simply not seen an innocent mother in cases of longstanding incest".

Exploding the Myth.

More recent views moved away from the stereotypic image of the "collusive mother" and regarded the non offending parent more sympathetically as "powerless in her role" and placed the responsibility for the abuse clearly with the offender.

- Erooga and Masson¹ comment that, while mothers may have at least ambivalent relationships with their abused children, it is not **they** but the perpetrators of the abusive acts who are responsible for what has happened to their children. Erooga and Masson¹ continue by quoting Ward who puts it more bluntly - "even if a daughter does experience her mother as rejecting, neither she nor the mother are asking for the father to sexually abuse her".
- Finkelhor² notes that the circumstances of father-daughter incest do **not** warrant holding mothers morally responsible for the incest. He promotes the view of mothers in incest situations as victims themselves - often

trapped in an oppressive role. Finkelhor's explanation for mothers denying the occurrence of incest is that, for many, the dilemma they face once they are aware of the incest is enormous and denial may be the only way they can cope.

- Herman¹¹ portrays non-offending parents as passive victims of a patriarchal society unable to protect either themselves or their children.
- Hewitt and Barnard³ when reporting on group work with mothers of incestuously abused children similarly viewed those women who had not effectively intervened to prevent their husband from committing incest as powerless to effect change in the situation.

Towards a Better Understanding of Non Offending Parents

The findings of the Family Crisis Program¹⁴ suggest that the responses of non-offending parents to the sexual abuse of their child and their own psychological characteristics are far more diverse than previous reports have indicated. A systematic evaluation was designed to assess the extent to which a sample of mothers matched the stereotypic pattern. The overall findings challenge the universality of the image of mothers as willing accomplices in incest or other types of sexual abuse.

Implications

- **In view of research undertaken during the 1980's (Ward 1985, Dietz and Craft 1980) which demonstrated that many protective workers maintained stereotypic beliefs of the non-offending parent, it is important that protective workers are aware of their own values and attitudes towards non offending parents particularly in relation to views on collusion.**
- **Attitudes of protective workers which are based on an underlying belief which holds non offending parents responsible for the sexual abuse of their child may lead to inappropriate and even harmful interventions. Non offending parents who show the slightest tendency to deny the**

allegations may be accused of collusion. In some cases children may be

removed precipitously from the non offending parents care.

- **The role of a non offending parent in a family where a child has been sexually abused needs to be assessed on the basis of the dynamics and characteristics of that particular family - preconceived notions should not influence assessments.**
- **It is necessary to undertake a thorough evaluation of the non offending parents capacity to work through the trauma of discovering that her child has been sexually abused. Only then is it possible to make sound judgements about whether a mother will be able to provide her child with sufficient support and protection to prevent any further sexual abuse from occurring. (Refer Assessment issues).**

Responses of Non Offending Parents to a Disclosure of Sexual Abuse From their Child

The Nature Of Non Offending Parents Responses

A number of studies (Everson 1985, Adams Tucker 1982, Faller 1984, Gomez-Shwartz et al. 1990¹⁴) report similar findings when examining the responses of non-offending parents to disclosures of sexual abuse of their children. Broadly, the responses can be categorised as follows:

- A Protective Response

Some will respond decisively and without ambivalence to protect their children. These parents direct their anger toward the offender, and in no way blame the child for the abuse. They are likely to take protective action without being pressured by authorities.

- A Response Reflecting Role Conflict

These non-offending parents experience a conflict of varying degree in their allegiances to both their child and their spouse. This group will often have difficulty taking strong enough action to protect the victim without the intervention of protective services. Some may become angry with the child, while others may offer at least ambivalent support to the child.

- Overwhelmed, Denying the Abuse or its Significance

This group will be almost immobilised by the disclosure of the abuse. They may deny the occurrence or significance of the abuse and show only moderate concern for their child.

- Rejecting and Unprotective

The responses of this group are typically rejecting of their child, siding with their partner and taking no action to protect their child.

Erooga and Masson¹ reflect the findings of these authors by highlighting the diversity which exists among non offending parents in their responses and encouraging professionals not to assume a likely response or a fixed stereotype.

Salt et al¹⁴ in discussing findings of the Family Crisis Program Study confirmed the diversity of responses of non offending parents and also indicated that the responses of non offending parents in an incest situation do not appear to differ markedly from the responses of non offending parents in non incest cases of sexual abuse.

Laing & Kamsler¹⁷ highlight the role confusion the non offending parent will often experience. "She may see herself as inadequate or blame herself for her failure to be a good enough mother to protect her child. She may also be very fearful that fully supporting the child will lead to her losing both her future security and her relationship with the offender. She may experience a dilemma of loyalty about whom to support and may feel overwhelmed by confusion about what action to take".

Laing & Kamsler¹⁷ also raise the issue of the role of the offender in influencing the non offending parent's response to the disclosure of sexual abuse. At this time the non offending parent will be extremely vulnerable to the tactics of the offender as he attempts to maintain the shield of secrecy. The offender may be denying the assault and be intervening in ways which lead the mother to disbelieve the child, or if she believes her, to think that the child encouraged the sexual contact with him. He may be saying things like: "She led me on, what could I do?" "She wouldn't leave me alone". "Why did she stay up late watching TV with me if she didn't like it?".

The mother may be unaware of the ways that the child has been coached by the offender to keep secret what occurred. The offender uses these ploys to ensure that his behaviour remains secret, create division and mistrust between his victim/s and their mother.

Because of the secrecy around sexual abuse and the offenders denial/minimisation, both the mother and child may be unaware of the extent of the offender's contributions to their own experiences and reactions, and to the difficulties in their relationship. While the offenders role is largely invisible, the mother and child will often be experiencing damaging guilt and blame in their interactions with one another.

The Process of A Non Offending Parent's Response

A number of writers (Salt¹⁴, Erooga and Masson¹) liken the responses of non offending parents to the disclosure of sexual abuse to the grieving process, in which there is a passage from denial through anger and depression before the traumatising reality can be accepted.

- The initial reaction is often shock and denial. This may be momentary for some, while others will refuse to believe that the abuse could have taken place. Non offending parents who continue to deny may need considerable therapeutic intervention before they can accept their child's allegations. Some mothers are never able to acknowledge the sexual abuse, and resist all efforts to be engaged in treatment.
- Once the reality is accepted, mothers often experience a period of guilt and self-recrimination. Many berate themselves for not having seen clues that the abuse had been going on or for not having taken action when they first suspected that something might be amiss.
- Anger toward the offender, and depression, may follow as the non offending parents contemplate the losses and disruptions in their lives.
- Finally, acceptance that the sexual abuse has taken place allows the mother to begin working toward restoring equilibrium within the family unit.

Not all non offending parents are able to proceed through the entire process. Some never break through their denial. For others their own depression may mean that they are unable to help their children.

Implications

- **A range of possible reactions can be expected from non-offending parents.**
- **Protective workers should approach each situation with an open mind with a view to identifying the nature of the reaction. This will assist in more effectively understanding the non-offending parent and facilitate**

the engagement process.

- **Acknowledging the crisis that disclosure of child sexual abuse precipitates for the non offending parent and encouraging the non offending parent to accept support during this time is important in working toward the building of a positive relationship between the non offending parent and the child victim.**
- **Initial reactions and response of a non offending parent to a disclosure of child sexual abuse does not necessarily predict the eventual capacity of the non offending parent to take action to protect their children. Recognising the response of a non offending parent more as an evolutionary process similar to a grieving process rather than accepting the initial response as the response, may result in a more positive and supportive relationship developing between the child and non offending parent. Therapeutic intervention may be required to assist some non offending parents.**
- **Protective workers have a crucial role in educating the non offending parent, preparing her for what she may feel and helping her to recognise her own potential to act to protect her child.**

Strategies and Practice Issues

The literature cited to date has had a focus on research findings and theoretical concepts. Several authors, however, present ideas and strategies more specifically related to practice. The following section is therefore more practice oriented with specific suggestions, regarding strategies for practice.

Engaging The Non Offending Parent

Given the importance of the support of the non offending parent for the child's recovery the engagement of the non offending parent, wherever possible, is crucial. A number of factors impact on the engagement process and various strategies can be considered as options to enhance engagement.

The Attitude of Protective Workers to Non Offending Parents

As noted previously studies demonstrate that the way in which protective workers view a non offending parent can influence the way a non offending parent responds to the disclosure of sexual abuse of her child. Just as negative attitudes can be picked up by the non offending parent eg. mother blaming, the collusive mother, etc. and often result in the non offending parent feeling blamed to some degree for the abuse, so too will sensitive and supportive attitudes be picked up and facilitate the engagement process.

Strategies which may positively influence the non offending parent at the engagement phase include:

- regarding the non offending parent as a traumatised person in crisis.
- being aware when communicating (verbally and non verbally) with the non offending parent that she may be vulnerable to feelings of guilt and blame. Maintaining an objective and open mind when assessing and working with a non offending parent should assist in avoiding interpretations by the non offending parent, that she is blamed or held responsible in some way for the abuse.
- remaining aware of personal attitudes towards the non offending parent in each case and ensuring that myths and stereotypes from early literature are not guiding the protective workers assessment and are not being propagated.

When to involve the non offending parent.

Oates¹⁰ makes several observations from his clinical experience in working with non offending parents which are useful for protective workers to consider when planning investigations of child sexual abuse.

Options:

- Interview the child before making contact with the non offending parent.
- Interview the alleged non offending parent initially.
- Make contact with the alleged non offending parent initially, advise her of the reported abuse, advise her that the child will be interviewed, invite her if appropriate to be available to support the child after the interview.

Advantages of Early Involvement of Non Offending Parent:

- Oates¹⁰ considers that a process which involves a non offending parent at the early stages of the investigation can help her to accept the facts and the reality of the abuse. To make contact after the initial fact gathering, and interview of the child may detract from this process.
- Where the non offending parent has belief in the child the positive impact on the child's rehabilitation and protection has been highlighted, at least in avoiding the child victim being blamed or punished for the abuse with the consequent psychological distress which results from this.

Disadvantages

- Early involvement, particularly when indicators at the notification stage are unclear may provoke an unnecessary crisis for the non offending parent.

-] ● Police may consider, from an evidentiary point of view, early involvement of the non offending parent inappropriate. This will need to be negotiated with police on a case specific basis.

The issue of when to involve the non offending parent requires careful consideration.

Many arguments are put forward for not making contact with the non offending parent initially - "how do we know she is the non offending parent?", "we will be accused of contaminating the evidence", "what if she becomes upset and angry, we can't let her child see her in this state", etc.

All of these are legitimate challenges to face, however, making initial contact with the non offending parent can result in more effectively engaging her and fostering or enhancing a supportive relationship with her child, thereby helping the recovery of the child victim.

It must be recognised that:

- almost without exception the non offending parent will be in crisis, upset, possibly traumatised by this interview, even if she knew about the abuse. This does not mean that, with time and support, she will not be able to support and protect her child.
- a non offending parent may require a separate worker to help her cope with her emotional response while the child is being interviewed.

O'Hagan¹⁸ believes that a non offending parent who is contacted prior to interviewing the child is more likely to move towards a position of supporting and protecting her child than one who is contacted after the child's interview. Feeling excluded can immediately create a negative reaction in the non offending parent towards the intervention and alienate her from the start. Excluding at this initial stage may result in the non offending parent believing that those intervening associate her in some way with the abuse and the likelihood of her rejecting the child is far greater.

The most appropriate way of involving the non offending parent in the disclosure process.

Oates¹⁰ suggests that a non offending parent will be helped to believe that sexual abuse has taken place if she witnesses her child's disclosure.

Options :

- Non offending parent witnesses interviews from behind a one way screen.
- If no one way screen is available a "hand-over" meeting takes place after the disclosure interviews where the interviewer briefly repeats what the child said.

Oates¹⁰ suggests that if non offending parents are waiting in another room they will need a professional for themselves to help them deal with their own emotions.

- Directly involve non offending parent in the interviews.

Oates¹⁰ warns that even truly protective mothers can become very upset during disclosure interviews. Anxiety, tension and upset in the non offending parent can induce a false denial in the child. If in doubt about a non offending parents reaction or if the non offending parent is not the child's "trusted person", it is safer to not include that person in the interview. When the victim is an adolescent her/his views on inclusion of the non offending parent must be considered.

Implications

- **Protective workers need to make professional judgements about how their intervention can be directed to foster and maximise a positive and supportive relationship between the non offending parent and the child victim.**
- **Non offending parents should be involved as early as possible after the**

notification is made, the type and extent of their involvement during initial investigation may vary given specific case issues.

Assessment Issues

Assessment of a non offending parent is part of the risk assessment of the child and will provide information on the non offending parents capacity to protect the child and give direction to the case plan.

In assessing non offending parents protective workers need to remain alert to the fact that:

- the responses of non offending parents to the disclosure of sexual abuse of their children will be diverse and influenced by a number of factors.
- the effective engagement of a non offending parent will be facilitated by protective workers understanding the nature of the response and the impact of the variables which may be operating.

Wattenberg⁸, in advocating a move away from the much accepted notion of maternal collusion, states that it is important in assessment to examine the dynamics of each specific family situation and the role of each family member.

Faller¹⁵ outlines the following areas as a useful structure for an assessment of the non offending parent:

Current Living Situation

This helps the protective worker to assess possible perpetrators, other potential victims, adequacy of the living situation, how independent the non offending parent is of the alleged perpetrator and what is the potential of the non offending parent to be independent of the alleged perpetrator.

Useful Areas To Explore:

Who lives in the house and how are they financially supported?

Who frequently visits or stays?

Childcare/babysitting arrangements.

Non Offending Parents Education, Employment & Employment History

This helps the protective workers assess overall functioning and ability and whether or not the non offending parent has the means to support herself financially.

Useful areas to explore:

Current employment status and income security.

Employability - stability of employment, history, skills and training motivation.

Social Support Network

Understanding the non offending parents support system may help in assessing the background to the sexual abuse, and the roles of those in and associated with the family, assist in treatment planning and in predicting potential for change within the family.

If a non offending parent has a support system she usually will be better able emotionally to handle the sexually abusive situation and may be less dependent upon the perpetrator and more able to seek what is best for herself and her children.

Useful areas to explore:

Nature of current relationships with family members including husbands/partners family.

Nature of relationships with friends, workmates, neighbours, helping professionals.

Who has been told about the sexual abuse and the nature of their responses?

Who can be turned to if problems are being experienced?

Anyone with whom the non offending parent and children could stay during this crisis.

Relationship with Partner
(Include history of any previous relationships with partners).

Understanding the nature of the relationship can help in understanding a non offending parents response to a disclosure of child sexual abuse and why she may tend to side with and support her partner and disbelieve her child.

The information the non offending parent provides about her current partner, if he is the alleged perpetrator, may be distorted by her reactions to the sexual abuse. If she has decided to support her partner she may obscure his faults and lie about material related to the sexual abuse. If she has decided to align herself with her children she may over emphasise his negative qualities.

Useful areas to explore include:

How the couple met
Quality and strength of the relationship
Partners relationship with the children
Any use of violence, drugs alcohol
Reason they parted (if applicable)

Non Offending Parents Perception of Their Children.

The non offending parent is generally the consistent caretaker and can provide the most complete historical information about the child victim and other children in the family. Asking about the victim's background will help in understanding the child's overall functioning and perhaps why the victim may be coping with the sexual abuse as she is.

The assessment will also need to examine the parent's perception of, and feelings for the victim, and the possibility of scapegoating.

Non Offending Parents History of Substance Use, Mental Illness, or Intellectual Disability.

Information about any substance abuse, mental illness, or intellectual disability will assist in understanding the dynamics of the sexual abuse, what intervention will be appropriate and in determining prognosis for change. This will also assist in understanding the mother's general functioning and ability to protect the child.

History of Victimization

A mother's own history of childhood victimisation is relevant in an assessment.

Erooga¹ notes that a significant proportion of non-offending parents of children sexually abused within the family have themselves been sexually abused as children. One common effect of this, Erooga claims, is for the woman to feel immobilised and powerless in relation to her child(ren) and unable to deal with the child's abuse until she has had the opportunity to deal with issues about her own abuse.

The Sexual Abuse Disclosure

An assessment needs to indicate whether or not the mother believes the child and how protective of the child she has been in response to knowledge about the allegations.

Useful areas to explore include:

What the non-offending parent believes about the sexual abuse allegations at that point, especially the child's statement. How she felt when she first learned about the allegations and what she did in response to them (if applicable). What is the non-offending parent's emotional response - is any anger evidenced? if so at whom is it directed - child, alleged perpetrator, professionals?

Assessment of the Need for Protection of the Non Offending Parent From Domestic Violence

Kieran O'Hagan, cited by Goddard¹³, stresses the importance of professionals involved in child sexual abuse cases being aware of the consequences of the intervention and being prepared for the possibility of the non offending parent and/or the child(ren) being subjected to domestic violence.

O'Hagan¹⁸ alerts professionals to consider whether protection of both the child victim and the non offending parent may be necessary in certain cases. His concern is based on experiences in Britain where a number of perpetrators, once their actions have been exposed, have inflicted violence on other family members. Some cases have resulted in the death of family members and the perpetrator taking his own life.

Implications

- **An assessment of the non offending parent is essential as:**
 - **protective workers need to determine her capacity to protect the child both immediately and longer term.**
 - **her role in the future protection and rehabilitation of her sexually abused child can be crucial.**
- **As non offending parent's responses to the disclosure of child sexual abuse are diverse the engagement of the non offending parent will be enhanced by recognising this and responding accordingly.**
- **Protective workers must remain open minded when assessing the non offending parent's role in the family and the circumstances associated with her actions and attitudes. Maintaining stereotyped views of non offending parents is to be avoided.**
- **Assessment of the non offending parent needs to explore the possibility of her own history of victimisation.**
- **Protective workers need to consider whether the non offending parent requires protection from domestic violence after disclosure of sexual abuse.**

The Needs of The Non-Offending Parents Following A Disclosure.

Erooga and Masson¹ note that the needs of non offending parents of children who have been sexually abused are often neglected. Following disclosure, the non offending parent needs an opportunity to deal with her feelings about what has happened and to adjust to the major change that has taken place, both for her emotional survival and growth and so that she can provide appropriate parenting for her child.

Erooga and Masson¹ highlight the importance of professionals encouraging non offending parents to work towards meeting their own emotional needs. Many writers (Hewitt³, Winton⁹) suggest that group work when complemented by other treatment opportunities, seems a particularly relevant approach to meeting the needs of these women.

Laing and Kamsler¹⁷ remind us of the various problems non offending parents experience at the time of disclosure and subsequent intervention. Women report feeling excluded and unable to find ways of talking to their children. It seems to many of them that police or counsellors know more than they do about their child's feelings and reactions. The guilt and blame many feel can be torturous. Some are mystified as to why the child did not tell them about the sexual abuse and wonder if this means the child initiated or enjoyed the sexual contact. Laing and Kamsler suggest that providing non offending parents with an opportunity to talk about their difficulties can be very helpful.

Offering non offending parents and children the chance to "debrief" together about the impact of disclosure enables an exploration about the effects of secrecy on their lives and provides a way in which they can begin to talk together in a different way, without falling into old patterns of guilt and blame.

Implications

- **A non offending parent should be regarded as a traumatised person or person in crisis at the time of disclosure with needs of their own.**

- **Providing the non offending parent with an opportunity for support - either individual counselling and/or group work - is important for the meeting of her own needs. If a non offending parent is coping more effectively she is in a better position to provide more effective parenting for her child.**

Conclusion

- The non offending parent plays a significant role in the ongoing protection and rehabilitation of a child who has been sexually abused.
- Recent literature reflects a move away from old stereotyped views of non offending parents as "collusive", passive, dependent etc. to portray non offending parents as heterogeneous with a diverse range of characteristics and responses to the disclosure of the sexual abuse of their child.
- Professionals need to be aware of personally held views and how they effect interaction and assessment of a situation, and ensure that old myths and stereotypes are not perpetuated.
- The perpetrator is responsible for the abuse.
- Assessment of the non offending parent, and all family members must be made on the basis of the specific characteristics of that family. Assessment needs to focus on the ability of the non offending parent to protect the child from further abuse.
- Protective intervention must work towards fostering even the most tenuous relationship a child may have with her/his non offending parent.
- Recognizing the crisis for the non offending parent that results from a disclosure of sexual abuse and regarding her as a traumatized person may enhance her engagement in the intervention.
- Viewing the response of a non offending parent as a process may facilitate a non offending parent moving from initial reactions such as denial and anger, to acceptance and positive action. This process may take time and may require therapeutic support.
- An open minded approach to the non offending parent should be the basis of protective intervention in child sexual abuse cases.

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