

## Child Sexual Abuse: A Root Cause of Many of Society's Problems

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## Georgia Center for Child Advocacy

- Established in 1987 as a private non-profit child advocacy center & was the fourth child advocacy center developed in the nation and the "first" in Georgia
- Mission accomplished by:
  - Providing a safe, friendly place where children can end their silence by telling a trained therapist about the abuse during a video-taped interview
  - Offering long-term psychological treatment that helps them heal and gives them hope for a future
  - Coordinating the agencies involved in the investigation of child sexual abuse

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## The Statistics are Shocking

- **1 in 4** girls are sexually abused before age 18
- **1 in 6** boys are sexually abused before age 18
- The median age of a child who is sexually abused is **9 years old**
- Most never tell – **Only 1 in 10**
- **39 million** survivors of sexual abuse live in America today



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## What is Child Sexual Abuse?

When an adult or older youth involves a child in any sexual act, including:

- Fondling
- Exhibitionism
- Voyeurism
- Exposure to pornography
- Internet "chatting" around sexual topics

The majority of the time the perpetrator "grooms" the victim and the family, using strategies that make the family feel the child is safe.

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## Children are at a higher risk than adults for sexual victimization

- Nearly 70% of victims of sexual assaults are under the age of 18
- 1 out of every 7 victims who reported to law enforcement is under the age of 6
- In 90% of sexual abuse cases, the child is familiar with the offender
- Offenders intentionally seek out organizations that provide programs for children and adolescents

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## Typical Child Victimiziers are like many people you know...

Approximately

- 90% are male
- 90% claim religious affiliation
- 75% are Caucasian
- 80% are/have been married
- 65% are middle income or above
- 50% are college educated
- 40% are younger than 18 years old

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## Societal Effects

- Drug and alcohol dependence (70-80%)
- Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety (80 – 90%)
- Suicidal thoughts/attempts (20-30%)
- Difficulty forming long-term relationships
- Eating Disorders
- Sexual risk taking that leads to teen pregnancy (60% preceded by sexual abuse) and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS
- Prostitution (>90% have been sexually abused)
- Homelessness (>50% of homeless women sexually abused)
- Delinquency and incarceration (60% women in prison were sexually abused)
- Direct and indirect effects of child sexual abuse cost this nation more than \$23 billion a year

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## Developmental Effects

### How might child sexual abuse derail the normal developmental process?

- Leads to a negative body image
- Creates a need for "control" that shows up in the form of eating and anxiety disorders
- Alters perceptions about healthy and age-appropriate sexual behavior
- Stimulates changes in the brain that disrupt adaptive processing of stress-related stimuli
- Creates misunderstandings about appropriate boundaries

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## Developmental Effects

- Creates confusion about the nature of healthy decisions
- Creates a sense of powerlessness (undermines communication about boundaries)
- Undermines the development of a "moral sense" or good judgment Leads to negative feelings about oneself that develop into depression and anxiety
- Leads to a need for escape that is addressed through drug and substance abuse and running away
- Undermines the adolescent's sense of trust
- Leaves the adolescent with feelings of abandonment
- Deprives adolescent of a sense of supportive relationships

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## Why Prevention?

- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays – roughly 20% of population
- Based on the population of children under 18
  - 79,466 victims of sexual abuse in DeKalb and Fulton counties
- Only 10-12% of sexually abused children disclose abuse –Georgia Center for Child Advocacy has seen 8,414 children ~10.5%
- What about the 71,052 children who haven't been helped?

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## Why is prevention difficult to achieve?

- Lack of “consciousness”
- Denial of personal and organizational implications
- Denial of impact
- Enculturation

To change the attitudes and behaviors that are barriers to the protection of children in our society, we must develop compelling and comprehensive prevention programs. We must have a community response to a community problem.

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## Impact of Sexual Abuse Prevention

Long-term Goal

- Healthier relationships
- Fewer high school dropouts
- Fewer teen pregnancies
- Improved mental & physical health
- Reduced drug/alcohol dependency
- Reduced homelessness
- Stronger family networks

Fewer Kids Abused

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## Survivor Stories



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## GA's Prevention Initiative

- State-wide initiative housed at the **Georgia Center for Child Advocacy**
- Train 1 Million adults in Georgia by 2020 to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse
- Eliminate the opportunity of sexual abuse in organizational environments by creating policies & procedures that will keep children safe while protecting the organization

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## Stewards of Children Targeted Organization Types

- Schools and Educational Programs
- Sports and Recreational Leagues
- Faith Communities
- Youth Serving Organizations
- Legal Community
- Medical Community
- Higher Education
- Parent Clubs
- General Public



Pedophiles search out places where children are. They take advantage of the taboo nature of the subject, something that no one wants to discuss. They thrive on the silence.

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## Distinctiveness

- Developed by the national non-profit organization **Darkness to Light**, [www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org) & emphasizes shifting responsibility of prevention from children to adults
- Standardized and evidence-based model
- Incorporates the fundamental mechanics necessary in creating organizational policies and procedures that keep children safe
- Calls participants into personal responsibility for the safety of children
- Acknowledges that the audience might include
  - People who know very little about child sexual abuse
  - Survivors of child sexual abuse
  - Families who have/are currently experiencing child sexual abuse
  - Sex Offenders
- Direct about the seriousness of the problem, the choices adults make that contribute to the problem, and holding each adult accountable.

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**What should the legal community be doing to promote child sexual abuse prevention and stop the cycle of substance and alcohol abuse for their clients?**

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**How You Can Help  
Treatment and Recommendations**

Danielle Levy, Psy.D.  
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Georgia Center for Child Advocacy



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## Most Researchers Agree...

- Childhood sexual abuse is highly correlated with substance abuse
- Early trauma modifies the brain in ways that may affect impulse control and craving
- Early sexual abuse appears to predispose women, particularly, to alcoholism
- Substance abuse is a relatively easy way to self-medicate and to “cope” with unresolved trauma

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## Consequences to Children & Society



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## Why is the Issue Important?

- In one study, 12-50% of alcoholic women acknowledged a history of child sexual abuse
- Up to 75% of alcoholic women reported both incest and child sexual abuse by a non-family member
- In a community sample, 56% of crack cocaine users reported a history of child sexual abuse

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- Women who seek treatment for substance abuse may not be asked about trauma history, so it is not addressed
- Female victims of child sexual abuse who abuse substances experience higher rates of hospitalizations, more severe psychiatric disturbance, and higher rates of relapse

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- Very few standardized treatment methods exist for substance abusing victims of child sexual abuse
- What works for men may not work for women, and the traditional 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous treatment is based upon a model geared towards men

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## Treatment Recommendations

If we routinely refer female substance abusers to traditional substance abuse treatment without assessing for sexual abuse and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), we may only be treating the most obvious problem and ignoring the catalyst to the problems.

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## Potential Problems with Treatment Methods

- Powerlessness is a core concept of the traditional 12-step AA program
  - Focusing on powerlessness may be counterproductive to a female survivor of sexual abuse. *A woman who already feels blamed for her own abuse and her inability to stop it may feel more unsafe if she is told that she is powerless*
  - Treatment of child sexual abuse is therefore more feminist based, focusing on empowerment, strength, and trust

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## Treatment Considerations

- The therapeutic alliance is imperative in treating child sexual abuse
- Both Sexual Abuse and Substance Abuse are associated with many similar feelings, such as guilt, shame, hopelessness, helplessness and denial. However, the reasons behind those feelings are very different

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## Treatment Considerations

- In treatment of Substance Abuse, abstinence from substances is the #1 priority
- In treatment of Child Sexual Abuse, trust and therapeutic alliance are the basis for all interactions. Substance abusing victims may not be equipped to handle the flood of emotions related to their trauma without the use of substances, until they are appropriately and effectively supported

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## Where to Start?

- When referring someone for substance abuse treatment, it may be extremely helpful for treatment and support groups to be separated by gender
- One study found that among substance abuse women, disclosure of sexual abuse tripled when they were proactively asked about history. Comfort with disclosure may be inhibited by mixed-gender groups

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- Substance Abuse treatment providers should be educated about Child Sexual Abuse, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Mood Disorders, and Dissociative Disorders (all are strongly correlated, particularly among women)
- Substance Abuse treatment providers should actively and directly assess for child sexual abuse in a trusting environment

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- All Substance Abuse Treatment Providers should be trained on recognizing the signs of sexual abuse
- Attending a 2 ½ - 3 hour Stewards of Children training would help equip Substance Abuse treatment providers
- **Judges and our courts may achieve widespread and global effects referring all cases only to those Substance Abuse Treatment providers who have attended and completed a Stewards of Children Training**

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## Assessment Measures

- Trauma History Screens:
  - Childhood Trauma Questionnaire
  - Structured Trauma Interview
  - Impact of Events Scale (IES)
- Substance Abuse Screens:
  - Addiction Severity Index
  - Raped Alcohol Problems Screen
  - Alcohol Use Disorders Identity Test

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## Without Adequate Training

If Child Sexual Abuse is not screened for accurately at the onset of Substance Abuse Treatment, referrals may be inadequate and ineffective, and may be counterproductive.

If substance abuse treatment providers are not equipped to assess for and treat child sexual abuse and the related disorders and symptoms, they should at least be equipped with a strong referral base

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## Get Involved



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## Questions?

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