

Against Child Abuse

Professional Forum on Child Sexual Abuse in Cyber World

Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children and Youths

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Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children and Youths

- **What is sexual abuse**
- **Characteristics of child sexual abuse**
- **What is Online sexual abuse**
- **Online sexual abuse vs Offline sexual abuse or Technology-assisted child sexual abuse**
- **Psychological impact of sexual abuse**

What is Child Sexual Abuse



What is Child Sexual Abuse

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

“This refers to forcing or enticing a child to take part in any acts of sexual activity for sexual exploitation or abuse and the child does not consent to or fully understand or comprehend this sexual activity that occurs to him/her due to mental immaturity.”

What is Child Sexual Abuse

Protecting Children from Maltreatment — Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Jan 2020)

“This sexual activity includes acts that **have or do not have direct physical contact** with children (e.g. rape, oral sex, procuring a child to masturbate others/expose his/her sexual organs, or to pose in an obscene way/watch sexual activities of others, production of pornographic material, forcing a child to engage in prostitution, etc.).”

What is Child Sexual Abuse

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“Sexual abuse may be committed **inside or outside the home** or through **social media on the internet** by perpetrators acting individually or in an organised manner. It includes luring a child through **rewards or other means** for abuse, including **sexual grooming** which refers to designedly establish a *relationship/an emotional connection* with a child by various means for gaining his/her trust with an intent to sexually abuse him/her (e.g. communicating with a child through mobile phone or the Internet).

What is Child Sexual Abuse

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Consensual sexual activity between an adolescent and another person may also involve sexual exploitation by a person who, by his/her characteristics, is in a **position of differential power** to the adolescent. Cases where the adolescent is not mentally mature, too young (e.g. under the age of 13) or the sexual activity leads to sexually transmitted diseases (“STDs”) or pregnancy may be considered and handled as suspected sexual abuse

What is Child Sexual Abuse

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[The younger the age, the more vulnerable a juvenile is even he/she is involved in a consensual sexual activity (With reference made to Section 123 “Intercourse with Girl under 13” of “Crimes Ordinance”, Cap 200, its maximum penalty is higher than the one of Section 124 “Intercourse with Girl under 16”). As STDs or pregnancy resulting from sexual activity will affect the juvenile physiologically and psychologically, personnel should first conduct an initial assessment to identify if there is a reason to believe or suspect the juvenile is harmed/maltreated where cases involved juvenile engaging in a consensual sexual activity being under the age of 13 or having STDs or pregnancy resulting from unsafe sex. Personnel should also take child protection and related investigation as appropriate.]

Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse

- do not usually have physical signs like in physical abuse
- hidden
- abuser usually known to the victim
 - ⇒ not easily revealed
 - ⇒ relies on victim's disclosure

Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse

- Secrecy
- Coercion
- Multiplicity
- Progression
- not merely behavioural, also relational
- power differential
- lacking informed consent



Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse

Reasons for unreported sexual abuse

- confusion
- fear of retaliation
- guilt
- shame
- lack of confidence
- lack of appropriate person to tell



Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse

- Delay in disclosing
- Denial of abuse even in presence of evidence
- retraction
- Inconsistent account
- Disclosure often leads to worsening of psychological difficulties and feelings of upset

Online vs Offline Child Sexual Abuse

- Access to Internet and social media has modified child sexual abuse
- Offenders can remain anonymous, and access vulnerable children easily
- Online sexual abuse can be any type of sexual harassment, exploitation, or abuse that takes place through screen

Technology assisted the initiation, maintenance and escalation of abuse

- increased ease of access to victims
- lowered inhibitions
- reduced recognition of abuse, deception and manipulation
- control of night-time space
- emotional blackmail
- image-related blackmail - maintaining and escalating the abuse, inhibit the victim from disclosing

Technology contributed to Impact

- self-blame and shame related to making, sharing images and complying with offender's requests
- deception in the images (the abuser's account)
- victim's participation (communicating inaccurately victim consent or enjoyment)
- permanence and reach of the images → ongoing traumatization, viewers' perception, esp family and peers
- the offender's control and immersion in the victim's life

Online vs Offline Child Sexual Abuse

Finkelhor, Turner, & Colburn, 2022 - US Online survey of 2639 individuals aged 18-28

- online child sexual abuse 15.6%
- girls, teens the more frequent targets
- perpetrators often teens and young adults
- proportion of perpetrators who were in-person intimate partners, friends and acquaintances outnumbered those who were online-only contacts

Online vs Offline Child Sexual Abuse

- not only adults or online strangers, but romantic partners and offline friends who pressure youth for sexual images or activities or who nonconsensually misuse images
- might be better characterized as forms of intimate partner abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual bullying

Online vs Offline Child Sexual Abuse

- presumption that online sexual abuse is of lesser psychological impact as no physical contact and no violence?
- **no** evidence to suggest that victims abused via the Internet suffer less harm than those who are abused offline
- image and online elements to sexual abuse add complexity and challenge to recovery (Hanson, 2017)

Online vs Offline Child Sexual Abuse

Jonsson et al (2019)

Online abuse associated with:

- more frequent online risk behaviour (eg. sharing personal information)
- poorer psychological health
- poorer relationships with parents
- lower self-esteem

Technology-assisted child sexual abuse

- this term avoids false dichotomy between online and offline worlds
- sexual abuse can be of many forms involving both online and offline
- technology and online aspects to abuse can add to complexity of its impacts

Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- Impact on each victim is unique
- many victims show considerable resilience



Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- impact on victims is a result of complex interactions of various factors:
 - the nature of the abuse
 - single incident or multiple occurrences
 - duration
 - force, threats or sadism



Psychological Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- impact on victims is a result of complex interactions of various factors:
 - their level of vulnerability prior to abuse
 - how the victim makes sense of the abuse
 - the reactions and support given to the victim

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Physical

- physical health problems (eg. headaches)
- appetite problems
- pregnancy
- sexually transmitted diseases

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Social

- negotiation and rewards
- lost of trust; withdrawal
- feeling unsafe, betrayed, lonely
- Intimate relationship difficulties
- re-victimization



Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual

- early sexual wakening
- sexual confusion (eg. pleasure, affection, fear)
- sexual difficulties (eg. hypersexual behaviour, sexual aversion)
- sexually transmitted diseases
- gender identity conflicts

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Emotional

- self-blame
- guilt
- anger
- fear
- confusion
- unstable emotions
- low self-esteem and poor self concept



Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Mental Health

- self-destructive behaviours (eg. self-harm, suicide ideations and attempts)
- anxiety
- depression
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- eating disorder
- substance abuse
- personality disorder

Protective Factors Mitigating Impact

- Individual Level
 - positive self-concept
 - coping style and problem solving ability
 - feeling of control
 - meaning derived from experience



Protective Factors Mitigating Impact

- Social Contextual Factors

- Familial Support
- Safe and stable environment
- Peer support
- School support
- Interaction with criminal justice system

when victims are interviewed multiple times, questioned harshly and perceive police and lawyers to act unfairly impact may worsen (Kunst, Popelier & Varekamp, in Hanson, 2017)

- Intervention

Concluding Remarks

- poorest mental health at disclosure
 - critical point when survivors and families would benefit from support
- support to victims and parents to help process feelings upon viewing sexual images
- provide education on healthy relationships, abuse and consent, not merely online safety



"It shouldn't
hurt to be
a child."

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Thank You

