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Sexual Abuse of Deaf Youth

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Abstract

This paper addresses the scope, nature and incidence of sexual abuse of deaf children and the behavioral/emotional characteristics of sexually abused children and adolescents. The authors also address issues in the prevention, intervention and reporting of abuse. Specific resources which can be contacted for assistance, consultation or diagnostic treatment services for suspected or identified victims of child sexual abuse are described.

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Humankind cannot bear too much reality.

—T. S. Eliot

Child sexual abuse is a current national concern and a major issue confronting administrators and educators serving deaf children. Incidents of sexual abuse of hearing impaired youth have been reported in both mainstream and residential educational settings as well as in the home.

Because child molesters are attracted to jobs where they have easy access to children, they often seek employment in schools. This preference of pedophiles makes it imperative that school administrators and educators have a thorough understanding and working knowledge of the issues of child sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child, under legal age who is developmentally incapable of understanding or resisting the sexual contact and who may be psychologically, physically or socially dependant upon the offender. Examples include rape, incest, fondling of the genitals, exhibitionism and voyeurism (CF Day, 1987). Childhood sexual experiences of a consensual nature, ranging from playing doctor to early sexual experiences with equines, are not abuse (Finkelhor, 1986).

Incidence

Available incidence data from the general population indicate that one in four girls and one in ten boys is sexually abused at some time prior to adulthood (Finkelhor, 1986). Comparable data has not been published for deaf children. The authors report here the information which does exist, including their own original research.

A questionnaire survey was undertaken at a residential school for the deaf. All members of the ninth-grade class

were surveyed to determine their knowledge of sexual abuse, self-protection techniques and their own experiences, if any, of sexual abuse. Some 50 percent of the students reported that they had been sexually victimized (Swax, February 1987).

In a more extensive study, police investigators, with the assistance of sign language interpreters, interviewed all 150 of the children at another residential school for the deaf to determine the occurrence of sexual abuse. Seventy-five of the children stated that they had been sexually abused. Nineteen reported being victims of incest in their homes. Three additional children reported both physical and sexual abuse. All students were interviewed individually.

A third investigation was conducted between 1984 and 1986 in which all incoming freshmen at a postsecondary educational facility for the hearing impaired attended an orientation lecture which described and defined the different forms of abuse. These young adults had previously attended both mainstreamed and residential programs. Some 322 students were surveyed with written questionnaires. Thirty seven (11.5 percent) indicated that they had been the victims of sexual abuse. Of these, 24 also reported physical abuse. More physical than sexual abuse was reported, i.e., 50 students said they had been physically abused only, 11 reported sexual abuse only and 24 reported a history of both physical and sexual abuse (Sullivan, Scanlan & La Torre, 1985).

The final research to be reported originated from the Center for Abused Handicapped Children at the Boys Town National Institute for Communication Disorders in Children. The Center has seen more than 200 handicapped children who have been the victims of physical and/or sexual abuse. Included were 100 deaf children from 18 states who received evaluation and/or treatment services. These deaf children attended both mainstreamed and residential educational placements. They were interviewed individually by counselors fluent in sign language. Sixty four percent of the deaf youth attended residential schools. Of these, 40 were abused in the school, 36 at the home and 15 at both the school and home. Of the 35 cases from mainstreamed placements, 21

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