

Family Issues and Family Treatment for Abused Adolescents/Children

Treatment Principles

- * Safety is the priority over the treatment modality
- * Family therapists criticized for being wedded to systemic approaches when treating families with violence/sex abuse issues.
- * Family therapy modalities require a strong base in trauma-informed treatment to be effective. This is a brief overview of treatment for families of abuse.

Preconditions of Reunification

Resolution of parent-child abuse is a life-long process. If reunification becomes a therapeutic goal, preconditions must exist:

- * Perpetrator/offender assumes responsibility for the abuse
- * Perpetrator/offender is aware of offending pattern and commits to change
- * Perpetrator/offender demonstrates willingness to participate in safety plan
- * Nonoffending parent acknowledges abuse
- * Nonoffending parent assumes responsibility of safety for the child
- * Nonoffending parent demonstrates willingness to participate in safety plan
- * Siblings are educated and do not blame the victim. All are involved in safety planning

Offender Treatment

If the offender acknowledges abuse, he/she will engage in specific treatment that addresses:

- * Naming and clarifying the nature of the abuse
- * Assuming full responsibility for the abuse by addressing faulty thinking patterns/cognitive distortions
- * Behavioral actions
- * Emotional responses
- * Physiologic responses
- * Demonstrate empathy for the child's response to the abuse

Offender Treatment - 2

- * Demonstrate willingness to participate in the child's safety plan
- * Must demonstrate effective participation in any other required or recommended services

Offender Treatment - 3

- * Offender's treatment is ongoing and may have to proceed for months before an actual family "Abuse Clarification" session is held with the victim.
- * This session provides an opportunity for the offender to read a letter written to the child victim that focuses on the offender's assumption of responsibility, empathy for the child, and commitment to developing the family safety plan. (Lipovsky)

Non-offending Parent Treatment

The non-offending parent must also accomplish certain therapeutic goals before reunification sessions can occur. She/he must:

- * Resolve feelings and expressions of disbelief, shock, and denial
- * Hold the offender responsible for the abuse
- * Remain absent of attitudes or statements that reflect victim blaming, minimization, justification, or externalization related to the abuse
- * Ensure that the child's emotional and physical wellbeing remains paramount
- * Modify any familial structure and patterns that directly or indirectly supported abusive behavior
- * Consistently protect and support the abused child and any other vulnerable individuals in the family

Non-offending parent treatment - 2

- * Demonstrate assertiveness, effective problem-solving skills, and self-sufficiency while utilizing appropriate support systems and external resources
- * Understand the range of factors and precursors associated with the offender's behaviors and participates in the offender's relapse prevention plan
- * Work collaboratively with supervision agents, offender treatment providers, and the victim's therapist
- * Take immediate and definitive actions when any concerns arise
- * Comply with recommendations of the child welfare agencies, treatment providers and the courts
- * Address any personal history of victimization (Lipovsky)

Readiness of Victim

The victim's therapist plays an important role in the reunification process and helps to define the readiness of the victim by assessing if the victim:

- * Has generally resolved acute symptoms associated with the abuse
- * Expresses a genuine and reasonable desire for contact with the offender
- * Understands that the offender is solely responsible for the abusive behavior
- * Is able to effectively and openly communicate needs and concerns

Victim Treatment (cont.)

- * Clearly understands personal boundaries
- * Recognizes concerns with secrecy
- * Feels safe and reassured
- * Recognizes potential warning signs of abuse
- * Has developed a personal safety plan (Lipovsky)

Treating Family Members

The family therapist can work with other family members and verify that they:

- * Understand that sexual abuse has in fact occurred within the home
- * Attribute full responsibility for the offense to the offender, without blaming the victim or justifying, or minimizing the abuse
- * Demonstrate no collusion with the offender
- * Recognize the significant impact of the abuse on the victim
- * Support the victim and others in the home, ensuring a safe environment

Family Members Treatment -2

- * Explore and understand how these circumstances have personally affected them
- * Recognize that the non-offending parent or other responsible adult holds the authority and power in the home
- * Feel safe and confident in the non-offending parent's ability to protect
- * Can identify cues in the offender's behavior that may reflect increased risk
- * Have addressed communication problems or issues of secrecy that may inhibit the reporting of risky or abusive behavior
- * Are working toward modifying overly rigid or enmeshed boundaries that existed within the home in the past
- * Adhere to the established rules and limits established by the treatment providers, family members, and/or the supervision agency

Collaboration & Clarification

- * Ongoing collaboration with treatment providers, probation, social service and all involved professionals is crucial for these family issues.
- * An Abuse Clarification session with the family therapist can occur when the professionals involved feel the above goals have been sufficiently attained.

Collaboration & Clarification

- * The change process requires patience, commitment, and persistence on the part of the family and can be very lengthy.
- * For the family to recover, there is usually the need for new roles, different patterns of interaction, changes in expectations and responsibilities, and shifts in the balance of power (Cumming & McGrath)
- * Family Therapists are uniquely qualified to help with these systemic/family structural issues.

Obstacles to Treatment

- * Legal powers may not agree with recommendations of therapists
- * Lack of communication between therapist/counselor and social services or legal personnel
- * Lack of treatment resources
- * Lengthy investigations/delay in court process/lack of coordination between criminal justice system and treatment providers
- * Will power and patience of the family in the process

Summary

- * Treatment should be abuse-focused/the victim's safety if paramount
- * Treatment should address the child's relationships with other family members
- * Treatment should have an educational component
- * Treatment should involve all family members

References

- * Gilligan, Leilah and Bumby, Kurt, Ph.D. (2005). Key Considerations for Reunifying Adult Sex Offenders and their Families. Brief prepared for the Center for Sex Offender Management, A Project of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Program.
- * Lipovsky, Julie A. Treatment of Child Victims of Child Abuse and Neglect. The Citadel.
<http://childlaw.sc.edu/frmPublications/treatment114200441012.pdf>
- * Cumming, G. & McGrath, R. (2005). *Supervision of the Sex Offender* (2nd Ed.). Brandon, VT: Safer Society Press.