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Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent
Psychiatry

Volume 32, Issue 5, September 1993, Pages 890-902

Special Article

Child Sexual Abuse: Immediate and Long-Term Effects and Intervention

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<https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199309000-00002>

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ABSTRACT

Objective

The primary purpose of this review is to highlight the progress made in the area of child sexual abuse during the recent decade and to identify the gaps in our current knowledge about this syndrome.

Method

More than 100 articles on child sexual abuse were reviewed, the majority written from 1980 to the present concerning the demographics of child sexual abuse, the psychological effects of child sexual victimization, the psychopathology encountered in adult survivors of child sexual abuse, hypotheses regarding the nature of the trauma, a critique of the research and approaches to intervention

Results

Although a wide variety of psychological sequelae have been documented in sexually abused children referred for evaluation or treatment, there appears to be considerable variability in the severity of the symptoms, and we remain ignorant of sequelae in abused children who never enter the mental health system. However, some of these children may become symptomatic in adult life. Validation of sexual abuse is hampered by the lack of specific behavioral markers. Methodological difficulties in child sexual abuse research include problems with definition, failure to measure severity of the abuse, sampling problems, failure to use standardized or appropriate instruments, problems with validation, and failure to use control groups.

Conclusions

Despite an increased focus on child sexual abuse in the recent decade, many gaps remain in our knowledge. Prospective longitudinal follow-up studies of sexually abused children and treatment outcome studies are urgently needed.



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Key Words

child sexual abuse; childhood trauma; incest

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