UNDERSTANDING & RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand & describe disclosures of sexual abuse as a process versus a discrete event
- Identify how trauma influences memories & recall of sexual abuse
- Learn 2-3 strategies for engaging nonoffending parents in a manner which increases their ability to support children & adolescents following disclosures of sexual abuse

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE
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- Childhood sexual abuse is a public health problem of enormous consequence (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012)
- 1 in 7 girls & 1 in 25 boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 (Townsend & Rheingold, 2013)
- Approximately 90% of children who are victims of sexual abuse know their abuser (Finkelhor, 2012)
- Research suggests that most cases of child sexual abuse are never disclosed to authorities (Martin & Silverstone, 2013)

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ACCOMMODATION SYNDROME

- Secrecy
- Helplessness
- Entrapment & accommodation
- Delayed disclosure
- Retraction

(Summit, 1983)
THE GROOMING DYNAMIC OF
CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

GROOMING DYNAMIC

- Identify & target the victim
- Gain trust & access
- Play a role in the child's life
- Isolate the child
- Create secrecy around the relationship
- Initiate sexual contact
- Control the relationship

(National Center for Victims of Crime, 2016)

DISCLOSURES OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE
DISCLOSURES OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE
- In the majority of cases, children do not disclose abuse immediately
- Victims often delay disclosure or fail altogether to disclose
- Only 12% of child sexual abuse is reported to the authorities
- Rates of disclosure, while minimal for both genders, may be disproportionately low for boys (Kaufman & Erooga, 2016)
- Disclosure of sexual abuse is usually a process rather than a single event

DYNAMICS OF DISCLOSURES
- Children do not give one detailed, clear account of abuse
- Disclosures generally unfold gradually
- Children typically “test” the reactions of those they are trying to disclose to
- The abuse may be presented in a series of “hints”
- If they are ready, children may then follow with a larger “hint” (Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, & Tracking, 2016)

WHEN VICTIMS DO DISCLOSE
- It is frequently to a friend or a sibling
- Depending on the child’s expected response from the mother, out of family members, mothers are most likely to be told
- Few disclose abuse to authorities or professionals
- Of professionals disclosed to, teachers are the most likely to be told (Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, & Tracking, 2016)
FACTORS THAT DETER DISCLOSURE

- Embarrassment & shame
- Expectations that the disclosure recipient would blame them
- Fear they would not be believed or not helped
- Didn’t want to upset anyone
- Wanted to protect the abuser
- Fear of the abuser (Lyons & Ahern, 2011)

HOW Trauma INFLUENCES Memories & recall of sexual abuse

TRAUMATIC MEMORIES

- Traumatic memories are stored differently than non-traumatic memories
- Stored initially as sensory fragments without a linguistic component
- Not stored cognitively as explicitly memories
- Stored implicitly in iconic & sensory forms
TRAUMATIC MEMORIES

- Traumatic events are stored in the non-thinking brain
- The thinking brain shuts down during traumatic experiences
- Trauma creates neural pathways that keep the brain in a constant state of hyperarousal
- Our bodies & nervous system are reactivated by reminders of traumatic experiences

TRAUMATIC MEMORIES & RECALL

- Ability to provide an accurate, verbal account of the sexual abuse may be impaired
- May be unable to sequence details of the abuse
- Experience difficulty talking about "what happened next"
- May not be able to remember basic or crucial details
- Often dysregulated while responding to questions about the abuse

NONOFFENDING PARENTS/CAREGIVERS
## NONOFFENDING PARENTS/CAREGivers

- Belief, support, & protection from the non-offending parent is influential for the child
- Strong predictor of treatment response for victim
- Predicts successful adjustment post-abuse
- Children with supportive caregivers display less distress & are less likely to develop severe psychopathology

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## NONOFFENDING PARENTS/CAREGivers

- Belief does *not* ensure protection
- Continuum of nonoffending v. non-protecting parents
- Parental support is a fluid process
- Caregiver support appears to be amenable to change & intervention
- There are costs of disclosure for non-offending parents
- There are reasons for non-offending parents to stay

(Levenson, Tewksbury, & DiGiorgio-Miller, 2013)

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## INITIAL NEEDS OF NONOFFENDING PARENTS

- Nonjudgmental support
- Information about roles & what is happening
- General information about abuse & its effects
- Information about resources

(Powers, 2016)
DOs AND DON’Ts

- Educate yourself on the status of the case
- Clearly state your role & limits of confidentiality
- State: “I believe your child”
- Explicitly state who is responsible
- Expect a wide range of emotions & responses

(Powers, 2016)

DOs AND DON’Ts

- Normalize reactions & responses
- Offer empathy for their position & divided loyalties
- Explore their strengths
- Ask them their own feelings
- Identify unreasonable expectations

(Powers, 2016)

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
CLOSING REMARKS

THANK-YOU

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