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Commentary on "An Examination of the Contextual Environment of Families with Sexually Abused Adolescents"

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The focus of this article is on the role of family in adolescent outcomes when sexual abuse has occurred. The authors identify environmental factors for promoting well-being among adolescents. Two sets of criteria are examined to observe the systemic influence on adolescents who have been sexually abused: 1) mesosystemic barriers (levels of school engagement and peer relationships), and 2) exosystemic risk factors (levels of social support, socioeconomic status, and community safety, as well as community size).

An existing data set from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Wave 1 (as cited in Dowd et al., 2002) was used to identify input from 237 adolescents ages 11-16 who had been sexually abused and represented both in-home and out-of-home care samples. Most were female (80%) and had caregivers who reported in the low SES category based on income and education.

Findings:

Two blocks of variables were entered into a sequential multiple regression model. The first block accounts for 9.6% of variances, but peer relationship was not significant in the equation. It is surprising to see "school engagement," which was significant in the first block, not make it to the second block. How is this mesosystemic barrier affected by the input of other exosystemic factors? Although factors entered in the second block model represent 15% of variances, only "Social Support 2" and Parent Ed 1" achieved statistical significance. This study must further analyze how these significant findings explain the effect of the combined mesosystemic barrier (school engagement) and exosystemic risk factors (parental social support, parental education) on the adolescents' psychological distress. Without knowing what Social Support 2 and Parent Ed 1 are, it is hard to draw any conclusions.

Practice Strategies:

The study implies that contextual factors are essential in helping adolescents who have been sexually abused. Even though this study does not detail how certain environmental barriers may lead to reduction of psychological distress, the predictive formula provides an initial idea for examining the role of families in reducing their children's psychological problems. It is important to use data to urge the larger community to provide programs to assist parents and children to build support.

In particular, the school setting may provide many opportunities for improving adolescent outcomes through school connectedness for both the student and parent. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention

supports school connectedness as a protective factor in children's well-being. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). Aspects of school connectedness include adult support (school personnel), fostering positive peer groups, enhancing a commitment to education, and fostering positive school environments (CDC, 2009). If most children spend approximately five days a week, six months of the year in a school setting, it is important to offer supportive school-based services to augment external interventions that are provided to decrease psychological distress following incidents of sexual abuse. Crosson-Tower (2003) suggests that schools can support a child with a trauma history by helping the child identify feelings and develop problem-solving skills, reducing competitive activities, and teaching conflict resolution and peer mediation skills.

Based on the findings of William and Gardell (2011), strengthening contextual environmental supports may facilitate better outcomes for adolescents with a history of sexual abuse. In moving forward, some of the clinical improvements addressing the needs of children and their families might begin with some basic strategies.

Strategy #1: Work with schools to encourage hiring of social workers who can develop group support and strategies to help young people develop skills to deal with adversity.

Strategy #2: Identify at-risk adolescents to increase their awareness of environmental influences that may block their potential development.

Strategy #3: Provide continuous support to parents and young couples to help them identify community resources so that they can best use community resources such as after-school programs and self-help groups to help them prepare their parenting and child-parent partnership strategies.

A strong research agenda must be built to identify interactive effects of both types of contextual variables in the process of helping parents understand their roles in reducing barriers and thus preventing psychological distress as reflected in their adolescent children's behaviors. Additional findings about the mental health well-being of children and adolescents can be found at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011) website.

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