

Parents' experiences when their sons sexually offend: A qualitative analysis

There has been much recent interest in sex offences, sex offenders and their victims. Most of the concern has focused on sexual behaviours, and on offender and victim treatment. Little has been written, however, about another victim group - the parents of sex offenders.

The parents of sex offenders are themselves victims of the abuse. They experience intense guilt, pain, loneliness and despair in response to their child's actions. Yet, almost nothing has been written about parental reaction to the discovery that their adolescent or adult child is a sex offender.

This article is an initial attempt to understand the experiences of parents whose sons have sexually offended. Since little empirical or theoretical literature exists on the subject, a qualitative study was conducted. This approach seemed the most appropriate since the intent was to generate theories, not test them. The goal was simply to learn more about these parents so therapists will have a framework within which to assess, and provide treatment to, this "hidden" group of victims. Method The study sample was made up of five individual parents (four women and one man) whose sons were convicted of sex offences. The parents ranged in age from their mid-30s to mid-60s and were interviewed as individuals (rather than couples) to prevent spousal influence on the expression of thoughts and feelings. The parents were referred by local mental health workers and were specifically selected because their sons' offences represented the most common sex crimes.

The sons were adolescents and adults who had committed a variety of sex offences such as incest, homosexual and heterosexual child sexual abuse, and sexual assault. Although they may have been convicted of only one sex offence, it is likely that each committed multiple sex offences.

The study consisted of six distinct stages:

- each parent was individually interviewed in an informal conversational manner for two hours and the parents were then interviewed as a group;
- each interview videotape was reviewed three times to develop initial researcher impressions;
- the parents were presented with the researchers' initial reactions for their comments and clarification;
- tapes of the second interviews were viewed three times to develop a list of themes;
- the developed themes were checked with the parents for accuracy, clarity and representativeness of their experiences; and
- the videotape of the last session was reviewed to see if any changes were required to the themes. The final session was also reviewed by an outside panel of sex offender experts as a reliability check.

Common experiences All of the parents initially felt a constant sense of burden, almost obsession, about their son and his "troubles." Over time, the parents became more adept at masking these feelings, but the preoccupation did not go away.

The parents also all tried to understand the underlying cause of their son's behaviour. The first response

was generally to look for societal causes such as sexual content in movies and on television. However, all the parents eventually blamed themselves and their early parent-child relationship. As one parent said, "one of the things [my son] says, over and over again, is that I just never spent any time with him."

By the time helping systems (such as the mental health and legal systems) became involved, the parents were in great need of personal support and guidance. However, the **parents** believed everyone viewed **them** as pariahs. As such, their crisis was merely compounded by contact with these helping systems. Still, each parent ultimately made a great effort to get help for their son.

The parents also all admitted that prior to the discovery of their son's offence(s), they believed strongly that sex offenders should be severely punished. Not surprisingly, all now favoured rehabilitation to incarceration.

By the time their sons were incarcerated, the parents were psychologically prepared to talk with their son about the offence (and needed to). However, all had great difficulty in doing so.

Finally, each of the parents reported that they became so involved with their son's problems that they tended to ignore other family members. They also became obsessed with the future and, to some extent, their son's potential for relapse. In the words of one parent, "we feel like there could be a time bomb out there ticking." Response stages Parents of sons who have sexually offended, like individuals who grieve over a loss, seem to respond to the ongoing crisis in a series of stages. In fact, many of the parents described the experience as like discovering that their son was terminally ill- you know things will never be the same again.

Four consistent stages of reaction emerged. All the parents first experienced a profound sense of the pervasiveness of the problem. They could focus on little else. Their family and work became secondary to their son's dilemma. The legal system reinforced this feeling by forcing the parents to focus on the problem for extended periods of time, as did therapist urgings to "deal with their feelings."

Next, each parent experienced a sense of helplessness. Each felt completely alone, incompetent and vulnerable. The parents then moved to a third stage where they mobilized their energy and became more involved in their son's problems (such as finding avenues for legal action). In short, the parents all regained a sense of being able to make things better for themselves and their sons.

Finally, the parents reached a stage where they were able to participate in activities unrelated to their sons' problems, such as taking a vacation or becoming reinvolved with friends or other members of their family. Treatment implications Therapists working with the parents of sex offenders should, at the beginning of counselling, review the common issues for parents with sons who are sex offenders. The therapist could then role-play varying ways of handling particular issues to help prepare parents for dealing with the actual situations.

It is also important for the therapist to understand that parents in treatment will likely be in one of the four response stages and that each stage should be completed before moving into the next. For example, it would be unwise to force a parent in the pervasiveness stage to become involved with outside

activities. Instead, the therapist should recognize the parent's sense of being overwhelmed, offer support, suggest coping strategies and predict that the situation will improve with time. The next step There were several limitations to this study. First, the small sample size reduces the generalizability of the results. It is possible that the themes and stages illustrated by the sample may be unique to this group. Along the same ones, it is also possible that examiner bias may have influenced the results.

The study was also retrospective. All the parents were in the last response stage and, therefore, described (for the most part) past experiences and feelings. Future research should examine parents at different phases of the experience.

Further research on parents whose children sexually offend will not only provide information for therapists who work with these parents, it will also generate a better understanding of the family dynamics of this type of offender. Future qualitative and quantitative studies should, therefore, also look at **entire** families to examine both individual experiences and family interaction.

Sons who sexually offend also make their parents victims. These victims, however, get little in the way of support. They suffer extreme feelings of guilt, pain and helplessness. It is hoped that a better understanding of the suffering of these forgotten victims will result in the care and counselling needed to reduce their pain.

Adapted from B. J. Smith and T. S. Trepper, "Parents' Experience When Their Sons Sexually Offend: A Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 18, 2 (1992): 93-103.