

An innovative treatment approach for incestuous fathers

In recent years, several Correctional Service of Canada institutions have begun to offer treatment programs for low-risk sex offenders. These programs target sex offenders who need only minimal intervention before returning to the community and usually emphasize developing empathy for the victim and preventing recidivism.

The Violence Interdite Sur Autrui (VISA) program emerged as an offshoot from these programs. It was developed specifically for men who have sexually abused children for whom they played a significant role (such as father, stepfather, grandfather, uncle or older brother).

This article examines the basic structure of the VISA program, setting out both its goals and general approach. Perhaps most important, the article also briefly highlights preliminary assessments of the program's effectiveness. Basic characteristics The VISA program was first implemented in 1991 in the Correctional Service of Canada's Montée Saint-François Institution. Unlike most correctional programming, this program does not focus solely on the offender. It attempts to help the entire family deal with the repercussions of incest. As such, the VISA program not only gives offenders an opportunity to reflect on their sexual deviance and its consequences, it also provides a way for abusers to attempt to make amends to those they have hurt - allowing them to act as responsible spouses and fathers.

In concrete terms, VISA encourages incestuous fathers to:

- overcome fear and shame, and acknowledge what they have done;
- take full responsibility for the abuse in front of both the people involved and the group;
- acknowledge the damage they have done to their victims, their families and themselves;
- take steps to make amends and establish a healthy relationship with their victims and those close to them;
- learn about their problem so they can look critically at their sexual conduct and eventually lead sexually responsible lives; and
- recognize the factors that contributed to the abuse and take steps to reduce the influence of these factors in their lives.

Program philosophy The VISA program does not focus on correcting deviant conduct (behavioural approach) or exploring the psychological conflict that triggers conduct (analytical approach), although these areas are not ignored. The program instead focuses on abusers' relationships with themselves, their victims, their spouses and other adults.

The VISA program is based on the premise that everyone can change and grow, and emphasizes that everyone is born with power, positive energy and the desire to improve.

As such, VISA therapists treat program participants as partners, not just treatment recipients. Participants contribute to the program's success by supporting each other both during and outside therapy, by acting as mentors to new arrivals and by providing an in-depth account of their actions to victims or the media.

VISA therapists also attempt to establish a place (real or symbolic) for family members in the process. Spouses are invited to participate in some program activities, family members are referred to relevant support services, and adults act as victim spokespersons by sharing their own experiences as abused children and/or betrayed mothers. Program workers must, therefore, maintain strong ties with the community support workers who assist the victims and families of incestuous fathers. Program components During the 14-week program, offenders usually participate in 28 psychotherapy group meetings, 13 sex education workshops and about 10 individual interviews.

Each group meeting is led by two psychotherapists, a man and a woman. The meetings begin with a short period of relaxation or centering to help participants prepare for therapy.

Participants are then invited to answer a question about the abuse they committed to prompt them to open up gradually and vent their intense emotions.

The main part of the meeting involves reviewing the assignment from the previous meeting. This review allows therapists and participants to measure individual involvement and progress.

Finally, participants leave the group with a new assignment or task to help sustain their commitment between meetings and to allow them to act on their resolve and desire to change.

The sex education workshops are run by a clinical sexologist, who discusses a variety of topics with participants, such as male and female genital anatomy and physiology; male and female sexual responses; masturbation; the influence of stimulants on sexuality; psycho-sexual development from childhood to adulthood; sexual myths; erotic fantasies; male and female sexual problems; sexual abuse and related cognitive problems; paraphalia; and accumulating knowledge and integrating it into the cycle of abuse.

Individual interviews are used to break down barriers and meet the specific needs of the individual participants. Is it working? To date, the VISA program has generated considerable interest and enthusiasm. More than 130 offenders of various races, cultures and educational backgrounds have participated in the program.

These offenders have pooled their efforts to help end this type of abuse (only two participants have been reincarcerated for a further sex offence) and, ultimately, to free their victims of the burden of incest and make amends to those they have hurt.

The VISA program has, therefore, demonstrated not only that it is possible to treat incest in a context of respect for abusers, their victims and their families, but also suggests that it may be more effective to treat the man/father than the deviant.

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