

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Disparate Reports of Stress and Family Relations between Youth Who Commit Sexual Crimes and their Caregivers

BOTTOM LINE

Key to developing more effective interventions is an understanding of the differing perceptions of family dynamics and stress levels between youth and their caregivers.

RESEARCH

Parents and caregivers play an influential role in shaping behavior and affecting behavior change. Therefore, families can be a source of protection for youth with problematic sexual behaviors (PSB) through positive parent-child relationships, strong attachments and bonds, as well as positive communication. However, families can also contribute to ongoing patterns of inappropriate sexual behaviors. Given the importance of positive family engagement, it is no surprise that including families in treatment and giving them the skills, they need can increase a youth's future success.

This study explores the different perspectives between youth with PSB and their caregivers regarding their perception of family relationships and experiences of stress. The authors explore two questions:

- 1) Do youth with sexual offending behaviors differ from caregivers in self-reports of stress levels and family relationships problems?
- 2) Do these respective reports of stress and parenting strategies correlate with problematic family relationships.

Youth reported more challenges with both stress and family relationships than their adult caregivers. Stress was associated with problems in family relationships for both groups, but different forms of stress were linked to problems in family relationships. Caregivers reported stressors such as not feeling confident in their ability to handle problems or cope with what they had to do. Youth reported feeling that something bad was going to happen. Youth also reported more family relationship problems than their adult caregivers but this is consistent with the existing research. The authors suggest that these disparities may be due, in part, to the normal reactions of going through reporting of a sexual crime. Under these circumstances, a family can become disconnected; there can be more disagreements and families can become both emotionally and physically disconnected.

The study also found that when caregivers used positive parenting skills and other social supports, both youth and caregivers were more likely to have positive family relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

This study is a reminder that youth with PSB are often more stressed and disconnected from their loved ones than their own parents and at times, even from what professionals may realize. Working with these youth can be a challenge, especially when we are also so in tune with the stress and anguish of those affected by abuse. It's easy to overlook the fact that sexual abuse and its aftereffects can be an adverse and traumatizing experience for the adolescent or child who abuses. It is also easy to overlook the impact that addressing sexual behavior problems in a child can have on a parent. While all youth need their families involved in their lives, especially in sensitive matters such as sexual abuse, and this is equally true for youth with PSB. Clearly involving caregivers in both the assessment and treatment of our children and youth is essential to ensuring the safest outcomes for everyone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

These findings illustrate the importance of professionals treating PSB to remain vigilant for stress, anxiety, depression, and family issues for both the youth with PSB as well as their caregivers. Historically, the field has focused much attention on individual risk factors for the child or youth such as sexuality, impulsivity, attention deficits, and other conditions they believe are directly related to re-offending. However, research shows that these kids are so much more successful if they have the support of caregivers and do not have to "go this alone." In fact; these findings align with other research suggesting that out-of-home placements should be used only when absolutely necessary. Our youthful clients will always be better served generally – and be better able to respond to abuse-specific interventions – when others in their environment are knowledgeable, understand what they need, and are available to help them address their most important needs and encourage them to build on their strengths.

CITATION:

Yoder, J. R., Dillard, R., & Stehlik, L. (2018). Disparate reports of stress and family relations between youth who commit sexual crimes and their caregivers. *Journal of sexual aggression*, 24(1), 114-124.

ABSTRACT

Certain family factors, including dynamics, interactions and communication patterns, experiences of intra-familial victimisation, overall functioning and attachment can increase propensities for the commission of a sexual crime and may even be linked to recidivism. However, there is an absence of research that examines factors that contribute to problematic family relationships and how youth and caregivers vary in perceptions of family relationships. The current cross-sectional research study delivered the same validated instruments to youth ($n = 46$) and their caregivers ($n = 46$) to determine relative perceptions of family relationships and stress. Two multiple regression models were conducted to determine factors that contribute to problematic family relationships. Youth reported greater stress scores and more problems in family relationships relative to caregivers. Stress contributed to family relationship problems for youth and caregivers, but protective factors were associated with less family relationship problems for caregivers. Treatment and research implications are discussed.