

Women who sexually abuse children

Workshop led by Hilary Eldridge, Chief Executive, Lucy Faithfull Foundation –
A child protection agency specialising in child sexual abuse

Hilary has been working with sex offenders for many years and with women who sexually abuse children since the early 1990's. The workshop looked at:-

- The prevalence
- Characteristics of women abusers
- What do women abusers do
- How to assess and intervene with female abusers and what can be achieved by intervention

Abuse by women is largely denied by society because it does not fit our "schema" i.e. it does not fit with our view of the world. As a result looking at women as abusers makes us feel insecure and anxious. Professionals tend to see males as perpetrators and females as victims and play down the gravity of sexual abuse by women. There is a tendency to see women as coerced by men and very few women ever get convicted.

There is a need for better training and guidance to MAPPA and resources for developing treatment.

It is difficult to judge prevalence but about 1% of convicted sexual abusers are female (approximately 3% of arrests). The proportion of women in the US are higher. Studies of people who have been abused would suggest higher rates of abuse by female perpetrators. This is also reflected in calls to Childline. Bunting (2005) suggests approximately 5% of sexual offending may be perpetrated by women.

Studies show high levels of emotional, physical and sexual abuse among female offenders. Women abusers are more likely to have longstanding and severe histories of victimisation. Women who abuse older children may use grooming techniques very similar to those of men, whereas those who abuse young children may not do so. Women can carry out all forms of sexual abuse including in some cases the infliction of physical pain.

Women have a variety of motivations for the abuse including desire for affection, fear of partners and revenge. The women in Saradjian's study (1996) did not have memories of feeling close to, loved or cared for by anyone during their childhood who did not also sexually abuse them.

Risk assessments designed for men cannot be applied to women and a new framework for assessment is needed (see chapter below).

Treatment can strengthen protective factors and good intervention needs to address the needs that were being met by abusing children and help them find non abusive ways of meeting these needs.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation supports practitioners and works directly with abusers. It is available for assessment, intervention, training and consultancy 0044 (0) 1527 591922. Assistance to probation is centrally funded by PPU and is therefore free to probation case managers, who can call LFF Director Sheila Brotherston about this service.

See "Eldridge, Elliott & Ashfield, Assessment of Women who Sexual Abuse Children, to appear in Calder M C (Ed) 2008 Complete Guide to Sexual Abuse Assessment.