

Familial impact of child sexual abuse: A scoping review

Impactos familiares del abuso sexual infantil: Una revisión de alcance

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Background

International evidence shows that child sexual abuse occurs mainly in the family. These abuses are repeated, prolonged, and chronic. Disclosure is crucial since it allows the child sexual abuse to be known by people in the child's environment, and the child can obtain credibility, support, and protection. During the post-disclosure period children need the support of parental figures and families. Child sexual abuse not only affects the children, but there are indirect victims, in this case, parental figures and non-offending siblings, that suffer stress, impairment, and loss. The literature has described the effects of sexual abuse on parenting, child-rearing practices, and sibling relationships. Based on the above, there is a need for research that deepens the understanding of the impacts of the disclosure of sexual abuse situations on family members, dyads, and the family as a whole. The question that guided the present review was What are the focuses of research in the last decade on the family impacts of child sexual abuse?

Aims

To analyze available evidence in specialized literature on the impacts of child sexual abuse, defining individual, dyadic, and family. The specific objectives were to identify the main focuses of the impacts of sexual abuse in the selected publications; to identify the main concepts in each of the focuses, and to analyze the classification of the publications according to the focuses and concepts identified.

Method & procedures

A scoping review study was developed to map publications on a specific topic. For the search and selection of publications, the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 Declaration methodology were used. The sources of information were the mainstream databases Web of Science and Scopus. The search period was between August 1 and September 7, 2021. The following steps were implemented: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The inclusion criteria were: (a) empirical studies about family impact of child sexual abuse; (b) written in English (c) developed with qualitative or quantitative methodology; (d) published between 2011 and 2021. These criteria were evaluated in the titles of the publications, discarding for duplicity, type of document, date or language. Subsequently, in the screening, the titles and abstracts were reviewed, excluding those not meeting the established criteria. Finally, full-text articles were evaluated, and decisions were made about their inclusion. The total sample is 29 selected publications.

Results & discussion

When categorizing and coding the data, it was found that the studies focus on one or more of the focuses, whether individual, dyadic, or family. All studies focus on the individual impacts of disclosure on indirect victims, whether parental or sibling figures; 23 studies address a dyadic focus, and 15 focus on family impacts. Within the focus on individual impacts, studies report a variability of negative emotions associated with child sexual abuse, and depressive, anxious and post-traumatic stress symptomatology. Among the impacts at the dyadic level publications address child bonding, parenting and sibling relationships. Within bonding, studies show both positive, ambivalent or negative impacts. Child rearing is centered on protection and care. There may be manifestations of overprotection or difficulties in establishing rules. In focus on family impacts, studies distinguish between family structure and family dynamics. Within the structure, the central concepts are family breakdown and change in family composition,

hierarchy, and roles. In family dynamics the concepts are cohesion and mutual support, coping strategies, and communication. One finding is that multiple focus predominates, which tends to recognize effects at more than one level, considering connections and reciprocities between these. Our results allow us to establish that predominates a relational view in the studies over an individual one. Focusing on the family unit, the concept of systemic trauma contributes to analyzing the impacts on families, visualizing shared and particular aspects of family members.

Conclusion

The distinction between the individual, dyadic and family focuses shows the need to deepen the knowledge of the subjective and particular impacts of an experience as a parental or sibling figure. And on the other hand, to be able to understand that individual experiences are always nested in broader subsystems or systems. The evidence shows that families, as units, are impacted by the disclosure of situations of child sexual abuse, generating changes in family relationships at multiple levels. Regarding projections for future research, the need for studies that deepen the understanding of traumatic experiences in terms of their complexity at the family level is highlighted. In relation to psychosocial intervention, having studies that recognize different focuses of impact could be a contribution to support programs and strategies with a family systemic approach, which respond comprehensively and effectively to the diverse needs, tensions and the challenges presented by the families.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, family impact, non-offending parents, post-disclosure period, scoping review, secondary victims

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