

Meaning given by therapists to the intervention of child sexual abuse in residential care

Significado otorgado por terapeutas a la intervención del abuso sexual infantil en residencias de protección

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Background

Child sexual victimization is a concern across the board in different countries; UNICEF established it is one of the worst manifestations of violence against childhood and adolescence (2017). The prevalence of victimization in protective residences is challenging to establish due to variations in abuse definitions, methodologies, and research designs. Nevertheless, some studies shed light on the magnitude of the issue. In a German study, 3.1% of respondents reported being victims of child sexual abuse in state institutions. In the Chilean context, the National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) indicates that 7.1% of respondents reported sexual abuse in residential settings in the last year. Child sexual victimization constitutes a fracture in the life history, leading to multiple consequences on biological, psychological, relational, social, and economic levels. This becomes even more complex when these violations have an impact on a trajectory of polyvictimization, as in the case of children and adolescents in protective residences, where sexual victimizations tend to be more severe, occur over a longer period, and involve various types of violations and perpetrators. This generates a high impact that can affect all areas of their lives in the short, medium, and long term. Given the above, it is crucial to investigate the characteristics of psychotherapeutic intervention in these contexts. While some international research provides insights into treatment and its challenges, it is necessary to continue expanding research on the treatment of child sexual victimization in residential contexts. This research should provide clearer guidelines on the characteristics of treatment, especially considering the significant information gap in Latin America and particularly in Chile.

Aims

To understand, from the therapist's perspective, the experiences of psychological therapy developed with child victims of sexual abuse in residential contexts in Chile, their facilitators, obstacles, extent, and challenges.

Method & procedures

The methodological approach was qualitative and exploratory, combining elements from victimology and qualitative methodologies in the social sciences in its design, aiming to provide a phenomenological perspective on therapists' experiences regarding the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in residential contexts. Fieldwork was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which formed the narratives of eight therapists who were part of outpatient programs in the protection network. These interviews deepened into the approaches employed to address the phenomenon, providing sufficient and detailed information to meet the research objectives outlined here, achieving the expected theoretical saturation. The collective interpretative and analytical exercise allowed for the articulation

and prioritization of categories, giving rise to thematic work matrices, which are reflected in the results and conclusions proposed here. The team ensured careful implementation and a constant concern that the purposes of this research did not jeopardize or undermine the values, interests, or preferences of those included in the sample.

Results & discussion

The results identify various themes that, according to the experience of the treating psychologists, are central in the intervention of sexual abuse with children and adolescents deprived of family care. Regarding the generation and protection of bonds, previous studies highlight the relationship between strengthening family bonds and restoring rights, making it possible to create protected family meeting spaces and establish new bonds as reference figures. Also central is the recognition of individuality and the safeguarding of recognized personal spaces and belongings that contribute to identity and the construction of a subjective space that belongs to them, also within the therapeutic space. Regarding victimization, the validation of the experience is the starting point for beginning to work from the recognition of what has been lived and the acknowledgment of their status as victims. The credibility granted to the victim is another critical point, as the reactions of the environment constitute a factor that mediates the impact of the abuse experience. The strengthening of agency capacity is considered central, in a context where we must promote the possibility of asserting the rights of children and adolescents, being heard, and participating in legal processes. On the other hand, it is important to multiply gratifying and positive experiences, thus counteracting the harmful effects of the experiences of children and adolescents. Another important aspect is the time dedicated to therapeutic intervention, which is currently considered insufficient and needs to be increased. There are still significant gaps in care in Chile, resulting from both the scarcity of spaces in specialized programs and the access to mental health services. There is also a need to improve criminal prosecution and increase the speed of investigative-criminal procedures.

Conclusion

This research findings address the singular qualities of therapeutic processes where there is a bonding necessity that is hardly remedied by therapy, along with intrinsic challenges in the residential context and difficulties in providing an effective space for re-signification for survivors. The results suggest the need to adjust technical guidelines for the development of psychotherapy in these cases and inject more resources, increasing the availability of professionals and enhancing the specialization of those involved in this type of intervention.

Keywords: childhood, intervention, protective residence, psychotherapy, sexual abuse

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