Child sexual assault and non-offending fathers

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This article is an overview of the experiences of non-offending fathers of children who have been sexually assaulted. It looks at the relevant literature and draws on the author's work in a rural Centre Against Sexual Assault to highlight aspects of these men's emotional reactions following trauma to their child.

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The concept of 'non-offending' fathers of children who have been sexually assaulted has yet to find purchase in either theory or practice. There are two reasons for this. First, fathers are largely absent in social work/psychology literature. Greif and Bailey (1990) found that, despite growing evidence of both the importance and the increasing role of fathers in families, their existence in the literature is negligible. When fathers are studied they are seen 'as perpetrators, as missing and as embattled' (Greif & Bailey 1990). The second reason is that sexual assault literature has focused on paternal incest where the perpetrators are biological, adoptive, step, de facto or foster fathers with 'non-offending' mothers as an adjunct. While it has been essential to highlight the reality of paternal incest, the emphasis has drawn attention away from the range of other familial and non-familial perpetrators, and the experiences of non-offending fathers have not been recognised.

When fathers are excluded, both in the literature and in practice, it reinforces social messages about child sexual assault. It perpetuates the idea that fathers are usually responsible for sexual assaults of children and therefore have no role to play in the child's recovery. It predisposes that non-offending fathers do not have emotionally nurturing relationships with their children and it excludes fathers from taking emotional responsibility by telling them that this is not their domain. It also reflects the social construction of masculinity that denies men's participation in the intimate, emotional spheres of life on which sexual assault and parenting impinge.

This article aims to introduce the concept of non-offending fathers of children who have been sexually assaulted, to ascertain their prevalence, to analyse the scant relevant literature and to explore their experiences. Research at Gippsland Centre Against Sexual Assault makes it clear that non-offending fathers are certainly present in the lives of their children, if sometimes distantly. These men have specific needs as secondary victims of sexual assault and have a distinct and vital contribution to make in the recovery of their children.

THE PREVALENCE OF NON-OFFENDING FATHERS

Between September 1994 and March 1997, 75 children attended Gippsland CASA for on-going counselling following sexual assault. The children ranged in age from 4 to 16 years with 46 being under 10 years old at the time of the assaults. The breakdown of the perpetrator's relationship with the child is as follows:

Biological father	10
Stepfather	17
Grandfather	12
Brother	8
Uncle	6
Family friend	6
Neighbour	6
Cousin	5
Older child	5
Peer	1
Brother-in-law	1
Foster father	1

There are a total of 78 (76 males and 2 females) perpetrators of the 75 children which includes three children who had two perpetrators.

Paternal figures are the single largest group (27 out of 78) representing 34.6% of all the perpetrators. Only 1 of the 10 biological fathers in this group was a custodial father at the time of the assault, suggesting either that non-custodial, biological fathers pose a greater risk or that they are more likely to be reported. They may also have a more distant relationship with their child, which supports Williams and Finkelhor (1995) who found that low involvement in caretaking was a risk factor for incest. All the stepfathers in the sample lived in the same household as the child they assaulted, supporting Finkelhor's (1996) findings that step-fathers are a specific risk to children. Seventy per cent of the perpetrators were relatives and all of the perpetrators were known by the children and their families. Although fathers and step-fathers are the largest single group of perpetrators, the majority (64%) of this group of children were assaulted by people other than their paternal figures. While there is little doubt that paternal figures represent a significant risk to children, other males may pose an even greater risk.

The fact that children are sexually assaulted by fathers and stepfathers does not preclude the presence of non-offending paternal figures in the lives of these children. In this group:

- 38 children (50.6%) have a non-offending biological father in the same household;
- 13 children (17.3%) have a non-offending step/de facto father in the same household;
- 4 children (5.3%) have a non-offending, non custodial biological father;
- 16 children (21.3%) have no non-offending father figure;
- 4 children (5.3%) have a non-offending adoptive/foster father.

The significance of these findings is the recognition of an important group of adult men who are secondary victims of child sexual assault. Their needs have been neglected and their potential to enhance their children's recovery has been undermined. Fifty nine children (78.6%) have a relationship with a non-offending father figure. These men are attempting to deal with the trauma of child sexual assault and are confronted with both their own emotional reactions and a complex range of behaviours and responses in the children for whom they are socially and emotionally responsible.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT ON NON-OFFENDING FATHERS

The experiences of non-offending fathers needs to be analysed within the cultural constructs of masculinity and fatherhood. The emotional impact of the sexual assault of a child is extreme and is likely to involve anger, grief, guilt, blame and shame. These emotions have profound effects on personal relationships, sexuality and parenting. The way in which fathers experience and resolve the trauma is intrinsically influenced by the social expectations of men.

Silverstein and Rashbaum (1994) explore the gender socialisation that boys receive in relation to emotional expression. They contend that by the time boys are adolescent, 'feelings have become a foreign language with their own alien vocabulary, in which women are fluent and men are deaf and dumb'.

They also believe that mothers are obligated by the prevailing patriarchal culture to emotionally distance themselves from their sons for fear of undermining their masculinity, which curtails boys' emotional learning. Ronald Levant (1992) sees men as suffering from alexithymia, which is the inability to identify and describe one's feelings in words. Levant (1992) identifies seven aspects of the social expectation of masculinity:

- avoiding femininity
- restrictive emotionality
- seeking achievement and status
- self reliance
- aggression
- homophobia
- non relational attitudes towards sexuality.

Each of these expectations effectively works against a successful resolution of the difficult emotions caused by child sexual assault.

The danger of these theories and beliefs is that they imprison men by denying them both the permission and the opportunity to express themselves emotionally. This is then interpreted as an inherent male inability and is reinforced by the structures of welfare agencies. It is only a small step then to believing that men are less emotional.

Direct work with non-offending fathers challenges this myth of emotional inarticulacy and provides insight into how the myths undermine recovery for this group of men.

Anger

Anger is a normal response to sexual assault for men and women. For most parents, anger is one of the first feelings – anger at the child, at themselves and at the perpetrator. It is often a terrifying emotion that threatens to overwhelm and sometimes paralyse. Anger is seen as an 'unfeminine' emotion which is not only socially acceptable for men but which may be considered obligatory. Mothers will often express distress at the enormity of their anger and be frightened at their murderous thoughts towards the perpetrator. Fathers are expected to express anger and to act on it too. Some fathers have talked about feeling that they let their family down by not murdering the perpetrator. They fear they may be seen as weak if they do not take revenge. This may be a result of patriarchal attitudes that view children (and women) as property which it is morally permissible and often, desirable, to protect, defend and revenge.

> Angry fathers fantasise about revenge. They sense that if they were 'real men' they would take matters into their own hands. Most do nothing. They are deterred by the fact that their wives and children depend on them (Briggs 1993).

They may also be deterred by fear. Levant (1992) points out that:

> Anger is, in fact, one of the few emotions boys are encouraged to have and, as a consequence, a lot of other feelings such as hurt, disappointment and *even fear* get funneled into it.

Society expects men to behave violently if they are justly angry and such

violence is an acceptable way for men to express emotion. It becomes impossible for fathers to explore their anger and distinguish what other feelings anger may mask, such as powerlessness, self disgust, fear, shame and guilt. It becomes much harder for anger to be used constructively and is more likely to frighten others.

Guilt

> In the aftermath of traumatic events, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal. Guilt may be understood as an attempt to draw some in-depth lesson from disaster and to regain some sense of power and control. To imagine that one would have done better may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness (Herman 1992).

Fathers experience intense guilt when their children have been assaulted. They feel guilty for trusting the perpetrator, for not trusting their instincts, for ignoring warning signs, for not believing and for failing to protect their children. Men are socialised to provide for and to protect children.

Fathers may experience gender guilt when the perpetrator is male (and total confusion when the perpetrator is female), which may conflict with the mateship ethos and the myths that men are taught about seductive victims and 'uncontrollable' male sexuality. Many fathers have commented on feeling guilty for being male and have been forced to re-evaluate their concept of masculinity.

Fathers may find guilt difficult because they are not conditioned to cope with powerlessness, whereas girls and women are universally familiar with it. Briggs (1993) claims that:

> When there is a family crisis, mothers and children traditionally lean on fathers. In cases of child sexual assault, caring fathers rarely know what to do. They feel useless, helpless, guilty and they panic.

Unacknowledged feelings of guilt can cause long term difficulties. They are likely to be destructive to fathers and to their self esteem, which in turn are detrimental to personal relationships.

When fathers are excluded, both in the literature and in practice, it reinforces social messages about child sexual assault. It perpetuates the idea that fathers are usually responsible for sexual assaults of children and therefore have no role to play in the child's recovery. It predisposes that non-offending fathers do not have emotionally nurturing relationships with their children and it excludes fathers from taking emotional responsibility by telling them that this is not their domain. It also reflects the social construction of masculinity that denies men's participation in the intimate, emotional spheres of life on which sexual assault and parenting impinge... These men have specific needs as secondary victims of sexual assault and have a distinct and vital contribution to make in the recovery of their children.

Shame

Parents feel ashamed that sexual assault occurred and that they were unable to prevent it; shame that they will be seen as 'bad parents'. They also feel their child's shame; shame that they will always be identified as a victim, especially in a small community; shame that their sons will become homosexual and/or an offender; shame that their daughters are damaged and dirty. Finkelhor and Browne (1985) refer to shame as stigmatization and relate it to the long term effects of child sexual assault such as guilt, poor self esteem and isolation.

Levant (1992) claims that:

> Men have considerable reluctance to violate the male code lest they be disgraced and overwhelmed with feelings of shame. Shame thus serves as a powerful cultural mechanism for ensuring compliance with the male code.

Shame ensures that fathers remain silent and isolated and are less able to effectively cope with the shame that their child feels. It is the silence that can pervade fathers' personal relationships and which can intensify the shame.

Parents are in the best position to alleviate the effects of shame by counteracting the stigma and reassuring the child that they are loved. Fathers are a vital part of children's sexual development for girls and boys, but they often withdraw, particularly physically, following disclosure/discovery, because they are afraid of further traumatising the child and/or being identified as an offender. The distinction between sex and sexual assault, affection and abusive touch must be emphasised for children and fathers.

Grief

Sexual assault of a child constitutes an enormous loss for the children and parents involved. There is a loss of trust and innocence, often associated with the essence of childhood. There is also loss of power and control for everyone in a family. Expression of sadness is gender influenced. Women are allowed, and often encouraged, to openly show emotion. Men are rarely permitted to do so. Men are taught to be in control of their emotions and permitted only three outlets – sex, violence and sport. Levant (1992) suggests that men are socialised to be emotionally stoic and 'cannot do what is so automatic for most women – simply sense inward, feel the feeling, and let the verbal description come to mind'. Perhaps they can, but do not, because expression of feeling is associated with weakness and vulnerability by other people.

Many fathers spoke of feeling overwhelming sadness about their child's trauma but felt inhibited about expressing it not only because they felt they were not allowed to be vulnerable, but also because they feared that to be seen as sad would be damaging to their child. They felt they had to be strong for those around them.

RELATIONSHIPS

Sexual assault, like other trauma, alters the fundamental sense of self of the victim.

> Traumatised people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self ... the identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed (Herman 1992).

Parents, as secondary victims, also experience this and it affects their personal relationships with partners, families, friends and colleagues. The range of difficult feelings identified by fathers and discussed above has significant impact on relationships.

Most fathers were reluctant to seek support from colleagues, friends and relatives, although they wanted to. They feared telling anyone because they believed that they would be seen as responsible for the assault. As the myth prevails that fathers are usually the perpetrators of sexual assault, it makes it very hard for fathers to identify themselves as people whom sexual assault has affected. Women are relatively free from that stigma and may, therefore, find it easier to seek support. Fathers identified a real need for objective support but were unable to take the risk of sharing their experiences with others. This creates an isolation that exacerbates the experience of trauma.

Some fathers relied heavily on their partners for emotional support but spoke again of the difficulties of appearing vulnerable. This was not just about feeling that being vulnerable was weak but that partners found it hard to cope with their vulnerability. Mothers often speak of their partners clearly suffering but not talking. Maybe it is because they have no one to talk to. The parental/marital relationship is dramatically affected after the sexual assault of a child. There are issues of blame, anger, powerlessness, guilt and sexuality. Davies (1995) researched the impact of child sexual assault on 30 non-abusing parents. The data was collected at least 12 months after disclosure and indicates long term consequences for both mothers and fathers. Davies found in his analysis of post traumatic stress indicators that mothers scored more highly on the intrusive scale and fathers scored more highly on the avoidance scale. Marital/sexual problems were identified equally by both parents with 50% experiencing long term severe difficulties.

Fathers identify feeling useless in the aftermath of their child's assault. They often felt excluded by mothers and professionals. They felt unable to share things with their partners and often felt there was no place for them in their child's recovery. This further isolates fathers and denies them the opportunity to contribute to supporting their families.

Parents often report significant impact on their sexuality after their child's sexual assault. It is commonly believed that men and women experience and express their sexuality differently and it may follow that this entails differing gender reactions after a child's sexual assault.

Men are given social messages that sexuality is an acceptable way to express feelings but it also suggests that men experience sex less emotionally than women. Fathers at Gippsland CASA have spoken of the sexual assault of their children having a definite impact on their sexuality. Some fathers talked of a need for intimacy and comfort after the assault and the opportunity to express themselves sexually and emotionally. Sometimes they felt rejected by their partners. Sexuality is often a powerful antidote to loss and grief. Fathers have also reported their revulsion to sex in the aftermath of their child's assault. They have talked of intrusive thoughts during sexual contact and an inability to distance themselves from their child's experiences. Some fathers were also reminded of their own childhood sexual assault.

These responses affected fathers' relationships and served, in some cases, to intensify the impact on the relationship. Most of the fathers felt confused about their sexual reactions and were surprised that they were normal. Again, men fall victim to myths about male sexuality and emotional intimacy.

The most significant impact on non-offending fathers is on their relationships with their children. Child and adult survivors of sexual assault identify their relationships with paternal figures as vital. Their father's responses to them after the sexual assault are crucial to their recovery from trauma and to their perception of themselves. The greatest concern for fathers is how they should relate to their children after disclosure of sexual assault. They are uncertain of what to say and what to do, especially about touching their child. Many will do nothing in order to do no harm. Children are likely to interpret this as confirmation that they are dirty, damaged and unloved. Children often talk about the importance of affectionate contact with their fathers. They are usually acutely aware of the difference between abusive and loving touch. Fathers need to know that it is vital to their child's recovery that they provide verbal, emotional and physical reassurance. When fathers are alerted to their children's emotional reactions and encouraged to understand and respond, the results are empowering for both fathers and children.

It is common for fathers to have been excluded from the details of the child's assault. Children need fathers to know what happened to them in order to be reassured that, whatever their experiences, they are still the special, lovable person they were prior to the assault. Only then can the shame be alleviated. Fathers, too, need to know the details so that they can process and resolve the trauma accurately.

Fathers have a vital role in teaching and influencing children about men. Amato (1986) found that fathers had a strong influence on children's self esteem at all ages. Fathers are essential in providing role models for girls and boys for both the masculine and paternal roles. As the majority of perpetrators are male, fathers can provide a positive alternative image of their gender for children. Children's recovery from sexual assault is dependent upon a supportive family environment, therapeutic help and the characteristics

of the child (Urquiza & Capra 1990). In order for fathers to be supportive, they need to be able to identify and understand their own feelings and those of their children.

When emotions are not expressed they are internalised, denied and avoided, causing other problems for the individual and those around him. If men tend to withdraw, deny and avoid the range of emotions which child sexual assault evokes, there are serious ramifications for themselves, their health and for their child's recovery.

Adults are often fearful of showing emotion in front of children, perhaps because they fear it might undermine their authority or make them seem 'weak'. If parents can share their anger, grief, shame, embarrassment and powerlessness with their child, it validates the feelings which the child is also experiencing. It demonstrates to a child that it is possible to have extreme emotional reactions and still survive. Perhaps this needs to be demonstrated for fathers too.

RESOURCES

Beliefs and theories about men are reflected in the structure and philosophy of services. As a result, men find these services inaccessible, perhaps allowing them to avoid seeking supports and certainly contributing to their isolation. The lack of posters, leaflets and literature that address boys, adult men and fathers confirms some men's belief that they do not belong in welfare agencies. The language, case studies and focus of the self help literature is invariably female. The potential of men to contribute to individuals surviving sexual assault is sometimes recognised but not actively encouraged. Fathers are frequently excluded from information because it is 'women's business' or because mothers, and professionals, are afraid of the father's reactions. It is a common experience for fathers that details of their child's assault are withheld from them to avoid fathers 'taking the law into their own hands'.

Many fathers have little general knowledge about child sexual assault prior to their child being assaulted. Their analysis of the situation may be based on erroneous and sexist myths. Professionals' expertise, accessibility, flexibility and sensitivity are crucial to a family's positive recovery from sexual assault. However, it is most likely that women, as primary care givers, have the most contact with professionals, both by choice and necessity. This convinces welfare networks that men do not 'seek help' because they are emotionally inarticulate and fear appearing vulnerable.

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Experience with fathers at Gippsland CASA contradicts this. They speak of wanting services but perceiving them as only relevant to women. They willingly acknowledge their vulnerability and welcome opportunities to talk about their feelings. This indicates that it is a structural problem, reflecting myths about masculinity, that prevents men seeking help rather than male pathology. For example, group work with men has traditionally been seen as too difficult because of men's perceived difficulty in expressing emotion. However, it appears to be common that when attempts are made to engage men, professionals are surprised by the response. Richard Fletcher, who runs Fathers against Rape groups, tells of initiating a 'Fathers in School' programme in NSW. At the first meeting 50 fathers came, catching the organisers by surprise as they had expected only a handful.

Barrera and Masterson (1988) initiated a general fathers support group in response to a belief that family support meant maternal support. They were surprised when the 'superficiality fell away and (the fathers) began to talk in earnest, displaying sympathy and support and offering constructive advice'. Similarly, when Lewzey and Lindsay (1991) set up a support for foster and adoptive fathers of children who had been sexually abused, they found that they destroyed a few myths; for example, that men are not in touch with their feelings.

> We actually discovered that the working class man led in exploring feelings and in sorting out difficult family problems which are encountered in caring for sexually abused children. Men are part of the treatment! (Lewsey & Lindsay 1991)

Meyers (1993) contends that:

> Support groups for fathers have been slow to emerge because social service agencies have assigned little priority to their development, believing that men's traditional socialisation would make fathers reluctant to express their feelings to others and seem dependent.

Traditional socialisation of men needs to be challenged and reassessed as it has been for women. The trend of putting men's 'issues' in the 'too hard basket' only serves to reinforce gender socialisation that disadvantages not only men but also women and children. There is a need for more information about what benefits and supports fathers, and how that can be made 'structurally amenable and functionally pertinent to men' (Meyers 1993).

CONCLUSION

Non-offending fathers may be absent at a conceptual level, but they are very much present in the lives of children who have been sexually assaulted. They experience the sexual assault of their children as deeply traumatic and have complicated and difficult emotional reactions to themselves, their partners and their children. These reactions are compounded by patriarchal influences which deny fathers the expression of feeling that facilitates their resolution. As a result, fathers are often excluded, or exclude themselves, from the recovery process, increasing their isolation. There is a need for a detailed analysis of non-offending fathers' experiences which addresses the short and long term consequences for them of their children's sexual assault.

It is crucial that non-offending fathers take a place in the sexual assault field for a variety of reasons. Services must begin to target non-offending fathers in a meaningful way, acknowledging their pain and offering real support for their own needs. Effective ways of approaching and communicating with these men need to be developed. If they can be supported as individuals then they are more likely to respond to their children's trauma with greater understanding and sensitivity. In this way, the potential negative effects that they may have on their children's recovery can be negated. The contribution, both positive and negative, that fathers can make to their children's healing from sexual assault should not be underestimated.

The position of non-offending fathers must be analysed with reference to their patriarchal context. The conceptual framework of masculinity requires examination to ascertain the influence and constraints that it imposes on non-offending fathers and men. There is an urgent need to give men the permission and opportunities to express and explore their emotional realities, which will benefit women and children too. Men can no longer be excluded from sexual assault and the factors that have previously conspired to do so must be actively challenged. As victims, partners, parents and perpetrators, men are an integral part of the problem of sexual assault, and they must also be part of the solutions. □

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