

Prevention of Maternal Recognition of Child Abuse

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Introduction

Every child has the right to health and a life free from violence. Each year, though, millions of children around the world are the victims and witnesses of physical, sexual and emotional violence. Child maltreatment is a huge global problem with a serious impact on the victims' physical and mental health, well-being and development throughout their lives – and, by extension, on society in general [1].

The various sectors involved in addressing child maltreatment need to develop a common conceptual definition of child maltreatment and common operational definitions to enable case identification and enumeration. They also need to have a common statistical approach to the problem, including standard indicators for measuring rates of maltreatment and the factors that increase the risk of maltreatment.

To prevent child maltreatment, policy and programme measures addressing risk factors and protective factors need to be implemented [2].

Maternal Sexual Abuse

There is a “friendly mother illusion” in society suggesting that mothers do not engage in sexual abuse and would protect and care for their children. However, in some cases they are the perpetrator of sexual abuse. There is a need to discuss these cases in research, politics and practice. The mother (not including foster parent or other caretaker) was the primary perpetrator in 78% of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse cases while the father was the primary perpetrator in only 31% of male-perpetrated child sexual abuse (MCSA) cases [3].

Sexual Abuse in Early Childhood

Sexual abuse in early childhood, i.e. below the age of three, is an underrepresented topic in research and practice. Considering international studies on prevalences of child sexual abuse, the complexity, global concerns and difficulties of international comparisons stand out; e.g., studies focus on a different age range and it is barely focused on children between 0–3 years of age.

If in early childhood, the mother is a perpetrator of sexual abuse, children need professionals and other extra-family members in their social surrounding, who are aware of the “friendly mother illusion”. In early childhood, this means to have adults who take care of the child's well-being and act for them in case of danger. Children need reference persons, who are aware of the

phenomenon of sexual abuse and especially maternal sexual abuse. In this regard, professionals, especially those working with young families, require knowledge about abusing mothers and associated risk factors [4].

Future Directions in Prevention of Maternal Sexual Abuse in Early Childhood

Children in their early years are especially vulnerable, as they are dependent on a caring social surrounding. The vulnerability of children is due to lack of: Physical strength and size; knowledge, experience, and self-control; the choice over associates; awareness in society about what children hurts alongside with sanctions against violence against children. Considering sexual abuse in early childhood with the mother as a perpetrator, the awareness of the social surrounding of the child is the most important point, as children up to the age of three are physically weak, cannot verbally disclose and cannot choose who they are with [5]. In early childhood, the family is the main social context for a child and parents or caregivers are mainly responsible for a supportive and safe upbringing. In cases, in which the family is not a safe place, professionals, like e.g. pediatricians, midwives, nursery and kindergarten teachers and adults in the social environment of the child are the primary protective factor for children from early on – provided that they are aware of the phenomenon and sensitive to indications [5].

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