

Incest and Sexuality

**The
Exploitation
of Children**

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The Exploitation of Children

GIRL 1: He used to stick his penis in my bottom. He'd have this stuff on it so it would slide.... He'd make me stand over the counter and I'd tell him it hurted so bad and he'd say, "Here, bite on this wash rag" or something. It was just terrible. When he'd sodomize me he'd be on the waterbed and I'd be down like that, he'd have his hands on the back of my head ... so I couldn't really pull away to breathe.

GIRL 2: I'd bite him!

GIRL 1: When he's about two hundred pounds heavier than you, you can't bite him or tell him no. He'd say it's all in your head that you don't like it.... If you'd just change your attitude ...it's your attitude that's bad. You've got the wrong attitude! And I'm sitting there thinking, My attitude! You shouldn't even be doing this!

— Excerpt from Teen Group

Incest lacks all the essential conditions for positive, healthy sexuality. There is no true consent, equality, respect, trust, or safety. Incest perpetrators use their victim's age, dependence, and immaturity to their advantage. They selfishly exploit the innocence of their victims.

Incest can include a wide range of sexual activities, from fondling to overt acts of intercourse and sodomy. While incest can be limited to one instance, it most often takes place repeatedly over time. Many survivors report frequent abuse that went on for a number of years and sometimes involved more than one perpetrator. Though experiences vary in intensity and duration, each woman's experience is valid and important, and deserves attention.

Because incest is universally regarded as wrong and harmful, practically all cultures have laws that forbid it. Incest is considered a deviant type of sexual behavior that warrants labeling the perpetrator a social criminal in need of behavioral restraint. Societies strive to protect children and adolescents from the physical and emotional harm that sexual abuse can cause. Most people realize that nonconsenting sexual behavior, which is present in incest, can be seriously damaging to the victim.

While in general societies legally recognize the premise that children are *never* capable of giving consent to an adult, perpetrators and sometimes survivors may have difficulty believing that this is so. In an unconscious attempt to justify their behavior and to minimize their

responsibility, some perpetrators fool themselves into viewing the child as consenting. They may communicate this idea to the victim, who is then led to doubt her own perception of her role in the incest. Many survivors blame themselves for not having stopped the incest. They are afraid that they allowed it to occur and thus must assume responsibility for it. Some survivors enjoyed the physical sensations and closeness. Some survivors willingly participated in order to get the affection and attention of a loved adult or older child. However, these situations *do not* demonstrate consent. A child's relationship with a parent or close relative is too encumbered by physical and psychological dependency to ever include the possibility of free consent. When a power imbalance exists because of differences in age and sexual sophistication, real consent cannot exist.

David Finkelhor argues that children are unable to consent to sex because they are uninformed in every way about sex:

Can children give informed consent to sex with adults? It is fairly evident they cannot. For one thing, children lack the information that is necessary to make an "informed" decision about the matter. They are ignorant about sex and sexual relationships. It is not only that they may be unfamiliar with the mechanics of sex and reproduction. More importantly they are generally unaware of the social meanings of sexuality. For example, they are unlikely to be

aware of the rules and regulations surrounding sexual intimacy, and what it is supposed to signify. They are probably uninformed and inexperienced about what criteria to use in judging the acceptability of a sexual partner. They probably do not know much about the “natural history” of sexual relationships, what course they will take. And, finally, they have little way of knowing how other people are likely to react to the experience they are about to undertake, what likely consequences it will have for them in the future.²

The sexual contact demanded of children in incest involves strange sensations, sights, smells, and sounds, which children are unprepared for and often overwhelmed by. Survivors often remember how scary it was to witness their usually controlled fathers, uncles, or cousins become naked, erect, and hungry for secretive physical contact with them. Most survivors knew something was wrong with the contact but lacked the maturity needed to identify what was wrong and to express it. Here a survivor describes her frustration with communication limitations:

I had no vocabulary to express my confusion, my fears, my view. A child has no vocabulary power, so adults rape children thinking the children don't know what's happening. Children *do know*—but children have no language ... to communicate. It's like *being a prisoner in a foreign country*, and not knowing the language. ... I cried a

lot. I acted out a lot. I still have a problem with thought and verbal expression regarding sexual intercourse.

Children do not have a sufficiently strong sense of themselves or a clear enough understanding of others to fully realize what is happening and to assert their own best interests. It is usually not until they are in their late teens that people can even attempt to consent in a mature way to sexual activity. Before that time, they are extremely vulnerable to being fooled and exploited by others more sexually experienced than they are.

Children have a tendency to feel guilty for engaging in activities which they sense are wrong or bad, whether or not they have any control over their involvement. Perpetrators often play upon this tendency, using the guilt to gain more leverage over the victim. Such an experience is described by a survivor in the following story:

I was molested by the next-door neighbor. I guess that I was between the ages of four and five when it first started. He—an older, fat, ugly man—had me do various sexual activities with him. This went on for several years, until I was about seven years old. I was afraid of this person and I hated the acts. I knew what I was doing was wrong, and I was afraid of being caught or my mother finding out. I felt tremendous shame and guilt. There were times when my mother suspected something was going on and confronted

me about it, but I always denied the fact and felt even more guilt. I was afraid that my mother would think I was a horrible person if she ever found out. The neighbor always gave me candy after he finished, which I always hid. I suppose that's why my mother started suspecting things. She found a lot of stale candy in bizarre places.

Finally my burden became too great, so I confided in one of my older cousins, who spent a lot of time at our house. He was about five or six years older than me, and for some reason I trusted him. That was a great mistake! I don't remember if it was right after I told him or sometime later when he used this information against me. I think I was about six when he blackmailed me. He told me that if I didn't have sex with him, he would tell my parents about the next-door neighbor molesting me. So I let him do with me what he wanted. I felt I had no other choice. I was scared of getting caught. The pain of intercourse was tremendous. I was also afraid I was going to get pregnant. I was old enough to know how people get pregnant, but I didn't know that I wasn't old enough to get pregnant. My cousin also burned me with a match in my private parts, trying to see what I looked like. I hated him, and still do.

Children need to feel that their initial sexual sensations are under their own control and for their own benefit. Self-exploration and self-stimulation create healthy early sexual experiences because they are motivated by the child's own desires, are engaged in privately, and occur

in a relaxed setting. In contrast, children's sexual activities in incest are dominated by the perpetrator's emotional needs and selfish orientation toward sexuality. Tension, fear, betrayal, pain, and mistrust color the victim's sexual awakening. Thus, children are robbed of the opportunities to experience their sexuality as something that is primarily for themselves.

- [2](#) D. Finkelhor (October 1979), What's wrong with sex between adults & children: Ethics & the problem of sexual abuse, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 49, no. 4: 694-695. Reprinted, with permission, from the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. Copyright 1979 by the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Inc.

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Suggested Resources

Outgrowing the Pain, by Eliana Gil, 1983 (San Francisco: Launch Press).

A short, readable book for adult survivors of child abuse which clearly explains how early abuse affects self-esteem and relationships. Especially good for people who wonder whether they were actually abused.

Betrayal of Innocence, by Susan Forward and Craig Buck, 1978 (New York: Penguin Books).

Basic information on the history and dynamics of incest, including many case examples. Sections on variations of incest, including mother- daughter, mother-son, father-son, and sibling.

Father-Daughter Incest, by Judith Herman, 1981 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

A comprehensive book on how incest affects daughters, including a historical overview, research findings, and treatment concerns.

For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality, by Lonnie Barbach, 1976 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books).

A good overview of sexual socialization and sexual pleasuring. Especially helpful for women resolving orgasmic difficulties.

For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy, by Lonnie Barbach, 1982 (New York, New York: New American Library).

Female perspective on healthy couples sexuality. Lots of exercises and suggestions for improving physical relationships. Contains basic sex therapy techniques.

Male Sexuality: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment, by Bernie Zilbergeld, 1978 (Boston: Little Brown and Company).

Excellent section on male sexual socialization, harmful myths, and reasons for male sexual problems. Includes sex therapy techniques for treating common male dysfunctions.

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, 1983 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Comp-Care Publications).

Overview of common types of sexual addictions, including incest. Can help survivors understand why some perpetrators sexually molest.

Learning About Sex: The Contemporary Guide for Young Adults, by Gary F. Kelly, 1977 (Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 113 Crossways Park Drive, Woodbury, New York 11797).

A good book for teens over fifteen years old and their parents, in paperback. Straightforward sex education for older adolescents. Includes section on love, responsible sex, and decision making in relationships.

“Identifying and Treating the Sexual Repercussions of Incest: A Couples Therapy Approach,” by Wendy Maltz, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 142-170.

Primarily written for clinicians. Presents a model for assessing and treating the sexual effects of incest in couple relationships. Includes intervention strategies, techniques, and therapeutic considerations.

Partners in Healing: Couples Overcoming the Sexual Repercussions of Incest (VIDEO) produced by Wendy Maltz, Steve Christiansen and Gerald Joffe, 1988. (For information and to order, contact: Independent Video Services, 401 E. 10th St. Dept. L, Eugene, Oregon 97401, telephone 503-345-3455).

Hosted by Wendy Maltz, this video program helps couples identify sexual problems caused by incest histories, and journey toward sexual healing and emotional intimacy. Symptoms of sexual concerns and specific steps in the healing process are discussed. Features three heterosexual couples (one with a male survivor). Helpful to incest survivors as well as a resource for therapy, education and training.

Two major self-help organizations for adult incest survivors are *VOICES*

(Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors) in Action, Inc., P.O. Box 148309, Chicago, Illinois 60614, and *ISA* (Incest Survivors Anonymous), P.O. Box 5613, Long Beach, California 90805-0613.

About the Authors

Wendy Maltz LCSW, DST, is an internationally recognized sex therapist, author, and speaker, with more than thirty-five years of experience treating sex and intimacy concerns. She authored a number of highly acclaimed sexuality resources, including the recovery classic, *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, as well as *Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women's Sexual Fantasies*, and *The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Pornography*. Wendy compiled and edited two best-selling poetry collections that celebrate healthy sexual intimacy, *Passionate Hearts: The Poetry of Sexual Love* and *Intimate Kisses: The Poetry of Sexual Pleasure*. Her popular educational website, www.HealthySex.com, provides free articles, podcast interviews, posters, [couples sexual healing videos](#), and more to help people recover from sexual abuse, overcome sexual problems, and develop skills for love-based sexual intimacy.

Beverly Holman holds an M.S. in counseling psychology from the

University of Oregon, where her master's thesis was entitled "The Sexual Impact of Incest on Adult Women." She also holds an M.A. in human development from the University of Kansas. Beverly is currently in private practice in counseling and mediation, specializing in incest and couples counseling. She is also a family therapist at a local agency, where she works with children and adolescents and their families. Previously she counseled in a family-oriented agency, where she led incest groups for adult survivors and worked with abused children and their parents. She is a member of the Oregon Counseling Association, the American Association for Counseling and Development, the Academy of Family Mediators, and the Executive Board of the Family Mediation Association of Lane County, Oregon.